

Richard Barr



Learning a painful posture lesson

He looked very old. Slowly, obviously in great pain, he made to get up from his bed. His first attempts failed. But he had to persist. His bladder was full to bursting.

Something nasty would happen if he did not move soon. Haltingly, agonisingly, he pulled himself vertical, clutching as he did, curtain rails and furniture.

He hobbled from one foot to the other, but made no forward progress. Painfully he inched towards his goal — the bathroom. The pain was excruciating.

As the morning grew towards afternoon, he made slow progress. By lunchtime he was walking, albeit like a very old man.

But he wasn't. He was 44 and he was me. I have never felt such pain before. Was it just pain, or was it terror too?

Just under 40 years ago I started school. It was the Elm and Emneth Infant School, in a typical Victorian building with high Gothic windows, so designed that unless the pupils grew to at least six feet, there would be no chance at all of them seeing anything of the outside world except clouds. I would spend a lot of time looking at those clouds. If Judy Collins had not got there first with her description of ice cream castles and feathered canyons, I could have written Both Sides Now.

But when I was not gazing at clouds or being terrorised by Miss Jermy (the head, and only teacher) into writing my name correctly I would study two posters on the wall.

The first had pictures of cups with faces on them. The message was: run away coffee, run away tea; come back cocoa, come back milk.

Oh those innocent days . . . Needless to say, I ignored the warning and soon learned the evil ways of coffee and tea drinking.

I also ignored the other poster. This had two letters: I and C. The message was that if you sat shaped like a C you would develop all sorts of back problems but if you sat like the letter I all would be well.

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"Now just stand naturally," said the pleasant physiotherapist from New Zealand. I obeyed her, feeling conscious of rather too much belly sticking out in front.

She inspected me, as one might examine a used car. I half expected her to kick at my shoes. She didn't; but nor did she mince her words.

"You have a terrible posture". She actually said "tirrible" but I certainly was not going to correct her pronunciation. "Your back is curved like a C; your shoulder is down on one side and your neck out. Lie down. Let's see what we can do for you."

I had not been massaged before. I had visions of emerging from the experience bruised and aching. It was not like that. It was more like having pastry rolled out on my back; as though muscles and sinews and tendons were all in the wrong place and needed reshaping and replacing.

Her fingers gently moved up and down my back, pressing and smoothing and easing as they went.

As she worked, she talked, telling me about New Zealand and her large family of siblings. She also said that what I had was probably a displaced disc; that from now onwards I must imitate the letter I and do exercises and swim regularly for the rest of my life.

After it was over she stood me up and instructed me how to correct my posture. I must now thrust my pelvis forward and hold my neck back. Then she laid down and effortlessly demonstrated the exercises I must do morning and night. I tried it. My flabby muscles were not equal to the task.

"Do it a little more each day. You will soon get used to it," she said reassuringly as she handed me back my clothes.

So now I lie on the floor, once again gazing at the clouds racing across the sky looking so much like — rows and flows of angel hair. Ah, Judy Collins, I wonder if you sat up straight in school, and confined yourself to cocoa and milk.

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