

*From Henry's Desk:*

## Class Reunions

Often on the Internet Polio list services, writers will frequently sign their names followed by something like "Class of 1950." This method of identifying the year that one had polio started some years ago. Of course these "classes" of people who had polio extend over many decades. Perhaps this is proper. From the onset of polio to the current time when many of us are living with Post-Polio Syndrome (PPS), all of us have learned a lot and have achieved an education that is not recognized by a formal degree. Probably most of us have earned a doctorate in philosophy in polio or a Ph.P.D.

I had polio in 1950 at the age of eleven. Throughout my adolescent years and young adult years I wore a long leg brace on my right leg and developed some scoliosis as I grew. I had much insecurity during the second decade of my life. I felt I was competing on an uneven playing field. I loved sports but could no longer compete in sports because of my physical handicap. As compensation I covered sports for my high school newspaper and for my college newspaper. I also did some coaching of younger boys and even some peers during these years. In college and medical school I did some intramural coaching of basketball. In many arenas I think I compensated well, especially in my academic studies.

Forty-five years ago I graduated from college. I went to college on a scholarship based on academics and partly on my intention to become a doctor (physician). This goal was directly motivated by my experience with polio. The college I attended for four years was situated on top of a hill in the Valley of Virginia. Every day I climbed that hill at least twice a day in order to attend classes and labs. The brace on my right leg and the strength of my left leg made those climbs possible. The same challenge occurred in medical school. Again, I was fortunate to attend medical school on a National Foundation Scholarship. The medical school that I attended was also situated on top of a hill. I climbed hills and steps to get to my destination. For the twelve years involving high school, college and medical school I managed to get where I needed to go on foot. In retrospect it was amazing how durable my overall health was during this time. I never missed one class because of illness or injury during those twelve years.

A few days ago I attended my forty-fifth college reunion. The college I attended was all male until twenty years ago when it became coed. Thus, the people at the reunion were many male graduates and their wives. All of my classmates in attendance were walking and only one had any sign of a disability. This classmate was walking with a cane because he had a bad hip. Most of my classmates had gray hair or their hair was obviously colored. Some could stand to lose a few pounds. However I was the only one in a wheelchair and the only one on the entire campus using a ventilator.

These men and their wives were my peers. Looking around the room at one of the receptions the reality of PPS impacted on me. Forty-five years ago I had walked across the campus with them on my graduation day and I "walked with them" with my brace on my right leg. At this reunion I could only roll with them; thanks to modern technology. The change in me compared

to forty-five years ago was directly resulting from PPS. My classmates did not have PPS. All of us had aged but what happened to me was more than aging.

There are many medical articles which attempt to explain the causes of PPS. The articles are fine and medical science should continue to seek an explanation for PPS. However, my clinical observation in many settings is that PPS is usually obvious when compared to others of the same age who did not have polio. Most of our peers are walking and not rolling, breathing without assistance, not dealing with various levels of fatigue and are in no obvious pain. When so many people who had polio over a half a century ago are now living with PPS, I do not need the Mayo Clinic or the Center for Disease Control to convince me of the reality of PPS.

I have been a member of the Central Virginia Post-Polio Support Group for almost sixteen years. Every month when I meet with these seasoned polio survivors I feel like I am at a class reunion. We have some events of personal history in common and we are now connected because of PPS. I have learned more from these people about PPS and life than I have learned from any classroom course. The advantages of sharing experiences and seeking solutions are difficult to measure. I hope all readers are able to participate in Post-Polio support groups. The experience is often uplifting.

I have been blessed by many people and have been encouraged at important and critical times in my life. In the past I walked and climbed many hills and now I roll up some of those same hills. I was in the Polio Class of 1950 and what an education a life with polio has provided. I feel as if I have earned a second doctorate, the one mentioned above, a Ph.P.D. This second doctorate enables me to look back with a philosophic mind. The poet William Wordsworth said it better with these words:

Then, sing ye Birds, sing, sing a joyous song!  
And let the young Lambs bound  
As to the tabor's sound!  
We in thought will join your throng,  
Ye that pipe and ye that play,  
Ye that through your hearts to day  
Feel the gladness of the May!  
What though the radiance which was once so bright  
Be now for ever taken from my sight,  
Though nothing can bring back the hour  
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;  
We will grieve not, rather find  
Strength in what remains behind,  
In the primal sympathy  
Which having been must ever be,  
In the soothing thoughts that spring  
Out of human suffering,  
In the faith that looks through death,  
In years that bring the philosophic mind.\*

\*from William Wordsworth's Ode to Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood

