

Hip Replacement

January 5, 2015

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Ka-chunk! The punch press cycled, and a dozen rotor blanks slid into the hopper while the ram rose, pulled by an enormous cam, the unspooling cold-rolled steel slid forward to an unpunched section and the cam forced the ram down again with force enough to slam through the eighth-inch steel to produce another dozen blanks. Ka-chunk! again with a sound that I heard but also felt through soles of my steel-toed boots.

Every five seconds for the duration of my eight-hour shift at Delco Products this two-story press cycled and ka-chunked at the cold-rolled steel. Minus the time it took to remove the end of the old roll and replace it with a fresh one, the press went through its cycle, producing the perforated steel discs that we stacked on rotor shafts, formed with molten aluminum, and wound with copper wire to produce the rotors that went into the fractional-horsepower motors used in Frigidaire appliances.

These, along with automotive shock absorbers were the output of Delco Products in the 1960s and '70s when I paid my way through college as an hourly production-line employee at one of the several large factories that were the economic life-blood and dominant feature of Dayton, Ohio, in those years. Delco Products, NCR, Delco Moraine, Frigidaire, McCall Printing, Dayton Tire and Rubber, Chrysler Airtemp, Inland Products, and dozens of machine and tool-and-die shops employed over 100,000 industrial workers and made Dayton a favorite destination for the hordes of migrants from Kentucky (mostly whites) and Alabama and Georgia (mostly blacks) who arrived during World War II and in the decades following. This immigration and the building of I-75 and U.S. 35 through

downtown changed forever the town that previously had been a model of good government and solid mid-western virtues.

Indeed, following the disastrous flood of 1913, Dayton had confronted its problems and in the process become a model of progressive good government, teaching the rest of the nation, including its neighbor to the south, what might be accomplished with a little soul-searching and the willingness to hold established political power to account. In addition to the flood protection enjoyed for the last 100 years, Dayton pioneered the council-manager form of municipal government. Cincinnati borrowed this idea from Dayton and unseated (eventually) the Boss Cox crowd from their position as the Queen City's orchard pigs.

Just in case the idea of orchard pigs is unfamiliar to you, let me explain. It was the custom once (and in some out-of-the-way places may be still) to keep an old sow in the orchard in the fall. She would sleep in the autumn sunshine with an ear to the ground, and whenever an apple fell from the tree, wake and following sound and scent find and greedily gobble the apple, then lie back down and wait for the next tell-tale thump. The main difference between the orchard pig and most bureaucrats is the pig doesn't spend much time convincing herself that she had anything to do with producing the apples. This metaphor can be applied successfully to political time-servers, many children of successful men, and most school administrators. But I digress.

There is a certain comfort in the regular, even inevitable quality of the assembly line. In contrast to the fallible mutability of the human condition, the assembly line was designed, and when functioning smoothly, performed its operations precisely the same way time after time after time after... Ka-chunk, five seconds, ka-chunk, five seconds, ka-

chunk on and on for as long as the feeder roll of steel lasted and then an empty, eerie lack of ka-chunk for as long as it took the punch-press operator to hoist another couple of tons of steel into place, feed the end of the roll into the machine (a gizmo not unlike the old computer printer feeders that used continuous paper feeds), do a quick safety check and hit the two start buttons that began the ka-chunk, five seconds, ka-chunk all over again.

Someone who understands more about Newtonian physics than I do might be able to tell you how a punch press develops its force and how big that force is. It was enough for me to see the veteran operators hold up hands with only two fingers to indicate they wanted four of something, usually four beers at the On The Double Café after the shift was over. The presses not on automatic cycle had two buttons that had to be pressed in order to bring the ram down and force the dies together to press out whatever part was in production. In those days before OSHA began to enforce work-place safety regulations, it was not uncommon for the operators to tape one of the buttons down freeing one hand for feeding blanks and removing finished parts, hence the prevalence of missing fingers.

In my several years as an hourly employee of the great and good “Generous Motors,” I held a variety of jobs, from assembly-line to piecework. Piecework was the best because the foremen and job-setters were usually satisfied if you made production. Our term for this was the make-out number. Once reached, the make-out number and a few more for good measure, one was free to pretend to work for the remainder of the shift. The best make-out job I had involved running a spring grinder. Every shock absorber had at least three coiled springs which my department made from great spools of wire. Once coiled and heat-treated, the springs were fed into holes on a six-foot diameter disc that rotated horizontally between

two grinding wheels. The wheels could be adjusted up and down in thousandth-inch increments; by taking a bit more or less from each end of the spring, the strength of the spring was adjusted so that it complied with specifications. A spring grinder met the make-out quota with 20,000 properly ground springs. Typically it took me about 90 minutes to produce that number which left me six and a half hours to make myself scarce. On good nights that meant finding an out-of-the-way spot with good light so I could read whatever my professors had assigned for the next class. Because I always seemed to have my nose in a book, the other members of the crew called me professor in a good-humored enough way that I took as a compliment, which it both was and wasn't.

These were the days of Spiro Agnew and the so-called moral majority, and I learned sooner than most that the mighty industrial unions, bastions of the Democratic Party, consisted predominantly of hyper-conservative petit bourgeoisie who had scrambled up from rural poverty to paycheck prosperity and who weren't happy that a bunch of long-haired college kids seemed to complicate their new-found status. Not all of the crews treated me and my kind with the friendly bemusement I found among the spring grinders; factories resemble the prisons of the movies (I have no knowledge of any other kind). They are large, busy places with lots of dark corners and back stairs. There were people who worked with us who could be dangerous and treacherous enemies, so when we heard, "Hey long hair, are you a boy or a girl?" we sometimes hesitated before giving the countersign, "Send your wife or your daughter around and I'll show her." Saying that to the wrong guy, or any guy on the wrong night, could stir up some unwelcome responses. A car might get vandalized, some heavy tool might "accidentally" land on or near your foot, or on one of those back stairs or in a dark corner you might get some version or

another of the sucker punch. Most of this I managed to avoid because, I suppose, I talked sports instead of politics. And I could play guitar better than most of my co-workers, a skill highly enough prized that it cut me some slack.

I held onto my job at the Delco for a long while after I graduated. So why was a college boy staying at a tiresome, irksome job when he could have been climbing a corporate ladder, or grinding through grad school, settling in the suburbs, marrying and producing two-point-seven children and living up to the expectations of his family and community? (I came very close to doing just that but was saved by a combination of the chaotic tenor of the times and my own contrarian nature.) The answers are several, but underlying them all was my desire, my need, my hunger to be hip. Can you dig it?

And in my understanding, taking part in the greatest industrial system the world had ever seen, looking at the process head-on, being able to stand my ground and do all it took to survive and even thrive as a blue-collar worker, all that seemed hip, not cool, but hip.

I stood in a pit and put coils on the backs of Frigidaires for twelve hours at a time; I welded the top seams of shock absorbers in a shower of sparks and coolant; I handled a pneumatic wrench, a punch press, a stevedore's hook, a fork lift, a hand sledge and cold chisel, and pretty quickly I got to where I was better than the job; I could do all that needed doing and have something left over. It wasn't all that great an accomplishment I freely acknowledge, but it was a step in a direction away from the path that had seemed so clear to me when I started college.

As an early baby boomer, I left high school with the intention of following my mother's desires and several uncles into the field of engineering. I had the math but not the

temperament. Like all my contemporaries I had been fed on a steady diet of American exceptionalism and Christian purpose. At the same time I had graduated from Mad Magazine to Playboy, and while I gave due attention to the air-brushed nipples that adorned its pages, I was drawn also to the opinions and pronouncements of Hugh Hefner and his hired savants. In hindsight, they don't seem nearly as hip as I thought them at the time. True, there was all that about forsaking our Puritanical ways and living hedonistically in the moment, and Playboy was early and consistent in its opposition to racism and censorship (very hip), but at heart their message was that if you had the right stuff – hi-fi, car, apartment, liquor, and clothes – you were hip, which falls almost entirely outside the definition of what it meant and still means to be hip.

What definition? Well you might ask. In preparing this paper I have asked any number of acquaintances to define hip. Most of them have hem-hawed something about knowing it when they see it; almost no one has ventured what might be called a simple definition. In respect for that hesitance, let me circle around the question in hope of drawing a bead on a definition in good time.

In *Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African-American Slang*, Clarence Major traces hip back to the Wolof language of western Africa. Hip, he claims, comes from *hepi* and/or *hipi* – to see or to open one's eyes. Along with *dega* (to understand) and *jev* (to talk falsely), the sources of dig and jive, these words made their ways to America chained to the decks on the middle passage. And with the loss of power and autonomy that travelled with the status of slave came the necessity to dissemble, to conceal, to misdirect the understanding of the master who had the power of life and death over the dissembler. This gave rise to the trickster who could talk openly and yet hide his meaning from any who were not *hepi* to

the *jeva*, hip to the jive. By this construction, Brer Rabbit was the hippest dude around and Joel Chandler Harris a chronicler of the fundamental nature of the black/white divide that has blessed and plagued American culture for most of its existence. Jive was the way slaves reclaimed some measure of personhood, of personal autonomy; few were the whites of the era who were truly hip.

John Leland, in his *hip: the history*, identifies four eras of hip convergence in American history, of moments when society noticed and valued the ideas and sensibilities of the fraught world where Africans and Europeans merged their thoughts and energies in creative and popular ways. The first emerged in the early 19th century and lasted one way or another for most of it. The white version of this synthesis was the minstrel show, the black, blues and ragtime. In the teens and twenties of the last century, the great migrations – blacks from the South and peasants from eastern and southern Europe – threw people together in what we have euphemized as the “melting pot” of the major cities, especially on the East Coast, most memorably represented by jazz, the lost generation, and the Harlem Renaissance. The hip I grew up trying to understand produced be-bop and the beat writers, Kerouac and Ginsberg most recognizably, and stretched from the end of WW II to the mid 60s. Finally came the hip-hop era of more recent times overlapping the rise of the nerdistans and geekvilles of the digital age. Each has its own story of black and white artists working toward that space, often unacknowledged and suppressed, where each race took and gave back reinterpreted what it meant and still means to be American. I will have something to say about each of these convergences in due time and hope to use the examples each provides to illustrate and support the importance of hip in the life of our society.

First and foremost, hip follows the Emersonian dictum that being a part of the mainstream is, in and of itself, mediocre and un-hip. Hip seeks enlightenment outside the conventional. Consider the transcendentalists for a moment, and specifically the four who published their signal works between 1850 and 1855 – Whitman, Thoreau, Emerson, and Melville. Each in his own way looked away from the concerns of most Americans, whether religion or politics, salvation or Manifest Destiny, to some other source of inspiration. A short quote from each will illustrate the point. “I sing the body electric... I am of every hue.” “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.” “He who should inspire and lead his race must be defended from travelling with the souls of other men, from living, breathing, reading, and writing in the daily, time-worn yoke of their opinions.” “It is better to fail in originality than to succeed in imitation.” I have no doubt that most of you will place each with its proper author. No one should confuse these greats of American literature with the beats of a century later, but they did share that outsider’s perspective on where wisdom and virtue could be located. If there was a herd, these writers were not members. Later in the century, the hippest of them all, Mark Twain, published *Huckleberry Finn* and set a standard for American fiction and for hipness that endures to this day.

In the culturally significant and chronically undervalued realm of popular entertainment, the 19th century provides two examples of creativity along the color line. Minstrelsy represents a white synthesis of racial elements harkening back to the primitive, the good old days, before the fall, a time of innocence, a pattern repeated by the country music industry and cultural conservatives. The good old days may have been old, but taken in their entirety, hardly unalloyed good. Like most eras, the times evoked were no more good (or evil, for that matter) than any era. Minstrelsy’s evocation of the old plantation as a locus of pre-industrial bliss conveniently leaves out or dismisses the back-breaking labor, poverty, limitations

of freedom, opportunity, diet, society, and medical care that would be prominent features of any forthright description of those good old days. Any golden era possesses a mixture of the precious and the dross, only golden in our imaginations and projections of our own desires to recapture something lost that likely was never found in the first place. Minstrelsy parallels this construction to a tee.

Anyone who wrote songs describing the slaves, happy on the plantation, almost certainly did not begin with the feelings of an actual slave. That said, the minstrel show did manage to import some genuine Africanisms, featuring the tricksters, Bones and Tambo, talking jive to the white-faced interlocutor. As I have written in an earlier paper, whatever its faults, the minstrel tradition transformed and dominated American popular entertainment from its inception in the 1830s until WW II. Frederick Douglass described it as “the filthy scum of white society, who have borrowed from us a complexion... in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their fellow white citizens.” Here he was referring to the Irish who had their own problems with acceptance in the 19th century and were the predominant practitioners of early minstrelsy. But upon seeing a minstrel show in which all the performers were black (Gavitt’s Original Ethiopian Serenaders), he wrote, “(T)here is something gained, when the colored man in any form can appear before a white audience. We think that even this company may yet be instrumental in removing the prejudice against our race.” I cite this to demonstrate that not every black response to the minstrel tradition ended up with Stepin Fetchit.

If minstrelsy was the white version of life along the color line, then blues represents the black take on the same thing. From Africa, call and response and polyphony, from slavery the use of these motifs in field work and religious song, from share cropping the rise of personal expression – “I might be hot and tired, poor and vulnerable, but I am free to say that aloud,” and not only aloud but with great humor, metaphoric power, and stubborn defiance. Mix in the guitar (instead of the banjo) and say the music must serve one master, either the church or the

bar-room, either the lord or the devil, and the blues was on its way. And remember if no blues, then no jazz, no R&B, no rock-n-roll, no punk, no hip hop. Some of you might not regret the loss of these last two, but they are part of the whole, two more entries on the hip parade.

We lack the time and you probably the patience to explore in much detail (and I have tried to boil this down to a manageable dose) the hip history of every marginal group that crashed the mainstream party with transformative artistry. But repeated again and again this process eventually led to the formation of a new more-but-still-imperfectly-inclusive mainstream. Each time conventional society expanded to include groups formerly on the outside, hip relocated.

Take jazz for instance. Percolating up through southern black idioms, kick-started by WW I and the introduction of the phonograph, ironically introduced by an all-white Italian-American ensemble, troubling the peace and the sermons of the guardians of public virtue, by the time jazz got to be swing it had become the dominant form of musical expression for the American public, taught by high school band leaders, solidly in the center of American popular culture. And Bird and Diz and Miles and Monk and countless others reclaimed jazz from the crowd and gave us back be-bop. Not only was be-bop hard to play, it was hard to understand and often hard to listen to. When Miles Davis performed with his back to the audience, he was visually emphasizing what the music had already done acoustically and conceptually. This was insiders' stuff; complaining about the music's social deficits labelled you as the outsider you were meant to be. Between then and now, of course, high school band leaders have incorporated be-bop into their programs and hip has moved on.

But the hip era ignited by be-bop and fueled by the soul-crushing consumerist conformity of the Eisenhower years is more or less where I come in to the story. Let me admit here that I don't claim to have achieved much hipness in my life, largely from lack of giving the pursuit of hip my all. Even so I

have had my brushes with the hip world, none more so than my 18th birthday in New York City.

To set the scene, let me go back to the notion that to be hip meant, at a minimum, to be out of step, apart from the crowd, in some meaningful way a non-conformist. What options did I have? I was what I had been intended to be, a middle-west, middle-class, middle-brow baby boomer. My early adolescence was spent in the Methodist church or at Boy Scout activities; I was a stalwart in youth choir and an Eagle Scout. What chance could I possibly have to be hip? I didn't even know I wanted to be hip until I discovered girls were impressed with, and shall we say, also friendlier toward those who were. In that light and by the inspiration of the older brother of a best friend, I took up folk music and guitar strumming. Everyone else I knew kept to the beaten paths of rock and roll, R & B, or Rogers and Hammerstein. By my 18th, the world of popular entertainment had embraced the hootenanny and the coffee house, and I had spent my senior year in high school playing in Dayton's most popular folk band, performing in bars and opening concerts at University of Dayton Fieldhouse for acts like The Serendipity Singers, Ian and Sylvia, and The Kingston Trio. My plans for college snagged on lack of money and the damage to my academic performance that seemed a natural consequence of spending my senior year playing in bars and coffee houses. As spring approached I was afloat on whatever status came with my musical activities and the normal indifference to the future natural to 17 year olds.

My world got a jolt when our manager, a Bronx-born UD senior named Freddie Puglia, announced he had gotten us a look-see recording date with Columbia Records for Easter week in New York City. The proposal meant that we would travel on Good Friday, stay with Freddie's mother at 241st and White Plains, and on Monday take the train into Manhattan and transfer around until we got to Times Square, then walk to Columbia headquarters at 42nd street and Broadway.

And so, on my birthday in 1965, we did just that. In case you have forgotten, standard dress for folk bands of that era

included gray slacks, blue blazer, striped button down, and loafers. So attired in our folkly best, burdened with three guitars and a string bass, we climbed up to the elevated platform at 241st, and after about 45 minutes, up again to street level at the center of the western world, Times Square. From there up the street, five clean-cut young men in matching outfits, past the lobby security, up to the 6th floor to Tom Wilson, our A&R man. His job (artists and repertoire) was to find, develop, and produce new acts so Columbia could stay atop the booming folk market.

We were his next project. He had arranged for us to hear pitches from song writers for a four-side recording project scheduled for the studio later that week. First song plugger turned out to be a short, cocky little guy named Paul Simon who got our attention with "The Leaves That Are Green." After a couple of pretty forgettable presentations, we were treated to a bearded, bald guy in sandals playing a guitar held together with tape singing songs about dead children in Viet Nam. He sang with passion and conviction, if not much skill and introduced himself as Alan Ginsberg. I knew from my careful scanning of Playboy that he was a big deal in the hip world.

And here I was, by happy accident, on the verge of taking a place among the hippest people in the hippest city at the cusp of what would become the very hip opposition to a war that had just begun to resonate in the America of 1965. I would like to say that we jumped at the opportunity and landed with a hip splash on the record charts and took our place among those who, in proper hip fashion, defied common sensibilities and championed the cause of peace for an ever growing audience, but...the un-hip conclusion to this story is we did just what our middle-west, middle-class, middle-brow breeding might lead you to expect. We went for the romantic and the safe and told Mr. Ginsberg, "Thank you very much, we'll let you know," and chose other material. We recorded Paul Simon's song (he played the guitar lead at the session while Art Garfunkel looked on), got our four sides in the can and went home to wait for a call that never came. That was the summer Dylan famously played the Newport Folk Festival with an

electric band, rendering hootenannies old news and killing the market for bands like ours. By the end of the summer, the band broke up, and we went our separate ways, I to college and then the assembly line and the others to equally un-hip futures.

A couple of ironic twists occur to me here. The obvious one is suggested by the phrase sell out. We had been ready and willing to dodge Ginsberg's call to tackle a subject that might actually relate to the real world, however controversial, and had chosen the path (we imagined) of commercial appeal. A few months later our attempt to sell out was rendered null by a more dramatic sell out – Bob Dylan and his Fender Stratocaster. Not that selling out is in and of itself un-hip. The history of hip is replete with examples of those who created their art for sale, from Mark Twain to Louis Armstrong to Miles Davis to Kurt Cobain. And when it comes to selling stuff, no profession has made more use of hip than advertising. The trickster who uses language to say more than one thing at the same time is a staple of the huckster's art, from P.T. Barnum on down to Madison Avenue. Our problem wasn't that we tried to sell out; we just weren't very good at it.

Most of the rest of Ginsberg's fellow beats made a lot of show about not selling out, but I'm inclined to think that this was at least in part more of the trickster saying one thing and meaning something else. And like a lot of people on drugs, they weren't really all that good at self-criticism. They may have actually believed their purer-than-thou rhetoric, but a lot of it doesn't stand much scrutiny. Like Kerouac's claim that he wrote *On the Road* in one amphetamine-cranked-go on one roll of paper without revision, the trickster story doesn't agree with what probably happened, but so what. He did highlight the answer to that old riddle about the chicken and the road. The conventional American chicken wanted to get to the other side,

but the hipster chicken just wanted to be moving, just to be on the road.

1965 was also the year that the hip generation began its transformation to the hippie era. At first the hippies seemed just as interested as the beats in discovering new and outside perspectives on how to understand the world, but it wasn't long before all that freedom turned into self-indulgent hedonism mixed with naïve, self-righteous political agitation aimed at liberation of one kind or another. Civil rights, stop-the-war, women's lib, Indian lib, well, you know because you were there, most of you, maybe not on the front lines, but you lived through it the same as I did.

You made it but hip did not come through unscathed. As the hip became more and more widespread and, dare I say ordinary, it lost much of its leverage. Columbia Records ad campaign for its classical catalogue boasting, "The Man Can't Bust our Music," is only one dramatic example of hip slipping into the mainstream. The more hip became normal the less hip hip became.

But hip wasn't dead. The '70s and '80s brought us the Do-It-Yourself era. Punk and Hip-Hop came to dominate the pop music scene. Here is where, I must confess, I lost interest in hip. The punks seemed especially unappealing to me. Despite their embrace of that most American and most hip claim of the right of personal reinvention, something there was that offended my sense of propriety. Since my days as a folkie, followed by several years in the college wilderness, I had spent my time on the road, trying to master the fiddle. To whatever extent I succeeded, it seemed important to me to deserve my place on stage by performing with some skill. The punk movement, on the other hand, turned that dynamic upside down. To them what mattered was the pose not the

proficiency. Anyone with an electric guitar and the right attitude could declare himself a punk performer, and many did. Even though the music wasn't very good, it seemed hip. You can make up your own mind about the quality of the music – just search youtube for the Ramones and make up your own mind. But time and gravity had done their work on me. And even though square was no longer part of the jive, I found myself square in the middle again – middle west, middle class, middle brow and now middle aged.

Meanwhile, hip moved on, or at least what seemed the vestiges of the idea born along the color line and fertilized by outsiders for the previous century and a half or so, and yet the old definitions of what it meant to be an outsider no longer had as much clarity. It wasn't that hip no longer operated in opposition to the perceived mainstream, but rather hip became the mainstream. While most of our attention was focused (with the help of the recording industry) on the great cluster-confabulation up at Yasgur's farm in Woodstock, the real revolution was going on in the garages of San Jose where reality was being rearranged by a bunch of geeks who would do for our established economic ideas what the automobile had done for the buggy-whip business.

No moment illustrates this quite so clearly as the '90s dot-com bubble. Talk about the triumph of the trickster! Companies founded on virtual, that is, essentially imaginary products and even more imaginary profits sold for billions. Those of us who built an economic model based on the IBMs and GMs of our youth now had to understand the same territory with Apple and Microsoft (not that big a leap; they at least offered a product one could buy.) When companies like Facebook became the paradigmatic centers of growth and prosperity, you could tell the game had changed. These corporations operated almost like jazz combos. The idea

became much more about the freedom of each player to improvise on a central theme that became less and less central the more the soloists riffed up new ideas. Work became a place to play, play hard certainly, but alternating writing computer code with yoga class or video games just wasn't the same old grind. The similarities between the grind in Silicon Valley and the old days at Proctor and Gamble headquarters are hard to imagine. Only one is hip; I'll leave it to you to decide which one.

And the players were self-selected outsiders. No longer dependent on the old black-white binary defined archaically by the one-drop rule, they represented a blur of identities along the ethnic, sexual orientation, post-modern lifestyle continuum and they flocked to places where they perceived a welcoming community. San Francisco, Brooklyn, and Austin come readily to mind; only lately does dear old Cincinnati start to seem like the sort of place where the hip and economically valuable oddballs of the digital age could find one another. The fact that this new-found hipness comes from the power points of ThreeCDC aided by the city government raises an interesting question. If Cincy's hipness depends on the power structure for its rise, how hip can it be? The same question applies to all those places we are trying to emulate for the sake of economic vitality. When the forces of stability and conservatism figure out how to take back the freedom promised in the digital revolution, as similar forces have done for every revolution in the last 250 years, will it be in the name of hip? Our partners in prosperity, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, have shown great promise in this process, and when our relationship shifts from trading partnership to earnest geo-political competition, where will the hip find themselves? Dissident artist Ai Wei Wei might provide an instructive answer to this question. If we are going to vie with

the Chinese for our economic future, we will almost certainly become more like the Chinese. Woe to the oddballs then.

I will conclude this combination memoir-cum-rumination with this thought. Hip is tricky, creative, flexible, persistent, and intimately wrapped up in what it means to be American. Hip's proper place is on the outside, and its proper job is keeping those in power from taking themselves too seriously. Now that hip has colonized the nexus of wealth and power, we will need something to take its place – in a phrase, hip replacement.