

STIFFNESS

One of the common ailments that comes with ageing is stiffness in the joints and muscles. The causes are many, including years of wear and tear, abuse and neglect, lack of use and a variety of diseases. Exercise, stretching therapy and a good massage can restore some joint mobility, but there are other kinds that are permanent, requiring the afflicted to adapt their lifestyle for the sake of safety and ease.

My illness, PLS, brings with it spasticity in all four limbs. There is medication that reduces the number and severity of the spasms, but it cannot eradicate them. A spasm is a temporary, involuntary twisting and stiffening of the legs, feet, arms or hands, for example. Spasms are not usually painful, at least not for me at this point; they are just awkward and puzzling.

In addition, my fingers and toes are stiff and seem to have minds of their own. Sometimes my toes just don't want to work together and bend so they can slip into my shoes; they'd rather spread out and cause trouble for the one with shoe in hand, so there! And my fingers often hit the keys on the computer or musical keyboard that THEY have in mind, never mind what I intended. Or they won't hit the keys at all if they'd rather not. I find some odd spellings and many incorrect spacings as I proof-read my writings. I keep using my fingers and giving them exercise, grateful for the work they still do, however reluctantly.

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In September, 2003 I was visiting my mother in the nursing home in Pennsylvania where she resided. She was resting peacefully in a recliner in the common room of her section. Since she seemed not to recognize me at all and since there was no way to communicate with her except to squeeze her hand, I began to notice the other occupants of the room. One woman, who seemed to be decades younger than the rest, especially caught my attention.

Suddenly her whole body went into a contortion. Her neck flew to the side and a grimace covered her face. Her arms and legs stretched, stiffened and twisted, holding the pose for perhaps a minute. Then she relaxed and fell back into a normal position in her recliner. All that time she made no sound and seemed to be in no danger. That was a spasm, I thought, and wondered if mine would progress to the extent that hers had.

A nurse came into the room, walked over to the woman and spoke so kindly to her. I didn't hear what she said, but I couldn't help hearing the name of the spastic person.

Her name was Verna.

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There is a kind of stiffness that is far worse than that of the body, and that is stiffness, hardness, rigidity of soul and spirit. The term "stiff-necked" is first used in the Bible in connection with a sad incident in the wilderness. Moses had been up Mt. Sinai for weeks when the Israelites became worried. Who would lead them out of this desert place? They prevailed upon Aaron, the brother of Moses, to make them an idol in the form of a golden calf. Moses, of course, knew nothing about this until the Lord gave him the shocking report:

"Your people ... have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I have commanded them and have made for themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, 'This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.' I have seen these people and they are a stiff-necked people" (Exodus 32:2-9).

The words associated with “stiff-necked” let us know how serious this term is. In this passage, the word was “corruption,” that is, introducing idol worship into God’s holy nation. In Exodus 34:9 the word is connected with “wickedness” and “sin”; in Deuteronomy 31:27 it is “rebelliousness.” 2 Chronicles 36:13 says of King Zedekiah, *“He became stiff-necked and ‘hardened his heart’ and ‘would not turn to the Lord,’ the God of Israel.”* Elsewhere the term is coupled with “arrogance,” “evil” and “refusing to listen.”

That’s not an attractive set of characteristics, is it? Why would anyone CHOOSE to be stiff-necked? For it is a choice. Proverbs 29:1 talks about those who REMAIN stiff-necked after many rebukes. And Deuteronomy 10:16 gives this advice: *“Circumcise [open] your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer.”* If the advice applies to you, please heed it. Certainly no one would choose to have a stiff neck physically like the one my pastor-friend Linda had; she could not turn her head to the right or to the left due to a disease. A spiritually stiff neck is just as uncomfortable and limiting.

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Jesus had a hard time with people who were rigid in following rules, who had ears that refused to hear; eyes that would not see; minds and hearts that were closed. They followed Jesus around watching for opportunities to criticize him. They found such an occasion one Sabbath in a synagogue. The story is in Luke 13:10-17:

A woman who had been crippled for eighteen years was in the synagogue that day. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. And yet she went out in public rather than stay at home where the physical and social pain might have been diminished. I admire that woman, stiff in body but not in spirit!

Jesus noticed her in the back, called her forward, and healed her. She immediately straightened up and praised God! Now she had no bondage at all! And then came the critics. The charge was one that was often repeated: Jesus had broken the Sabbath rules; the healing should have taken place some other day of the week. Jesus called the critics hypocrites and gave them something so simple to think about that they were humiliated. He asked, *“Doesn’t each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?”* These rule-keeping people may walk freely, but inwardly they are crippled and bent. Beware! They love to get others to follow their ways.

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One final story contrasts so well the character and actions of a godly man and the criticism and actions of the stiff-necked. It is found in Acts 6 and 7 and concerns Stephen.

Stephen was one of seven men chosen by the early church to oversee the distribution of food to the widows in the community of believers. He is described as full of the Holy Spirit, wisdom and faith; he was also filled with God’s grace and power. He did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. Members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen tried to argue with Stephen and when they could not prevail, they found some people willing to accuse him (falsely) of blasphemy.

Stephen began his defense with a narrative history of Israel. Then suddenly he started accusing them with these words: *“You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised [closed] hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him!”*

When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy

Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God. *"Look," he said. "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"*

At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city, removed their coats and began to stone him. *While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he said this, he fell asleep.*

So quickly Stephen was in the presence of Jesus who had come to receive him, while his body lay crushed under a pile of stones. His Christ-like character still thrills and inspires our souls after all these years! At least it does mine. Thank you, Stephen.

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If you have been stiff-necked, hard hearted, closed minded or rigidly legalistic, it's not too late to change. God our Maker is a great Re-maker as well. Ezekiel 36:26 says: *"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."* I know this verse refers to Israel, but I'm sure it also applies to individuals who desire a change of heart. Again, choice is involved. Would you like to be soft and useable, like Stephen? Or do you want to remain the way you are?

I like Isaiah 64:8: *"O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hands."* I do not want to be difficult material for my Master Potter to work with as he molds and shapes me into the image of Christ. I want to be the softest possible putty in the hands of my God.

This chorus by Daniel Iverson expresses my inner desire, far more important to me than getting rid of my spastic condition:

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me,
Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.
Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.
Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.

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Verna Kwiatkowski

www.vernakwiatkowski.com

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