

Message for June 4, 2020

“Underscaled effort.”

Dillon, my physical therapist and I had been staring at the 5 lb. weight lying accusingly on the floor where I had dropped it instead of raising it above my head as I had intended. “What was that again?” I asked.

“Underscaled effort,” my tormentor repeated. I know that description of physical therapists as tormentors isn’t fair. I like Dillon and the physical therapy assistants a lot. Their job is to prove to me the inherent truth in a proposition we have all been told for as long as we remember. Work hard now, even if it’s uncomfortable, even if it hurts a little, and you will be stronger and hurt less later. I know this proposition is true. I’ve experienced its truth in the past, but I’m weak and lazy and in pain, so I require external tormentors like my PT and PTAs to prove it to me once again.

Actually, my PT is really a DPT, Doctor of Physical Therapy. The field has come a long way in a hundred years. Physical therapy was born from the horrors of the First World War. So many men came back from that terrible conflict maimed, disfigured, injured in mind and body, that the existing medical establishment was quickly overwhelmed. Doctors and nurses didn’t have the time or training to put these men through the work of rehabilitation. And work is exactly what physical therapy is.

The first two-year education program in physical therapy was instituted in 1936. Four-year baccalaureate programs were started in the 1960’s. You could earn a Master’s Degree in Physical Therapy starting in the early 1990s, and now the DPT is the recognized top rank of the profession. Most DPT programs include seven years of education and training followed by a 1,500-hour clinical residency. That’s pretty impressive, but I still like to tease Dillon about “degree creep.” I tell him to hurry up and finish torturing me because my wife has an appointment with her Doctor of Cosmetology, and I have to be home to receive a package from the Doctor of Supply Chain Logistics who drives the big brown truck.

“Underscaled effort means you didn’t try hard enough,” Dillon patiently explained, “but we don’t say that anymore. If I tell you that you didn’t try hard enough you might perceive that I am making a judgment about your character that might diminish your feelings of self-worth. If I tell you that your movement represented underscaled effort I am making a clinical observation that contains no inherent value judgment.”

“But Dillon,” I replied, both of us still contemplating the 5 pounds of evidence on the floor, “you and I both know that I didn’t try hard enough.” Dillon looked decidedly uncomfortable, but he didn’t argue with me. “What if my character needs a wake-up call and a kick in the pants at the expense of my feelings? If I had successfully lifted that weight as I intended, I would have had increased feelings of self-worth.”

“Perhaps,” Dillon said as he picked up the weight, a signal that the conversation was over. I was about to ask whether “didn’t try hard enough” became “underscaled effort” about the same time PT became DPT, but his signal saved me from that embarrassment. He’s just the messenger.

I find myself being drawn back to the simple command in Ecclesiastes chapter 9, verse 10, “Whatever your hand finds to do, do with all your might.” I think about some of the worthwhile tasks I gave underscaled effort to and wonder how outcomes might have changed had I performed them with all my might. Can you really do every task with all your might? It seems like some people do. Wouldn’t your metaphorical arm fall off after awhile? As usual, I’m overthinking this.

This little verse has two parts, and the second part, “do with all your might,” is conditioned on the first, “Whatever your hand finds to do.” At first glance Your mind is drawn to the conclusion – give 110% effort, but the key to this little powerhouse is in the first conditional phrase. Perhaps the unknown author of Ecclesiastes is really saying, “First, decide on the right thing to do, then give it all you’ve got.”

I did manage to get that weight above my head before I left that day. “There is the evidence that you’re shoulder is getting better. You’re getting stronger,” Derek said.

“I know, and I don’t scream like a little girl anymore when my shoulder hurts,” I replied.

“The PTAs are particularly grateful for that. It used to freak them out a little, but they couldn’t say anything for fear of damaging your self-worth.” I was about to let him have it when I noticed the big grin on his face. “You better go,” he said. “You don’t want to miss your Doctor of Supply Chain Logistics.”

*Lord, we have battled this virus for what seems like a long time, but much work remains to be done. Please give us strength and courage for the tasks ahead. Help us to focus on your will and our long term goals and not worry about getting our feelings hurt. Please continue to bless the everyday heroes, including physical therapists and physical therapy assistants, who define courage in this age. Please comfort the stricken, welcome those we have lost into your kingdom, and touch their families with your peace. Please help us to heal this divided land. Amen.*

This is my final Bridging the [Social] Distance message, but it is only part 1 of “Effort.” Laurie will have part 2 tomorrow. Thank you for letting us share this time with you every week.

God bless you all,

Bert