

UUCPA Reflection -- 8/18/2012

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My New Normal

Good morning. I'm Robert Neff, and last year I won the UUCPA Auction item to work with Amy for a Sunday service. This is my story, that led to today's theme:

Have you ever had a day, an event, or a realization which has completely changed how you will experience the rest of your life? That happened to me, about 10 years ago.

At the time I was an active, fit 39 year old, able to enjoy a lifestyle that included bicycling and basketball as much as I could. I developed a lump on my knee, it was diagnosed as a benign cyst, but it did not respond to simply draining the fluid out -- it just came back. My orthopedist assured me that he could fix it, so that's what he tried to do.

He surgically removed the cyst, but in the course of the operation my peroneal nerve was severed, and I lost the ability to activate the muscles that lift my toes. To this day I have the condition known as "drop foot", in which the front of my left foot drops and drags when I walk.

The cyst came back in a few months, and I still have it.

Let me tell you about drop-foot -- what is drop-foot like? There are some things that can never be the same. I cannot control my toes when I land on my heel, so I cannot "stroll." If you have walked with me, you may have noticed that I just clump along. Kicking is a bad idea, either kicking a ball, or in swimming. When my foot drags I worry that I will catch my toes and fall, and I do fall much more than before. Falling is the biggest hazard for drop-footed folk -- that's how Jim Peterson died. Also I don't have much feeling in my left foot. That's a net benefit, since I don't notice when someone accidentally steps on that foot.

Now I know some of you, especially the ones over 60, are thinking, “Drop foot? He’s complaining about Drop Foot!” Really, drop foot is not something I complain about any more, but it has changed the way I experience life.

Having one body part that does not function gives me great appreciation for all the parts that work so well in our daily lives. All the stuff we are all used to being able to do every day. Tossing and catching a ball. Being able to see, taste, hear, smell, and feel. Being able to run, walk, dance, or stroll. Having this disability helps me appreciate being alive.

Also, I joined the drop foot fraternity. We are a small, friendly group, easily recognized by the way we walk -- by our gait. I expect at least 4 of us at church this morning. Some got it from accidents or injury, others as part of a disease like MS or stroke. We don’t move too fast unless we are sure we will not fall. On a wider scale I’ve learned to relate not just to young, able bodied folk, but to understand the aging, falling apart process.

I can understand the frustration of an 89 year old who has worn out his wrists from too much tennis, and will have to find something new, and I really can relate to a stroke survivor’s long term efforts to recover her capabilities, and to the joys in small improvements.

I’m still playing basketball, with a brace on my ankle, and even learned a left handed lay-up, so I can make better use of my good leg. Having drop foot, a small disability, has given me a richer life experience over the last 10 years.