

## The Geezer Path

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According to a study that I recently found, we “elders” do not like the term *geezer*. May I offer another view? I want to be a geezer. I choose to follow the Geezer Path.

Some years ago, investigators studying patients in a VA hospital wrote an article about “geezers” at that hospital. *Geezers* were elderly veterans who were feisty, opinionated, and talkative. Geezers wanted to be involved in whatever was being done to them or for them. They did not acquiesce. They complained or asked questions. This kept them (and their doctors) alert and probably dissipated a lot of anxiety, at least for the geezers. According to the study, geezers did better overall, medically and socially, than the nice, docile old guys, the non-geezers. (I think that the ones who made it back alive from WWII and Korea probably tended to be proto-geezers.)

For many years, my ambition for my old age was to become a curmudgeon. I had been able to avoid fools and incompetents more than most other people, in part because of my career in academia. Not that there is any shortage of fools in academia – but I could usually educate them if they were students or ignore them if they were colleagues (professors are hard to educate).

Still, I supposed that I would put up with no more of it after retirement. I would become a curmudgeon. I would let people know what was on my mind, and strike fools down when necessary with my withering, caustic wit – a G.B. Shaw, H.L. Mencken sort of guy. Now that I am old enough to actually be a curmudgeon, however, I have reconsidered.

For one thing, ill-tempered, grouchy old men have become commonplace. It’s the baby

boom. Even boomers who are not quite old enough to qualify act like curmudgeons. In typical Boomer style, they don’t care. They want to bitch and they want to bitch NOW. To hell with waiting until they are over 70 and qualified for the job.

Florida is full of old guys (and women), bitching that everything but the weather is so much better in New Jersey or wherever. In the summer, even the weather is better in New Jersey. That does not leave Floridians with much to stand on. Consequently, there is a bumper sticker down here that says,

**We don’t give a shit how you do it up north**

While I’d like to avoid being just another common-garden variety pain in the ass, I have a deeper reason to hold back. No, it’s not Dick Cheney. Well, maybe it is in a way, since I could never meet the standard that he has set.

For one thing, experimenting with curmudgeonhood is risky. First, it is almost impossible for curmudgeons to change their minds, or even to absorb information that they don’t already agree with. If they think they are hearing information contrary to their views, they get all Ann Coulter/Bill O’Reilly on you, which pretty well stops any useful information exchange. Second, being a curmudgeon might be irreversible because I might burn so many bridges that apologies would be fruitless even if I was willing to attempt them. I mean, where do ex-curmudgeons go?

But mainly, I thought about what it really means to be a curmudgeon and what it would demand of me. I realized that curmudgeonhood was a fantasy that I was not quite cut out for.

### *A Different Slant on Life*

These reflections were prompted by a long and painful series of events, in which I lost the sight in my right eye, was assaulted on a bus, and watched a first-rate surgeon give up surgery.<sup>1</sup> The experience, with all of its subplots, profoundly changed my perspective (no pun intended).

For one thing, my actual healing, i.e., learning to live with one eye, was greatly aided by other people: family and friends. For example, some people I knew fairly well disclosed that they were blind in one eye. I had never noticed that about them. They did not need to tell me, but they did. I had felt that my disability was obvious to others, but I then realized that it was not.

Second, I was not the only one injured by my infection. I was not even the one who was hurt the most. Barb thought for a while that she might lose me, if not to death then possibly to brain damage. My injury may have affected the surgeon's life more than it did mine. I continued in my job until it was time to retire, and I retired for reasons unrelated to my eye.

He, on the other hand, did not continue in his job. Maybe, he had "operated" for years with the belief that he was fully in control, through the force of his will and skill. When he found out that he was not in control, he could not continue.

Third, oddly enough, an experience of being assaulted on a bus reminded me that I am not belligerent by nature. While I was adjusting to my new, monocular, world, I was reluctant to drive, so I took the bus to work. One morning while I was dozing on my bus ride to work a mentally ill man slapped me - hard. After he had slapped me, I could see that

he was not going to hit me again. I was not angry and not afraid. (No, really. Affronted and wary, but not afraid.) There was no value to me in fighting either physically or by legal means. I decided not to charge him with assault.

Fourth, I discovered that I am motivated more to understand than to blame. I know that this may sound sanctimonious, but my actions bear it out. In the immediate aftermath of my injury, I demanded, and received, a full explanation of how I received a contaminated cornea.

The short version was that nobody was to blame. (No irony intended.) Everybody did their job correctly. The infection was not caused by malpractice, but rather by a flaw in the tissue donor requirements. Post-surgical infection with this kind of bacterium had never been reported in the literature. (I know because I checked.) The eye bank, therefore, had no reason to anticipate that a cornea would be contaminated in this way.

I probably could have received compensation for what I had been through. A lot of money could have come to me from a lawsuit. (I like money. Also, I have been known to enjoy revenge, although usually in small matters.) I knew, however, that the money potentially involved would greatly tempt everybody, including me, to get it or to hang onto it. Once started, a lawsuit would have forced each party to prove its case rather than make the changes necessary to prevent this kind of injury from happening again.

Scapegoats would have been found. People who had done nothing wrong might have lost their jobs if not their careers if I had sued. The best cornea department for hundreds of miles, and the eye bank, might have been harmed, if not shut down.

During my career, I had lead many discussions of responsibility for patient injury resulting from professional error and system

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<sup>1</sup>See *Dr. D. and Me*

failure. This was the first time, however, that I had to work through an issue that affected me personally. In the process, I realized how complicated blame can be.

Bad things happen when nobody is to blame. The people involved were more than just sorry or frightened. They wanted to make sure that this never happened again. A lawsuit would have been settled out of court, probably with a secrecy agreement. A report of the event might never have been published,<sup>2</sup> and possibly the eye banks would have been so busy defending their donor criteria that it would have been hard for them to change them.

The outcomes of blame depend on too many unknowable details. Also, if I took revenge on somebody who couldn't fight back, for whatever reason, I'd just be a bully. If the other person could fight back, then of course, I'd be in a fight. And, as you know by now, I pick my fights carefully.

Reflecting on these experiences showed me that curmudgeonhood does not really fit with my view of how the world works and my personal values. It is a luxury that I choose to forego. Perhaps you will feel the same way, if you really think about it.

### ***The Geezer Path***

So, then, what is the Geezer Path? In one phrase, it is an obstinate, purposeful and self-respectful approach to life. In many encounters, I decide whether I really care about the outcome. If I do, usually I simply insist on my deep "belief" that the other party (store, whatever) wants to do the right thing for me. I calmly continue to repeat my request until (a) I get what I want, (b) I decide I am

**The geezer path is an obstinate, purposeful and self-respectful approach to life.**

asking too much or (c) the other person escalates the transaction to another level. One look at my white beard and gray hair will suggest that I have all the time in the world (even if I don't).

Staying on the Geezer Path often requires restraint, however. I am often tempted to really get in touch with my inner SOB, and introduce him to others, especially when they seem incompetent or uncaring. The odds are, however, that anybody in a service job (from physician to clerk) has figured out ways to deal with that sort of behavior (ways that sometimes may be stealthy and unpleasant).

Suppose I feel that somebody is lazy, uncaring, and has wronged me in some way. Suppose, hell. It happens often enough. I know that I can punish them with my words directly, by writing an angry letter, or by speaking to their boss. Today, I'm more likely to wonder, "then what?" If I throw my little curmudgeonly bomb, where will it land, and who will it burn? Does my annoyance actually count for more, potentially, than somebody's job?

The health care system offers me many opportunities to practice the Geezer Path. I'm pretty healthy, and yet I spend lots of time with doctors. Some new diagnosis or test gets added all the time. Nothing ever falls off the list. Waiting rooms tend to be full and visits tend to be short. Staff tend to be less educated than they used to be, and turnover is high.

But now, somehow, a lab tech poking around for a vein no longer seems to be a monumental insult or malpractice. A doctor who keeps me waiting may not owe me a full

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<sup>2</sup> Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Reports, December 5, 2003 / 52(48);1176-1179

explanation (although I still expect some acknowledgment). After all, the patients who had appointments with my eye surgeon on the day I had my infection would have been quite indignant. They surely had to wait for hours after their appointed times, because he spent most of his morning with me. But of course, he could not explain why, beyond some vague-sounding “emergency.”

Because of my background, I can adopt a polite “teaching-rounds” mode. For example, at the doctor’s office I may wait an hour beyond the time of my appointment. Then, a nurse I may never have met before leads me to an examining room, plunks me down in a chair, and immediately takes my blood pressure.

Often the systolic (upper) reading is high. I happen to be fairly sure that my BP is OK, when I am not feeling annoyed and when it is taken correctly. So I ask the nurse, “What do you think my BP would be if you had followed the protocol for office BP determinations?” There is a moment of shocked silence while I watch to see if the nurse knows that she has not done my BP correctly. If she seems to understand my point, we go one way. If she is clueless, patronizing or belligerent, we go another.

On another occasion, when a young nursing aide seemed clueless, I said, “Let’s try it again with a large cuff, with my arm supported, and after I have remained seated quietly for at least 10 minutes.” <Smile>. By the way, my “high” BP was normal when she took it correctly. <Smile>.

Once, when my doctor came in, after making me wait yet another 15 minutes on top of the hour I had already waited, I didn’t demand an explanation, but I did ask, “So, how can I come here and NOT have to wait over an hour after my appointment time before you are ready to see me?” I should explain, my doctor, Walter, is a schmoozer like you never saw before. He starts his office hours late, probably from schmoozing on rounds at the hospital, and he never catches up. When he has a no-show, I’m sure that his nurse does a little dance of thanksgiving.

But here’s what he suggested. “Doug, you should not have to wait so long. From now on, whenever you make an appointment, ask for the first appointment of the day.” It never occurred to him that he might change anything *he* does. Oh, well. I can see that I still have a few things to learn about how to walk the Geezer Path.