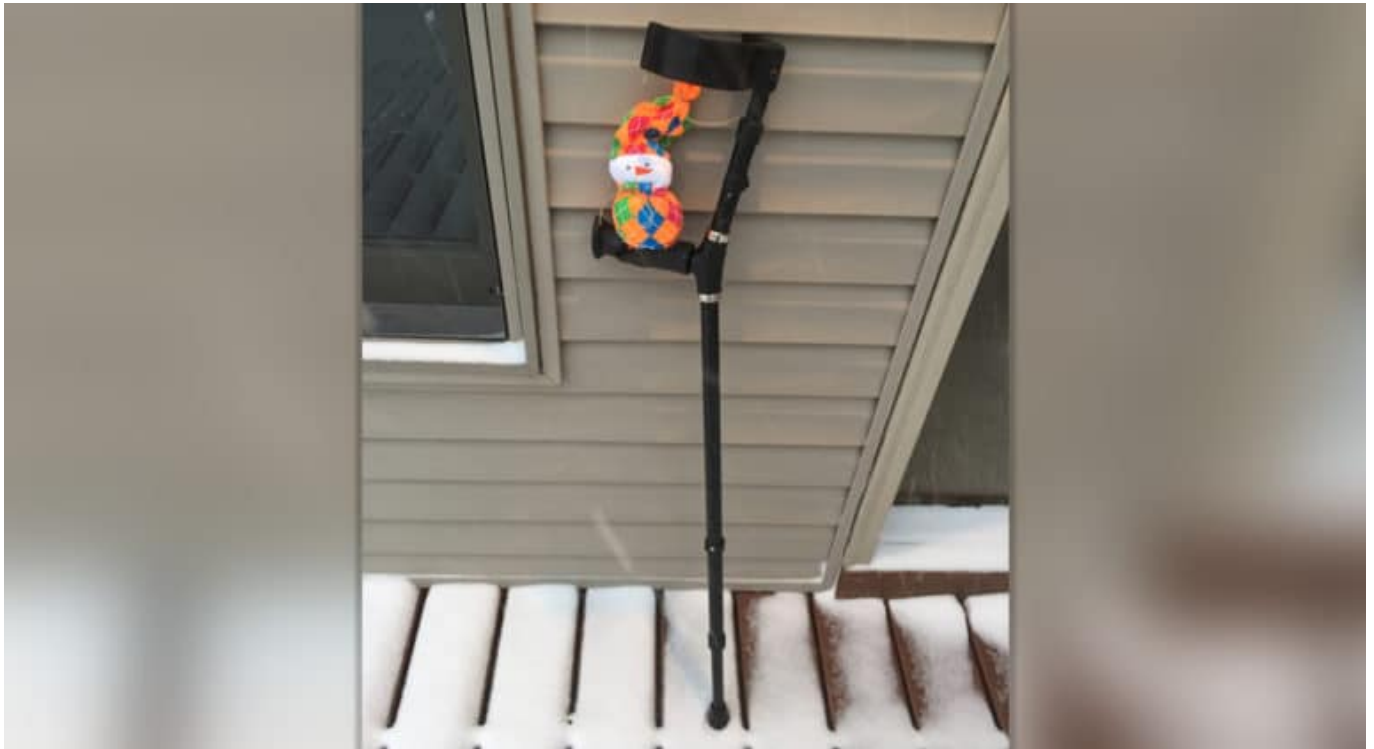


Cane Commentary



I was diagnosed with MS about 30 years ago. Along the way I've thought a lot about how MS has affected my day-to-day life. I had a pretty benign course for the first ten years or so; indeed, most people probably didn't even know that I had MS when I was in my 30s. But then things got a little worse, and I started to need a cane to walk.

The impetus for getting the cane was some woman at the D.C. train station saying to her friend, "Look, he's drunk and it's not even 7:30 in the morning!"

Not drunk, lady, just uncoordinated and unsteady on my feet. But thanks for the kick in the butt. Clearly, I needed to start using a cane.

My first cane was a fold-up, retractable contraption that straightened itself out when I needed to use it. It folded into four sections and could be stored in a purse or a briefcase or whatever. My colleagues gave it to me on my 40th birthday. Such a thoughtful and practical gift.

Soon after I got it, I told my uncle that I had started to use a cane. Looking almost grave, he asked me how I felt about it. I said, "It's cool." He was surprised by my laid back attitude; he thought it might be more of a serious thing, psychologically, I guess. I said, "No, check it out. It's **cool**," as I unfolded the cane to let him see it spring to life.



I've since started using a crutch versus a cane. My physical therapist calls it a Canadian crutch. It provides a bit more stability than a cane, I discovered. It's less "cool," though; doesn't fold up or anything.

Using an assistive device, as these things are known in clinical circles, is a bit of a flip out on the social level, both good and bad. I'm pretty sure that it doesn't add much to my basic physical appeal; but neither did appearing to be inebriated at 7:30 in the morning. On the other hand, the kindness of strangers, to channel Tennessee Williams, is everywhere when you use a cane. It's so heartwarming. People help me. A lot of people and in a lot of different ways.

That said, I've had a few pretty odd, uncomfortable exchanges that can be linked directly to using a cane. All of them at the gym. One young fellow asked if he could take my photograph. Seems he wanted to use the photo as inspiration. I think. I hope. I guess he was impressed that I was working out with big dumbbells—the weights, not the other people at the gym—and was putting them away laboriously, one at a time because I had the crutch on one side, notwithstanding my disability.

Another guy at this gym told me in the locker room that he was going to tell his dad that he'd seen me there working out. I said, "Oh really?" Yeah, he said. He thought that his dad needed to start exercising. I guess the message was something like, "check it out, dad, even this guy who needs a cane to walk is working out." I hope that worked for him and his dad, but it felt a little weird.

There were other exchanges, but enough already! Most cane-related experiences have been good, some have been a tad odd.

As is my wont, apparently, I try to have fun with the whole crutch business. Thus I can be seen twirling it like a baton as I wait practically anywhere, but especially on subway platforms. And I routinely use the crutch tip to depress elevator up and down buttons. Little

kids like banging the crutch on the floor. For a really long time. I encourage this. Little kids, unlike adults, make no pretense at all about their cane curiosity. "What's that thing?"

In short, I'm a big fan of the assistive device. Makes it easier to stand and walk without falling over. For anyone who may be struggling with the decision, that's really it in a nutshell.