

# When You Don't Use it You Lose It—Fast

Yom Kippur Morning 5778/2017  
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This is a story about what I learned this past May and June when I was in the hospital living through what most people who had what I had die from. The morals of the story are

*Don't neglect the body your life lives in,  
When you don't use it, you lose it, and  
One step at a time.*

I was in a hospital bed for six weeks, fed intravenous sugar, during which time I lost 26 pounds of mostly muscle. I also lost the coordination to use the muscles that were left. I could not sit up. I could not stand up. I could not walk. I could not talk. I could not write. In six weeks I lost all that.

But I had some muscles and skills to spare, it turns out. That's at the end of the story, but here's where I want to start it.

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In 2004 Etz Chayim bought a building right in the middle of our demographic, just one mile from my house. I looked forward to walking to synagogue, but I never did. My brain and feet were connected to my car, and I never could rouse myself to even try it. Not even on Shabbat. Why? I was velocitized, that is, used to speed as well as to speeding around at the last minute. Using my car instead of my feet meant I could get a few more minutes done of whatever I was doing before I left: another cup of coffee, another few emails answered.

Five and a half years later, in January 2010, I developed dangerously high blood pressure. My doctor prohibited me from working until I got it under control. It took five months. Among his prescriptions were diet and exercise, of course. But first, he said, I needed to collapse, to let go of everything that was pressing on me. He then recommended talk therapy to help me make a sea change in the ways I live my life. Somewhere along the way I decided to start walking. Walking was easy to do, and all the articles on health said that those who walk, in any significant amount, are healthier and live longer than those who do not. So I walked. As I was not working, I had nowhere to go and no time I had to be there by.

So I bought a little pedometer, and began to take walks around Palo Alto, seeing how far away, in steps, things were. I found that the one mile to Etz was about 16 minutes, 2300 steps. It's a little less than that to Orthodox Congregation Emek Beracha. It's 45 minutes to the Chassidim at Chabad, and 45 minutes to Conservative Shul Kol Emeth. Yes, I go to those places for variety and friends. It's 25 minutes to Piazza's Market, and 35 minutes to Mollie Stone's. It's 45 minutes to the Safeway on Middlefield. I know these distances as times, so I can plan accordingly, and use these errands as my exercise time. It takes me 40 minutes to walk here to the JCC, and yes, I did, this morning.

Because of this constant walking I am in shape to lead tours, and I was able to co-lead a trip to Israel with Pastor Danielle last March, during which we did considerable hiking up

and down archaeological sites. I was also able to ascend 1000 big stone steps up the mountain trail between Monterossa and Vernazza in Italy's Cinque Terre in August of 2016, and I'm looking forward to climbing Machu Picchu this coming summer. I tell you all of this because I am alive today due to this walking.

Most of you are aware that I was very sick last summer. Here is the story. The day after we returned from a family trip to Scotland (May 1-12), I felt very bad in my chest and abdomen. I thought I was having a heart attack, so I asked my wife, Joy, to take me to the Palo Alto Clinic's Urgent Care. They determined that it was not a heart attack, but also that something serious was going on, so they put me in an ambulance that took me to the Stanford Hospital Emergency Room. At that point my memory stops, due to the amnesiac effects of the anesthetics and sedatives they used on me to keep me from pulling out the tube that was down my windpipe for a month. They correctly diagnosed it as pancreatitis, but then my heart stopped and after they revived me, then revived me again, they had to find out why, so they opened me up.

They found out that I was losing all my blood from a burst pancreatic artery, caused by an overactive inflamed pancreas, which had been caused by gall stones in the adjacent gall bladder. I had several surgeries, and was pumped with 30 units of blood products because it was hard to get the bleeding to stop. Luckily, as I am AB-positive, I'm a universal blood *recipient*. At times there were a variety of blood types flowing into me hanging from the same stand. My decades of donated blood are even with the blood bank now.

My family stayed with me night and day, 24/7, together until I stabilized, then sometimes in shifts. Joy took a leave of absence from work. Our daughters worked and still spent the rest of their time at the hospital. I have no memories of any of that month, thank G0d. But they do. It was very tense for them, because in addition to all the surgeries, the doctors were guarded in their prognoses, saying only that I was very sick, by which they meant I might not make it.

But I did make it. The doctors agreed that I was pretty much an anomaly: people as sick as I was rarely live through such complications. So while I was sedated with my family sitting prayerfully and caringly in the ER and ICU and then hospital room, doctors and nurses, and even a medical student, some off duty, would come around or return just to poke their heads in and inquire how I was, to see the guy who lived and to root for me. My family were amazed at their concern, and emotionally buoyed by their attention.

Finally, after all the dire prognoses and multiple surgeries, to my family's great relief, I came through it all alive, with my mind intact despite the lack of oxygen to my brain when my heart stopped. I woke up to find myself in the hospital. Slowly, over the next two weeks, they told me most of what happened to me during the four weeks plus from the day before mothers' day to the week of fathers' day. Day after day health professionals told me I was lucky to be alive. I have to admit that I was also lucky that the surgeon in charge of Stanford's ICU when I was admitted is the Chief of Trauma Surgery. So I got the best of the best!

My daughter, Ilana, a Doctor of Physical Therapy, told me I had saved myself because all my previous six years of walking and exercising my upper body had made me strong. Like health insurance, it paid off. The doctors and nurses and therapists all agreed that my strong body played a big part in my survival. I could weather the loss of 26 pounds of muscle. But I would have to rebuild it, and retrain it. When you don't use it, you lose it, and you would be surprised how much body *and* bodily coordination you can lose in a relatively short time. I found out when I got to my next hospital.

After I was released from Stanford, I spent nine days in Santa Clara Valley Medical Center's acute rehab facility. It is intensive physical rehab, and to get in you have to commit to 3 hours plus of activities a day. I was so weak back then that it was daunting just to think of all that activity. And doing it was even harder. Abilities I always took for granted, like getting up to a standing position, were gone, along with the muscles to do it. So there was Physical Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Respiratory Therapy, Speech Therapy (because I had been intubated and had a tracheotomy), and Recreational Therapy, as well as gym time for strengthening exercises. But the motto of the rehab unit is "one step at a time." They teach and we practice little things, pieces of movements, before putting the whole movement together. Don't walk, just try to stand using a walker. Just try for a few seconds. Now, can you take a step? Another step? One step at a time. One day at a time. Start out low, slow, and short, and trust it will work out in time, going a little higher, faster, and longer each day.

Rehab is exercise and repetition. It also involves belief. Belief that you are going to get better. Belief that the hard work is worth it. Belief that life is worth the pain and the hard work. All the believing that goes into exercising also goes into rehab. All the picking oneself up from a comfortable inertia to get moving at all goes into rehab. All the rousing of one's beliefs and commitments to push past pains and weariness and go the extra repetition in exercise is also part of rehab.

I am now exercising regularly to regain muscle mass, coordination, and stamina, as well as balance, gait, and posture. I still have a ways to go. I also will be working with a vocal therapist to retrain my voice, restricted now, due to the month of intubation, to a breathy sound and a one-octave range.

When our children were young, and Joy and I were both working professionals juggling 50 hour work weeks with kids' activities, we did not exercise. We always intended to do it, but we never had the energy when we had the rare bit of time. When I turned 40 I was fat and lazy, low energy, wheezy, and not the physical role model I wanted to be for my girls. There is a picture of me with my extended family from that time that hangs in the family gallery on the staircase wall. I look at that picture as I walk the stairs as part of my exercise routine, and I look like a manatee stuffed into a suit. By the time I turned 60 my blood pressure shot through the roof, and I needed that medical intervention to save me.

I am saying this because we do not have to go to a gym to get exercise. All we really need to do to stay healthy is walk a little more. Any amount of walking makes us healthier. How much healthier depends on how much we walk. Working out in a gym is good stuff, especially if we want to buff up. But it's not the only way to work our body. We just need to

take our body for a walk once in a while. Think of your body as the dog you live in, and take it for a walk.

One way to walk more is to stop playing the game called "How close to the store can I park?" Instead, if we just park a little farther from where we're going, we'll get to walk more. This means that when a full parking lot makes us park farther away we'll see it as an opportunity to say "Thank G0d for the exercise" instead of the usual aggravated divine curse we blurt. Walking *can* change our mood sometimes.

And take little walks. After an hour or so behind the computer, I get up and walk around a bit to get my blood and ideas flowing. Just don't always walk to the kitchen! Also, take a Shabbat walk to a pleasant place. If you live close enough, walk with your kids to school in general and at Etz, and for those Shabbat services you attend. Just start to walk. Leave the car and wear out *our* shoes, not our *brakeshoes*. Don't neglect the body our life lives in. Take yourself out for a walk.

It may take several fits and starts before we actually accomplish walking as a lifestyle logistically and emotionally. It's really hard to get walking for the first time. I know. It took me a while to get organized to walk. After many incomplete starts, I finally had my shoes and headphones and hat and backpack and sunscreen where they were easy to access, and I could focus on the walking. One step at a time.

As I said before, using my car meant I could get a few more minutes done of whatever I was doing before I leave. That's how we all feel. In our minds, walking means we lose time. At least we *think* walking loses time. I want to debate that notion. I am alive and walking again today because I walked a lot for six plus years. I did not lose time. I'm five months into a life I would not have had if I hadn't walked. That's the health insurance angle of walking. Walking is the price of a certain kind of health insurance. You pay with time.

But you also get time back while you're walking. Having the time to think, or to listen to music, or to notice the seasons change along with the world, also gains me time. And after I did it for a while I began to miss it when I don't do it. It's not the walking itself I miss. It's the way walking makes me *feel* that I miss when I don't walk. I feel more energetic and capable when I've been walking. And I sleep better because my body is rightfully more tired.

### **The blessings for body and soul.**

When I woke up after my month of sedation in Intensive Care, my family were there to fill me in on what had happened. One way or another they found reason to repeat that I was alive after almost dying, and that the strength of my body and spirit had helped keep me alive. I thought about that a lot, especially as I was bedridden, and dependent on the power and help of other people, nurses and family, to take care of me.

In our prayerbook we ask, in our healing prayer, for "a healing of the body and a healing of the spirit." As I lay there in my cocoon of a hospital bed, I rolled the two morning prayers for the body and for the s0ul, around in my head. Here's the prayer for the body:

Blessed Y0u, Ad0nay, our G0d, Ruler of Space&Time, Wh0 made the human (body) wisely, creating pores and passages, holes and hollows (within us). It is revealed, well-known to Y0ur glorious Throne that were one closed one open or an open one closed, it would be impossible to exist or stand in Y0ur Presence. Blessed Y0u, Ad0nay, Wh0 heals all flesh "and does wonders." (*Judges 12:10*)

First, about Ad0nay, Wh0 heals all flesh "and does wonders." What an amazing thing a G0d-created human body is. Given half a chance it can heal itself. Once the doctors stabilized my body's crisis, it began to do its thing and heal itself. Many of my new scars closed up on their own, and quickly. They itch a lot, but the doctors tell me that itching's a good thing, because it means the scars are healing.

The prayer talks about *nekavim nekavim, chalulim chalulim* / pores and passages, holes and hollows. The way I heard this prayer now was that my gall bladder had been clogged with rocks, and they were banging on my pancreas, which got angry and then shut down, but not before spewing protease, protein-digesting enzyme, that opened a hole in my artery, which opened up, and emptied my heart of blood, which emptied my brain of oxygen. If the doctors had not closed this artery and refilled me with blood, "it would have been impossible for me to exist..." So my pores and passages, holes and hollows closed and opened inopportunistically, and almost killed me. Finding this out pushed me to focus on that prayer in a way I never had before.

Clogged pores and leaking passages almost killed me, but what kept me alive were the new holes and hollows the medical staff opened for me: they intubated me with air, intervened intravenously by dripping enriched liquids into my veins, and created a new stent, a tube that went from just past my stomach to my gut, so food, when I finally got to eat again, would bypass my inflamed pancreas and help it heal. So you can see how this prayer became my theme song. I hope it will become more meaningful for you, too, but I also hope you never have to find meaning the way I did.

Here's the second prayer, for the s0ul:

My G0d, the s0ul Y0u gave me is pure!  
Y0u created it. Y0u formed it. Y0u breathed it into me, and Y0u sustain it within me.  
*and You will take it from me, and return it to me in the coming future.*  
As long as I have breath I thank Y0u Ad0nay my G0d and G0d of my ancestors,  
Much more than creation, Summit of all s0uls.  
Blessed Y0u, Ad0nay, by Wh0se power all life has s0ul and all human flesh, spirit.

The doctors had commented on my strong spirit making a difference in my survival as well. I have never thought of myself as strong of spirit. I have an enthusiastic personality ☺, but I never connected that enthusiasm with strength of spirit. Strength of spirit is what heroes have. I'm not a hero.

But I have been persistent in exercising, and I know it takes spirit just to get going, as well as spirit not to give up. I can fast on Yom Kippur, and that is a triumph of the will. I have

been committed to my family, and to the extent that I have been a part of their spirit I have gotten tenfold more spirit back. I have achieved many of my goals as a rabbi, and to the extent that I helped people find their way with spiritual issues, I also got back much more than I gave. And I try to find a good and optimistic spirit in every situation and in every person. So I do thank G0d for the s0ul that I have, the s0ul that goads me into being persistent in exercising my body as well as exercising my values. And this is how I now relate to this prayer, as a conversation with myself about where I demonstrate spiritual strength.

I do know that the cards and emails sent to me were very helpful in raising my spirits, as were all the meals made and brought to my family for all that time, and afterwards, too, during my first weeks back home. And I thank Etz Chayim's Mitzvah Singers who serenaded me on the last Shabbat afternoon of my time in the rehab hospital. All these helped my s0ul cope with the challenges of my body, bringing a raising of the spirit to the healing of the body.

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Just as I seemed to have been in training for six plus years preparing to survive my surgeries this summer, by walking and eating a better diet, I am now in training for something else. According to a recent issue of *Scientific American* (April 2017, pages 23-27), diet and exercise are the only things so far to successfully reverse or prevent dementia. Over 200 drugs have been developed to treat dementia, and all have failed. This diet and exercise health intervention was tested on mature adults, and both *ameliorated previous* declines in mental ability as well as *delayed new* declines. We can start walking now no matter how old we think we are, and start rolling back mental decline. My mother died of dementia at age 77, and I am 68, only nine years younger than that. Don't neglect the body our mind lives in. Keep our bodies moving.

I want to end this talk with something I saw Dick Van Dyke say on Jay Leno's Tonight Show about eight years ago when Van Dyke was in his mid 80's. After Leno introduced him to applause, Van Dyke waltzed in from off-stage, dancing all the way to his seat into which he floated like the dancer he is. Leno noted his guest's age, and asked him what his secret was for staying so limber and coordinated. Dick Van Dyke said two words:

Keep Moving!

Keep moving. When we don't use it we lose it. It does not take long for body mass and physical coordination to atrophy severely. The same, by the way, goes for all we've learned. When we don't use them we lose them. Pff! There goes High School Spanish. Whoosh! There goes Algebra. Oy! There goes Hebrew. There goes knowing how to do an *aliyah*. Did you know you can practice the Torah blessing just by singing along with those doing them? When we don't use it we lose it. As Hillel said, (*Pirkey Avot 1:13*)

*ud'lá moséef yaséf*    Don't add to? You reduce!

Hillel was talking about learning. If we stop learning we begin to forget what we've learned already. But it also applies to exercise in general. And it applies to our bodies:

Don't add to? You reduce!

So

Keep moving, or your body and brain will waste away.  
Keep moving. Don't neglect the body your mind lives in.  
Keep moving. Take your body for a walk.  
Keep moving. One step at a time.

*It's a new year. We start clean today.  
Take steps.*

Oh, and my longtime good friend, Mark Rosenberg, commented on this talk, "The whole walking regimen is premised on good knees, ankles and feet; not to be taken for granted."

To which I wrote back, "You're right. So I try not to overdo it. Right now my feet and lower back are acting up, but not totally stopping me. My upper body, chest and back, is full of pains that come and go as my innards heal and as my exercises make new strong muscles that pull on my tendons and bones."

I am personally aware of the limitations people have. Believe me. Even before I spent time in a rehabilitation ward I knew that not all of us can move as we'd like. But even when, not if, we are disabled, *keep moving*. Let's move whatever we can move, as far as we can move it, and whenever we can move it. Just *keep moving*.

Oh, and  
don't cross streets with your mind buried  
  
in your phone!