Falls

December 24, 2007

This morning six of the Peacock clan went out for a run around Decatur, Georgia, where we have gathered for the holiday season. In ascending order of speed there were Madeleine, Eileen, Georgina, Lauren, Brian and Caroline. But we ran together as running buddies are supposed to do. The first to go down on some unswept leaves was Lauren; she made a great recovery using her hand on the low stone retainer wall in front of a typical cottage in this older Atlanta neighborhood. Georgina has caught the fitness bug and runs this three to five mile loop most days, somewhat hampered by a missing thyroid, spleen, a busy job and four small children. Her foot landed on a stone, twisted and slipped, and down she went in an ungainly pile. Now the aftermath to a fall is the interesting period. First you get an adrenaline rush and cry out some choice words. Next you triage the damage. Is this life threatening, worthy of significant attention or should I just get up and keep on running? This was just a little sprain but Ginny has spent the rest of the day seeking attention among discussions of tonight’s and tomorrow’s food and activities. Listening to the omnidirectional discussions of a bunch of experts discussing holiday festivity planning and politics is enough to send one out for a run, were it not for the egg nog.

Many years earlier, Ginny and Garrett went to Turkey on their way home from study abroad in Germany. Ginny once again fell down the stairs and broke her foot. The logistics of getting her home to the US together with an arm full of Turkish carpets proved to be insurmountable. The carpets are still in Turkey.

When I was a little boy in the 1940s we lived in Sproatley, UK. I was very interested in cricket and would practice every day with my friends, except in the winter when we planned our alternative medium of stardom – as football players. Our house had two straight paths, one from the back yard to the back gate and one from the compost heap to Uncle Walter’s brown shed in the orchard. Path maintenance was accomplished by throwing down the ashes from our coal burning fireplaces into the low spots caused by rain and then trampling them down flat. We used to play cricket on either path, using an upturned bucket as a wicket, my Don Bradman autographed bat and a hard rubber ball. The ball was constructed from old bicycle tires. After repairing all the punctures we would eventually discard the bicycle inner tube for a new one; we would cut rings from the tire and stretch them around a stone until we had a fair sized replica of a cricket ball. This ball was somewhat lively and the rough ashes would sometimes require rubber band replacement. Also, the cinders would penetrate little boy’s knees when they fell, requiring parental attention with painful doses of iodine and much bandaging. I still have a scar from those happy times.

On another occasion we were playing along the orchard pathway. Down the right hand side of this path when you faced the shed there was a pig sty and pig run. The sty was made out of the old metal cylinder that used to be our air raid shelter. My dad and Uncle Walter cut the cylinder long ways and spread out the edges to make a semicircular sty. The back half was for storage and the front half for the pigs. A square run was constructed of corrugated iron with a small opening in the side that housed a chute down which we poured the pig slop into the troughs. There was a damson tree next to the pig run, which we used to climb. The rich blue damsons were delicious. Under the damson tree was a boxing ring. One day the ball sailed into the pig run and as the pig was apparently sleeping in the sty I ventured over the corrugated fence to retrieve the ball. Just as I picked up the ball the pig came out of the sty to enquire into the reason for this intrusion and to eat the hapless child for dinner. On reflection this was a fair attitude of the pig as at Christmas time we would usher it along Park Road to the butchers to be turned into pork chops and black pudding. I rushed for the fence put my foot on the upper edge of the lower piece of corrugated iron and my hands on the top and pushed upward to escape this attack pig. My foot slipped and I crashed down on the top ledge across my stomach and was severely winded. Luckily I fell out of the sty before the pig could devour me and landed in a crumpled heap under the damson tree. But when I came to I had the ball in my hand.

Recently I visited New Bedford, MA just in time for the annual Spooner Run. There was Kevin, wrist in a splint, ready on the starting line. “What happened?” “Oh I was out running and fell and broke both bones in my forearm.” Now that was quite a fall. If fact it was probably the worst running fall that I have ever heard about. Another fall of note occurred in the annual Detroit Free Press marathon 20 mile training run. At about mile 18 young Geoff Chase who was trying to keep up with his aged running buddy needed an excuse. So he tripped and fell. On his way down he hit his stopwatch to save 20 seconds from his time. Just a few weeks ago I swapped e-mails with Gene Yates, a colleague from UCLA. He was skiing and wiped out. A couple of other skiers picked him up, checked his vitals and volunteered to escort him down the hill. After a short while Gene found his escorts to be too slow so he zoomed off down the slope ahead of them. He later found that he had a fractured pelvis which took months to heal. Gene is 80!!

When I was a teenager I worked on the farm during the summer months. One day we were making stacks of straw bales. The method was to lay these 2’x2’x4’ tightly packed twine bound bundles in layers running in different directions to improve the stability of the stack. I was about seven layers up and picked up a bale by the twine to move it to a corner of the stack. The twine broke and I fell backwards off the edge of the stack to the ground. Fortunately I was not hurt so I climbed up the ladder to the top of the stack again. “Where have you been?” said the farmer.

When I was in my twenties I tried being a school teacher for a year. My piece de resistance was a trip for a dozen and a half early teenagers to the Lake District – an area of mountains and lakes in North West England. One day we got lost in the clouds and walked 25 miles over mountain paths to the youth hostel. Now exuberant children do not always do as instructed, like “do not run down the hills.” This outgoing whippersnapper decided to race down the hill, fell and broke his arm. I had to hitch hike 30 miles to a local town to get the thing x rayed, set and cast in plaster, and then hitch the thirty miles back to the hostel. The delicate part was taking the boy home to his mother, “Mrs. Mohammed,” I said, “Norman fell and broke his arm.”

A couple of years later I went mountain climbing with a couple of friends in Norway. One of my friends was a hill walker, accustomed to multi day hikes in the Alps. The other was a rock climber. The trip in question required both horizontal and vertical skills. My task was to carry some rucksacks and keep up with these mountain goats. All together we climbed the seven highest peaks in Norway in about 12 days, a challenging trip. We walked through dripping bushes, across snow fields, along the edges of blue green torrents and glaciers with crevasses covered by snow. We scrambled up screes and steep cliff faces. The top few hundred feet of the Romsdalhorn was very steep so we roped ourselves together and gingerly picked our way upwards, reaching for ledges with our fingers and toes. It began to snow and the snow covered the ledges, bad news. But it was easier to go up than down. At last we arrived at the top and huddled in the little hut where we signed our names in the book for posterity. We waited out the snow storm and rappelled down the steep part and then made the long trek back to the hostel. On another day we had to scramble down a south facing slope where all the rock was crumbling, but still no fall. On about the eighth day we were picking our way diagonally across and down a scree. I decided, unwisely, to go down the scree and then across the top of a large snow covered slope. One of my friends dislodged a rock which came bouncing down the scree. They shouted a warning just before the rock hit my shoulder with a glancing blow, knocking me over and down the snow slope. As I slid down the slope I was able to turn and get my snow pick into the snow to arrest my descent after about 100 or more feet. The rock continued its slide and eventually came to rest. It must have weighed about 50 pounds. Memo to self, do not walk below another climber when traversing a scree.



My big brother was / is a famous sky diver and one day persuaded me to make my first static line jump. He put me through a quick ground training program and sent me off with another instructor in a little high winged airplane. At the prescribed spot upwind of the target I was instructed to ease my way out of the door, grasp the wing spar and put my foot on the wheel, which turned, oops. “Go”, said the man, so I went. In no time I felt the pull of the static line and my big round parachute opened with a flutter above me. Now that was the easy part. The next few minutes were wonderful, - floating over England’s green and pleasant land. I looked down and saw my brother’s VW speeding around the perimeter road – to a place some distance from the target. The wind worked its wily way and the big round parachute was impossible to steer. I saw the perimeter fence and then a freeway pass under my route, having ignored the gesticulations of my distant brother to pull down on a toggle to turn. Up came the ground and before I could mentally rehearse the graceful fall and roll that I had practiced in the gym, I fell in an ungainly heap. No broken bones. Some 40 years later I did my second jump, this time in tandem with an instructor. A similar heap ended the thrill.

One day Mike, Garry and I were running up Kern Road, in Oakland Township, MI when Mike disappeared down a hole. Just like that – he literally disappeared. Quite inconsiderate and rude as I was in the middle of a story about the time I had beaten him by a nose at the Crim. But Mike was a strange bird. Once when we were being chased by a dog along Brewster Road, he turned, got down on his knees and barked. The dog turned tail and ran home. This disappearance was reminiscent of Eileen who when she was very pregnant with Caroline was walking along Pokfulam Road down to the Hong Kong University swimming pool with Ginny and Lily in tow. Now Hong Kong was well known for its road work and sundry unguarded holes. Eileen disappeared and although she was not hurt we believe that this incident is to blame for Caroline’s occasional mental lapses.

While we are on the subject of dogs I must recount the behavior of an early morning dog owner. On this occasion in Nassau Bay, Texas I was out doing my morning 10k when my toe caught a raised edge of a concrete slab and I tumbled quite gracefully, rolled and was up on my feet in no time. Unfortunately the rolling part involved rather rough contact between my wrist, knee and shoulder with the concrete pavement, which won the brief confrontation. “Ouch” I said as I surveyed the substantial damage, lots of blood. “Come on, good dog” said the dog walker as she hurried by on the other side of the road.

A couple of years ago I was walking with my wife around the block at Christmas time in Kansas. A suburban homeowner was watering his lawn. The temperature was about 15 degrees and quite a lot of water had spilled over on to the sidewalk. Eileen decided to walk into the roadway but I ploughed on down the sidewalk. Big mistake! My feet went in five different directions and gravity took over. Bump. I was not hurt, so I continued down the path. Bump again – a big one this time. I explained to this suburban yokel, who was smoking a cigarette and surveying the scene from his front porch, that perhaps the grass did not require water at this time, “Yes” he said, “it sort of just came on. Should I get you an ambulance?”

The detailed story of my substantial wipeout during a mountain bike race earlier this year has been told elsewhere. But I shall briefly recap the sad sequence of events. I fell off my bike and made big holes in my elbow and knee. The fire engine came and poured saline on the wounds. I went to the ER who couldn’t handle the trauma. So I went to the OR which had a conglomeration of the necessary skills. I was given morphine and chattered happily all day while the anesthetist and surgeon did their thing – 30 stitches. This injury paled in the light of the horror stories of friends and acquaintances who had suffered much greater breaks of wrists, ribs, collar bones and shoulders from falls off bicycles. One friend – a urologist – broke his elbow and put himself out of business for a few months. The last time I was in hospital was in 1950 when I fell off my bike on a fishing trip and broke my little finger. Earlier in the year I crashed my airplane in Payson, AZ. The airplane was badly hurt, but my only trauma was to my ego, which required more training and a later success in my private pilot check ride to repair, somewhat. This just goes to prove that falling off a bike hurts more than crashing an airplane.

Our first child, Georgina, was a wonderful blessing, but the local ER thought otherwise after two trips there in two weeks. Bad parents. Ginny fell down a couple of stairs in Birmingham, UK and broke her one year old ankle. I think that the second break was her wrist. By the time her sister came along we were accomplished child beaters. But Lily was resilient for a while; she managed to roll down all the stairs that had been the site of Ginny’s downfall, but without harm. Later however we found her Achilles heel – her radio ulnar joint which would sub luxate when traction was applied. Some call this nursemaid’s elbow. Reduction is achieved by holding the forearm, puling gently and then supinating. This happened on two or three occasions. Once we got her all the way to the ER in Oklahoma when her nose began to itch. Reflexly, she attempted to scratch it and her elbow popped back into its proper position. Her sister Caroline and brother Tom also had this weakness and we became experts at arm breaking. We discovered Tom’s problem when someone tried to pull him out of the swimming pool. That same pool was also the site of an almost fall for 5 year old Tom. He decided to attempt a jump from the high diving board. Three times he climbed the stairs and walked to the brink. Each time he paused for an age while surveying the scene and calculating the risk of catastrophe before climbing back down the steps, only to turn round and try again. Eventually sanity ruled and he climbed back down the steps to leave this important life hurdle for another day.

Tommy excelled at falling during his teenage years. Especially while learning skateboarding, skiing and snowboarding. Tom took three days to acquire the magical skill of skiing. On the first day he learned how to ski – straight down the hill - none of this sissy zigzag stuff for this six year old. He used the line of skiers waiting for the ski lift as a user friendly arresting mechanism. He noted that when you collide with two or three of them from the side, they gently absorb the forces as they all collapse in a heap. On the second day he learned how to stop, but that is only part of the trick; one has to learn when to stop, a component not learned until the third day. The second day was like a video game – taking out bunnies on the bunny hill. Once he wiped out on the snow slope and lost his glasses and was quite sad. But later he described this incident in a school paper as being formative.

Ginny and Caroline’s introduction to skiing was not spectacular. We went to Angel fire with another family from Norman, OK, the Cauraughs, Jim was a good footballer. We hadn’t skied before. Eileen stayed at home with little Tom. We sent Lily off with our friends and I took Caroline and Ginny on the lift up the bunny hill. Caroline had her usual broken arm in plaster. The three of us fell off the lift in a pile of bodies, poles and skis. I pointed Ginny down the hill and told her to go, which she did, but mostly rolling. She lost her glasses. Meanwhile Caroline and I, clinging together, zigged and fell, then zagged and fell again, and so on down to the bottom of the hill where we met a very tearful Ginny. Someone had found her glasses fortunately. She has never skied again, but only this morning her two oldest children Madeleine and Alexander went with paternal grandmother and cousins for a ski trip. Perhaps they will start with lessons.

His thoughtless parents bought a seven year old Tom a water slide for his birthday. Our first house in Rochester, MI was on a hill and there was a great grassy slope down the side, ideally suited for the tethering of this yellow plastic sheet and close enough to the outside tap to get the water flowing liberally. Unfortunately we lost the instructions which cautioned that strict parental supervision should be exercised to only allow one seven year old at a time on the slide, especially when high speeds were forecast. As usual Tom excelled at demolition.

As Tom progressed up the rock and roll ladder he continually searched for new crowd pleasing antics. On one occasion he scaled the large speakers at the front edge of the stage and then, still rocking, leapt down the eight feet into the front of the crowd. He broke his ankle.

Our second house in Michigan was down a long private road which had a slight slope, sufficient to accelerate a bicycle or similar vehicle to a significant speed. Now Evil Knevil had demonstrated that if one travels as sufficient speed on a wheeled vehicle and then encounters a ramp one can remain airborne over a number of cars parked side by side. Now Tom was quite cautious and did not attempt the Grand Canyon leap first off. Rather he built a small ramp and on his inaugural run took off gracefully and landed less gracefully. The trick is to not land front wheel first as the shock involved is transmitted straight up through the wheel and front forks to the handlebars, to which the hands are attached. The force is then transmitted through the arms unless of course the arms are not sufficiently strong to withstand this force. On this occasion this was the case and Tom broke his arm. Ouch. Undeterred he continued to idolize Evil Knevil. Tom and his buddies found an abandoned four wheel ATV and got it going. In front of the house there was a pond with lots of frogs – a fair facsimile of the Grand Canyon. This time the ATV accelerated to about 5 mph and soared at least two feet before splashing down into the pond and scaring the frogs. Apart from a wetting Tom sustained a severe gash in his thigh, the remnants of which are visible to this day.

Caroline’s most famous fall was when she was in the Adams High School Drum Corps (a strange diversion for this nightingale) and Tommy was the drum corps leader. Caroline caught her toe on a rock and did a roll on her drum, literally. She was of course reprimanded by the drum corps leader for being such a klutz and embarrassing the line. Now detailed analysts of this failure mode would note that a bass drum interferes more than somewhat with the vision needed to manage foot placement, especially when the owner of the said foot was beating the drum mercilessly and trying to keep in step with the woodwind and brass.

I believe that hereditary has something to do with the propensity for falling. Both Eileen and I had scooters when we were young and learned something of the relative instability of two wheels, especially on icy roads. Eileen had a couple of recurrences of her falling disease as she approached her 60th year while living in Rochester, MI. On the first occasion she slightly misjudged a stair depth and placed her heel on the carpet that surrounded the front edge of the step. Her foot slipped and down she went right on her coccyx, which broke most painfully. She summoned help from neighbors as Brian was down in Houston, TX at the time. But this, although painful was only a warm up for the big one which occurred some months later. We had a cat, Luca, named after the song of the abused child who lived on the second floor. The cat would climb on to the roof and try to attract attention by caterwauling and scratching on an upper floor window. The day was very cold after a snow fall and snow melt that resulted in black ice on the black top outside the garage. Eileen heard the cat’s noise and went out through the garage to entice Luca down with food. Again her heel hit the ice and she slid. Her fall was broken by her arm which in turn also became broken – all the way through the neck of her humerus, just below her shoulder. This was serious and demanded serious attention from an orthopod. The two broken ends were aligned and her arm was placed in a sling for quite some time. But time and physical therapy are great healers and now she can scratch her own back.

So much for some of the great falls in the history of the Peacock family and friends.

