

From Henry's Desk by *Henry Holland*

Christmas Memories and Polio

Christmas is a time of family togetherness, generous gift giving, joyful times with friends, and an element of fantasy and for many a time of religious renewal. In my first decade of life my family consisted of three generations with six adults and myself living in a two-story stucco house in the north side of Richmond. The house was almost a cube with four rooms downstairs, four bedrooms upstairs and one bathroom. Every morning everyone used that same bathroom and I rarely remember having to wait in line to get into that bathroom. There was a basement, which had a coal bin at the rear end where the coal was stored near the coal furnace that had to be attended to several times a day. The burning coal heated the water that sent steam to the radiators located in every room of the house and usually provided cozy heat. Of course the addition of homemade quilts helped insure warmth at night.

Until I was nine years old I slept in the same large bed with my grandparents and I never felt crowded. When an uncle and aunt married in 1948, I was allowed to get my own room. My earliest Christmas memory was during World War II in 1943 when I was four years old. My Uncle Stokely was in the U. S. Army and he came home for Christmas and brought an Army buddy named Ray Chappell with him. Somehow these young men had found a Lionel electric train and bought it for me. Electric trains and other metal toys were hard to find during W.W. II. This was a simple electric train with a black engine, coal tender, boxcar, flatcar and a caboose. The train ran on O-27 gauge track and was a marvel to watch. The adults seem to enjoy it as much as I did.

After the war on another Christmas about 1948, Santa Claus brought me a larger electric train. This train engine was marked as a Pennsylvania Railroad model. This engine had a realistic sounding train whistle and after dropping a little white pellet in the smoke stack, it would puff out smoke like a real steam engine. During the Christmas of 1949 I received a new Roadmaster bicycle. This was a twenty-six inch bike that had only one speed, but actually would go any speed that I could make it go. It had a speedometer on the handlebars and I could visualize just how fast I was going. I rode that bike almost every day until September 17, 1950 when I contracted polio. I spent the next three months in the Medical College of Virginia (MCV) Hospital polio wards. I spent Halloween and Thanksgiving on those same wards. I was convinced that I would spend Christmas on the polio ward on 5 West of MCV Hospital. I was resigned to it. This was a painful time as many of my new friends who were fellow patients were being discharged almost daily during December. I had just started walking slowly with two leg braces and crutches by mid December. Daily, I had been going across the street by means of a tunnel constructed during the Civil War to Old Memorial Hospital where the physical therapy department was located. With determination I had learned to laboriously and slowly climb steps. This was dangerous despite my success, but apparently this was a significant milestone in my rehab.

Because on Friday, December 15, my doctor (Dr. R. D. Butterworth) told me that I might be discharged before Christmas. This was exhilarating news and I could hardly believe it. On Monday morning my discharge became a reality. I remember getting dressed in regular clothes, strapping on my two new long leg braces and walking slowly down the hallway of MCV 5 West to the elevator rotunda. Other patients said goodbye and wished me well and many of the nurses fondly said their farewells. When I got to my home on North Avenue in the north side of Richmond I knew that I was facing the six steps to get into my house. I climbed those steps in a backward fashion as I had been taught by the physical therapists. Over the next week I fully enjoyed the preparation for Christmas Day. My grandmother used some old family recipes to make Christmas special coconut cake, fruitcake and eggnog. My peer friends in the neighborhood came by to see me and seemed to accept me despite my leg braces. I was thrilled to once again enjoy the decoration of the Christmas tree, especially the miniature snow village under the tree. That Christmas was a very joyous Christmas. I received many additions to my electric trains and this interest in electric trains lasted through my teen years and provided a pleasure that did not require running or a lot of movement. It also helped me understand the mechanisms of electricity.

When I reflect back on that Christmas of 1950 I know at the time that I had no idea how I would face and largely overcome the challenges that I had to face. My short-term goals were to get back to school with my peers, to learn to ride my Roadmaster bicycle again and to find ways to get around in a barrier rich world. I do know that my experience with polio was a major inspirational influence in directing my life goals toward a medical career. I also think that polio caused me to take my religious faith more seriously and to continue to study the scriptures to this day.

Many Christmas seasons have followed that one in 1950 and many have focused on the joy found in helping to provide Santa Claus for my children and grandchildren. Each Christmas has also enriched my belief in the wonder and mystery of the meaning of Christmas as found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. For somewhat illogical reasons I have also realized that my polio experience has mysteriously enriched my life. In the company of other polio survivors and PPS survivors I am among those who bear witness to a whole generation of polio survivors who usually persevered in silence and rarely shared much about their lives with polio, the greatcrippler of children. In my current state of health I am delighted to be alive and in my right mind. I can even state that my life with polio has been a unique gift that I did not choose, but am now grateful for the pilgrimage of experiences that polio has made possible. With the new reality of Post-Polio Syndrome, I have met many other polio survivors and this unexpected experience has and continues to be a mysterious blessing.

Those of you of the Christian faith are familiar with the Christmas story as described in Matthew and Luke. There are actually two stories revealed in Luke chapters 1 and 2. Mary and her kinswoman Elizabeth become pregnant within months of each other. Elizabeth is married to an old priest named Zechariah. When the angel Gabriel informs Zechariah that Elizabeth will bear a son, he does not believe that this can happen and he loses his speech once he leaves the temple. At the expected time Elizabeth gives birth to a son. On the day of

the newborn son's circumcision his mother announced that his name would be John. Her neighbors and relatives admonished her and stated that no relative was named John and that the new baby boy should be named Zechariah after his father. Zechariah who had remained mute gestured and asked for something to write on. He wrote that his son's name would be John. Immediately Zechariah's speech returned and he began praising God. Then Zechariah expressed his prophecy. The latter verses of that prophecy read:

"You, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High God. You will go ahead of the Lord to prepare his road for him, to tell his people that they will be saved by having their sins forgiven.

Our God is merciful and tender. He will cause the bright dawn of salvation to rise on us and to shine from heaven on all those who live in the dark shadow of death, to guide our steps into the path of peace."

This child named John became better known as John the Baptist who preached the forgiveness of sins and offered baptism. He also announced that a greater one would follow him. History bears witness to the apparent fulfillment of John's prophecy.

Perhaps many of us recall the dark days of acute polio and the challenges that resulted. We also know about the dark days of developing PPS and the challenges that have resulted from this unexpected later life adversity. Hopefully we can find strength in the faith that some greater blessing is promised. This is one of the hopes of the Christmas message. This is one of the hopes expressed by Zechariah about his son John. That someone greater than John would follow.

HAPPY HOLIDAYS TO ALL OUR MEMBERS
AND THEIR FAMILIES