



Aches and Pains

Every single day that the weather permits, my neighbour Yamaguchi-san comes out with his broom and pan and sweeps the street in front of our houses. He doesn't stop at the edge of his own house, but includes the property on each side of his, as well as across the street, along the length of my property too.

Years ago, when I first saw him doing this, I was a bit embarrassed, because sweeping in front of one's home is something each household should do for itself, but he wasn't concerned. He knows that I live here alone, and that sweeping the street isn't really something that a 'single guy' is likely to do, so he quite happily takes over the chore. And it works both ways actually, as I do the snow shovelling for both of us when necessary in winter, a job that is far too dangerous for somebody of his age.

He's not just trying to be a 'good neighbour' by doing this; he has a problem with his knee dating back to a wartime injury, and knows that if he doesn't keep active, his leg will stiffen to a point where he is unable to walk around. So sweeping the road is good exercise for him, and when the weather is really nice, he even comes out twice a day to do it. If I'm not busy down in my workshop and happen to notice him through the window, I'll pop outside and chat with him while he works. The conversation always starts at the same place - how his leg is aching or not today. I guess for somebody at his stage of life, 'aches and pains' become a main focus of one's daily routines!

Now, so far at least, I don't have anything to contribute to such a conversation. At least not most of the time. But there are two periods each year when I can join Yamaguchi-san in such a recital, once in the spring, and once again in the fall.

A couple of years back - it would have been a day sometime in spring - I started to have a few 'problems'. I felt a recurring pain behind one of my shoulders, and had some trouble with one of my knees; it began to ache quite a bit. I'm not the kind who runs to the doctor for slight aches though, so just tried to shake it off. After some time passed, the problems seemed to fade away. I just put it down to (slightly) advancing years. Later that year - it must have been in early winter - I began to have quite sharp pains in one elbow; it became a bit difficult to use my computer keyboard. I tried to ignore it, even though it was indeed quite uncomfortable, and yes, after some time passed, it seemed to go away.

Come the next spring though, what do you think happened but that the pain in my back and knee returned! And again went away after some time passed. And yes, the next fall, once more my elbow began to ache.

Perhaps you will read this and think to yourself, "Dave is starting to get old; he's moving into that part of life where the weather and humidity affects his joints, just as with his neighbour Yamaguchi-san." I myself started to wonder about this too; am I really starting to 'get old'? But I'm only 57!

This year though, when yet again the same thing happened in the spring, I finally figured out what is going on.

It all comes from the way that I re-arrange my living space as the seasons turn. During the summer, I have my computer set up on a table set against one wall of my 'living room'. I sit in a typical chair at this table, sometimes for many hours per day. When the weather becomes cold in late November, I open up the hori-kotatsu

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- the sunken table located in the center of the room - and move the computer over there. For the next five months or so I sit at that low table, not using a chair at all.

The pain behind my shoulder? It comes from a projection on the chair back, which presses against me when I tilt the chair back and put my feet up! The knee problem? I sit with my legs crossed sometimes - always with the right knee over the left. It gets stretched and begins to ache.

Then in the fall, when I move down to the low table, all the angles of my position are changed, and my elbow leans on the hard table surface as I manipulate the computer mouse. These various 'aches and pains' are nothing to do with aging at all, but simply from being careless with my body position while working!

So now that I've recognized what is happening, of course I try and take care to avoid the problematic situations, and even though my knee or back may still ache slightly in the spring, at least I now know not to worry that I am developing some dread disease.

But it sure wouldn't hurt if I helped with the sweeping a bit more often!

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