

The Land Where Everybody Walked with a Cane

Once upon a time, in a far country high up in the faraway mountains, there was a land where everybody walked with a cane. The reason they walked with a cane is unclear: maybe there was an old grandfather in their distant past whom they imitated out of respect, or perhaps it had started out as a disguise against foreign invaders. Anyway, for centuries, in this isolated country the people had all walked with canes. The little toddlers had their baby canes, then they graduated to their kindergarten canes, their middle school, high school, and college canes, and then their walking-down-the-aisle- to-get-married canes. They never thought about it because this is how they had always done it, and life went on with everybody hobbling around leaning on a stick.

One day an explorer appeared on the horizon, lost in the mountains, and strode down into their little world on two feet. They took him in, fed him, befriended him, and tried to give him a cane since they noticed he didn't have one. He told them, "Thank you very much, I don't need a cane, and by the way why are you all leaning on them?"

They didn't quite know what to say, since no one had ever asked this question before. "Well, uh, gee, we, uh, always walk with our canes, we can't walk without our canes, if God had meant us to walk without canes He would have given us three legs, we can't walk without our canes, WE CAN'T WALK WITHOUT OUT CANES!"

Well, this explorer wasn't buying it: so one night while they were all asleep, he crept into everybody's room, grinch-like, and stole all their canes. When they woke up in the morning, they had to crawl out of bed and struggle to the street on wobbly legs to discover the meaning of this catastrophe. There in the square stood the explorer standing before a great bonfire, where a great pile of canes was cheerfully crackling up in smoke. The people were enraged, they were hysterical, they were petrified.

But as they approached the fire to try to save some of their equipment, somebody noticed, "Hey, we're walking!" "Hey, we're walking without our canes!" From a wobbly perspective they looked around and saw each other for the first time standing upright on two legs with both hands free. It took a

moment, but in almost no time all they were dancing, and prancing, and striding about the square on unencumbered happy feet, free at last!

Moral:

Many of us bind up our muscles in knots unnecessarily. When we first start to learn an instrument, the unfamiliarity of the experience normally causes us to grip and freeze our muscles into fixed positions. It is very easy for these rigid postures to become habitual, and if we don't learn to free up our muscles these habits can pursue us and restrict our motions for the rest of our lives.

Learn a word: kinesthetic sense, or muscle sense. This term refers to your muscles' ability to locate and manipulate objects in space. Close your eyes and touch your nose with your finger. Most of us do this pretty well, because our muscles are always sending signals to our brains about where in space are limbs are. Our brains can determine where our arms, or our hands, or our feet, or our fingers are located in space, by measuring muscle tension. Every muscular movement sends out a signal to our brains telling us where those muscles are, so that we can pick up things, or move things, or find things.

The thing is, your brain responds most powerfully to the muscle that is sending out the loudest signal; now, if you're holding a muscle really tight, it sends out a stronger signal than a muscle that is relaxed, so the brain prefers that signal over weaker signals. Therefore the brain tends to use these tight muscles as reference points to find locations in space. This would be fine except that tight muscles don't work very well, since they can't move. Not only can't they move, but their tension spreads to other surrounding muscles and freezes them up too, so they get tired, and inefficient, and cause pain which can become chronic and extremely dangerous.

Most of us don't even feel these tensions, because as soon as they become habits, they feel natural, or, rather, we don't feel anything all; we don't even know we're doing anything wrong except for the fact that we can't play fast, we can't play accurately, and we get tired after only a few minutes. When your attention is drawn to a muscle that is causing this type of problem, it is very difficult to make it relax because, when you do, your brain loses a vital reference point it has been using to find its way round the keyboard or the fingerboard. Consequently, when you try to train a tense

muscle to relax, your first response is to feel lost, disoriented, and insecure. But if you stick with it, and remind yourself repeatedly to relax, you can re-train your muscle, and your brain will install new reference points based on the new reduced level of muscular tension.

Thus, just as the people in the land where everybody walked with the cane felt very unhappy at first, when they lost their canes, but then got used to, and enjoyed, their new-found freedom—you too will soon discover that you can do everything better without the cane. Learn to really feel what your muscles are doing: if the muscle you've just turned on to do a job, stays turned on after the job is done, you must learn how to turn it off.