

## On Using A Walking Stick (column from Home Truths on BBC Radio 4)

Whenever I see a stick, I get disproportionately excited, like Bill Oddie spotting a chaffinch. It's like anything in life - if you've got it yourself, you notice it more. Before all this health palaver, 'stick people' were invisible. Now, they're all over the blinking place.

There are usually more of them - us - early in the morning when we go shopping to avoid the crowds or perhaps to avoid being seen. There's the old lady who teeters along with two sticks - one small step from a zimmer. There's a silvery-haired gentleman in a blazer who's stuck Alpine hiking badges on his knobbly one, as if to say he's still a happy wanderer.

Then there are the deviants - the ones in denial, who use shopping trolleys instead. The smug buggy-users who cut you up on the pavement. (you know who you are). And the young and chavvy crutch clutchers, who always look like they broke a leg and got an asbo in one fell swoop.

We all silently notice eachother, and sometimes smile, but rarely speak.

One old chap did speak the other day though. It was in the post-office. There was a long, silent and surly queue. He was leaving the counter just as I was tottering up to it. And we came face to face. Two stick people. He eyed my stick up and down and said, loudly: "Where would we be without 'em. Eh? Eh?" I hadn't a clue what to say. Everyone was listening. I wanted to say: "I'd be fine without it thank you. It's just temporary." But I didn't. I stood there, in front of the staring crowd, and came out with it: "Um (nervous laugh). I suppose we'd fall over, wouldn't we? (another nervous laugh)."

I got very excited the other night when a stick person appeared on "Who Wants To be A Millionaire?" He was called Mr Baranauscus. And I wanted him to win, not because he was nice or disabled or whatever, but just because he had a stick. I was a bit distracted, though, by the stick's whereabouts. As soon as he sat down, the stick disappeared. Presumably removed by a runner during an edit. In real life, you either put the stick on the floor, or you prop it up and it falls over every time, deliberately, with a loud bang, followed by a flurry of people offering to pick it up for you, in very loud voices. Mr Baranauscus also had glasses and ginger hair and I wondered whether the bespectacled or ginger communities were rooting for him as well.

Talking of 'bespectacled', I once read wearing glasses is supposed to boost your perceived IQ by ten points or something. Baseball caps reduce it by 50, obviously. As for walking sticks, they remove your IQ entirely and make you go deaf, which is why people shout at you in monosyllables as if you're a geriatric dog.

Thankfully, people don't ask you direct questions like "what's wrong with you then?" But you know fine well they want to. I would. The cockier type of non-stick-person asks "what have you done to your leg then?" And media pals nearly always say, in their best confessional voice: "tell me about your worst moments."

I'm happy home alone with my stick. But, get it out in public, and it feels like an embarrassing new partner who's terribly nice and well-off but actually very ugly. Friends I've not seen for ages look it up and down as if I've just married it, but haven't informed them. The pushier ones cast glances sideways at it as we're talking, as if hinting they want to be introduced. Some even say: "well...so...um...what?...what's been um happening then...um?"

My more politically-correct acquaintances pretend it's not there at all, and look doggedly straight ahead at my face, like nervous novice nudists. As you know - naturists look down on people who look down.

My inner circle of friends are less likely to beat about the bush on the stick front. One or two have suggested I should get a posher one. A sort of disability Nimbus 2000. Subtext: "I may be disabled but at least I'm not poor". But I refuse to. You shouldn't try too hard with a stick in my view. An old friend I'll call Jason calls it my "cripple twig".

But at least he doesn't tell me I look 'distinguished'. The adjective of choice among people who need to offer an opinion. I don't want to be described as 'distinguished' any more than I want to be called 'sweet'. Men hate being called sweet, as you know. It's like being called 'feisty' if you're a pensioner or 'handsome' or 'large-boned' if you're a woman.

Basically, the stick, like the wizard Prospero's staff, does odd things to people. It even affects my pet rabbits. They're not quite sure what it is. So they just chew it, leaving sweet little tooth marks. They almost seem to prefer the stick to the carrot ... so to speak.

It confuses toddlers too. In the street, they just stop in their tracks and stare. This then really embarrasses their parents, who scream "let the gentleman past" (I'm a 'gentleman' now, I'll have you know). Then they yank the staring child yards out of my path as if I'm a stampeding wildebeest.

My friend's toddler asked me the other day: "Peacock...do you belong to a club for people with sticks?"

"No" I answered. "Well yes, sort of. I'm still not entirely sure whether I do or not."