

Tissue Expanders: Thoughts on Discomfort and Joy

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On a recent Sunday I sat in church with a medical drain tube and some unattractive stitches hidden under my baggy shirt. Blessedly fortified by narcotic pain medication, I listened to my pastor's sermon. Toward the end of his message, one comment fell on my ears with bell-like clarity and special meaning.

Speaking of the painful trials we encounter in life, Pastor Al remarked, "Sometimes God puts us in those places to stretch us, to give us a greater capacity in our heart, because our hearts tend to shrink up and shrivel like a prune."ⁱ

Silently I mouthed the words, "tissue expander."

You see, I recently underwent a mastectomy – the removal of a breast due to cancer. It was a life-saving necessity and the surgeon told me that it is a surprisingly easy procedure to recover from, physically. However, I also elected to undergo a procedure called "reconstruction." And that is a different ball of wax – or silicon, as it were – altogether. Hence the potent pain meds, even two weeks out.

The reconstruction wasn't necessary, but I was told I would probably be happy with it because it would restore my – dare I say girlish? – figure to the contours with which I am accustomed. But it turns out they don't just remove the bad part, slip in a silicon replacement and zip you up. No, it doesn't work that way. Rather they have to pick up the chest muscle and put a tissue expander (a bag of fluid partly the size we are aiming for) behind it. And the chest muscle, it seems, doesn't much like being picked up and having things put behind it.

Ouch.

Unfortunately, it doesn't end there. Once my chest muscle has accepted the situation, the doctors will periodically inject more fluid into the tissue expander, further stretching me out until I am the proper size to be... ahem... symmetrical. Then they will replace the expander with the permanent, much more comfortable prosthetic.

So when Pastor Al went on to say "God wants to stretch out the borders of your heart so you can receive more of His favor and more of His goodness, more of His power, more of His joy, more of His peace!" I half-grimaced and half grinned.

Oh, yeah, I thought, I know what that's about.

After all, I didn't have to put myself through a reconstruction. I chose to go through this uncomfortable process because I was persuaded that, in the long run, I would be happy with the results. And the results would be much longer lasting than the discomfort. Ultimately, it would be worth it.

But if this is true on a relatively superficial, physical level, how much so when we are talking about the eternal matters Pastor Al had in mind?

He finished by saying, “We’re always trying to get out of something and God is trying to get something into you. Psalm 6 says our God is a faithful God; He knows the end from the beginning – we can trust Him.”

A choice to avoid discomfort at every turn is also a choice to close ourselves off from meaning, usefulness, growth and, yes, even joy. It is a choice to consign ourselves to a life of trivial, temporary comfort. For often the deepest joys in life – and always the eternal ones – come at a cost.

Ironically, even when we flee it, suffering will come to all of us in the end. Like my cancer. I could have refused treatment for my very treatable cancer. But I have seen the results of cancer ignored, and it is far, far worse. When I chose the mastectomy, I was choosing to extend my life. And when I chose the reconstruction I was choosing a fuller life (if you will excuse the irresistible pun). In a sense I was not choosing the pain, I was choosing the outcome, and simply accepting the pain as an unavoidable part of the road to get there.

Of course it isn’t a simple pain = gain equation. I made my surgical choices under the advice of the doctor who also gave me a set of instructions that I am careful to follow. Failure to heed the doctor’s instructions would result in all sorts of unnecessary pain that would bring no gain at all.

The long and the short of it is this: I hate my tissue expander. But I want what it will ultimately accomplish. So I willingly let them put the irritating thing into me, and I give thanks for the medication that helps me cope with it.

And regarding trials in life I say to God, “Yes. Proceed.”

I confess, I am chief of wimps. I hate pain. But I want more – oh, so much more – of God’s favor, goodness, power, joy and peace. And ultimately I want an eternity filled with those things and no more pain. So I will trust God to stretch and expand me however He must, knowing that in Christ He has already borne the bulk of the pain on my behalf (something the surgeon couldn’t do) and He has prescribed all that I will need to make the rest of it bearable.

I’ve signed the release. The rest is in His hands.

*“... and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, **who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.**” Hebrews 12:2*

ⁱ Pastor Al Pittman, Calvary Worship Center, Colorado Springs, CO www.cwccs.org