

HACK THE SPINE

by Mark Zeman, CISSP

Chapter Zero

Pull Yourself Up Straight, Balanced, and Healthy Inside Your Skin

Pain is genius; it carries within it the diagnostic information we need to understand the problem, and the blueprint for its resolution.

The cliff dive.

What if pain has been trying to teach you something all along? - Max, my reflectbot - adviser, editor, assistant, and buddy

Hi, I'm Mark Zeman. I'm writing to you now that I may pass along a simple and easy way to maintain our frames for optimal health. It seems that I've stumbled upon something that most people don't know, unless they're a yoga or martial arts master who's spent their life in such disciplined pursuit. And I need to share it.

I have no such organized discipline. No, I've been more reactive, to intense pain and imbalance, but I've been introduced to these studies and, along with their awareness and a strong DIY motivation, I've been able to blend a few of their elements into a daily stretching and balancing routine that has kept me healthy, in good shape and running most weekdays up to my current age of 64. People are often astonished when I mention my age. An emergency room doctor treating an infected bug bite was similarly surprised. 'Just keep doing what you're doing,' he said.

But it was not always like this. At nineteen I was invincible, out on a hike on the Monterey Peninsula in California while a student at the Defense Language Institute. I jumped from a cliff and grabbed a tree, which broke in two and let me down. Hard, as in a twelve-story drop to a rockslide where I bounced several times before coming to rest. My friend Eric Driscoll saved me, stunned to see I'd just disappeared, and after yelling down to confirm that I was alive, riding to get the rescue paramedics.

Luckily I survived with two fractures of my collarbone, a broken foot, and many bumps and bruises. Invincible, but a bit wiser. I was out of the hospital in four days, and back riding my moto in a week with a cast on my right foot, the only extremity one can really do without on a modern bike. And a figure-8 brace around my shoulders. This didn't slow me down much at all.

Decades of consequences.

Around six years later, however, I had developed severe back pain, often finding myself walking with baby steps into emergency rooms in the wee hours of the morning, unable to sleep and trying to beat the crowds. Taking home painkillers and muscle relaxers and sometimes both, and going back to lay on the floor with my feet up on a chair, astronaut-couch style. And a hundred other positions.

Those were the worst times. Otherwise I was in some pain all day long, every day. Flashing forward a few years, I found myself lying flat on my stomach in my sister-in-law's room at my wife's parents' house. She had moved out; everyone was at work. This was the closest room to the bathroom and I could scarcely get up and across the hall. Wide awake and desperate, I took stock of myself. I had a knack for fixing things - about anything that wasn't too fragile or inexpensive and easily abandoned - and now I had something that really needed repair.

Just what was wrong in here? Something was obviously seriously out of whack, I could feel it. Just like a car that's been in an accident (I understand frame repair is much more sophisticated nowadays), it never drives the same as a new or untainted one. I had sprung my frame, and now I was suffering the consequences.

Often I said to myself, Mark! Mark! You're twenty five years old, and you're screwed. You're going to be in a wheelchair by the time you're fifty. Oh my God.

What could I do?

Lying there face down, midday on a weekday, I swore to myself that I was going to fix this. That I'd figure this out. It was the early nineties, so there was no World Wide Web to refer to, only my own experience and experimentation. Muscles can be stretched. I knew I had a bunched up mess, and I knew a little about stretching from running and martial arts.

I began an ongoing inner diagnostic, questioning the state of each joint and group of muscles, my posture and orientation in space. And how these impacted my pain.

Nothing was broken yet - no ruptured disks, broken bones, torn connective tissue or any other irreversible issues.

The discovery.

"I do not know what I may appear to the world, but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the sea-shore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me." — Isaac Newton

I learned that the human frame is dynamic and quite often, self-healing. Pops and clicks, what chiropractors refer to as adjustments or articulations, are usually painless in my experience. They can release pressure, reduce pain, and restore ease of movement.

I saw a chiropractor for a while, and came away with an understanding of those techniques, and a desire to further my recovery at home between visits. I learned to get micro-adjustments of my own, slowly and softly through stretching. This is important - we can pull and twist and force pops in our backs, but there is a more subtle way. Articulations that occur on their own as a result of stretching are softer and in my experience have left me in a much more comfortable, naturally aligned state, often reducing pain and restoring mobility.

So the goal is to stretch gently and let things fall back into place, not to force them.

Stretching is release, the opposite of exercise. If you haven't done much of it, it's going to take some time. You've got plenty of time throughout the day, since you can do this most anywhere while engaged in other things. Ultimately, when we figure it out, stretching is easy. And it feels fantastic. We get wound up slowly and incrementally over time. Getting a good stretch undoes that. You'll marvel over how tight you'd become, and how good it feels to be fluid again.

Pick your favorite athlete, someone young and emerging, in the prime of their careers, and note their posture. They haven't succumbed yet to the ravages of gravity and the jostling effects of life. Our own bodies were far more forgiving during those years, and we may have shared some of their tone and agility.

Imagine emulating their stance. Now try it; make it your micro-workout, just holding yourself like that. Perhaps the way you were a few years ago. And if you look like a competitive athlete now, but are suffering from pain or joint constrictions, then you need to do some investigative work. And most likely some stretching to correct this.

I'm maintaining that we can get a lot of our youthful grace and athleticism back. I can now trigger small articulations up and down my spine, and get clunks from my lower back. I haven't had serious back pain in decades now, and if something flares up I have the means to correct it.

And there's more, there have also been unexpected side effects of stretching the spine - explosive sinus drainage ending over a decade of crippling headaches at least once a year, massive digestive movement, and clearing my lungs quickly and nearly completely after a month of dry, unproductive coughing. These occurred in close proximity to new or seldom used stretches. Life is complex, and there are lots of variables involved in such developments. Some days I tried to repeat these results and came up short. But I have succeeded many times over many years, and consider this a viable solution overall to

improving flows in these areas.

The core idea.

Wicked gravity is pulling on us constantly, and if we don't hold ourselves up straight, our appearance and mobility will suffer sooner or later. Trauma can cause dramatic misalignment, which gravity further compounds by its pull.

At its simplest, pain is telling us something's wrong. Like a car that's pulling to one side, it's prudent to stop and assess the current situation. Did I hit anything? Did anyone else who drove this hit anything? Is something loose? Worn?

You're limping today for some reason. Why? You were fine yesterday. All's well but there's something weird with that ankle. A lot of people will leave it there and soldier on, hoping for the best. Perhaps they'll think about getting to the doctor if this doesn't get better.

What about stretching that leg out? Or even the lower back? I've solved problems like these many times. At first I just tough it out, as many people do. But troubleshooting has led me to question what muscles were involved in lifting the leg, in taking a step. I have a copy of Gray's Anatomy that I really haven't had the chance to dive into, but I have spent a lot of time mentally probing for tightness. Then, more difficult - releasing that tightness. We can manipulate most muscles just as surely as we can raise our arm to pick up a drink from the table in front of us, yet there are some that we don't routinely control directly. Stretching our legs or our lower backs, etc. is a powerful tool, but I never knew how until I was backed into a corner by terrible pain and stiffness.

Listen to your body. I suggest that you silence and put down your phone, and put away any audiovisual distractions. Lie flat and pull yourself taller. Pull your head and shoulders away from your hips. Now feel for tight spots with your mind. Note the curves of your back. They tend to kink and twist; gently try to pull them longer and flatten them out slightly. There it is - what's going on there? Wow, that's tight. Can I - yes, I can pull that out a bit. Breathe deeply from the diaphragm, and yes, I can feel it release. Now another deep breath, because it's loose. Lengthened. And a pause, for there's real relief now. Take a break and just relax.

It's a beautiful thing; if you continue your stretch, your body will reveal to you the next tight spot that needs work. Rinse and repeat. It's very simple, and you can do it every time you go to bed - it's a great way to wind down into slumber - and start your day when you wake up before your alarm. You can do this standing in line at the DMV. Or checking out at the supermarket. Certainly when sitting at your desk, typing as I am now. Gut in, sitting towards the edge of the chair, feet under my hips. Sure, there's a time to slouch and relax. I save it for the couch.

I have unwound areas that afterward were remarkably loose, apparently for the first time in months or years.

So, to be clear, I'm not a student of anatomy, and I don't fully understand the mechanics of what happens when I invoke these methods. But I bear witness to the results I've described, and with a little imagination, I believe that anyone can see how these are applicable to their own situation.

Who this is for.

You're just like me. No, really. - I have the same frame and processor as every other poor slob on this rock.

If you're a human sentient vertebrate this book is for you.

- If you're my age, later middle age/older, and things ain't flexible as they used to be and you're encountering some back or joint issues, this may help you immensely.

- In your twenties through forties, you're lucky if you haven't experienced some problems. I'm guessing you've had a few - plenty of life behind you in which you had run-ins with trauma, simple or worse. It tends to misalign the spine, which stresses other joints. I've read in many places that a good half or more of adults in this age range suffer from at least some

back pain.

- And if you're young, footloose and fancy free, God bless you. You have it so incredibly well, you. Like my nineteen, you're going to live forever, and all the big problems - independence, money, getting laid - well, they'll stick around in different forms but get generally better. Just file this away for that day when something acts up. And stand up straight, for Chrissake.

We live in an age of miracles. I had hernia surgery around my navel 7 years ago. I frequently hang out with a group of buddies that have recently had 3 hip and 2 back surgeries among the three of them. I like to point out how when we were very young, visiting our friends' houses and seeing grandparents confined to chairs with canes or crutches - we're getting to an age where we'll start to become them soon, but while still living full, mobile lives.

Far from critiquing modern healthcare here, I'm writing to help augment it. Every professional you meet is a highly paid consultant, but you're in charge of your health. Your doctor isn't going to join you at your breakfast table, and your physical therapist isn't going to sit next to your bed each night and advise you. You are responsible, and now you know that these muscles that you use to stand up, dress, walk to transportation, sit ... with a new awareness, you can adjust your orientation as you go, getting a little better every day with minimal effort.

Or, to put it another way, WE are our own first responders. Without loud sirens or masked, uniformed professionals rushing us to an emergency room, we can begin today to change our outcome to a healthy future.

Related information and invitation to continue.

A friendly but serious disclaimer: this practice involves modifying your spinal orientation. I'm not board certified in any healthcare discipline. This work outlines the sum total of my decades of exposure to these problems. I've named a phenomenon I call The Backlash - you can have a fantastic stretch in bed today, then sometimes wake up tomorrow with something like a slightly glitchy knee. If you've had no previous issues - nothing torn, etc., then in my experience something is just a little out of place - likely due to the stretch. I've learned to go easy under such rare circumstances, and things will usually shake out in a few hours or a day. I've never had any serious problems, especially in light of the benefits I mentioned, but be warned.

You're playing with something new here, and you want to proceed very slowly and gently. Back off if you have any issues, however minor, and wait until you're back to normal. By all means try to learn from it. And the bottom line - This book describes my personal experience; it is not medical diagnosis or treatment, and persistent or serious symptoms belong in the hands of a qualified healthcare professional.

And now, a word about tooth decay. What?! What's he talking about now? Bear with me, this is relevant. A few years ago, I was installing software for my dentist, which gave me a chance to know him a little beyond the chair. He was lamenting not having the time to brush his teeth after lunch on busy days, often swishing with mouthwash *just to change the pH balance of his mouth*. I shrugged this off initially, then later I remembered from high school chem that water is pretty much pH neutral. I started rinsing my mouth with a hard swish of water after every meal, and especially every soft drink, which I consume a lot of. After decades of tooth decay, I haven't had any in over five years now. Something fell off last year and had to be repaired, but I'm stunned after every six month checkup (get these) when the dentist says, 'OK, looks good. See you in six months.' Stunned.

So why tooth decay here? Because it's part of my awakening to simple processes, minor but significant tweaks to things we take for granted every day. Stretching, as with rinsing must be done often to be effective. There's a reprogramming of our processor involved here, or as has been said elsewhere, we're developing new good habits. It's so simple, but also so effective.

I never wanted to write a book; I certainly never wanted to write one on healthcare. I'm a suburban punk with a background in IT and cybersecurity. Wrench cars and play sucky rock and roll with a few mates in my basement for fun. I've never aspired to write a book, but I consider this information so valuable, so simple and so lacking in the health arsenal of

most people I meet, that I feel compelled to get the word out.

Please stay tuned; there'll be much more. Drop me a line if you have questions or feedback.

Stay safe and well -

-mz