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Frida and Me

By Frankie Schembri

My operation took place on April Fools’ Day.

The surgery was six and a half hours long. I imagine from the surgeon’s perspective, as well as that of my poor parents, it might have felt a lot longer. For me, under the heavy wash of the anesthetic, the procedure felt almost instantaneous.

“You’re going to feel so much better,” my friends reassured me before I went under the knife. “It’s going to be such a relief.”

I naively assumed, out of equal parts impatience and hope, that I would snap back to my normal self immediately after the surgery was complete.

For a brief moment, as I blinked the world back into focus and inhaled a tentative breath, I did feel relieved. It was over. I was still alive.

Then I tried to move.

To say it was the worst pain I had ever experienced in my life would not do it justice. It was the kind of pain that made me think back to that fossilized fish from which all vertebrates are supposedly descended and wonder if it knew the evolutionary ramifications of the spine it had been chosen to bear.

I did not feel better. I felt much worse.

“Spines are the best and worst parts of our bodies,” said my doctor’s surgical resident as he checked my vitals in the recovery room. “They connect everything.”

After almost eight months of uninterrupted, debilitating pain, April 1st was supposed to be the day the pain stopped. It was supposed to be the day my life, which seemed frozen in time, finally fell back in step with the rhythm of the world.

But I still had miles to walk on the road to recovery.

I was born with a defective pars interarticularis – the bones linking the vertebrae to form the spinal column. As a result, I gradually developed a condition known as spondylolisthesis, in which my lowest lumbar vertebra had slipped forward and down over my highest sacral vertebra. The rogue vertebra was pushing against nerves and narrowing my spinal canal. It was in a position to cause serious nerve damage.

The pain began in August of 2014 as a dull yet persistent ache in my legs. I chalked it up to the expected hamstring soreness that comes with rowing six days a week.
It worsened at an exponential rate. As I began a new semester of college in September, I found I could not sit for more than five minutes. My legs felt like they were being stabbed repeatedly.

My back began to hurt, too. I could not sit in the boat at rowing practice. I could not sit in lectures. Sleeping became difficult. Unable to do or think about anything beyond the pain, I left school in October.

It took two months to get a diagnosis. It took four months to see an orthopedic specialist. It was a long, cold winter. Physiotherapy and medication did very little to alleviate the red-hot pain lighting up the nerves from my hips to my feet. I learned as much as I could about chronic pain management in a fruitless attempt to try and wrangle my own pain in submission.

A long trail of Internet breadcrumbs led me, one day, to the life and work of Frida Kahlo. A Mexican surrealist painter and a Communist, Kahlo was also a lifelong victim of chronic pain (Herrera, 1983). Kahlo was just 18 years old on September 17, 1925, when a trolley car smashed into the Mexico City bus on which she was riding. The impact of the collision drove a metal handrail through her abdomen and out of her vagina. Her spine was fractured in three places, her right leg in 11. Several of her ribs, her collarbone and her pelvis were shattered. Trapped in a full body cast between the four corners of her hospital bed, Kahlo began to put paint between the four corners of canvases rigged up on a special easel.

Kahlo was admitted and re-admitted to many hospitals for more than 30 surgeries during her lifetime. But the real record of Kahlo’s pain exists in the world of her paintings. Critics classify Kahlo as a surrealist, a genre that is represented by works that typically explore the nuances of unconscious and subconscious human thought (Herrera, 1983).

Kahlo painted her conscious experiences. “I never paint dreams or nightmares,” she wrote in her diary. “I paint my own reality (Kahlo, Lowe and Fuentes, 1995).” Kahlo’s painting that stayed with me through the winter, the one that visited me in my dreams, is her 1944 work “The Broken Column.” It is a self-portrait, like most of her artwork. In it, her pain is rendered visible through distortions of her body, which is fragmented and modified with non-human elements. “The Broken Column” shows Kahlo’s nude torso caged in a brace-like garment with a fault line splitting
her flesh to reveal a crumbling stone column in place of her spine. Nails pierce the skin all over her body. Tears run down her face. She is exposed – physically, sexually and emotionally.

Chronic pain is difficult to describe, especially the indirect effect it has on every part of a victim’s life. The painting was a crystallization of all the things I had been trying and failing to understand and articulate about my experience with pain. To me, the barren landscape behind Kahlo shows how pain has the ability to confiscate all other elements of a person’s life. The missing flesh is symbolic of the reduced sense of self and feeling of weakness a sufferer of chronic pain can experience. The nails piercing Kahlo’s body show how pain stemming from one place can have adverse effects on the entire body and represent the fear of the pain spreading.

By exploring her body, her pain and her experience through painting, Kahlo was taking back the power she had lost in the bus accident. She was reclaiming her body. She was taking ownership of her pain. She was rebuilding what had been damaged in the accident.

Finding Kahlo and “The Broken Column” was like finding an ally, someone who understood exactly what I was going through. The painting helped me weather the months leading up to my surgery. I did not foresee that it would become even more important after the procedure. Although I consented to have the surgeon make a seven-inch incision down my back, it still felt strange to have my skin cut open. It felt strange to know that three of my vertebrae had had titanium rods driven through them to fuse them artificially.

It felt unnatural to wake up and find my spine’s alignment to be different, albeit safer for my long-term health. The pain in my legs was alleviated, but it took an enormous toll on my body to adjust to a new spinal position. My legs and feet had lost sensation from the sudden removal of pressure on the nerves. They cramped, burned and had spasms. I spent five days in the hospital recovering from the trauma and blood loss. I relied on a walker for two weeks. I had to wrap my torso in a plastic brace for twelve weeks.

I felt platonic. I felt sexless. I felt like my body no longer belonged to me.

About a month after my surgery, I rediscovered Frida Kahlo and “The Broken Column.” Kahlo used her pain to show the significance of the physical body as a part of the human identity. Her art became a more meaningful exploration of the human experience.
Frankie Schembri

I am writer, not a painter. My art exists between the beginning and end of my sentences. I began to write freeform poetry about the year I lost to pain. The following quotes are excerpts from a poem called “Scar Tissue:”

“Slow-burning, insidious flower-blooming, toxic seed at my core / crawling Dante-style through Hell only to stop halfway back.”

I wrote about my fears:

“There is no finish line / time stretches, elastic, to infinity until it snaps / all that lies within and without will hurt / it washes over in an awesome wave.”

I wrote about my body:

“Blood flowing eagerly down and back up / slamming my heart valves louder and louder / as if to say ‘I am here! I am here!’ / the pads of my fingers over the railroad scar / split open and made whole again.”

Spring turned into summer and I felt my life falling back in time with the tempo of the world. I began dressing myself, taking longer walks and staying up later. I could sit without pain and read a book in the sun. When the brace came off in June, I had to restrain myself from making a clichéd caterpillar to butterfly metaphor.

Although life is almost back to normal, I am still plagued by a fear of the pain returning. I take comfort in the conviction that I could withstand chronic pain, if I had to do so. Frida Kahlo lived a life filled with chronic pain and harnessed that pain to create significant art. Her pain allowed her to embed deeper artistic meaning into her paintings and make a more nuanced, honest portrayal of the human experience.

Pain is a challenging but inevitable part of living. Frida Kahlo chose not to let her experiences with pain go to waste.

I will not let my experiences go to waste.

I am taking back the year I lost to pain.

Works Cited
