

School of Hard Knocks

9th in series

By Helen Hinchliff

As published in the Gulf Islands Driftwood, Sept. 17, 2014

“Onward and Upward!” I declared with a smile. And then . . . I fell flat on my face.

I could have broken my nose and my glasses, but since I wasn't looking where I was going they weren't in jeopardy. Whew! But think of this: if I'd been watching where I was walking, I probably wouldn't have fallen in the first place.

Instead, I was looking back over my shoulder watching my friend Lynn astride her bicycle as she was gathering speed to climb Park Drive after our brief chat on Desmond Crescent. Meanwhile, I was still walking in the opposite direction, unaware that I would soon be flying off the edge of the pavement (which was about an inch higher than the adjacent gravel shoulder).

Fortunately, I was carrying a four-litre jug of milk. I dropped it as I fell, and my upper chest landed on it with full force. The jug burst, and it broke my fall with the same degree of compassion as an automobile air bag.

Aside from having the wind knocked out of me, the only damage was my right cheek covered with a slurry of milk and

grit and a few bruises and scrapes on my hands and knees. Lucky me! It could have been a whole lot worse.

Chances are you also have a tale about some terrible tumble you've taken. That's because the older we get the more likely we are to fall and, if we have osteoporosis, we're quite likely to break a bone.

Orthopedic surgeon, Erica J. Mitchell, in "Don't Let Hip Fractures Kill," reported last year that as many as fifty percent of all women and one third of all men over age 65 will experience a fragility fracture, far more than will have cancer, a heart attack or stroke.

According to the Public Health Agency of Canada (www.publichealth.gc.ca), one of every three seniors will experience a fall in any given year and half of those will fall again. Multiple falls increase our chances of living out our days in a nursing home. Forty percent of admissions to Canadian nursing homes are the result of falling.

It gets worse. We could actually die! And, if by chance, we break our hip when we fall there's a nine percent chance we won't live for another 30 days. According to a study published *The Journal of the American Medical Association* in 2009, 300,000 Americans age 65 or older fracture a hip every year. Of those, around 25% will die within 12 months, and "many more will experience significant functional loss."

Not only do all these falls cost us seniors our functionality and even our lives, but they are also costing the Canadian economy an estimated \$2 billion a year!

So what are we going to do—roll into a ball and take to our beds? If my mother's experience is any guide, that's no solution. Her fear of falling became so intense during the last few weeks of her life just turning her in bed elicited extreme anxiety: "I'm falling! I'm falling!" she'd shriek. Once she grabbed my arm so tightly her finger nails broke my skin.

We need to reduce our chances of falling and can be proactive in a number of ways:

- Let's start by paying more attention to where we are walking. Personal injury attorneys report that 60 % of "slip, trip, and fall accidents" involve uneven pavement. I could have sued BC Highways, I suppose, but maybe I was also at fault because I wasn't watching where I was walking.
- Let's do something about hazards around the house and yard. The BC Ministry of Health website has a wonderful Home Safety Checklist that takes us through each room in our house, providing helpful hints about clearing the clutter, providing more light and installing grab bars.
- Let's get strong and stay fit. A regular exercise program can help improve strength, balance, gait, and reflexes. I know that I have often been able to right myself and I think it's due to exercise and practicing my balance.

I could go on and on with this school of hard knocks, but maybe you should start doing your own research. The Internet is chockablock with websites providing information on how to prevent falls. There's a great video at

<http://www.learnnottofall.com> showing the proper way to get up after a fall—*if you are able*.

But maybe you'd prefer to join the rest of us at the Seniors Services Society Wednesday, September 24, at 2 p.m. for a program on Home Safety specifically related to preventing falls. We'll meet in the green building right across the street from Country Grocer.