

Tap Dance

"a half an inch of water and you think you're gonna drown"

John Prine-*"Thats the Way that the World goes 'Round"*

I volunteer for an organization called Operation Independence. It's an organization that provides free rides for seniors to their medical appointments. Currently I'm a part-time driver. Of course I'm also a senior, so one day I could be the passenger.

Often, as I drive, my passengers share the stories of their lives. I've listened as Hank, an army veteran, told me of his experiences in Vietnam. I've heard Jo Ann, a feisty 88 year old black woman, explain to me what it was like to participate in the 1960 Nashville Civil Rights sit-in alongside John Lewis. Another rider, Marvin, told me about the challenges of raising his Down's Syndrome afflicted son for fifty years; tearing up as he related how much his son would miss him during the ninety minute appointment.

These conversations are why I volunteer.

Recently I was tasked with providing a ride to an 84 year old woman named Emilia, who needed to go to her doctor for a routine check-up. However, early that morning, I received a call from her daughter Rosalyn. Emilia had gotten sick during the night and had just been taken by ambulance to the hospital. I was no longer needed to drive her mom. However, she asked, "Would I mind taking her to the hospital so she could be with her mom?" Rosalyn didn't drive.

Of course.

Rosalyn, who appeared to be about 60 years old, was carrying a large bag when I picked her up. As I put the bag in the back seat, she told me it contained shoes and change of clothes for a recital later that evening. Assuming the recital was for her granddaughter, I asked Rosalyn if it was a dance recital.

Turns out it was a dance recital but not for her granddaughter; Rosalyn was the headliner. Rosalyn was an accomplished tap dancer and performing in shows the next three nights. Her eyes lit up as she told me about that evening's performance. She explained that she had told her mom to "hurry up and feel better" so she could get out of the hospital in time to see her dance. She invited my wife and I to attend. Told me we could bring our friends and that we would not be disappointed; "I'm actually pretty good!"

On the way to the hospital I asked Rosalyn how she got into tap dancing.

She told me that her mother had enrolled her in dancing school as an eight year old, and she had loved to tap dance ever since. She had been awkward as a child, and the dancing made her feel good about herself. She loved the look and feel of the tap shoes and loved to perform. "After you hear an audience applauding for you, you don't want to give that up." She continued dancing though high school, but

after graduation, the opportunities to dance dried up, and, anyway, “I needed to work to help support my family.”

Her first job was at a factory. She was young, the only woman working on the assembly line, and after continually being harassed by management and workers alike, she quit. “I wasn’t putting up with that nonsense” she explained. Disillusioned by the experience, and wanting to feel good again, she found an amateur troop that performed in senior centers and returned to dancing. “I never feel better than when I’m tap dancing.”

A few years later, while working in an office, she suffered the first of many seizures. She was diagnosed with a neurological disorder and was told that it would be too dangerous to tap dance; she could suffer a severe fall. Eventually the doctors stumbled on the correct medication, and the seizures stopped. She started dancing again.

Ten years ago she developed cancer. Doctors told her it was ‘the good kind’ and was curable, but she needed chemotherapy and radiation treatments. After a year of therapy, the cancer went away. Three years ago, her mom got sick. She became her mom’s caregiver while continuing to work full-time. Last year, Rosalyn’s cancer returned. After another six months of chemo and radiation, it appears the cancer is in remission. She’ll find out for sure at her check up in February.

Through all of this, she continues to dance.

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Nobody gets through life unscathed. Whether living with the scars of war like Hank, enduring a lifetime of racism like Jo-Ann, or raising a child with Down’s Syndrome like Marvin, all of us carry burdens. Some burdens are only a half an inch of water. Others are full blown floods.

In either case, no matter life’s challenges, it is so easy to wallow in self-pity. To fret about what is going on in the world and in our lives. To be disillusioned, afraid of what might happen next. To be angry at real or perceived injustices. To let our wounds and our worry get the best of us. Pull the covers over our heads, blinders over our eyes and just hope it all goes away. Thinking we’re going to drown.

But it is not the burdens that define a life, it’s the way we choose to face them that is our measure.

Rosalyn chooses to dance.

That’s all I’m sayin’

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