

Wednesday Jan 23, '02

Dear Scott —

Joe and I got home uneventfully, talking most of the way about our trip. I believe the timing of our trip to have seemed to be poorly planned, but as it turns out, was propitious. It's clearer to me now that as we get older we are closer, which is good because we need each other more than ever. In writing you here two letters — one to tell you how much I love you and Stuart, the other a technical "lesson" about what I suspect is happening to you — to help you understand what is happening to you and what you can do about it if you choose —

We are not a close family as far as sharing joys. I did call to tell you when my heart surgery came about, so you would know. My chances of dying from it were small, but surviving without the operation, with two major heart blood-vessels blocked, was not good, leaving me no intelligent choice other than to have the operation, and it fortunately proved to be easy, standible, and successful. Fortunately (or not) I knew pretty much what to expect, since I had done this same kind of thing to patients and watched them deal with the consequences.

Your eye operation - I think - is your only medical experience. I have the feeling you may view the thought of having any operation as the modern equivalence of a trust with the Iron Maiden, or some atavistic Anguistion.

Anyway, I know you are frightened of the possibilities - how could you not be? It is not really the fear of sudden death that bothers you so much as the problems of slow decay - It is hard for me to know how ~~of~~ difficult it is for you to bear these fears. I hate it that you are distressed, so this makes two of us. You are such a private person that you cannot share these burdens, spread them a bit to Stuart, Suz, Jas, and Nancy. One of the hardest things for you (and me) is to let people love you, and it is your greatest failure. One symptom is that you have never called me - I used to be an excellent doctor, and you could have used me, and you still can.

Your problem is much like Mother's - years of smoking is the heart of it - The drinking took its toll but not like the smoking. That is by far the worst. Mother's Carotid artery closed and nearly caused her a stroke. But an operation fixed that, she stopped smoking and lived nearly 20 years more - pretty good years too. (Don't imagine how ugly her life would have been with a stroke). The only way she avoided it was by calling me on the phone - I heard her slurred

speech and immediately knew what was happening. I called you, and Stuart got her right down to the doctor - remember? Well, the other evening Nancy spilled the beans about your leg - So now I know. And I so appreciate her, and the fact that you let me look at you - if even for just ~~at~~ brief look.

I'd like to discuss technically what I think is your situation, and what I think you can and should do about it. Nothing I'm going to tell you is certain - just my quick impressions - It may all be wrong and only a good doctor and good physical exam can set you on the path to repair. You have atherosclerotic plaque disease, from smoking. It has obstructed your left femoral artery, probably at the groin. You have enough collateral circulation coming from other arteries to feed your leg + keep your foot warm, but when you exercise, the leg doesn't get enough blood and pain develops. This is caused by the plug at the groin, not a consistent narrowing of the whole blood vessel system. If the whole thing were obstructed, the collateral blood-flow couldn't reach the toes and your lower leg would die + have to be amputated - that does happen but usually in diabetics, not smokers. What happens in smokers is usually patchy intermittent plaques of calcification, quite localized, that

develop clots on them and occlude the pulsatile blood-flow. Fortunately, these are easily removed by a good vascular "plumber" — usually. Your aorta in your abdomen is soft, and your vessel in the right leg may be narrowed but not completely ^{since you still have pulse in your right foot.} The symptom of left calf — left leg pain is called "intermittent claudication" (clausa — latin for "to close") As the disease advances you may begin to get rest pain, not related to exercise. This can be severe, like a burning. If this happens there is no choice but surgery or lose the leg. — You may stay where you are for awhile, not better, not worse — significantly.

I was pleased that your lungs sounded pretty good, but there's no telling for sure without a chest x-ray.

Scott — I won't beat up on you or try to force you into one thing or another. You are intelligent enough to know about the smoking and that you are no longer young. You probably understand the concept of diminishing reserves and that at some point, when they are used up, disaster happens. But I myself would do anything I could to stop smoking. I'd go to a good doctor for a physical, and I'd seriously consider the advice I got.

That's all I'll say for now. Call me to talk any time. And please try to let us all love you.

Peter

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