

When Bicycling Goes Away - The Nancy Janus Story

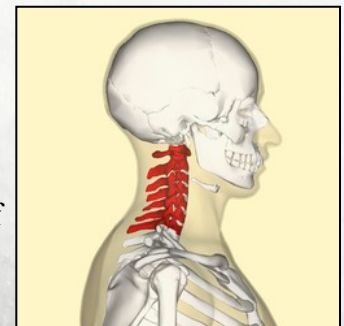
I believe in education. I believe life's experiences make up a compendium of learning opportunities for each of us. I believe that the negative events that happen to us make up the tuition that we pay for the learning that ultimately derives from them. This sort of philosophy leaves me thinking about what I might have learned from the accident I had four years ago.

You may not all know what happened. I had left home on my bike to join the club at the Publix on University the street, stopped briefly at the stop sign and made a perpendicular to mine. The woman that hit me seems to straightaway, so I believe she just wasn't looking ahead. that, I have absolutely no memory of the accident. hooked her right front fender onto the quick release of cracked it, and then I was thrown a considerable distance Braden Run, but tire skids from the blue walls of my There were no witnesses to the accident. Shortly the grass. I don't know how I got from the pavement to my flight. That kind man shared with me that he laid in my ear, "Just hang on." He also shared that the my bicycle, turned around about 200 feet ahead and upset and that people began to gather around her. But I was all alone.



Someone called 911 and the helicopter came to take me to the trauma unit at Blake Hospital. By now, the bike club ride had surely left from Publix, and my husband was entirely unaware of what had happened. The story is that the police found my telephone in the grass and, looking through it, found that my youngest daughter had registered herself in the contacts as "favorite daughter." I don't think they called her, but that through some type of police search, they got our address from her phone number. They arrived at our house shortly after the club ride must have ended because it wasn't long before my friend, Kathi Breit, showed up to see why I hadn't ridden. She wound up driving my husband to the hospital. I spent the next seven months in four different hospitals, and finally came home in early September 2012. The damage that matters is a spinal cord injury in my cervical spine, between C4 and C7.

For a brief lesson on spinal cord injury, as I understand it, an accident such as mine doesn't have to cut or nick the actual cord, but due to swelling that occurs the body creates scar tissue that prohibits the normal transmission of nerve signals. Paralysis can occur anywhere below the site of the injury, and injury at specific vertebrae controls specific parts of the body. In my case, the injury at C6 controls my hands. I no longer have much functional use of them. Muscle strength is very low and my fingers pull tightly inwards. I am writing this essay with a stylus poking at the keys of my laptop, for example, and I drop lots of food. My right leg is partially paralyzed but my left leg still works pretty well. I can't raise my arms above my shoulders but that may be because of disuse during all those months in the hospital.



Cervical vertebrae top down, C1-C7

We took the woman who hit me to court, and somehow her side convinced the jury that she was not negligent in hitting me. The defense that her side made throughout the trial was that I had run the stop sign and ridden out into the middle of Braden Run. This was despite the fact that my bicycle was in the courtroom and it was the rear end that was trashed, with no damage to the front. We, our lawyers, and reportedly even the judge, were astonished by that verdict. We subsequently learned that in automobile-bicycle accidents juries commonly find for the driver because they can identify with him or her.

I think a lot about why this accident might have happened. It is really hard not to find ways to blame myself. I feel as though the tuition I've paid is awfully steep for what I may have learned from it all. I have asked myself over and over if it is possible that I did run that stop sign, but looking at the location of the skid marks would make it impossible for me to have ridden into the center of the intersection, turned 180 degrees, and to have been hit so close to the curb. It certainly makes it clear to me that it is essential for cyclists to stop at stop signs despite the temptation to run them when no cars are in sight. The car that hit me was not in sight for me which makes me think perhaps I must have failed to look both ways before turning right. That is a lesson that we all learn in preschool when we begin crossing streets. But I can see no other reason that I didn't see her car coming, even if it was coming overly fast.

I used to enjoy cycling with motivational rock playing in my ears. I was stupid and never imagined the danger in that. One day, Charlie Morris called me on it and explained that not only was it dangerous but also against the law. I'm a quick study and cleaned up my act right away. But in the inevitable rehashing over and over of how this accident happened I've asked myself repeatedly if I could have "fallen off the wagon" and used ear buds that morning. I'm not much of a wagon faller and no ear buds or wires were found anywhere around my phone, so I think my act was clean. But I absolutely see why the no headset law is in place and must be followed by all cyclists.

I have found that it is emotionally destructive to fall into "what-if" thinking. What if I hadn't ridden that day, or what if I had left 5 minutes earlier or later, etc. I have a vague recollection that I left home a few minutes late that morning and was concerned that my group would start the ride without me. Probably that worry was floating in my head and may have made me more tense and distracted than I should have been riding to Publix. Lesson learned: always leave plenty of time to get to where you are going without the distraction of unnecessary tension.

From the experience in court I think I learned a number of things. First of all, I'd never been in an adversarial position in a courtroom before and in my mind, mine was an open and shut case. I was living in a wheelchair and the woman and her husband had simply walked into the courtroom. I didn't know that in jury selection the defense could throw out potential jurors selected by the prosecutors. There was one educational professional in the lineup who was rejected, making me feel uneasy. Of all the potential jurors, I felt that she would best understand all that I've lost.

I believe that I also learned in that courtroom that there is such a thing as overkill. My opponent's attorney said on the first day that their side recognized that I had been very seriously injured and that there would be no argument about that. Nonetheless, my attorneys persisted in bringing in doctors and my physical therapist to make the case of just how serious my injuries were. The testimony of those witnesses probably added two days to the court proceedings and were probably not necessary. Jurors, missing work or their habitual activities surely do not appreciate a trial that is longer than necessary.

As I sat in that courtroom, I realized that I didn't care a lot about the size of the monetary award I might win. I thought that enough money to take care of me if and when Brian can no longer handle transferring me from wheelchair to chair or bed or recliner would be helpful. At the same time I didn't feel that any amount of money was worth the life changes I have experienced. Mostly I wanted the driver not to walk away from this accident unpunished, and she did.

Now it is over two years since that court case, and I have had to learn a lot about living as a disabled person. Let me begin with the positive things I've learned. First and foremost I have learned that I made an extraordinarily wonderful decision when I married Brian Berry. Every single day he shows me how much he loves me by the wonderful care he takes of me. I am the single greatest absorber of his time; time that a retiree should have to engage in exploring and building and acting on those interests that working life didn't allow time for. For these four years, Brian has had to drive me absolutely everywhere. Time gone.

I have learned how important it is to think about what I can still do instead of ruminating over what I cannot. If I get into negative thinking it makes me cry, and if I start it is hard to stop. So I try to keep my intellectual life alive, focusing on my teaching, on current events and on friendships. Some disabled people comfort themselves by telling themselves that others are worse off than they are. For me, that is not positive thinking. It just makes me feel sorry for others.

My life is so much slower now than it was before the accident. I've learned to appreciate small things that I once took for granted. A trip to Sam's Club or to Publix is now a delightful field trip. Looking around at Detweiler's is super fun. Riding in the car I notice and think about the colors of people's cars and the amusing stickers they decorate those cars with. I have greater appreciation for the outside world, for things that I never took the time to notice.

One of the most important things that I've taken away from this is that a lot of people actually really care about me. I don't honestly know why this has come as a wonderful surprise but it has. When we decided to travel to Panama for stem cell injections last summer, one friend set up a crowdfunding account to help us pay for it. Not only was that extraordinary in itself, but the overwhelming response to it and the very kind statements that donors made to and about me were so touching. It's a shame that it took a profound accident to make me aware of this, but I feel that the response of old friends (even high school buddies from Chicago), newer Florida friends, and so many past and present students has acted as a wake up call for me to really take note of friendships as they come my way. I feel very fortunate to have awakened.

On the more negative side, I've learned that a whole new self-identity has to come with becoming a disabled person. I frequently lose sight of the many things I am unable to do, and then am unpleasantly surprised when I encounter them. For instance, in my dreams at night I am always able-bodied, so I awake every day surprised and disappointed that I can't walk. As I sit here writing and see my wheelchair across the room, it is difficult to recognize it as mine.

I always saw myself as extremely efficient and disciplined, and that was a point of personal pride. Now I can't feel those good feelings of a room that I've made all neat and orderly or of a laundry, clean, folded and put away. I can't maneuver my wheelchair into the closet, so I wear what Brian or one of my daughters has selected for me.

Probably the worst thing of all is for me, as a formerly accomplished and independent woman, is having to ask for practically everything: a glass of water, an unreachable itch to be scratched, an envelope to be opened, anything that requires handwriting, etc. I hate feeling like an inconvenience, and no amount of reassurance from family or friends takes that away.

I have also learned that it is really hard to see small changes that occur to oneself. I absolutely love it when I can do something big for the first time, like walking a little faster with my walker or covering a somewhat greater distance. But I need for others who haven't seen me for awhile to notice smaller, and to me, unremarkable changes. I wish I could see those smaller changes to integrate them into my sense of accomplishment and self-esteem.

With all this, I sometimes wonder if I wish I'd never started bicycle riding. But I don't. I loved the feeling of the wind in my face and my legs working hard to maintain speed. I loved seeing the world around me at a slower speed. I loved that sense of fitness and accomplishment after completing a long ride. I loved being together with people who shared my love of riding through the bike club. I loved the ride I took alone through south Vietnam, and the cross state rides with big groups whom I grew to know. I miss all that hugely, and more than anything, I'm so glad to have had all those experiences. I certainly have learned the hard way that life can change in a matter of seconds and that it is always so important to take note and fully appreciate all your experiences...especially the lovely ones on your bike.

Nancy Janus, 2016