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Spa spawns sprain in the neck

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Most people have things hanging around from their past that they no longer use. In my own stash of such items, I can think of a machine that goes nowhere despite my feverish rowing, a sailboat with a significant leak that I've never been able to find and a motorcycle that I stopped riding 28 years ago when Melissa was pregnant.

And then there's the four-person Jacuzzi in the bathroom next to my downstairs office. I mothballed it years ago, because it consumed more megawatts each day than the entire East Coast and was also a bother to fill, empty and juice with chemicals.

I bought this self-standing spa in 1985 to add an amenity to the Bed & Breakfast that we operated for 10 years. A finish carpenter and I added on a large elm-paneled bathroom to a downstairs bedroom. There the Jacuzzi gurgled and bubbled away, creating its own little tropical rainforest.

We were the first B&B in the county—now there are a dozen or so. I think we might have been the first Jacuzzi spa as well. This gave rise to much speculation about what Melissa and I were “really doing up there.”

What we were *really* doing up here was a lot of cleaning, washing and cooking.

I was never much of a Jacuzzi person. I always felt that I was being slow-boiled in a cauldron of witchy disinfectants. After 20 minutes, I would emerge in a sweat, looking like a steamed crab. I don't expect sympathy, and I certainly deserve none.

I admit that I didn't raise too many procedural objections when the spa was hot-bubbling me while February howled at 10-degrees below zero on the other side of the picture window.

For those readers who know me, a question might arise that goes something like this: Why would anyone pay to stay with him? I admit that I'm not the friendliest pup in the litter.

My sociable wife is one reason. The hot tub is number two. That's about it, offhand.

We're having non-paying company this weekend, and Melissa thought it would be nice to fire up the Jacuzzi -- unused, now, for 18 years -- for their enjoyment.

“Why can’t they just enjoy the empty Jacuzzi?” I asked.

“I’m sure they could and would,” she said.

“We could also take the bed out of their room and the light bulbs out of their sockets. Then we could present ‘emptiness’ as a trendy theme. Let their imaginations fill these absences. Don’t you think they would enjoy living for a weekend in a crossword puzzle?”

“I’m sure no one would mind if *you* were absent,” she said, “and we only had to imagine your presence.”

“Now you’re getting into the spirit of creative emptiness,” I said.

“We are not going to welcome friends under the banner of less is more,” she said.

“But the Jacuzzi is a lot of work,” I said. “What if it leaks? What if it explodes? What if it swallows them like a couple of soft-boiled noodles?”

“What if the sky falls?” she asked. “What if a Siberian tiger builds a nest in the barn?”

“All valid concerns,” I said.

She paused. “Fill ‘er up, Jack.”

Any time you try to get something from your distant past working again, there are problems.

Most of the time we had reasons for stopping something back then. Usually, they were defensible reasons, or at least they appeared that way at the time.

It may have been that the something was not working, and we were unable or unwilling to fix it. Or we tired of the something and have just never gotten around to sending it off. Or we decided that it’s better for all concerned to do something else, so we pushed the leftovers into a dusty corner but never fully let go.

You can’t just pick up where you stopped something decades ago. You can’t stomp the pedal and expect trouble-free performance.

Yet, I know several couples who had “kept company” in high school or college, parted before getting married and then found each other anew in their 60s after spending most of their lives with other spouses.

In her retirement, my formidable high-school Latin teacher married her high-school sweetheart after being single into her late 60s.

This gave rise to a good bit of tittering among those of her former students who had learned the drinking song, *Gaudeamus Igitur*, in her class—“Let us rejoice, therefore, While we are young....” It’s never too late, I guess, for a half-decent Roman bacchanal.

I have no firsthand experience with rekindling a 50-year-old relationship where I left it, or where I was left or where the leaving was by mutual consent.

If I were suddenly divorced or widowed, I think I would go on by myself. I doubt that I would be seen as much of a catch, even though I'm widely thought to be more fun than a barrel of monkeys. Blue Grass, when all is said and done, is not a hotbed of senior dating—at least, as far as I know, which is only as far as my front porch.

But the sentimental sap in me -- and, maybe, in all of us -- might give a passing thought to available alternatives from the past.

A friend was recently approached by a long-lost college boyfriend now in his early 70s. He was ardent about a visit; but she was wary. On the phone, he couldn't stop talking about himself. She flagged him on it, but he persisted. She told him to stay home, 2,000 miles away.

I was rooting for that one to work, just like I was hoping the Jacuzzi's pump would pump, the heater would heat, the watertight seals would seal and the pipes would hold water.

One nice thing about old flames is that both remember the lively fire that warmed them once upon a time.

Another nice thing is that you don't have to lay pipe with each other. You knew the other person's quirks, prejudices, ouch spots and family histories. When you start from scratch, you have to learn all the not-to-say things on the fly.

While people change in some ways, people don't change in all ways. It's always possible that the changes that come with time and age will make things work better in a second round. You never know.

I've stalled long enough.

I've plucked a column out of the absence of one.

I found a new filter for the Jacuzzi and lined up the chemicals. I checked joints for signs of weakness. I wiped down the tub and even vacuumed the dirt-collecting spots that no one can see unless they move the Jacuzzi, which is like relocating the Great Pyramid at Giza.

I pushed the ON button.

LEAK!

The bottom of the plastic cartridge that holds the 24-inch-long filter is cracked. It's spurting into a pie plate squeezed beneath it. I turn the cutoff valve, but it's locked in open position.

The cartridge is one inch from the Jacuzzi's floor, so I can't replace the pie plate with a bigger container, which would give me time to figure out a quick and efficient way to drain the water.

I run into the kitchen, grab a four-quart pot and a turkey baster and run back.

If I use the turkey baster as fast as I can, I can keep the water in the pie plate from overflowing onto the elm floor. I feel like I'm in a Disney cartoon featuring Goofy.

I spend the next four hours sitting cross-legged on the floor, hunched next to the Jacuzzi, drawing water with the baster and dumping the filled pot into the toilet.

The Jacuzzi's leak had imprisoned me. My only choice was to keep draining it ounce by ounce until I lowered the tub's water level below its intakes.

I could feel a muscle in my neck tightening. The awkward sitting position was overextending my Trapezius muscle. There was nothing I could do except sit there, squeezing a rubber bulb to save the floor.

My neck locked up last night. I was barely able to walk.

Do things like this happen to other people?

My neck felt better this morning.

We are looking forward to having friends with us this weekend. They will have a functioning bed, working light bulbs, clean towels, soap and water.

The Jacuzzi will be empty and dry—but very clean.

I will invite them to sit in it and imagine being hot and wet.

The lesson I draw from draining a Jacuzzi spa with a turkey baster is simple: Patch all leaks in old vessels before you sail.