

I Could Give All to Time By Robert Frost:

To Time it never seems that he is brave
To set himself against the peaks of snow
To lay them level with the running wave,
Nor is he overjoyed when they lie low,
But only grave, contemplative and grave.
What now is inland shall be ocean isle,
Then eddies playing round a sunken reef

Like the curl at the corner of a smile;
And I could share Time's lack of joy or grief
At such a planetary change of style.
I could give all to Time except - except
What I myself have held. But why declare
The things forbidden that while the Customs slept
I have crossed to Safety with? For I am There
And what would I not part with I have kept.

*From Henry's Desk: **Lent and Crossing to Safety*** By Henry Holland

For those of the Christian faith this essay may mean more, but perhaps some truth and wisdom will be reflected regardless of one's faith. We are currently in the season of Lent in the Christian calendar. Lent is a time for repentance and soul searching. A life with polio has most likely caused many of you to do considerable soul searching, both in the past and now in living with Post Polio Syndrome (PPS).

As an infectious disease, historical evidence would indicate that polio has been in existence for over five thousand years. However, over these many centuries, the literature on polio has been limited. In the last century there was more in the medical literature about polio as a result of the epidemics that began in the early part of the last century. With the development of the Salk and Sabin vaccines, the medical literature regarding polio quickly vanished. Now, with the reality of Post-Polio Syndrome (PPS), the literature, both medical, non-fiction and fiction have increased in the last decade. In my opinion, this literature has resulted for two reasons. One is due to PPS and the other is due to books that have been written by polio survivors and family members of polio survivors. In our support group's library, we have many of the medical books on PPS, but we do not have many of the non-medical books

Despite our knowledge of many of these books, polio still occurs in literature or the arts when I least expect it. Several years ago, I audited a course on Job at a local seminary. The course dealt with "Job in the Bible and Beyond" and how the story of Job has influenced the arts down through the centuries. On one evening, the professor (Dr. Sam Balentine of Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, VA), showed slides of art that best depicted the suffering of Job. One of the slides was a painting by Piero della Francesca in Arezzo Italy. The painting revealed a recently resurrected Jesus, half in and half out of the grave. There was still some of the look of death on Jesus' body. At this point, the professor read a passage from a novel, *Crossing to Safety* by Wallace Stegner.

"But I noticed that Sally stood a long time on her crutches in front of that painting propped temporarily against a frame of raw two-by-fours. She studied it soberly, with something like recognition or acknowledgment in her eyes, as if those who have been dead understand things that will never be understood by those who have only lived."

In the novel, Sally is a polio survivor who wears leg braces and uses crutches. She and her husband Larry become life long friends with Sid and Charity when both husbands were young college professors at the University of Wisconsin in the late 1930's. Both wives got pregnant at the same time. While vacationing in

Vermont, Sally was stricken by polio. Years later, the two couples travel to Italy and the scene described above occurred. One interpretation offered by this scene is that many polio victims can identify with Job or the suffering of the crucified Jesus. Many polio survivors have risen to full lives despite the damage of polio. However, many can recall the fear and even horror of a near death experience. We may tend to forget that thousands of children died from acute polio, especially before the development of the iron lung. This disease has shaken thousands of families. Many of us do "understand things that will never be understood by those who have only lived."

I can identify with many interesting passages in this novel. Larry, Sally's husband, tells this story in the first person. Larry comments on the uncertainty of life with these words: "You can plan all you want to. You can lie in your morning bed and fill whole notebooks with schemes and intentions. But within a single afternoon, within hours or minutes, everything you plan and everything you have fought to make yourself can be undone as a slug is undone when salt is poured on him. And right up to the moment when you find yourself dissolving into foam you can still believe you are doing fine." This sounds a bit like the process of PPS. Many of us have "fought" to be contributors and not burdens to our individual worlds, only now to feel undone by the "salt" of PPS.

Again Larry speaks of the friendship that has developed over the years between his wife Sally and Charity. "The cant word these days is 'bonding.' I suppose some people see in a relationship like that signs of an unacknowledged lesbianism---the same people who probably speculate about the sex life of somebody like me, a perfectly healthy man with a crippled wife. I don't care how they speculate, or what their answers are. We live as we can, we do what we must, and not everything goes by either Freudian or Victorian patterns. What I am sure of is that friendship---not love, friendship---is as possible between women as between men, and that in either case it is often stronger for not having to cross sexual picket lines. Sexuality and mistrust often go together, and both are incompatible with amicitia."

Near the end of the novel, Larry writes of his observations upon living his adult life with his polio-disabled wife.

"One of the peculiarities of polio is that its victims, once they have recovered from the virus and settled down to whatever muscular control it has left them, live a sort of charmed life. Crippled as they are, they are rarely ill, they are surprisingly tough and durable, they astonish their sound companions with their capacity to endure. But that is not forever. There comes a time in the life of every such patient when the whole system---muscles, organs, bones, joints---begins to fall apart all at once, like the wonderful one-hoss-shay. Every polio patient is warned to expect that time, every polio family lives with the foretold doom waiting for it at some unknown but expected time in the future. One learns to live with it by turning away from it, by not looking. And yet on occasion one is aware of an intense, furtive watchfulness, and the victim, the doomed one, must surely have just as often the vulnerable sense of being watched."

In my mind, the above paragraph is describing PPS. The author of this novel, Wallace Stegner, lived from 1909 to 1993. *Crossing to Safety* was published in 1987, around the time PPS was being identified as an entity. Stegner has written many novels and wrote this one after fifty years of writing. I wonder how he knew so much about the character of polio. Perhaps, he had some personal experience with polio. In his career, Stegner won the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and O'Henry prizes. If you like a novel with deeper meaning I would recommend it to you.

Reference: *Crossing to Safety* by Wallace Stegner. Penguin Books. New York. 1987, pp. 274-275, 201, 288, 336