

Dump the Gump.....Chapter 6

(The following is the sixth chapter of Jerry Epperson's account of his life with polio. Enjoy, the Editor)

By Wallace W. (Jerry) Epperson, Jr.

I hated the movie "Forest Gump". The idea of running out of your leg braces just by sheer willpower was silly, or stupid, or at to me, insulting. Fantasy? Of course.

His limited mental capacity and slow speech also re-enforced a stereotype that mental and physical disabilities are somehow linked, at least to some.

I doubt that I am the only handicapped person that has well-meaning people speak to me s-l-o-w-l-y as if I would have difficulty understanding normal speech. Smiling in a condescending manner, I know they are trying to be kind, but it is difficult to not be offended. I try not to be insulting or sarcastic in my replies, but sometimes I cannot help myself.

My family owned a 1969 Camaro convertible for more than thirty years. It was both kids' first car. One day in the summer I drove to the mall with the top down. I never take the last handicapped parking spot, but on this day, they were all empty so I used one.

Immediately, a lady ran over and chastised me for using a handicapped spot. I couldn't get a word in. Finally, I climbed out of the car and she saw me limp. She was quickly contrite, apologetic and explained that "handicapped people shouldn't drive convertibles". Nobody ever told me.

Another reaction is to ignore us as if we aren't there, especially if on a scooter or in a wheelchair. In line in a store or at a movie buying tickets, numerous times people have walked around me or stepped directly in front of me as if I was not there. It gets worse at Christmas. Trust me, it isn't because I am too small to see. I always speak up, often loudly, and make my presence known. Sometimes they argue; sometimes I drive over their toes.

Speaking about being on a scooter or wheelchair, I am always amazed at how many people do not watch where they are going. It is one reason I hate crowds.

Some people who are walking and talking, either to another person or on a phone, never look down – or look forward with any degree of attention. Hundreds of times I have seen folks coming and, if no other options exist, I just stop and wait for them to run into me. Without exception, they look at me like I created the problem, but so far there have not been words.

Of course, I am not without some guilt in this regard. I have backed into displays and people, thinking I had space. Oops.

I need to use a three wheel scooter to make the sharp turns required in my home, but these can be dangerous if you are going almost any speed and turn too sharply. They do tilt and can toss the driver. They also can skid if the surface is wet or slick, too.

The largest challenge, for me, is curbs. Driving off a curb will not just throw you off, but turn the scooter over. Too often, curbs are not well marked.

At the Las Vegas furniture show in 2004 or 2005, my college roommate, Dexter, and I were leaving the Mandalay Bay to get our rental van. The cut in the curb was obvious and I drove to it, but it had a separate ramp that led down to the cut that I did not see. I was thrown off my scooter, landed on my forehead ripping my clothes, breaking my eyeglasses and my watch. The scooter ended on top of me, somehow.

It could have been worse. I landed directly in front of a bus which could have been moving.

Of course, everyone ran to help but I needed to stay still for a moment and do an inventory to see if I had broken anything. I was stunned. For one horrible moment, I saw three Dexters.

My right knee was bloody and my forehead had a three inch square where the pavement had scraped off skin. I had abrasions on my right hand and arm and lots of bruises, but nothing was broken except my pride. I was sitting on the road while clients and strangers, including Dexter, tried to help. I was lifted by my belt onto the scooter and went to my hotel room, hurting, but nothing required an emergency room visit, thankfully. I wish they had a pill to cure embarrassment, though.

The next day, I looked like (and felt like) the bus had hit me but life went on and I survived. I also slowed down a bit.

The Americans with Disabilities Act mandates that cities put in ramps and cuts but too often they do not look at the angles, especially if it is on a steep hill, and these can be dangerous. Also, some of the automobile ramps that are cut into sidewalks are too steep for scooters or wheelchairs to cross without tipping. In my predicament, if I tilt to the right I can stick out my right leg and catch myself. Unfortunately, if I tilt to my left, I just fall over just like Arte Johnson on his tiny tricycle on "Laugh In". (Young people, ask your parents.)

There is one block in downtown Boston that has no cuts at all. Somehow it was forgotten. Fortunately, I didn't have clients on that block, I just had to pass it to get to others. The only choice in these situations is to drive on the street which usually is not as dangerous as it sounds.

Please, if you see a scooter on the street, it isn't because they want to be there.