

## Regain, restore, recover, redemption

I'm not sure which word best fits but I have recently experienced all four. A year ago my life was altered by a collision with a large metal object. I don't like to dwell on the what-ifs, but a few millimetres make a big difference when it comes to your cervical spine and cord. Suffice it to say I feel blessed to be alive and mobile. The memories of my months in a hard cervical collar are fading, but I haven't forgotten the general malaise of just feeling less. It wasn't so much the neck pain or arm weakness/numbness that made me feel this way but the loss of my former self. I found relying on others for formerly simple, mundane tasks very difficult and humbling. Exercise is a huge part of my life and I definitely identify with being a recreational athlete. Having that part of my identity taken away led to feeling weak and vulnerable. I received a small glimpse of what my life could have become if my injuries were more severe and permanent. In retrospect, feeling weak, vulnerable, and humbled is a valuable, character-building experience that I would rather have avoided but is now

part of my life lessons.

One of the first questions I asked my neurosurgeon, M Squared (I have disguised Dr Mark Matishak's name so as to not embarrass him) was about my exercise options. Initially I was limited to walking and stationary bik-

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ing. However, no limit was put on amount so it is possible that I went for long walks that I don't really remember due to the mind-altering affects of opiates. I know this because someone mentioned they saw me miles from home walking in little circles whistling to myself. As my recovery progressed it is also possible that I pushed the limits a little. I am here to testify that strange looks come your way when you jog or lift weights while sporting a neck brace. Stop the eye rolling; I swear I didn't ride my bike outside until the brace was off.

However, the brace may have had faulty Velcro fasteners and fallen off prematurely. I distinctly remember my first road ride as an anxiety-filled, sphincter-testing fear-fest complete with hallucinations of silver cars flying at me.

Things steadily improved from there and I began to contemplate competing again. I chose a triathlon in Santa Cruz, California, which was scheduled almost 1 year from the date of my accident. When the big day arrived and I lined up on the beach with my fellow age groupers, the prerace jitters were replaced by a sense of calm as I reflected on the year's journey. I felt happy to be alive and to have a body that was up to the physical challenge of the next few hours. How many others would love to have this gift? I kept this thought in the forefront of my mind as I swam, biked, and ran. As the miles passed, my lips settled into a small smile of gratitude. As I crossed the finish line, my eyes filled with tears as the words flowed—regain, restore, recover, redemption.

—DRR

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## Back to basics

Over the past few months I have taken on a number of small (at least I thought they would be small) projects in my mother's home and my own. Some turned out to be bigger jobs than anticipated, some were necessities, and some were small cosmetic issues. I enjoy the challenge of finishing a project about which I know very little at the start.

As a single homeowner I pride myself on owning some decent basic tools—my favorite is an 18-volt power drill that I received from my parents years ago for Christmas. They were quite surprised when I asked for it. I also own tools, picked up over the years, that look interesting and cost a lot of money but have never been touched because, to be honest, I no longer have any idea what purpose they serve. They were likely bought for some DIY project that I Googled or saw on YouTube and had every intention of tackling at the time.

For my current list of projects I again bought more tools, feeling proud that I was ready and equipped to get to work. Many turned out to be fancy gizmos that didn't help me get the job done more quickly. They mostly served to complicate a simple

task and I ended up returning to my old, reliable favorites.

In medical school today students and residents are commonly taught to follow practice guidelines and algorithms for diagnosis and treatment in the belief that they save time and money. We now have clinical practice

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guidelines set out for a wide variety of medical conditions. Some are excellent but I consider this to be assembly-line medicine. They are useful and work well for straightforward conditions but cannot be relied on to account for all the intricacies of more complex disease processes.

I am of the old school that believes the basic process of taking a good his-

tory and performing a good physical examination is the cornerstone of making an accurate diagnostic evaluation most of the time. Obviously, advanced technology in imaging and interventional radiology, tumor markers, and immunoassays, to name a few, have allowed us to hone—but not to replace—our diagnostic capabilities. And sometimes technology leads us down the wrong path. Even with the vast array of these technologies at our fingertips things get missed. If I miss a diagnosis (and unfortunately there have been a few misses) it's because I didn't ask the right questions, identify something abnormal in the physical examination, or order the right test. If I'm having difficulty with a diagnosis I have learned to go back to the basics and talk with the patient again as I have likely missed important information. So while I embrace new technologies, I have learned that cutting corners is the fastest way to make errors. As in construction you will usually find a good explanation for every problem if you go back to the basics.

PS: If anyone wants any fancy mystery tools I would be happy to give them away.

—SEH

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