

# The Gift of Pain

By Dr Tan Poh Kiang, Editorial Board Member

Some gifts are unexpected – neither the nature of it nor the manner of its arrival. This year I received an unexpected gift on 27 February, early on a Saturday morning. We were a group of four cyclists doing a 100 km ride, starting early at 4 am. When we had covered nearly 80 km, I was drafting behind the lead rider along Nicoll Highway. All of a sudden, his front wheel glanced against the curb and he skidded. I squeezed my brakes by reflex and flew over his fallen body and bike. I landed squarely on my left shoulder and was lying dazed. My friends behind had also crashed in a pile-up. We had our share of abrasions (road rash as the cyclists and triathletes like to call them) but it was when I tried lifting my bike over the highway's barrier that I discovered my left shoulder and arm hurt badly. A sharp deformity over the collar bone and subsequent x-rays at the emergency department confirmed a mid-clavicular fracture with mild displacement of fragments. My orthopaedic surgeon felt that it would heal just as well without surgical fixation and so I began to wear an armsling over the next few weeks. I had unwrapped my gift.

I might have had the privilege of experiencing a road traffic accident resulting in over twenty stitches on my face; a ruptured appendix; renal colic as well as displaced J-stent with post-op infection. Pain is still torturous irrespective of one's pain résumé. The first lesson of this gift was immediate – I learned what I could not do. I couldn't lie flat and had to sleep propped up at 45 - 60 degrees for almost ten days. I couldn't put on or take off my shirt for the first week and did not wear pull-over T-shirts for almost two months. I couldn't put on the blood pressure arm cuff on my patients (well, I could only by leaning forward so that my immobilised hand could help the good hand. Many patients were frightened by me getting my face so close to

theirs!) Each day that I was in my sling and in pain helped me discover more things I could no longer do. It also helped me realise how much I take for granted what I had been able to do before.

The next obvious revelation was how much help I desperately needed in this state of affairs. I needed help from my wife to get showered and dressed in the first week. I needed help from my daughters to accomplish simple chores around the house. I needed help from my clinic staff to break ampules of injectable drugs. In addition, I also needed to be chauffeured. We spend nearly all of our younger days learning to be independent so it was humbling to have to admit I could not make it on my own and ask for help for many things each day. But it was also precisely in the humble act of seeking help from those closest to me that I learned afresh how much I am loved and cared for.

When I crashed my bike, I was 13 weeks away from an ultra-marathon race that I had signed up. I wanted to do this race very badly and had already started preparing for it. With the fracture, I was out of action for the next seven weeks. Many well-meaning friends told me to abandon the plan. A couple even volunteered to take over my race registration. I was doubtful about my ability to complete a 84 km race even with the intended training plan before the accident. I agonised, I struggled and I prayed. Being in a sling and not training gave me a lot of time to reflect. Somehow I felt God speak softly to invite me to trust that I would heal in time. It was a test of faith. I also sensed it would be a test of character. I shared my quiet conviction with my wife Joan. She was gracious to support me – not only in principle but would run the second half of the race with me (the Sundown Ultra-marathon is made up of two laps of the usual marathon route).

I waited till I was cleared by my

orthopaedic surgeon to resume running. That left me with six weeks before race day. I did whatever I could with the limited training time. The 84 km race was flagged off at 6 pm on 29 May. About 600 of us took off from the start line. I was surprised that I felt relatively strong and completed the first lap with 15 minutes to spare before the flag off time for the 42 km race, when my wife would join me. The surprise was short-lived as the next 42 km was the most painful run I have done up to that point in my life. Every muscle, tendon and ligament in my legs screamed for help. I think I walked more than I ran. The thought of giving up recurred at frequent intervals. I had the ready excuse that I did sustain a collar bone fracture after all. The frequency of the thought of quitting was matched by the frequency of Joan's loving encouragement. Her voice was the strength I did not have. My mind compared the pain in my legs to the pain of the fracture in the initial days and I convinced myself that fracture pain was worse. So I put one foot in front of another and as I listened to words of encouragement, they silenced the screams of pain. 13.5 hours later, I crossed the finish line.

Lance Armstrong once said, "Pain is temporary. It may last a minute, or an hour, or a day, or a year, but eventually it will subside and something else will take its place. If I quit, however, it lasts forever."

I have been blessed with a gift I did not ask for. Pain is evidence of life and its blessing is that I get to learn to appreciate life and love.

**SMA**



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