

THE HEALTHY BARBER

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He looked more Moorish than Scottish: perfectly groomed dark hair, smooth olive skin, hairy face and arms. Smartly dressed, an example of good health and elegance. And as soon as he said hello, a vigorous Scottish accent hit my ear drums, the hammer and all. He was about to cut my hair for the first time in Prince George, the capital of Northern BC.

I grew up in Paraguay, only the second landlocked country in South America. I never met a Scotsman there. The Paraguayan culture is monolithic, and for all intents and purposes Catholicism is the only religion. But after qualifying as a physician, I moved to South Africa, where I trained as an Obstetrician and Gynecologist.

In Cape Town, I came across a couple of Scotsmen. I learn that they make good whiskey, that men sometimes wore silly women's skirts, and that there were two great soccer clubs: Celtic and Rangers. Every country has it - the classic North versus South derby, a rivalry that stretches over decades and stirs up emotions like no other game. In Spain it is Real Madrid vs Barcelona, in Alberta the Edmonton Eskimos vs the Calgary Stampedes.

Barber saloon etiquette dictates that you try a conversation with the barber, usually starting with a silly comment about the weather, or sports. Pretending to be a connoisseur of Scottish culture, I asked him whether he was a Celtic or Rangers supporter. "None of your business" was his blunt response. The abrupt answer chilled the air for a few minutes. Truly a hair rising experience!

I reevaluated the situation. He kept going with the razor around my neck. He did not look like an assassin, but he looked really annoyed at my question, and I was quivering. I kept a close eye on the razor, and was ready to jump up and run like a puma. Nevertheless, he started chatting again, a bit embarrassed by his response, and asked what I did for a living.

I had 2 choices: to give him a pill of his own medicine; "none of your business" or be smart. With his sharp razor close to my head, which had now turned into a pair of scissors, I thought better about the first choice. But somehow, my response was "I have a delivery business", which is not far from the truth. As an Obstetrician and Gynecologist, I have personally delivered a few thousand babies.

I remembered my psychiatry professor talking about depersonalization, or the feeling of watching oneself act, while having no control over a situation. I was a classic example there and then. Was I entering a psychotic state, or I was I responding appropriately to the potential murder scene in the barber shop? To my relief, I saw some other customers and a few barbers around.

The conversation turned friendly, towards many other interesting topics of the day. Google was not part of the English vocabulary, and the internet was nowhere to be found

yet. I left the shop alive, and the haircut was in good order. My wife did not find any bleeding from my scalp.

Unbeknown to me, most Celtic supporters are Catholic, and Ranger enthusiasts are Protestants. So you define your religion by declaring which team you support.

So I decided to go back to him, and for years he cut my hair. We never talked about his soccer loyalties, but he did ask me about my delivery business from time to time. I always answered “it is booming”. He probably pictured me driving a big truck in Northern BC, not wearing greens in the hospital.

Robert moved to Nanaimo quite a few years later, and I was sad to see him go, he was a good barber. I stayed in the same barber shop, but missed him and his dry sense of humor.

A little later, and unrelated to my hair cutting experiences, I saw an old Scottish lady in my office. I had performed a major surgical procedure on her 6 weeks earlier, and she was bouncing around again. She always came with her daughter, the principal at my kid’s catholic school. She kindly gave me a box of the most delicious home-made shortbread. When we were saying goodbye, she happened to mentioned how happy she was that her son, a barber, was returning from Nanaimo. I asked her to describe him, and I immediately realized that the healthy barber was a ...Celtic supporter!

At my next haircut, there was the healthy barber again! He was perhaps a little heavier, but he looked as healthy and sounded as Scottish as ever. He explained that it rained a lot on the island, and his wife got tired of it. So when she suggested coming back to Prince George, he immediately agreed. He missed his family and his Prince George pals.

I decided to play a trick on him. I asked the healthy barber if his mother made the best shortbread in the world, to which he replied with an inquisitive sounding “yes”. And when I asked him if she just had an operation “down below”, his eyes went wide open. “How do you know all these things?” was, of course, his next question. “Because I did her surgery” I replied with a grin in my face. “What!” he almost drop the scissors on my head. But “aren’t you a delivery boy, I thought you drove trucks around here?” We had a good laugh after I explained to him what had happened that first day we met.

We went to the pub that night to celebrate our story. And we talked freely about the Celtic soccer team. I am glad to report that I never had another encounter with a suspected psychiatric mental process. But I still like the answer “I have a delivery business”, which I use from time to time, especially when confronted by a plumber or an electrician at my house.

Dr. Roberto Leon is a Kelowna-based gynecologist who has delivered 10,000 babies (at least) over 35 years. Learn more at drleon.ca.