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MY TURN

■ **Dmae Roberts**



The journey of healing

The last two months have proven to be a major challenge and a bit of a milestone for me. I underwent knee-replacement surgery and I'm officially a bionic woman — but without superpowers. In fact, I had to learn how to walk again and step-by-step (pun intended), I figured out how to perform simple activities such as dressing, bathing, and even how to get up from a chair without causing pain.

The first week I was in the greatest pain and felt the most helpless. I couldn't even lift my leg to get in and out of bed. Thanks to my loving husband Richard and a creative and adept physical therapist — who pushed me to move my leg despite the throbbing and twinges — each week I surprised myself with how much more I was able to move.

I used a walker the first few weeks, then I graduated to a cane. By the time this column publishes, I will not need the cane anymore. Richard really rose to the challenge by installing grab bars around the house and a shower bench, and by changing the showerhead to a detachable one so I could shower sitting down. He also put in two handrails for the stairs to my office. It was a joy a couple weeks after the surgery to be able to go upstairs again.

This experience has really shown me how people with disabilities are treated by others. A few people were oblivious and nearly ran into me or my walker. Others did not make room for me to glide by them after saying, "excuse me." Elementary school kids stared open mouthed. And some adults turned the other way, as if they didn't want to catch anything from me.

At one point, four 40-something women were gabbing in the vitamin aisle at a Whole Foods store. I was looking for my multivitamins and a clerk was helping me, but we were not able to get by them to find my brand. I asked if it would be possible for us to go by if they were not looking for an item. One woman retorted, "We are looking for things," then went back to chatting with her friends — without moving over even slightly.

I only had a cane at this point, but the rudeness and discomfort people displayed made me even

more determined to focus on disability issues in my work in the future. I found out firsthand how frustrating it can be for disabled people, including discovering that quite a few disabled parking spots and ramps are not thought out very well. Some of the disabled parking spots are located right next to a curb on the passenger side, which makes it difficult to find solid footing when exiting the car, while some ramps are so steep that a walker almost slides down. I also discovered how difficult it is to go up a steep ramp when you can barely lift your leg.

I learned the value of elevators and handrails as well as bathrooms with grab bars and tall toilets. Though I'm getting better each day, it will likely be about six months before the swelling in my knee finally goes down and I will be able to benefit from the titanium in my knee joint so I can take long walks again without agony. I'm not sure yet if I'll regain the mobility I had before my knee became curved like an "S."

The thing that still boggles my brain after any surgery is studying the hospital bill. I tend to question every item in the bill. Three years ago when I had a surgical biopsy, I found a \$9,000 charge for anesthesia. I called the billing department. They then discovered that the clerk had indeed made a typo and wrote that I was asleep for nine hours instead of 90 minutes.

With the knee surgery, the bulk of the \$30,000 bill (luckily most was covered by insurance) was for the operating room and overnight stay. I questioned the \$3,000 for anesthesia and asked for an itemized account. I was shocked to find out that every time the nurse gave me a pain or nausea pill, I was charged \$33! For a single pill! Nothing I could do about that, but it's still a good policy to question medical bills because people make mistakes. I believe one of the greatest mysteries of healing is the astronomical cost of our medical care. But that's a subject for a future column.

Meanwhile, I count my blessings and have empathy and consideration for those whose disabilities are more permanent than mine. With each day I feel stronger and it gives me hope.

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