

ACHES AND PAINS

A few years ago, as I was approaching my 60th birthday, I had a few pains, which had been gradually encroaching on joint mobility, notably in my left shoulder. For decades I had felt a seasonal twinge, and assumed it was the same bursitis my father complained of most of his later years. Now it had become perennial. Considering the 'clock' description of mobility range, I was good from 2:00 to 10:00.

In general I am a guy in denial of aging issues and I usually avoid looking at the strongest evidence of the process (in the mirror). Thus, it irked me to be reminded daily or even hourly of such frailty, not felt by the *young*.

Once again, nearing 60, I found myself deeply involved in the restoration and remodeling of my wife's inherited family house, a 4-story 8000 sq. ft. structure from the 1500s, in SW France. Of course, the bulk of the work, heavy demolition and restoration, was on the (abandoned since the Revolution) top floor, up a 44-step staircase, which I had to climb and descend as much as 30 times a day, usually carrying really heavy stuff. Fortunately, my knees were still OK. Late in the project it came time to install over 40 4x8 sheets of 1/2" sheetrock to finish unrepairable surfaces and ceilings.

I must digress a moment here to describe the labor situation in France. Following decades of socialist-dominated governments and bureaucracies, The People now assume they should not have to work...really work. The single goal of French professional life is to somehow get some disability that gives them a full government pension without making life uncomfortable. While they wait for the magic accident, they don't want to extend themselves more than the absolute minimum. Even the normal incentive of tax-free earned income doesn't sway these people. The government will give them enough to sustain a minimal life, so why try harder?

The result of all this is that search as I might, NOBODY in our little town was interested in doing 'day-labor' to help me get the jobs done. I could hire a construction firm, but not independent tradesmen. For most jobs I could invent a system to help or just work more slowly, but carrying sheetrock had no shortcuts. I had to move the intact 60-lb. sheets manually *and carefully*, up the 44 steps.

Again referring back to my reduced-mobility left shoulder, this was a problem. OK maybe I can stand a little pain, I thought. I had moved all kinds of oversized things before with no problem with the left hand on the bottom and right up. Unfortunately, I had to mount the steps with right turns, requiring the left hand/arm in a forbidden zone. The preferred arrangement would force me to go up the stairs *backwards*.

I put off the transfer operation for days until the morning the drywall guy was arriving (he politely declined to do the carrying due to some injury). OK...I grabbed the first sheet (stacked vertically) and got to the foot of the steps. I gingerly rotated to the horizontal-carry position and the shoulder screamed out.

It was 50 degrees in the stairwell but I was sweating from the offended shoulder joint. I got it to the top and slid it down against the wall. This was not good. Had I done real, permanent damage? No time to think about these issues. We'll try another one.

So it went all morning until I had enough up to keep Christopher busy a full day. I broke for lunch with everything normal. In fact, I didn't actually think about the shoulder; only relief in the accomplishment.

That night, sitting down to the TV, I casually exercised the bad shoulder and discovered nearly full mobility, much as it had been about 20 years before. Now I had to analyze what had happened. I surmise there was some accumulation of calcium or other deposit due to my former easy professional life of relatively low-flexing work, as a marine electrician, and this new sustained and strenuous movement pushed it back from the rotating areas, though at the cost of a lot of (temporary) pain.

Great!!!

5 years later (April, 2010); construction work was long past, but now the right shoulder was exhibiting similar symptoms to the left. It was a 'creeping paralysis' and this time I had no heavy lifting scheduled to address it. I couldn't just start swinging the arm, perhaps with a weight. It would hurt too much, and I just couldn't justify it for the small loss of mobility. Maybe I should finally just *get old*.

We have a couple big 'standard' poodles; one grown (father) and one 4 months old (daughter). From time to time they get out of control playing and start wrestling and barking at full volume. So it was that I was driving with the dogs in the back of the minivan, heading to the lumber yard, and they started up, while I was trying to concentrate on traffic. This really upset me, and I lashed out to deal some manual 'corrections' to the pair through the space between the seats. I never stopped to consider my violent movement was directly into the 'red/forbidden' mobility zone of the shoulder.

The joint screamed out, bringing tears to my eyes, and I never actually made contact with the perpetrators, though they settled down a bit from the threat. Continuing through the heavy traffic, I realized that I had done it again. The joint flexibility was restored, though to about 85%.

I now have an informal program of carrying a big sheet of plywood or sheetrock at least once a month. It works, and I retain over 90% mobility in both shoulders.

The lesson for this tale...?

"Use it or lose it!"

John Kessler
Your Neighbor