

From Henry's Desk..... **Eighty-six Days in the Wilderness**

"Son, you have polio" expressed Dr. Robert Morton on Saturday morning, September 23, 1950. These words were terrifying to me at age 11 and they still convey a haunting anxiety when I think of them today. I remember every detail of that awful Saturday and what a permanent impact the poliovirus made on my life. Many times over the years I have wondered and asked myself, "Why me?" The impact of crippling polio affected my self-esteem, my self-image, and my goals in life, my personality defenses, my religious pilgrimage, and my understanding of others.

All of the synoptic gospels describe the forty days that Jesus spent in the Wilderness. During this time Jesus fasted and when he left the Wilderness he was famished. In Matthew and Luke he was tempted by the devil to eat ample bread, seek the help of angels and have dominion over the world. He resisted these temptations.

In a polio ward crowded with children, there was sufficient bread but no angels were around and most of the children were unable to move their legs and arms or even breathe without the aid of an iron lung. The children could not even imagine dominion over anything. There was no devil to tempt the children with instant cures. Over time there was only the agonizing pain of physical therapy and the brainwashing command of "No pain, no gain."

I was one of the children on the polio ward at the Medical College of Virginia Hospital during the summer of 1950, Virginia's most severe polio year. I spent eighty-six days in the polio ward wilderness. I endured the pain of physical therapy, but there was some gain. Can I say there were blessings? Over time I did gain some self-esteem, saw myself and others with different insights and perceptions and a new determination burst forth that has carried me to this hour. I have not seen or heard the voice of God, but when I least expect it, glimpses of God break into my being. It can be as simple as a sermon about a Way in the Wilderness or a story involving a broken vase or the choir singing "Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation" or a poor but grateful patient responding with a tearful smile.

During the summer of 1950 racial segregation was still the law, even in hospitals. However, on the white polio ward African American nurses were welcome and were more than willing to take the risks involved. One of them wrote the following in my notebook:



Richmond, VA

October 15, 1950

Dear Henry,

It was just you to be so pleasant at all times. Keep on keeping on.

Mrs. Therla Hall P.N.