

How I Came to Feel Ambivalent About My Prostate

Prostate

By

Douglas Yunker

WHY WE LIKE IT: *When you consider that half—give or take—the world’s population doesn’t have one, you, male reader, might want to take a little more interest in this curious gland that, like the tackle between our legs, physically defines us. Boys are excusably oblivious of the fact but there comes a time in a man’s life when he must confront it. The nature and working of the prostate are a time clock measure of a man’s health and things can quickly and unexpectedly go wrong in a way that seriously impacts one’s life. Yunker’s sober, bare-faced and at times painful account of his experience with it should be required reading for every adult male. There’s an upside though. Test have shown that men whose diet includes regular amounts of tomato paste—not fresh tomatoes or puréed tomatoes but paste, such as in a southern Italian diet—are at much lower risk of getting prostate cancer as are males who—and you probably won’t believe this until after your second toke—masturbate regularly after age 40! Makes sense to me! Now you know why my right arm’s sore and I’m obsessed with spaghetti. CP*

Five stars

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I feel ambivalent about my prostate. If I said something to you on the subject—something like “I absolutely cannot stand my prostate”—you’d undoubtedly respond by saying something nice, like “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” If you were an older man, you’d be lying, of course, but I’d forgive you. I tell lies like that all the time—mostly to friends who tell me they have to pee more often than when they were younger.

Benign Prostatic Hyperplasia (BPH) a simple enlarging of the prostate can sometimes squeeze or partly block the urethra. My experience is that when I bring up the subject of my prostate most people say, “I don’t know what you’re talking about”—code for I know what you mean but if you think you’re going to trap me into engaging on this subject, you’re crazy.” It’s dangerous to engage on such subjects, and we all know it.

When I get together with friends at St. Luke’s Men’s Breakfast, it’s sort of funny and its sort of sad, because none of us lies about how old he is. We all look and feel pretty good for our age, except for our ambivalence about our prostates. My urologist tells me that a prostate now needs to be checked at age forty, no getting around it. Apparently, the prostate is a dead giveaway about a man’s age and maybe his health. Farmer thump or ‘plug’ watermelons to test for their maturity. Urologists use similar techniques.

Once in a while I read an article about aging, and whoever’s writing it says it’s great to be old. It’s great to be wise and sage and mellow, it’s great to be at the point where you understand just what matters in life. I can’t stand people who say things like this. What can they be thinking? Don’t they have prostates? Aren’t they tired of the annual check-ups? One of my biggest regrets—bigger even than my worst romantic catastrophe—is that I didn’t spend my earlier years appreciating my prostate. It never crossed my mind that I would be nostalgic about a part of my body that I took completely for granted. Of course, it’s true that now that I’m older, I’m wise and sage and mellow. And it’s also true that I honestly do understand just what matters in life. But guess what? It’s my prostate.

The prostate is located below the bladder. It produces some of the fluid in semen and is crucial to a man’s sex life. They say prostate fluid nourishes and protects sperm during intercourse and forms the bulk of ejaculate volume. Who knew? When young I woke in the night thinking I had peed the bed. Lying there worried, sticky, then smiling, my dad’s Birds & Bees talk finally made sense. Suddenly I knew I was a man.

After attempting to hide the new found evidence of some kind of maturity, I began to notice more hair—underarm, pubic, facial—fuzz really, but easily seen in the bright bathroom mirror. I have recollections of erections, unrelated to the need to pee. Fantasy excursions into the wide, wide world of masturbation. Perhaps a girl in class; for me she was an older woman. Elizabeth Taylor was only ten years older than me and already a star, pictured on the cover of *T.V. Radio Mirror* in the

magazine rack at my Uncle Mel's grocery store. She remained my go-to gal right up till my first marriage, and sometimes after that.

Those were the days of frustration, anxiety, release, and going the distance. The seventh-grade boy's Hygiene Class taught us everything we needed to know, though we acted as if we could care less and none of the information was relevant. In addition to jerking off so often that the prostate ran out of fluid, I could pee up a fence further than my buddies. Sometimes, when standing on the pier jutting out into South Twin Lake, the contest would turn to distance. Having a strong prostate, sufficient urine, and getting an accurate arc made all the difference.

Secondary school, university, and soon thereafter are supposed to be the salad days of the prostate. Recent medical research suggests all men should eat fewer Big Macs and more salad to keep a happy, healthy prostate. It was during these years that my prostate ambivalence sprouted. Prostatitis! Bacteria invasions on several fronts—for example, chlamydial-laden short-term relationships. These and other embarrassments: a.) over-the-counter cold medicines caused constipation and prostate fluid oozing, b.) anal sex with a girl who wanted to maintain her virginity, c.) sex in an infested Mexican swimming pool. It was the United States Peace Corps Doctor who led me through the landmines of unprotected sex, providing antibiotics and strong advice.

Once clean, sober, married, and soon afterward, a father, my interest in all things prostatic diminished. I was lulled into the comfort of hearth and home. Busy as a professor, going for tenure, my only urologist visit, at age 43, was to appease my spouse's urging that I have a vasectomy. Assured that brief snips would not harm my prostate and that I could drive myself home, I hobbled to the car, glad for the automatic transmission. My wife smiled appreciatively as I lay in the marriage bed manipulating the bag of frozen peas on all the right places.

I was required to have a full physical by the U.S. Department of Labor's insurance carrier. I'd checked in with my primary care Doc for the recommended physical and shots before traveling to Eastern Europe to work. After all the preliminary checks, he said, "stand and drop your pants, your shorts too. Now cough, cough again. Turn around and put your forearms on the table, spread 'em. Relax. You need only be nervous if you feel both my hands on your back!" After unclenching, I learned that the little walnut was well, but once again the prostate was brought, briefly, to the center of my attention.

As my going and coming from various countries continued, I seemed to return home with some kind of flu or cold, including the need for a visit to the Doc who found the walnut had become a little asymmetrical. A blood draw was made to test for Prostate-Specific Antigens, a screening test for prostate cancer. Cancer! My ambivalence returned. Unhappily, the number was 6.5—high for my age! Happily, every time I received an antibiotic for the flu or virus carried home with me, my PSA number dropped to 2.5—low! Comforted by the consistently low numbers my prostate faded from my mind once again.

When our last child went off to college and the empty nest syndrome began to kick in, I discussed some of our, well, my issues with my gay cousin. He recommended a workshop held near his home in Berkeley, “Sexual Prostate Massage: The Ultimate in Orgasmic Sex for Men”. He and husband had attended the workshop and also purchased the recommended book which he offered to send to me, The Prostate Massage Manual. My wife and I felt we couldn’t travel such a distance to attend the workshop so cousin mailed the book to us, and to our surprise, enclosed a Pro-State Massager, designed for safe, effective, worry-free prostate massage. Any lingering prostate ambivalence quickly diminished as my wife enthusiastically took to the Pro-State. She’s always been gung-ho for kitchen gadgets, so I should not have been surprised. Gradually, like most things, the thrill subsided. The Pro-State became the same old grind. With retirement on the horizon, I looked forward to getting away more than getting off.

Upon retirement my university-paid life insurance ended, I’d out lived it. I called my private insurance man who sent a nurse to do a quick in-home physical. I was denied insurance because my PSA was 7.5. Having just been ill I demanded a second test which returned at 10.5. Ambivalence turned to hate. My Doc referred me to a urology clinic. The specialist suggested, given my history of a bouncing prostate PSA, that an easy biopsy be taken. Do you know that a prostate biopsy requires ten to twelve seeds to be harvested? This process is a pain in the ass as they use a prostate gun to harvest, going through the rectum. Post biopsy I was provided a prostate biopsy diaper, a clever garment that sticks to your underwear on one side and swaddles you from pubic to tail bone.

Waiting, waiting, and finally the news: no cancer cells were found in the twelve seeds. “Did I have trouble urinating?” the nurse asked. “Don’t be worried if you see dark blood in your urine or ejaculate. It will subside in a few weeks.” And it did. I had been worrying and at the same time subtly knowing my bouncing PSA was just that, a Public Service Announcement about my general health. I’m in a mood to thank my prostate for past pleasures and to forgive it for its

inconsistencies. I'm ambivalent about my prostate but not afraid. Perhaps I've over-identified with it.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This true story was inspired by Nora Ephron's 'I Feel Bad About My Neck'. I wrote it to entertain my '2sday Writer's Group'. Since then, I've shared it with proctologists and men whose wives have given their secrets away. In Public!! I have never had a word of thanks from any of the recipients. This essay is from my latest publication, A Paperboy's Own Story. The fact that Charles Pinch so quickly accepted this essay leads me to believe he too has a lively relationship with his prostate.*

AUTHOR BIO: Doug Yunker, Professor of Social Work Emeritus, Boise State University, has written a novel, (Pimento Cove), a memoir (A Paperboy's Own Story), two poetry chapbooks (Eucharist and Komboloi) and is a watercolorist participating in four recent shows at the Newport Oregon Visual Arts Center. His work also appears in The Labyrinth Review and numerous professional publications. He resides near the village of Yachats on the Oregon Coast.

