

Silence: A Missed Opportunity for Education?



My mouth is dry. My heart is pounding. I'm beginning to sweat.

No, I'm not about to perform on a stage or give a speech to a roomful of people... and yet... everyone is looking at me—not at him—waiting, expecting me to do something.

Or are they?

I've just arrived at a small get together, hobbling in with my walker. I've barely have made it through the door when I hear someone, over all other conversation already in progress, loudly exclaim:

"Hey, gimpy!"

Those words have stopped me in my tracks, and I scan the space for the source. Ah. Right there. It came from someone a few decades older than me, with a beer in one hand, a cigarette in the other and a proud grin on his face.

I don't recognize this stranger, though I was later told I'd briefly met him once before.

This man doesn't know who I am or anything about me. He doesn't know I'm temporarily using a walker because I recently had surgery on one of my legs and I cannot put weight on it

for two and a half months. He probably doesn't know I have MS either, and if he does, he certainly doesn't know anything about it or why what he did was so tasteless. He doesn't know that, someday, I may **need** to use a walking aid to get around.

Even if he was privy to any of that information, is it any of his business?

I've written before, here and on my personal blog, about how illuminating this injury recovery has been in offering me small glimpses into what my reality could be if my MS progresses in that direction. And that's why this man's failed hilarity stung the way it did.

So, what do I do? Do I perpetuate the scene he created, only moments after walking through the door, and make the rest of the evening uncomfortable for everyone? If I call him out, will everyone think I'm dramatic or overly sensitive or unable to take a "joke?" Do I offer an explanation? Do I owe him one? Is that really what he's after, or does he just want a reaction from me? Do I do what I usually do and crack a self-deprecating joke and sacrifice my mental and emotional peace for the rest of the night? Or do I do nothing and wonder if I'm condoning the behavior?

I can't speak for anyone but myself, but to me, a "joke" of this nature—no matter how innocent and no matter who it's coming from—is cruel. These trite one liners are things I've heard ever since my diagnosis. I go about my day, dodging eye contact with people and abruptly changing conversation topics, knowing that a cheap joke could be on the tip of anyone's tongue. And it's not just a quick, fleeting comment. No. It's a reminder. It's a reminder of a life I didn't choose, the life I didn't dream of as a child.

It's a life we all live, loud and proud, but always on edge, anticipating the next time we have to make the decision:

Do I call him/her out and risk ruining the night for innocent bystanders? Or do I suffer alone and risk contributing to the core problem by remaining silent?