

bread for the journey

Canes

No, not the Miami Hurricanes or candy canes. Just plain canes. That's what this is about.

I recently returned from a golf outing with my son. One of the psyche-job techniques I used on the course was to bring along my cane and stuff it into my golf bag. I walked onto the green, putter in one hand and cane in the other. The sight of a guy gimping around a golf course with a club and a cane strangely intimidated the guys on the green waiting for me to limp up to the putting surface. "We've got to put this old man in his place once and for all." It worked. They didn't put me in my place and I played out of my head—swung freely from the forward tees. It was a marvelous experience.

I have learned that most people tend to treat their fellow humans more kindly when they discover they walk with a limp. Canes or crutches elicit the compassion, which seemed to ooze from their pores. Airline personnel were eager to make certain I was comfy. They invited me to come to the head of the bomb detector line. They ushered me through the radar hassle-free. They urged me to board the plane first. What a great ride. The flight attendant reminded me to duck as I boarded—as if I had forgotten I am 6'4". And then she complimented me on the color of my cane.

And, I must eagerly say, I was deeply moved by how warm and compassionate Rosecrance staff has been during my startling recovery. The human resources people made certain I was aware of all the benefits that accrue during a sick leave. The ESR staff opened doors regularly and assisted me in creative ways. Ed cut my cane down to size. Jeff made certain my desk chair was ergonomically friendly. My safety on salty sidewalks was a prior-

ity. One kindly security guard assisted me to my car in a particularly inventive fashion. Mary loaned me the crutches I needed. I will miss the kindly greetings that came my way: "How are you getting along?" "Looking good." "Hang in there." "Soon you'll be running like a kid again." Very encouraging.

While waiting in the front row of the boarding area this weekend, I commiserated with a fellow similarly impaired fellow. He told me his story. I told him mine. Turns out, he is a retired minister. We shared our concerns about getting older, the downward spiral, and the hopes for the future we harbored, and our mutual faith in God. We struck up a sudden but brief friendship. And it all began because we both used canes.

It was particularly startling for me to discover how naturally compassionate to the core people are as I made my way home from the bus station. Walking down Bell School Road from E. State must have been quite a sight: rolling a suitcase with a garish purple cane strapped to its back and—of course—the telltale limp. Four people stopped to ask if I wanted a ride on down the road. Finally, my dear wife showed up from her long weekend with the grandkids, just in time to rescue me from the public eye and take me the rest of the way home.

Hopefully, you have surmised this is not merely an essay about canes. It's not even primarily about compassion. Surely we would have a safer, saner world if we were more compassionate to one another. That is a no-brainer.

The key to compassion and an authentic kinder, gentler world, it seems to me, is grounded in the recognition of our vulnerability and the shared recognition that we walk with a limp. And we, all of us, use canes or crutches. Our canes are not always visible. But we all have them. We use some device to assist us, to help us walk, to make it through a day without falling down. No one gets through this vale of tears without assistance.

(continued on back)

Now, this is the conundrum or confusing mystery. We don't want people to see our canes and our crutches. Because if they see our canes and our crutches, they will also see our weaknesses and our wounds. For some mysteriously strange reason we don't want anyone to see our vulnerability. Our wounds and our weaknesses are a shameful embarrassment to us. It makes us feel as though we are less than the rest. Only the strong survive in our world. The strong have one up on the weak. Losers get the mental attitude and attaboy awards during the March Madness of NCAA basketball. Winners get to move on towards capturing the coveted prize: CHAMPION. Advantage to the strong. Handicapped parking to the weak.

The wounded, weak and vulnerable in our culture are surely the beneficiaries of compassion. The disabled get the best that a just and compassionate society offers: spacious private lavatories—sink and all the amenities—and a parking space close to the entrance. Wow! I can give ample testimony to the privilege that comes with being among the walking wounded.

But I would give anything to be the one who is in position to offer the rides, the condolences, the handicap sticker and the free pass at the airport screener center. I would much rather be the guy who offers a hand up, than the guy who receives the helping hand.

The strong run the world, win the prize, the war, the job, the prestige and the power. The weak and/or elderly receive the hand out and the hand up. The free bus ride. Medicaid. The Consolation Prize. It is a shameful thing to walk through the airport and experience the pitying look, the deferential smile, and the poor-you-buddy treatment. Need a wheelchair? Here, take this seat—the one with the handicap sign on it.

There is a billboard I see and spot and sort out on regular trips to Michigan. It reads, STUBBORNNESS IS THE NUMBER ONE KILLER OF MEN. The message is this: men (and a growing number of women) refuse to see, accept and own where they are wounded, weak and vulnerable. When it hurts, accept and embrace it. Get it fixed. Buy a cane. Use the crutches. "Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path."

All of us are in the same line to receive our Handicap Sticker. It is the human story. There are no winners and losers in the game of life. There is only "us." And "us" is in this together. Because this is true let us be genuinely compassionate to one another. 



The Rev. Dr. William Lenters, Chaplain

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is a bi-monthly news and views letter from Rev. Dr. William Lenters, Chaplain at Rosecrance. Bread for the Journey is written on behalf of people who live with substance use and mental health disorders. Together, and by God's grace, we will try to make a difference.

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