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An adventure in paradise ...

My musical friends will know, Catskills Irish Arts Week concluded last night. Always a magical time, not to be missed.

A week or so ahead of the event, I was still feeling wobbly after a hellish bout of benign paroxysmal positional vertigo a couple of weeks previous. The nauseating, wild, room-spinning vertigo had resolved after Arleen and I performed the Dix Hallpike test and then the Epley maneuver to get the runaway otolith crystals parked where they wouldn't roll around in one of the inner ear's semicircular canals. But I've continued to have some slight dizziness, and I've felt a bit fragile ever since.

So I decided not to go.

Circumstances, however, did not cooperate. I realized I had no choice but to attend, as I wouldn't make it through the month without the income from my vendor's table. (I've found I only need to attend the last three days; I do exactly the same business in three days as I do if I come for the full week.)

So I called to book a room at Weldon House, where I always stay, only to discover it was full, as was the Blackthorn Lodge, which runs both facilities. So I called Gavin's Irish Country Resort and was told there was a cancellation and one room had become available. The price included meals in the restaurant, which I wouldn't need (I bring my own food), and it was more than I was used to paying, but I was pretty sure it was the only room left in all of East Durham, so I made the reservation.

I had a mountain of work to complete before I could go, and somewhat limited energy, but I've done enough of these events now, I can gauge pretty well how to get everything ready without burning out too badly. I did in fact finish the last of the preparations within minutes of when I needed to hit the road if I were to get there in time to set up for the evening's concert.

The car was oven-hot from the sun. I opened all four doors so it could air out while I finished packing (the air conditioning has never worked). Half an hour later, when I brought my stuff to the driveway, it was pouring rain. I'd already loaded a banker's box full of food and personal effects on the passenger seat. The corrugated box was soaked and nearly melted. No time to exchange it, though, so I hoped it would air dry during the drive.

It didn't. The cardboard was too weakened to support the contents, so I would have to find another box when I got to the inn.

The drive was tedious, with slowdowns due to road construction, but otherwise uneventful. The GPS said it would take two and a half hours, but it took three. My spirits lifted as I rolled into East Durham, where the magical atmosphere of Irish Arts Week filled the street.

I heard a familiar "clunk" sound in the back of my car and thought, "What's up with that?" Glancing at the dashboard, I saw the "trunk open" symbol was lit. "Nuts," I thought. "How did that happen?" I pulled over, got out and closed the trunk. Within seconds of driving away, I heard, "clunk." I stopped again and closed the trunk again. And again, as soon as I was moving, "clunk."

So I drove on to Gavin's, hoping the trunk lid would stay down and nothing would fall out.

I checked in and asked the person at the desk where I might find a cardboard box. “I’ll call the pantry,” she said. She picked up a phone and I heard her ask, “Do you have any boxes?” She pointed me in the direction and said, “It’s the screen door.”

I went to the screen door and called, “Hello!” Someone came to the door and pointed left. “Dining room’s over there,” he said and hurried away. I called again, “Hello, I need ...” “Another person called from inside, “Other door!” Finally I got someone to pay attention. “I need a box. You people keep trying to get rid of me.” “Sorry,” he said. “Here are some boxes. Do you see any you can use?” I found a suitable box and went back to my car.

As I drove around to my parking spot, I wondered, “Why is the trunk latch opening?” Rainwater in the switch, I figured out, from leaving the door open in the downpour. So I closed the windows, put the car heater temperature to the hottest setting and turned the fan up all the way. I left it like that for the rest of the night’s driving, and by the time I returned to my room after the concert, the problem had stopped.

I don’t wear shoes if I can possibly avoid it. I’d brought a good pair of flip-flop sandals, the ones I’d worn with a sport coat and polo shirt at the Science and Nonduality Conference last October. At events, the sandals stay parked under my vendor’s table and I’m barefoot. “Like Tolstoy,” someone commented.

I rolled up to the pavilion where Thursday evening’s concert would begin in an hour’s time. As I stepped out of the car, I sensed something was amiss with my left foot. Looking down, I saw the webbing had broken and the thong had come away from the sole of my sandal. I couldn’t walk with it, so I took off both sandals and went to work.

Later, when there was some slack time at the table, I worked out a repair that could be done with the tools and materials I had on hand. It was a little uncomfortable, but a strong repair and it looked OK. The rest of the evening was routine, not a lot of business, but that was normal for the first night. Friday night and the all-day Saturday concert are always the busy times.

I drove back to my room, exhausted, and fell into bed. I awoke feeling renewed, but very hungry, and truth be told, lonely. I live what feels like a sort of exile’s life. It’s just my own psychological makeup and nothing “real,” but I’ve always felt like a sort of outsider guest in several communities, with none that quite feels like “home” (Irish music, Transcendental Meditation, nondual spirituality, Christianity, Judaism, the town where I grew up, etc.).

Feeling adrift, I walked over to the dining area and saw a buffet breakfast was arranged outside, with picnic tables under a canopy. Only three people were seated, so I filled my plate and joined them. Two men, maybe in their fifties, and a young man, maybe late teens or early twenties, with flaming red hair. “He looks like a young Sean Smyth,” I thought.

I ate silently while the men talked about a friend’s business project. I couldn’t tell exactly what. It sounded like the friend had invented something and was working out how to market it. Eventually, one of the men turned to me and asked, “Are you enjoying the week?” “I just got here last night,” I said. “I’m a vendor. I make whistles.”

“You’re Jerry Freeman!” He said. “I have several of your whistles. I love them.” All three men enthusiastically talked whistles, and I began to feel a little less lost. The topic came around to Clarke “originals,” the conical, rolled and soldered tinplate whistles with the wooden fipple block. “It’s a sound that’s been lost to the music,” I said, “because they’re not very good from the factory.

People don't know how to tweak them, so nobody plays them. It's a terrific whistle when it's been set up well."

The young man was keenly interested, so with pen and napkin, I drew for him the details of how to turn a Clarke original into a world-class Irish whistle. Someday, I'll manufacture them myself. That voicing needs to come back to the music.

As I got up to leave the table, one of the men said, "Thank you. Thank you for your generosity."

(This happens again and again, by the way, whether it's music events or meditation meetings or mowing hay. I forget that people care about me and appreciate what I have to offer. Someday, maybe, I'll get it through my head and not have to be reminded every time.)

On the way up the stairs to my room, I felt something go amiss with my right foot.

"No," I thought. "It couldn't be." I looked at my sandal and sure enough, it had broken exactly the same way the left one had the night before. "I've had these sandals five years," I thought. "What are the odds they would both break within twelve hours of each other?"

I put the sandals aside and set up to work on whistles, preparing for the evening's business at the concert. As I worked, I thought about the broken sandal and decided to stop and repair it. But I couldn't find the piece that anchored the webbing to the sole, so I couldn't fix it.

I got in the car and drove into East Durham to look for flip-flops.

I went into Lawyer's General Store, looked around and found a rack of flip-flops and water shoes. Women's and children's sizes only (except for the water shoes, which weren't what I wanted). There were none that would fit. So I drove down the block to East Durham Hardware. "Do you have flip-flops?" I asked. "Over here," the man said.

For \$2.99, I found the cheapest looking grey flip-flops you could imagine, and the only size I could wear was about two sizes too big. But I needed flip-flops, and I knew there wasn't another pair to be purchased in East Durham, so I bought them. "Will you guarantee these will last two days?" I asked the store manager. "No," he said, and we both laughed.

Trying them out, I found they were dangerous to wear. The soles stuck out so far in front and back, they would catch on things as I walked and trip me up. Not to mention, they looked like clown shoes. I wondered if I could trim them to size. The only scissors I'd brought were a small pair of barber shears I use for some of the fine cutting I have to do. But sure enough, it cut through the soft foam soles, and the finished product looked respectable. Finally I had a pair of sandals I could wear safely, without embarrassment.

I finished the afternoon's whistle preparations, loaded the car and got ready to drive to the pavilion to set up for the evening.

When I turned the key in the ignition, the car alarm went off. "Nuts," I thought. "What's that about?" I turned the engine off and on again. The alarm continued. HONK! HONK! HONK! HONK! ... I got out and locked and unlocked the doors from outside. The alarm continued. I got back in and started the car. The alarm continued. Eventually, the alarm stopped by itself for no apparent reason and I drove to the pavilion. I parked the car and took the key out of the ignition. The alarm went off again. HONK! HONK! HONK! HONK! ... People looked at me. "My car is trying to embarrass me!" I called to them. They stopped looking. Finally the honking stopped and I unloaded.

The evening went well. A good amount of business, a lot of friendly conversation, many people telling me how much they appreciate my work. And wonderful music, with a lot of poignant, mournful singing about leaving home and family, love and loss, old age and dying. Several times that night, I fought tears.

The thing is, I'm getting old.

I can't do some things I used to, and lately I've been wondering, with the dizziness, will I be able to mount forty feet of scaffold and do the chimney work for the new wood-burning fireplace insert so we can keep the house warm enough this winter? I've been feeling doubtful and diminished, not sure how I'll be able to carry on.

After the concert, I loaded my boxes and started the car. HONK! HONK! HONK! HONK! ... As I drove off, I shouted to the onlookers, "I'm stealing my own car!" There was nothing more to be done about it that night. In the morning, when the inn lobby was open again, I could use the public computer to go online and search "2000 VW Jetta how to turn off alarm."

After breakfast, I went online and found the instructions I needed. Disconnect the positive battery cable. Turn the ignition key ten times on and off. Turn it on again and hold it five to ten seconds. You should hear a click. Reconnect battery cable.

I got a wrench out of the trunk and followed the instructions. I was doubtful of the key-turning business. It seemed, with the battery disconnected, nothing was happening. I turned the key the final time and held it ten seconds. No click.

"OK," I thought. "I wonder if that did anything."

I reconnected the battery and started the car. Silence, except for the sweet sound of my little horse's diesel engine. "Is it really fixed?" I thought. (Yes, it was really fixed. I think probably, the key-turning routine was bogus. Likely just disconnecting and reconnecting the battery was enough to reset the alarm.)

I finished the morning's preparations and drove to the pavilion, arriving a little after 11:00 for the event scheduled to begin at noon. Within the first half-hour, my table was very busy and I hurried to keep enough whistles ready on the table. A man about my own age came over and held out a battle-worn pre-1980's key of D redtop brass Generation. "I've played this for years and years," he said. "I bought it in 1970. It doesn't work like it used to."

The windway roof was completely worn off the first quarter inch of the beak, leaving the inside of the windway exposed. The windway floor was severely warped in an arch, closing off about half the original opening at the downwind end. And the inside of the mouthpiece was covered with a layer of crust from hundreds, maybe even thousands of hours of playing.

"Let me see what I can do," I said.

I love those old, classic Generation whistles. Generation replaced the tooling in the early 1980's and the whistles have never been the same. The really good vintage ones are special and it delights me to bring them back to life, which I get to do two or three times a year.

A few months ago, I stopped offering tweaked Generations in Eb, D and C. As they come from the factory the whistles no longer can be reliably tweaked, so I had to give up on them. (High G, F, Bb, alto A and tenor G tweaked Generations, however, are turning out better than ever.) Pondering the implications, I understood what to do.

When the University of Connecticut provided me with CT scans of my whistle designs, I also got scans of good examples of pre-1980's Generation Eb/D, C and Bb whistleheads. I will turn those scans into 3D printing designs and create replicas of the original, treasured Generation whistles. It will take some time, as the technology and materials are still evolving, but I will do it, I promise. Those classic whistles **MUST** come back.

The 1970 redtop brass Generation was in rough shape. There was nothing I could do to repair the damaged windway roof, and I wouldn't try to change the distorted interior geometry. This is archival work, and I take a very light touch to the original plastic on these historic instruments. I could do two things:

1. Meticulously clean the whistle. I removed the crust from inside so not a single particle could be seen when sighting through the windway. Very important not to leave even the smallest crumb, as it will disturb the airstream and damage the sound.
2. I installed a filler lattice under the windway. People stick a ball of poster putty to fill the cavity under the windway, and that cleans up some of the unstable notes. But poster putty or any solid filler deadens the sound. It took me ten years to finally come up with a solution I was satisfied with. I needed something transparent to sound waves, but that an airstream would see as a solid surface. Finally, I figured out how to create an open lattice that attaches under the windway. It works perfectly without altering the original plastic in any way.

I finished that work and tried the whistle. It was beautifully sweet and perfectly balanced between octaves. I thought, "This is special."

Looking around, I saw Mary Bergin, talking to someone near the back of the hall. It was between sets of music, and a good time to approach her, so I went over and got her attention. She smiled when she saw me and said hello. I held out the whistle and said, "I wanted you to see this." Her eyes twinkled as she looked at it. That was the kind of whistle she played for many years before they stopped being produced.

"Try it," I said.

"Is it safe to play?" She asked.

"Yeah. I've worked on it."

We stepped outside and she started to play, at first a little hesitantly. Her eyes lit up and she played on awhile. As she handed it back, she said, "Wonderful." "Isn't it sweet?" I asked. "Lovely," she said. "Good on ye."

A little later, back at my table, Laura Byrne appeared. We chatted a minute and I handed her the whistle. "I want you to try this," I said. She played the whistle a long time, and beautifully. There, I could hear better than when Mary played it and I realized that was the best classic D Generation I had ever heard. Gorgeous.

After Laura had left and my table was quiet awhile, I began to think of angels. I've mentioned before, I don't see angels, but at times, I'm keenly aware of their benevolent presence.

"You brought me here to see that whistle, didn't you?" I asked. "Yes," I heard them say. (I can't explain how this works, but it's clear enough to me where the words are coming from.)

The rest of the day went true to form for these events. I did enough business, saw some old friends

and heard more great music. I noticed, I didn't feel the slightest bit tired. The event was scheduled to run until six o'clock, though typically, the musicians onstage ignore the schedule and play on for another hour or two.

A little after five o'clock, I was getting a few more whistles ready, to keep the full selection of finished whistles out on the table. As I was chamfering the sharp edges off the toneholes on a brass tenor G tonebody, my X-acto knife slipped and pierced my left wrist exactly at the pulse point. Blood flooded out faster than I remember ever seeing from such a small cut. I covered it in less than a second with a tissue and held strong pressure against it with my right thumb.

I stood up and walked over toward a beverage vendor's stall. I told the first person I encountered, "I've cut myself and need a napkin. Can you help me?" The man pulled a clean cotton handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to me. "Perfect," I said. "I may have pierced my radial artery," I said. "I need to find a doctor or nurse."

He said, "I think Réidín Ó Flynn is around somewhere. Shall I look for her?" "I need someone to make an announcement from the stage," I said. "I don't think Réidín's the best one for that." I walked toward the front of the hall thinking, "I need Paul Keating."

I found Paul and told him the situation. He went to the mic and made the announcement. Within a few minutes two women came to me where I had sat down. The whole time, I continued to hold strong pressure against the injury, using the handkerchief. There was no loss of blood.

I explained, "I may have pierced my radial artery." One of the women took the lead and did most of the talking. "If you have in fact done that, you need an ambulance." We discussed it for half a minute, and she took her cellphone and called 911. She seemed to know exactly what to do. I asked, "Are you a doctor?" "Nurse Practitioner," she said, as was the other woman there. (Later, I learned there were three nurse practitioners there, but I was only aware of two at the time.)

She got me to lie down on a platform near where I'd been sitting, found some duct tape to better attach the handkerchief, and helped me find a position where I could hold the wrist elevated and maintain pressure against the wound. After awhile, as we waited for the ambulance, she asked, "Why don't you take the pressure off and we'll see if the bleeding's stopped."

"I don't want to do that," I said. I had not released the pressure for as long as a second the entire time since the accident, and I was afraid to risk it.

Soon, two men in blue uniforms appeared.

We talked briefly, and they asked me to walk to the ambulance. "We need to know if you're dizzy or disoriented, see if you can walk a straight line, check your blood pressure." "I assume you mean not counting my baseline dizziness that I already had before this." "Right," they said.

We were walking as they told me this, so I said, "How about this straight line?" I walked along the line between two sections of pavement and surprised myself how easily I could do it, even with hands locked together so I couldn't hold my arms out. "Excellent," one of them said. Just at that moment, something came to me, clear as a light turning on. "I'm in better shape than I thought." From that moment, even in the midst of the emergency, I began to see the future differently.

When I got into the ambulance, I said, "This is nicer than my room."

"We want to start an IV," they said.

“If I may, I’ll refuse that for now,” I said. “I haven’t lost any blood, and I’m sensitive to the phthalates in the tubing and IV bags. If it’s necessary later we can do it, but I always feel worse after an IV.” “It’s up to you,” they said.

Blood pressure was fine. Blood oxygen saturation in the fingers of both hands was 97% - 99% (better in the injured hand, actually) so there was no loss of circulation. No nerve damage. No tendon damage.

“Was there pulsing or a steady flow?” “A steady flow,” I said. “What color was the blood? Bright red or dark?” “Dark red.” “Then it wasn’t arterial blood. That would have been from a vein. There are many veins near the surface in that area that might have been involved.”

By then, we’d spent some time, and one of the men asked, “Let’s release the pressure and see if the bleeding’s stopped. Don’t move the bandage. If there’s a clot, you don’t want to disturb it. If it’s still bleeding it will soak the dressing and we’ll see it.”

There was no more blood. I didn’t want to take an ambulance ride in any case, but having seen the bleeding had stopped and appeared not to be from an artery, I decided I would have someone drive me to the emergency room in a car.

I felt well enough to go back to my table and spend some time working out logistics. Tom Wadsworth had already begun sorting out a ride to the nearest emergency room and looking for a place nearby I could stay the night. This was taking some time, and I began to feel it would be safe to remove the handkerchief and look at the cut. That would be important because I not only didn’t want to take an ambulance ride, I didn’t want to go to an emergency room.

I tracked down my nurse practitioner and asked her to sit with me as I removed the bandage. “I want you to be here while I do this,” I said. The cut was surgically clean, about half-an-inch-long and nicely closed, though fragile so soon after the injury. The incision was halfway across a medium sized vein just under the skin. I’d severed, or partially severed, that vein.

“OK,” I thought. “An urgent care center can handle this.” I told Tom and he started calling around to urgent care centers in the area. As he did that, I pondered, “At an urgent care center, what would they do? Butterfly bandage? Stitches?” And then it occurred to me. They would Superglue it. Arleen, my Better Half, had worked at an urgent care center. She’d Superglued many lacerations and cuts, including a few of mine here at the house. So I knew how it would be done. Not rocket science.

“They’re all closed,” Tom said. “Every one I try to call, the connection goes right to the ER.” “OK,” I said. “I think I’ve got this. I have some good Superglue here. I’ll do it myself. I think I can drive back to Connecticut OK.”

I glued the incision, exactly as Arleen had done for me now and then. I’m good with glue, use it all the time in my work, and I did a good job.

I didn’t try to work on any more whistles and I got help packing and loading my car, but I was able to sit and enjoy the last hour of the concert, which ended at eight o’clock. I even sold another two or three whistles.

It was a perfect night for a drive. The air was pleasantly cool, with still some daylight for the first part of the two and a half hour trip. Traffic was light on the Interstates on a Saturday evening. I would be home exactly on schedule.

Just out of town, I saw a billboard, "Catskills Urgent Care Center, 9 am to 9 pm 365 days." I looked at the dashboard clock. Eight twenty eight pm. The nearest urgent care center was open, but somehow Tom hadn't been able to get through on the phone. "Thank you, Lord," I whispered. I didn't want to go on an ambulance OR to an emergency room OR to an urgent care center. I wanted to go home and sleep in my own bed.

As I drove, I thought about what had happened.

Arleen has always been impressed, almost to the point of awe, by how fast I knit and heal from injury. Patients she's seen would be incapacitated for days or weeks with injuries I recover from overnight or even sometimes, in hours.

Even with that background of experience I was impressed by how fast and well the cut had closed itself and knit together. And again I realized, "I'm in better shape than I thought."

"Angels," I thought. "You put me through this to show me, didn't you?"

"Yes, we did," The answer came back.

"Are you going to do this every time I start to doubt myself?" I asked.

"If we have to," the answer came.

Epilogue ...

I wondered if I'd overreacted, made a fuss about something trivial and put people to a lot of trouble unnecessarily. Just before I went to bed, I thought, "Where's the pulse?" I placed my index finger a millimeter below the incision, at the middle of the cut. Strong pulse. I placed my index finger a millimeter above the incision, at the middle of the cut. Strong pulse, and very close to the surface in both cases.

The incision was exactly over the radial artery, as I'd thought when I first cut myself. Truth be told, I believe I did pierce the radial artery with the point of that knife. I saw dark blood because I also opened a vein closer to the surface, and I didn't see pulsing because there was an additional steady flow from the vein and I covered the cut before the next heartbeat. I think the surgical cleanness of the cut and my strong capacity to heal are what allowed it to close as it did.

"It was necessary that there should be sin; but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

~ Julian of Norwich