

HAMMER OF THE GODS

An Essay

by

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That clear-skied morning in April 2006, I had no idea anything was amiss. I awoke, walked the dogs, ate breakfast – the usual: scrambled egg whites and toast – and dressed for work. I looked forward to the weekend, as it was Friday. Nothing about the progression of hours drew my attention as anything other than a mundane end of the week. By lunch, I was beginning to feel unwell and so forewent eating. It was a vague, this feeling, and so I figured it would pass and things would be fine.

By quitting time, I was in agony.

I managed to drive myself to the local emergency room, a recent addition to our tiny town, rising like a cathedral above the Colorado plains. Stumbling in through the pneumatic doors, I found my way to the registration desk where a woman handed me a clipboard and a stack of forms to fill out. I did my best, though it was difficult to focus on details while hunched over the clipboard like Quasimodo. Bright flashes of agony flared beneath the skin of my abdomen.

Handing the clipboard back to a different person, I returned to an empty seat and tried to

get comfortable while it felt like a hot fire poker was being repeatedly jabbed into my belly.

Realizing that I couldn't sit upright for any length of time, I crawled beneath the row of chairs and curled into a fetal position.

Pain forces us to focus on each excruciating second, stretching time infinitely. It was an interminable wait. Finally, my name was called, though I'm surprised I heard it. Pain roared in my ears and I couldn't straighten myself up to walk. I stumbled across the waiting room, hunched, arms wrapped protectively around my middle.

There are many ways in which opportunistic illnesses can take control of our immune systems and wreak havoc. We don't like to think about it, to think about how many viruses and bacteria there are inside us right now fighting for supremacy.

A Center for Disease Control report stated that over half a million bacterial cells can be found in the average kitchen sink drain, and that's just the sink. The bathroom is a veritable font of found bacteria; over 5 million cells in the average bathroom sink, toilet, and tub. We are exposed to hundreds of millions bacterial cells every day.

The bacteria that dwells in our bodies is constantly racing around like a gang of juvenile delinquents looking for something to vandalize or destroy. At the same time, white blood cells act like microscopic police officers trying to prevent the delinquents from getting away with anything.

In the emergency room, I was examined by a weary-looking woman in crimson scrubs, hair amuss, dark circles surrounding her eyes. I wondered when the last time was she'd slept. However, I wouldn't have cared if Doogie Howser himself had shown up. I wanted two things:

strong drugs, and for the pain to go away so I could set about forgetting it had ever been there.

After my vitals were recorded, I was handed a thin cotton gown that tied in the back. It's funny how modesty flies out the window when you can't breathe because you hurt so bad. I was led to an unoccupied area of the ER that looked like it doubled as a surgical theater, and felt as if it was ninety degrees. Heat exacerbates pain. The nurse said the heat was stuck on, though someone would be there in the morning to fix it.

"In the meantime, I'll set a fan in the doorway for you. You're going to be here until tomorrow."

"Why?" I managed to ask.

"Well, there is no surgeon available right now who can remove your appendix. We've put a call out to the on-call doctor. We'll let you know the minute we hear from him."

She gave me a mild painkiller to take the edge off the pain and got me settled into bed, returning moments later with the promised fan. Afloat on a chemical cloud, the pain subsided into a dull ache, and with cooler air being forced into the room, I dozed.

Appendicitis, if not treated quickly or properly, can be fatal. Should the appendix burst spontaneously, it spews infectious materials into the abdominal cavity. Once that happens, peritonitis can set in and an immediate regimen of strong antibiotics is necessary to avoid death.

Pain is the hammer of the gods. In his epic poem, *Savitri*, Sri Aurobindo writes: *Pain is the hand of Nature sculpturing men / To greatness: an inspired labour chisels / With heavenly cruelty an unwilling mould.*

It's transformative, if we survive, and if we allow it to be.

Ten hours later, I hadn't heard anything from hospital staff. I'd napped on and off, drawn again and again to the surface of wakefulness because the painkiller they'd given me had worn off. In the meantime, a new shift had come on duty. Using the call button, I summoned a different nurse and asked what the holdup was.

"We're unable to reach a surgeon that's covered by your insurance," she informed me.

Really? I wanted to scream. There's not one person anywhere qualified to take care of this? But I held my tongue for fear of alienating her and being unable to request any more pain medication. I felt a bit like James Caan's character in the movie "Misery," being held hostage in bed. All I needed was Kathy Bates to show up with a sledgehammer and a hobbling block.

Twelve hours, nothing.

Fifteen hours. They'd located a surgeon, but he was on the golf course and would be awhile.

Sixteen hours, I felt my appendix burst. If I thought the pain had been bad before, I was sadly mistaken. It was the difference between being pleasantly sedated and having the sun go supernova inside you. I became incoherent. All I could do is writhe around on the bed so frantically I worked the sheets right off it. Tears streamed from my eyes. Finally, a kind nurse gave me an injection of morphine.

Bliss.

Seventeen hours and several more shots of morphine later, word came that the surgeon was nearby and would be there soon. Staff promised to keep the morphine coming. It was my only hope. By the time they wheeled me into surgery, eighteen hours after I had arrived, I was delirious and barely noticed when they put me under.

The evolution of scientific research has helped us appreciate that the pain experience is

more complex and highly multifaceted from the subjective to the specific. The individual nature of pain is highly variable. I shattered my ankle when I was twelve after falling fifty feet from a tree. I thought then that I'd never experienced anything that horrible. When I reached my late teens, I began experiencing kidney stones. It's said that the pain of a kidney stone far outweighs that of childbirth. How can we know that? I may see the color blue differently than someone else in the same way that I feel pain differently. My tolerance level, by my own admission, is fairly low. Throughout several decades I've passed more than thirty kidney stones. The pain grew worse rather than easier to tolerate over time.

Pain is a wholly perceptual experience. There's acute and there's chronic, with the latter being defined as pain that lasts longer than one month beyond the normal healing period or that is associated with a pathological process that causes continuous or recurrent pain over months or years.

My appendix was removed through a small incision in the abdominal wall, a marvel of modern medicine. A barely noticeable scar was the only physical reminder I had now, reminding me that one of my organs had been removed after trying to kill me. Served it right.

I met with the surgeon a week later, when he explained that my abdominal cavity had been a 'hot mess.' Unfortunately, all too accurate. What he didn't tell me, though, was that because of the toxic sludge that had fountained into my body, my immune system had been completely wiped out.

It's I learned four months later. The hard way.

One of the reasons I love Colorado is its natural beauty. I lived with my three dogs on the edge of twelve square miles of protected open space. We walked that land every day,

encountering all types of fauna: owls, prairie dogs, skunk, deer, rabbits, bald eagles and the ever-present predator...the red-tailed hawk. It was the circle of life right outside our door. Afternoon squalls provided standing water in low-lying areas that attracted marine life like tadpoles, dragonfly, frogs, turtles, snakes, and my least favorite: mosquitos.

After a particularly wet spring, mosquitos were found swarming all over the county. Doctors warned of insect-borne disease. Town officials hired independent contractors to spray insecticide over the worst areas. In spite of my aversion to those vampiric critters, I still had to walk the dogs.

One August day, just after sunrise, we were walking through a nearby park. It grew warm early, so we didn't stick around too long, as there were several ravines that still had water in them. Mostly I was concerned for the dogs. Mosquitos lay their eggs in the ducts in the inner part of the eye, which hatch and become heartworms, which could kill them. We hurried through the remainder of our walk and headed home.

My roommate then was a disabled man who couldn't work, but could take care of the dogs when I was at work, creating a mutually beneficial relationship. He was also a heavy smoker, which wasn't a problem as long as he took it outside onto the patio or somewhere away from the house.

One early morning I awoke to find twenty or so angry red welts on my legs. I looked at the ceiling to find it lousy with mosquitos. I found the roommate in his room.

“Did you leave the patio door open last night when you went out to smoke?”

He shrugged. “I might have.”

I showed him my legs. He apologized. Nothing that I could do but caution him to keep at least the screen door closed when he went out.

In the bathroom, after a shower, I slathered pink calamine lotion on my legs and headed off to work.

Several days later, I noticed a strange rash on my chest and shoulders. It didn't itch and the skin wasn't tender, so I thought it might be heat rash or something and ignored it. It disappeared within a day.

Three days later, I came down with what I thought was the flu. Every millimeter of skin hurt. My joints felt like they were being pulled in different directions at the same time. My eyeballs hurt. I ran a fever of 103. 105. I was nauseous. Nothing worse than a summer illness, I thought, lying in bed with a pillow over my eyes because the light hurt. Twenty-four hours later and I wasn't getting any better, so I called out to my roommate to ask if he could take me to urgent care.

He helped me to his car, as I was incredibly weak; weak enough that I feared falling because my legs wouldn't support me. I felt unstrung, like a marionette whose master has cut him loose mid-performance. My head pounded like Thor himself was playing the Anvil Chorus inside it. On the short drive over, I found that my right arm and leg began trembling uncontrollably. My roommate practically had to carry me into the building.

The staff took one look at me and hurried over with a wheelchair. Though I was in tremendous pain, I tried to describe my symptoms but couldn't think very clearly. They were concerned enough to get me into a bed right away.

Later I would learn that I had become unresponsive, that I had lost consciousness. I regained a foggy sort of awareness sometime later and realized I was in an ambulance, and then blessed darkness.

The staff at nearby Boulder Community Hospital were very concerned when they were unable to revive me, and placed me in a negative pressure room, as they also had no idea what I had become infected with, and I wasn't in any condition to tell them.

A negative pressure room is a safety measure used by hospitals to prevent cross contamination into the rest of the hospital. And since they didn't know what they were dealing with, they took few chances. If I had any kind of communicable disease, it would spread quickly unless they took proper precautions. It's often used for airborne contagions like tuberculosis, measles, or chicken pox.

In order for the staff to enter the room, they donned Tyvek hazmat suits. The few times I surfaced, I thought I was in the Universal Space Station before I slipped under again.

The pain I experienced was far different from appendicitis or kidney stones. Those events had very specific pain centers, usually where the inflammation occurred, or where the object was located in my body. With this, the pain was all consuming. It wracked my body, and the ongoing tremens on the right side of my body only made it worse. Hospital staff were unwilling to give me any sort of medication or pain killer, at least until they understood what I was infected with.

They eventually moved from the negative pressure room to a private space in the emergency room where they could continue to keep a close eye on me. I vomited numerous times, but because I had been unable to eat anything for several days, not much came up.

They began a series of lumbar punctures, or spinal taps, to have a look at my spinal fluid, thinking maybe they'd find an answer there. I had come around again, but the pain of my body was so intense I barely felt the needle piercing my spine. After seven or eight of those, they were finally able to isolate the illness: meningitis and acute encephalitis. From there, they began

to put together a narrative about what might have happened. It was only then that I was able to relate about the mosquito bites, and found out that I had contracted West Nile Virus, which wiped out what little immunity I had built up since the previous April, leaving me susceptible to nastier illnesses.

They checked repeatedly on my pain levels, which rated an 11 on the Wong-Baker pain scale, which only went to 10. Later, I learned that I had also stopped breathing twice during those vaguely remembered hours after I was first admitted.

After ten days and an intensive round of antibiotics, I was released. I was still weak and disoriented. The illness had completely wiped out my short-term memory. The right side of my body was useless, and I feared I might never regain full functionality again. I was thankful to be home, however.

There are innumerable types of pain. Medical science classifies pain by the kind of damage that causes it, like tissue or nerve damage. But it doesn't recognize the pain of a broken heart when a beloved dog dies or we lose somebody in an accident. It doesn't count the mental anguish we feel when someone we're close to decides the relationship is over. It can't cover the pain of witnessing abuse of a friend or an animal. So in addition to physical pain, there is the pain of suffering through which we might be able to view various aspects of human life.

“Did you ever say yes to a pleasure?”

Oh my friends, then you also said yes to all pain.

All things are linked, entwined, in love with one another.”

--Nietzsche

Over the following three years, I worked diligently at regaining my life. I played memory games until I was able to retain the information. Being right side dominant, I had to relearn how to eat, brush my teeth, and dress myself. My employer placed me on long-term disability, but I wanted to return as soon as possible. Sitting around the house was not helping. I needed something other than my health to focus on for a change. Through the support of my friends, dogs, and a staunch refusal to give up, I made a full recovery.

Between 1999 and 2015, there were more than 43,000 reported cases of West Nile Virus. Of those, nearly 1,900 people died. [1] Though I had contracted the virus and survived, it was the gateway through which other, more insidious illnesses attacked. Though 70-80% of those infected rarely exhibit symptoms, approximately 1 in 5 exhibit symptoms that are non-injurious. Less than 1% of those infected develop deep neurologic illnesses such as encephalitis and meningitis. Some of the neurological effects may be permanent. In that respect, I consider myself fortunate. I've known others who were infected. One is in a wheelchair for the rest of her life, paralyzed from the neck down. Another can no longer work, as he never regained his ability to form short-term memories.

Pain is subjective. Each of us learns the application of the word through experiences related in early life. Often pain is physical, but more often it is psychological or even spiritual. There is a school of thought and theory called philosophy of pain, putting forth the idea that living involves being exposed to pain every moment, not necessarily as a persistent reality, but as a possibility. When we pursue happiness, we pursue a life without the presence of pain. Yet, would we be able to know pleasure if we never knew pain? It reminds me of a philosophy class I

took in college, in which it was posited that we would be unable to see light if there was no darkness. There is not one without the other.

Pain changes you. Not only in biological ways, but in fundamentally life changing ways as well. It makes you stronger, or it kills your will. Like a gale force wind, it drives you either forward or backward. It changes the way you view the world, but more specifically, it changes how you view life. In the thirteen years since that illness, I have stopped taking things for granted. I'm constantly surprised at how I find beauty even in things that other people might call trash. My focus on creativity has increased exponentially, and I no longer skip writing days because I know that today, tomorrow, or even an hour from now, some catastrophic event might take place and I will lament the things I wished I had done. I realized that it costs nothing to be nice to people, no matter how we feel. Illness definitely gave me a renewed respect for life and all things living. What was it Joni Mitchell said? *You don't know what you got 'til it's gone.*

Ain't that the truth.

[1] Center for Disease Control report: https://www.cdc.gov/westnile/resources/pdfs/data/1-WNV-Disease-Cases-by-Year_1999-2015_07072016.pdf