

Scars

By

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The water was icy cold, a fact confirmed by the large chunks of ice floating on its surface. The 32 ounce glass bottle of soft drink in my hand was room temperature or a few degrees warmer. Until the bottle blew up in my hand I did not know that when a warm liquid in an un-tempered glass bottle is plunged into a bath of ice water, an explosion is very likely to occur. It did and I jerked my bleeding hand from the freezing water.

Upon examination, I knew the cut was deep but certainly not life-threatening or even bad enough to seek medical help. Pulling a handkerchief from my hip pocket, I wrapped the finger tightly and told my fellow crew members that I would henceforth assume the duties of cashier. That job could be done using one hand. My time pouring soft drinks into cups to sell at our high school basketball game was over.

Over the next few weeks, the wound healed nicely, but the white scar on the second joint of my right ring finger remained clearly visible. Even after 60 plus years, when I see the scar, I clearly recall that night and the exploding bottle.

Teenage boys not quite old enough to hold a driving license almost always like loud mufflers, fast cars and all things mechanical. At least I did. My neighbor, Dick, owned a Whizzer motorbike. He was the envy of the neighborhood gang when he proudly rode his Whizzer through the streets of our little town. You didn't need a license to ride a Whizzer because the rider had to pedal to breathe life into the

Whizzer's 3 horsepower engine, a laborious task, but in the eyes of the law it made the Whizzer a bicycle rather than a motorcycle.

Dick celebrated his 16th birthday by taking the driving test and passing, thereby receiving his license to drive a real car. His Whizzer was relegated to the garage where it languished for a few weeks. But it would ride again!

One Thursday that summer, as Dick backed his car from the garage, I asked if I could "rent" the Whizzer for an evening ride. After a brief negotiation, we agreed that I would pay Dick one dollar per evening jaunt and fill the Whizzer's one gallon gas tank before I returned it to the garage. I was happy to ride the Whizzer and Dick was happy because the rental fee would buy nearly four gallons of gas for his car-cruising night.

I picked up my buddy for an evening trip; he sat behind me on the large soft seat and I perched atop the Whizzer's gas tank. After a short ride around town, we took to the country, careening down the road at an astounding 35 miles per hour! I spotted an intersection and decided – too late as it turned out – to turn right on to a county road. I had slowed the bike somewhat, but we were still rolling at about 30 mph as we leaned into the turn. The evening was nearly gone and darkness was settling in, so I didn't see that the intersection was covered in a blanket of fine ashes.

The bike's tires failed to grip the ash-covered road and we went down, sliding sideways across the abrasive surface. My right knee was between the roadway and the bike, and it hit the ground first. We slid for about 30 feet, legs still straddling the Whizzer, and finally came to rest on the far side of the road. Jumping up, we first surveyed the Whizzer to make sure it was not damaged. It was fine except for a small scrape on the right handlebar grip. Us? Not so fortunate.

Ash is an abrasive material and after grinding through my best pair of jeans it abraded about three layers of skin, gouged my kneecap and left us both panting for breath. The pain came later. We rode back to town; I filled the bike's tank, returned the Whizzer to Dick's garage and went home to self-administer first aid to my now-burning kneecap. Soap and water was ineffective, so I poured hydrogen peroxide over the wound. After the "boiling" stopped, I added merthiolate (Yowee!!!) and a few band-aids, then went to bed.

I was to go with my older brother to a Cleveland Indians game on Saturday, but as I got up Friday morning, my knee was uncooperative. It was painful to bend my leg, so I decided that professional medical help was in order. I would do anything to get to that ball game, because the Indians were to play a double header against the Yankees and I desperately wanted to see Joe DiMaggio, Bob Feller and the other greats of the day.

The Doc looked at my knee, turned away and then came at me with a toothbrush-looking utensil and some rubbing alcohol. The brush didn't hurt nearly as much as the alcohol, so after two good hard brushings with the toothbrush, and a fiery alcohol bathing, he applied some salve and wrapped it with a large bandage that made me hobble as I walked. He said he couldn't get all of the ash out, it would be there for a long time, but it wouldn't hurt anything. It was hard and painful to walk, but I made it to and from the game.

A few ashes from that Whizzer ride remain in my kneecap and each time I see them, the memory is renewed. I am transported back in time; sitting astride the gas tank of that Whizzer, flying down the road, hair blowing, feeling the thrill of independence.

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“Your eyes are yellow, Dad.” said my youngest daughter sitting across the restaurant table from me. “And your skin looks a little yellow, too.”

“That’s just sun tan from my golfing visit to your Uncle in New Mexico a couple weeks ago” I replied as I scratched at the incessant itching on my arms, chest and back.

“I think you better see the doctor about that”, she suggested, but I shrugged it off.

A few days later, in the process of undergoing my annual physical examination, I was told to go immediately to an imaging center for a CAT scan and ultrasound exam. My liver enzymes were off-the-charts high and it had to be addressed promptly. From scans and ultrasounds, quickly to hospital, an endoscopic exam confirmed the doctor’s suspicions. I had choleangial carcinoma, a malignant tumor within my liver. After unsuccessful surgery to remove the tumor, the medical team met to design a strong and quick regimen of radiation therapy to destroy the tumor blocking the flow of bile from my liver. With much prayer and treatment, I am a 25-year cancer survivor.

The 14 inch-long surgical scar gracing my abdomen is a daily reminder of how fortunate I am to have survived a type of cancer that that kills 99% of its victims within six months of diagnosis. Surely there is more for me to do in this life, or I would be among the 99%.

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That horrible Sunday morning, I walked in the house from church to find my wife sobbing. She said our grandson, a Marine stationed on Okinawa, Japan had taken his own life. I fell back against the door, knees nearly buckling as the impact of her

sentence sank in. Adam was gone! How could this be? He was only 20 years old! Why would he do such a thing? The questions outran my ability to formulate speculative answers. The pain nearly overwhelmed me, pain that has no fix, no first aid, no surgery, no medication; nothing to take it away. Our family was so proud of him when he became a Marine – so tall and proud, fit and handsome in his uniform. How would the family get through this if we did not come together in our grief, supporting each other?

Because of the distances, medical procedures and investigations, Adam's body would be two weeks coming home. Funeral plans were made, visiting hours set and we waited. Late on the night his Marine-escorted body arrived, through our tears and hugs, we watched the honor guard gently carry his casket from the airplane to the hearse that would take him to the funeral home.

The next evening's visitation was a tribute to Adam's impact on people during his too-brief 20 years. Over 400 friends, fellow-wrestlers (he had been a highly talented high school wrestler), coaches, extended family members and friends came to pay their respects and tell us stories of how Adam had touched their lives in positive ways. The funeral service was held the following morning.

Our family sat together and as we listened to tributes from his sister, fellow Marines, high school teammates and coaches, we were again struck by the impact Adam had on people; we never knew he was such a significant role model to his peers. The service ended and at his parents' request Adam's body was taken for cremation. As the hearse left the church solemnly followed by the flag-bedecked Patriot Rider motorcycle escort, Joel, another of my grandsons, began to sob uncontrollably. I

comforted him with tight hugs and words as best I knew how; how can you prepare for things like this, I wondered through my own tears?

Some months later, Joel was still struggling with Adam's loss and his mother asked me to talk with him about it. We met for lunch at his favorite place to somehow talk about Adam's death – our mutual loss. For some unknown reason, I began talking to him about the scar I had on my left ring finger; the one on my right kneecap; the surgical scar on my abdomen and how looking at them took me back to precisely where and how they were obtained. Although the wounds they represented were no longer painful, they were reminders that I had been hurt but ultimately healed. I tried to plant the idea with Joel that Adam's death created a huge scar; not on our bodies, but on our hearts and souls. And that is a good thing, because we cannot forget him so long as that scar remains within us. It will take time – maybe a long time - for this wound to heal, but we will heal; however, the scar will never go away and Adam will always be honored when we lovingly remember him through the scar his death created within us.

Reflecting on that homespun metaphor, I thought of other scars in my life: the deaths of parents, siblings, in-laws, friends and neighbors somehow left their invisible marks. It is when we embrace our scarred lives, and through our tears or smiles, remember the people we've known and loved, whose lives intersected with ours, we are truly human. In so remembering, we can live in gratitude for the events, the people and the Providence, that enable us to go on.

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