

#22. BLOCKING PAIN, Part VI. Riding with the wind

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In my previous papers I tried to uncover the scientific basis of several “pain blocking” techniques. We talked about imagery, use of counter-irritation techniques, changing brain waves, blocking the conscious brain with hypnosis, and the placebo effect. Today, in my last paper on the topic, I want to share with you what I know about an amazing group of women that has filled me with awe and wonder for their ability to seek freedom, break the barriers and even “block pain”!

When I decided with my husband to start riding a motorcycle 10 years ago (at the beginning of my “zoomer” years), we took a safety course and then bought our first Harley Davidson bikes. While my husband was my companion over the weekends, this was not always the case. So, I tried to find girlfriends who enjoyed the same sport and came across the Motor Maids of Canada. The Motor Maids (for short MMs) was the first all-women motorcycle group founded in 1940 in the USA with the Canadian division founded in 1949. Together, the group consists today of over 1200 fun loving motorcycle female riders across North America, with more than 120 in the Eastern Central District in Canada where I belong. So, I phoned timidly the then president who welcomed me and suggested that I meet the group in the MM Mother’s Day Brunch held outside Toronto. This was May 2003. It was rainy weather and I chickened out, deciding to leave the bike home and take the car.

When I arrived at the brunch place, I was amazed to see at least 35 bikes parked outside, street bikes, cruisers, sport bikes, ranging in size from small to gigantic, with helmets lying on their seats. Inside the restaurant I was welcomed by a large group of women of all ages but mostly well over 40 and 50. Most were leather clad with chaps (the special leather motorcycle pants most of us wear) with heavy jackets hanging at the backs of their chairs. I sat in a round table of 8 women and I introduced myself to the bubbly group. Once I said I was a pain doctor the conversation turned very quickly to health issues and specifically pain. Hildi, a white haired woman sitting on my right side, asked what kind of bike I ride and in turn I asked her the same question. She replied: “Well, I cannot ride a bike this year as I am still in therapy”. In short, Hildi had been involved in a serious motorcycle accident the year before and had suffered a broken shoulder and a double fracture in the bones of one leg. She ended up having surgery for an artificial shoulder and a large plate with pins for the leg.

“I guess, then, you cannot ride anymore” I said. “No way” Hildi replied. “I have already ordered a new bike with modifications”. Hildi was then 68 years old, but was not the only one at the table with pain. A younger looking woman, around 38, said “I am in pain almost all the time. I have been diagnosed with fibromyalgia”. She admitted she had lots of stress in her life been a single mom of 3 and working to support her family. “But”, she went on, “I get onto my bike and all the pains disappear when I am riding out there”! A third woman took part in this “painful” conversation. She was short, close to 60 years of age and had a noticeably crooked spine. “I, too, have pain nearly all the time. I had two back surgeries, but they did not work. “How do you manage?” I asked. “Well, just knowing I can still harness my steel horse between my legs, gives me a lot of satisfaction and somehow blocks my pain when I ride”. “Of course”, she went on, “I have a good horse” and pointed to a monstrous cruiser, many times her own body weight. I was dumbfounded. “I don’t get it” I admitted. “How come you are here and not at my pain clinic”? This encounter prompted the researcher in me to offer to study the group. I was going to ask how many of these women had pain, how they managed it, if they saw doctors or specialists as well as whether or not they took any medications. My study was not going to end there. I needed to understand what kind of personalities these women had and what drove them to riding, a male sport endowed with a fair amount of risk. Well, my study did not pan out. Since older women are particularly prone to joint problems, statistics made me estimate that at least 1 in 3 of these women would have chronic pain. Upon my first request back in 2004 in the MM monthly newsletter, only one woman, a single willing research subject, showed even the slightest interest in my study! As you might have guessed, she had serious arthritis in her hands and asked me to “do something, so she could use the clutch and the throttle again”! What you may have not guessed is her age. She was at least 75 years old, and had been a member of the MMs for nearly 50 good years!

Years later I saw Hildi in a bike swap show. My first question was: "Do you still ride?" "Of course" she replied with a big smile on her white haired face. "Did you expect me not to"? Hildi was by then 72 years old and going strong.

A couple of years ago, I once again joined the group for another Mother's Day Brunch. By then I had changed my regular two wheel motorcycle to a trike. A bad surgery to my left foot and a serious injury to my right knee had made my surgeon give me stern warnings: "One more injury to this knee and you go for total knee replacement. You have near-terminal knee damage". I could not take the slightest chance to maybe lose balance and drop my bike, something that is nearly inevitable when you ride motorcycles (in the bikers' circles we know there are two kinds of bikers: those "who have dropped their bike" and those who "will")! I could take no chances, so my trike came handy. My trike is a monstrous Harley Davidson Fat Boy with the back wheel converted to a two wheels for major balance and stability. It is loaded with chrome parts and heavy in custom painting and I am very proud of it. So I drove my "1250 pound girl" to the brunch and started chatting with other fellow riders. An older slim woman approached me admiring my machine.

As is natural, I asked her about herself and her bike. She took me proudly to her large two color street bike, sparkling under the mid-day sun. "She is the one I have here" she explained. "I have another one in Arizona where I spend 7 months of the year". In short, this woman was travelling back and forth between Toronto and her other place in Arizona. She was a widow and when in Toronto, she would spend the time babysitting her two grand children (not forgetting of course to ride with her fellow MMs). She only bought her second bike recently, because after many years of riding her bike back and forth between USA and Canada, she felt it was time to "take it easy". "Wow" I exclaimed. "You mean, you have been riding thousands of km on your own twice a year until recently? Were you not a little worried"? "What for" she replied. "I am enjoying it thoroughly and I have lived a good life. By the way, I only got my bike 10 years ago, after my husband died". "How old are you?" I asked. "68" she replied with a smile. Which meant, she laid her hands and feet on a bike for the very first time at the tender age of 58?

I do not wear a hat. If I had, I would have taken it off to salute this woman and all the other women in the group that have amazed me with their determination and love of riding. One of them told me once: "Pain is what you make out of it". "What about the risk of riding, the risk of been unprotected on the road at the mercy of careless car drivers and the gravel on the street?" I asked. "What risk are you talking about? The risk is greater if you let life go by without excitement" she answered graciously. How true, how true for me and all the other fellow riders!

How do these women block pain when they ride? Many things work in synergy: Distraction; stoicism; great sense of control; thrill; breaking the barriers in a male dominant sport; pride for the achievement; friendship and companionship; fun; freedom to breathe, smell the hay, feel the wind on the face, hear the roar of steel and sense the rumble of the bike on the road. Far too many things that push pain SO LOW in the priority ladder of our brain.

I have attached a photo of the group in the memorable 2003 MM Mother's day brunch. I am 5th from the right standing. For those interested in knowing more about the MMs, please see www.ecnmotormaids.ca. While I am featured in the August 2009 newsletter, please read all the other newsletters (accessed at the bottom of the homepage). You will be as amazed as I am!

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