The Lighter Side of Rectal Surgery

It started out as a hard little bump right at the outer edge of my rectum. I found it one morning as I was…well, you know. I felt around it, discovered it was sore if I pressed it, and immediately assumed I had cancer. And, that I would need an operation. Probably a colostomy. And, that I would spend the rest of whatever was left of my life walking around with my poop oozing out into a glorified sandwich bag attached to my side. All of these thoughts rocketed through my mind in the span of thirty seconds.

I immediately put the whole thing out of my mind, or at least tried to. But over the next few days, that little bump seemed to grow; first the size of a BB, then in a few days a pea. The soreness now was real, and constant. I could no longer sit comfortably. I knew I had to see my Doctor.

My doctor was about my age. Dr. John, I called him. And a pretty good ol’boy. You could joke with him. Nevertheless, there is something particularly intimidating about the thought of having one’s rectum examined, especially at close range. That morning, I did my best to get the old tailpipe as clean and fresh as soap and a washrag can manage. On the way to the doctor’s office, I tried to drive with my cheeks apart to keep it from sweating. Any effort so as to not offend Dr. John, or embarrass me.

My first obstacle, which I hadn’t prepared for, was explaining the reason for my visit to the receptionist, in front of a waiting room full of other patients waiting to be seen. “Yes, Mr. Friel, what are your symptoms?” she asked, her voice echoing through the pin-dropping quiet of the waiting room.

I could feel my face redden as I swallowed and whispered, “Uh….got a bump on my rectum....”

“I’m sorry, sir,” she said in a voice that seemed to carry throughout the building, “a what on your rectum?”

Without turning, I could feel the smiles on a few of the faces in the waiting room. No sense in false modesty now, so in a slightly louder voice, I told her it was a bump about the size of a pea on my rectum. She asked, “Is it right on your rectum, or on the cheek?”

My God, why doesn’t she just have me drop my pants right here in front of these people? But, I held my composure and said, “It’s close enough you could walk. You wouldn’t need to take a bus!” She just looked at me blankly and motioned me to wait my turn.

Finally, I was summoned into the examination room. After a little small talk, and with his nurse standing nearby, I told Dr. John about my problem. He said, “Well, drop your pants and shorts and climb up on that table. Lay on your side and draw your knees up.”
Ahh, man. Here it is, the moment I’d been dreading. But, I unbuckled my belt and got undressed, trying to act nonchalant, as if I got undressed everyday in a room with an attractive young nurse (wonder what nurses talk about at lunch?), while Dr. John pulled on rubber gloves. No fool, that Dr. John. He said, “Now, Ed, I’m going to spread your cheeks and check the area. You just relax.”

Is he kidding? Relax? He’s gonna stick his finger in my rear end, press on that throbbing hotspot of pain, and he expects me to relax?? Superman would be quivering in that situation. But, I squeezed my eyes tightly shut and waited.

“Good Lord Ed, relax! You got that thing tighter’n Ft. Knox!”

I desperately tried to relax as he put one hand on my hip and then felt his finger start to work. He was gentle, I guess, but when he squeezed the bump slightly I jerked and uttered a guttural sound that even startled me. The probing continued, albeit a little more gently. After what seemed an eternity, he withdrew his finger, straightened up and said, “Well, I’m not sure what that is, but I don’t think it’s cancer. Let’s just keep an eye on it for a while.”

Keep an eye on my rectum. Hmmm. Wonder who gets that assignment? What a visual that conjures up.

So, the days passed. It didn’t take keeping an eye on my behind to know things were getting worse. The bump, or whatever it was, was growing. It now felt the size of a golf ball, and about as hard. And painful! I had real difficulty driving. And sitting in my office chair was out of the question. During one meeting with an employee, I actually had to lie down on the floor. There was simply no way to make that sound logical to him. He probably thought I’d had a hard night with Mr. Jack Daniels.

I finally called Dr. John again, and told him that the thing on my rear was swelling, and I’d had all the pain I cared to tolerate. So he scheduled me back in that day, and I went through the disrobing. And once again ‘assumed the position’ on that hard cold table. This time, Dr. John seemed genuinely concerned as he gently felt around the growth. “I don’t like the looks of this,” he said slowly. “I want you to see a specialist.”

I got my clothes on as he went to his office. I waited for him to come back, wondering what curse had befallen me that I needed a specialist. A rectal specialist! Then I got to thinking about why anyone would be inspired to specialize in the rectum. Does a student in medical school wake up one morning, snap his fingers, and exclaim, “The rectum! I’ll specialize in the rectum. It’s obviously my calling.”

“Okay, Ed. You’re set up with Dr. Spalding. He’s a young guy, but one of the best rectal men in this part of the country.”

Hmm, do you suppose that’s on his resume, or under the accomplishments section of his Country Club application? Would you put that in an obituary, or on a tombstone?
Next stop, Dr. Spalding’s office. My stomach, tied in a knot. Fearing the absolute worst. My swollen butt, throbbing with pain. Feeling as if I alone had been singled out to suffer the worst affliction ever to strike a human being. It was the end of the world.

It got worse after Spalding examined me and told me to get dressed and have a seat.

Thanks, I think I’ll stand.

“Well, Mr. Friel, what you have is a rectal cyst. In lay terms, a boil. You need surgery as soon as we can arrange it.”

Ahhh! That’s it! My life is over. A boil? Those things out of the Bible? Didn’t sinners get those things? Wait! I remember my grandmother talking about boils, and lancing them. Old people who drank spoiled milk and didn’t bath frequently got boils. And now I have one? How’m I gonna tell ANYONE I got a boil on my butt? I’ll be a laughingstock. The butt, literally, of any number of jokes.

Dr. Spalding continued to talk as these dark thoughts raced through my mind. “We’ll open the area surgically, and drain it.”

“Of what,” I asked.

He said, “It’s full of pus. And, it’s hard enough that there’s a lot in there. Probably the consistency of gelatin.”

That does it; no Jello for dessert, ever again.

“Surgery like this is pretty routine,” he said.

Not to me, it ain’t.

The good doctor continued, “And the only real risk is if we happen to cut the sphincter muscle.”

Okay; now, he has my full, undivided, riveted attention. “What kind of risk is that,” I asked weakly.

“That sphincter muscle is one of the strongest in the entire body. If we cut it, it never heals properly. And we don’t want you going around with a weakened sphincter.”

Doctor, you can go to the bank with that. We’re talking about MY sphincter; not some generic sphincter! I have a closet full of light colored trousers with a lot of wear left in them.
In a daze, I agreed on a date a few days out. The surgery would require a hospital stay of probably two nights, then a week or so to heal and get everything working again. Providing, that is, the ol’ sphincter is still in one piece.


And then, a day or so later, it hit me like a Revelation. Hey, wait! I’ve never been in an operating room. I’ve never had anesthesia. Never spent a night in a hospital, being soothed by beautiful caring nurses. This could be an experience right out of Marcus Welby, M.D, or Ben Casey. This could be an ADVENTURE!

My whole outlook changed immediately. I actually started looking forward to the trip to the hospital. I made a mental note to savor and remember every detail. The check-in. The prep. The whole thing. The fear vaporized. Anytime I had a twinge of anxiety, I’d quickly remind myself of the upcoming adventure. I actually started to look forward to the surgery. In fact, I got so caught up in the anticipation of the operation that I insisted on driving myself to the hospital, instead of having my wife take me, like some sick person.

Finally, it was time for the process to begin. I had been lifted onto the operating room table by the orderlies, and was lying on my stomach with my bare behind elevated to make it as accessible as possible.

Dr. Spalding said, “First thing we’ll do is to shave the area and prepare it for the incision.”

I asked him, “Doctor, is it really necessary for me to stay in the room while you do that?”

Bet they loved a comedian.

The anesthesiologist lowered the mask to me and said, “Count backward from 100 when I put the mask on.”

I replied, “Doc, you don’t have anything in that tank that can get to me.”

After the surgery, Doc told me I’d made it to 97 before I passed out.

The day after the surgery, Dr. Spalding came into my room and asked me if I had any pain. I told him I did. I don’t tolerate discomfort well. He said, “I’m going to put you on morphine.”

Lemme tell you…a guy could get used to morphine. As soon he gave me that shot, I felt myself float up off the bed and onto the back of a white dove. We flew out the window of the hospital. We flew west toward the snow-capped Rockies. I could see the streets of
Denver vividly below me. The spectacular details of the streets. Stoplights. Buildings. People at work in the windows. The rush of traffic of Littleton, giving way to the lush, green pine forests of Evergreen. We soared higher.

The sky, incredibly blue. The remarkable shade of blue it gets only over mile high Denver. I was absolutely at peace aboard my beautiful white dove. No fear, just serenity, as I surveyed the breathtaking forest below me.

My dove banked and began to descend into the pine forest. But as we got closer to the tops of the trees, I saw they weren’t trees at all. We were descending onto a golf green. We passed the tops of the blades of grass and continued to descend toward the ground. The blades of grass soared hundreds of feet above and around us. Far below, on the ground, I could make out a dot of brilliant red. The closer we got, the bigger that dot became until it blossomed into a full feathered plume of dazzling red on the closed and visored helmet of a Knight in Shining Silver Armor aboard a rearing white stallion…

I related this experience to the doctor the next day. He asked me how I remembered it all. I told him I seemed to drift in and out through the afternoon, and made cryptic notes on an old Reader’s Digest. And that was just the stuff I remembered. I wish I could recall the entire hallucination.

That night, I felt the pain return slightly. I told the evening nurse I was uncomfortable. She was pretty cute, short blond hair, glasses, and a nice figure.

This hospital stuff ain’t half bad. A new adventure after all.

The nurse came in with my shot. And with the great anticipation of another trip, I felt the needle go in.

But almost immediately, something felt dreadfully wrong. I felt my stomach tighten. Bile rose in my throat. I broke out in a sweat. And before I could ask for a towel, or for anything, I vomited unceremoniously all over the bed.

Must have made a wonderful impression on that cute nurse. What DO they talk about when they get together?

Later, they concluded I’m allergic to morphine. So much for any thought of joining the drug culture.