Surgery and The McGarrigle Sisters' "Log Driver's Waltz"

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March 8, 2021 By Robin McGee

Last year, an endoscopist CRC surgeon told me that my planned ileostomy reversal could not happen. He described my stricture and scar tissue as too extreme, warning me that I would have unendurably horrible bowel function afterward, including possible fecal incontinence, given my tortured anatomy. When he said this, my first thought when was "Oh no!" But I confess my second thought was, "Thank God." I well remember the agony of reconnection, and the misery of Low Anterior Resection Syndrome (LARS), the condition of bowel disorganization that lasts years after reconnection. Given my limited prognosis, I did not want to live my remaining time with LARS.

But my ileostomy was dysfunctional. It was only partially diverting my digestion, so food waste got past it into the large intestine. But because of the stricture, it could not get out, resulting in chronic buildup of excrement (and toxic excrement at that, due to chemotherapy). The pain was extraordinary. I was not a candidate for a full colostomy (in which rectum is removed), because of radiation-induced organ fusion. So I begged doctors to help me find a way to live with it.

A wise GI specialist, shocked by my condition, told me, "You cannot stay the way you are." She advocated for me by calling several colleagues in search of a solution. In dialogue with my cancer surgeon, they came up with an excellent option: a double-barrelled colostomy. This would keep the rectum in place, allow for a colostomy that is 100% diverting, and provide a separate tiny stoma (called a mucous fistula) to allow drainage from that blocked lower arm. This little stoma would not require an appliance, only a bandage. It would also allow for me to irrigate the distal arm and deliver pain medication to that region.

At long last, I had the long-awaited surgery three weeks ago. The surgeon needed to deal creatively with all many internal oddities caused by my multiple surgeries. He said there was so much scar tissue that he had to take out my entire intestine, unravel it, remove the adhesions, repair minor damages, and put it all back in. He made the

mucous fistula come out of the old ileostomy site, and formed the end colostomy from my descending colon. He and the team were surprised by the extent of the stool buildup. Over three years' worth of poo had become fossilized throughout the entire large intestine. He said he tried to "milk it out" (!) but it was so fixed and so dehydrated he had to give up. (All this makes me wonder what would have happened to me if I never got this surgery—would I just explode one day?)

Bowels swell when they are handled in surgery, which often results in vomiting. I required an extra week in hospital, in a limbo between constant barfing and the partial obstruction caused by that "mummy poo" blockage. The surgeon said once I could eat enough, the transit of food would eventually break that logjam. Gradually, I kept enough food down to accomplish that log drive.

Now I am at home, recuperating. I must eat a low-fibre diet for a few more weeks. My end colostomy is on my left side, and the small mucous fistula is on my right. Already, I can tell this colostomy is infinitely easier to live with than the ileostomy was. I am so relieved to have this done. I feel safer now that my digestion is properly diverted. Having one's large intestine online allows for better nutrition, easier medication use, and less inflammation. I am happy to have mine back on the team. If I could, I would hug it!

I return to work on 1 March. Although I am in better shape now than I was last year when I worked full time, I hope I can maximize the amount of time I am working from home given COVID19. I have four months until retirement in June—I can do anything for four months. Chemotherapy must also resume in March, so I have other challenges ahead.

Today's song is a humorous nod to my digestive obstacles as well as my Ottawa roots. It is the "Log Driver's Waltz," written by Wade Hemsworth in 1979 and sung by Kate and Anna McGarrigle. Popularized by the amusing NFB cartoon, it emphasizes the skills that log drivers require. I can't say my log driving efforts were quite as graceful!

If you ask any girl from the parish around
What pleases her most from her head to her toes
She'll say I'm not sure that it's business of yours
But I do like to waltz with a log driver

For he goes birling down and down white water
That's where the log driver learns to step lightly
Yes, birling down and down white water
The log driver's waltz pleases girls completely

When the drive's nearly over I like to go down
And watch all the lads as they work on the river

I know that come evening they’ll be in the town
And we all like to waltz with the log driver

For he goes birling down and down white water
That’s where the log driver learns to step lightly
Yes, birling down and down white water
The log driver’s waltz pleases girls completely

To please both my parents, I’ve had to give way
And dance with the doctors and merchants and lawyers
Their manners are fine, but their feet are of clay
And there’s none with the style of my log driver

For he goes birling down and down white water
That’s where the log driver learns to step lightly
Yes, birling down and down white water
The log driver’s waltz pleases girls completely

Now I’ve had my chances with all sorts of men
But none as so fine as my lad on the river
So when the drive’s over, if he asks me again
I think I will marry my log driver

For he goes birling down and down white water
That’s where the log driver learns to step lightly
Yes, birling down and down white water
The log driver’s waltz pleases girls completely

Birling down and down white water
The log driver’s waltz pleases girls completely

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