

From Henry's Desk: by Henry Holland

Falling Again

Seven years ago I wrote a short essay on falling. In the essay, I attempted to describe the pain, fear, and possible bad consequences of falls that many polio survivors have experienced over the years. Depending on each person's degree of physical handicap, the falls may have been more frequent and more dangerous. Whatever the severity of the handicap, all of us were encouraged and motivated to get back on our feet, no matter what it may take. If we did not get back on our feet, then the world of the polio years was inaccessible. That world included schools, stores, houses of worship, some parks, and many homes. I know that my experience included many falls, some more memorable than others. Like many PPSers, I have slowed down, am more cautious, and take all precautions to prevent falling. I began using a scooter on a part time basis in 1991. By 1996, I began using my scooter almost all of the time. This adaptation conserved my energy and reduced the risk of falling. No matter the precautions, falling and other types of accidents are a reality to all PPSers. We can always fall again.

In almost twelve years of scooter riding, I had never tipped over my scooter. Well, this all changed on Saturday, February 22. On that Saturday afternoon my wife Brenda and I went to a small social event for some Polio survivors and their spouses. The event was held in a high-rise condo building, which had covered parking. It was raining on this Saturday. I rode my scooter inside the building without incident. I carry a thirty-pound ventilator and a thirty-five pound battery on the left floorboard of my scooter and place both of my legs on the right floorboard of the scooter. As Brenda and I were leaving this event Brenda went to get our van and I headed for an open area where loading the scooter into the van would be simpler. The lighting was not good. I approached what I thought was a small or shallow drop off of a curb to get to an open area for loading the scooter in the van. As the left rear wheel dropped off of this curb, which was higher than expected, I was caught off guard and the scooter tipped to the left and the scooter, the ventilator, the large battery and I all came crashing down on the wet asphalt. My head hit a glancing blow against a parked car's fender on the way down. Fortunately for me there was no apparent injury and the vent was still functioning. I was lying in an awkward position on my left side. My left leg was entrapped in debris, but did not seem broken. I was fully conscious and could feel the water soaking into my left pant leg and left coat sleeve from the puddle of water in which I landed. I knew that I needed help. Brenda heard the noise of the fall and came running back to the scene of calamity. She immediately recruited help from several able-bodied polio spouses. Also, there was a nurse working in the building who came to my aid. Her name was Peggy.

Somehow I was untangled from the scooter, vent, and battery. During this time of disentanglement, the ventilator had to be moved and I could not use it. For several seconds that seemed like an eternity I could not get enough oxygen and began to feel light headed. However, the vent was reconnected and I immediately felt less fear as I again could feel my lungs expanding with air. Somehow Peggy and others were able to lift me to my feet, got me in the van and we went home. I realized that I had been blessed to have Brenda and good friends close at hand. I did not break a bone and was only slightly bruised.

During this time of fear, I thought of my faith and I also thought of the faith that the Apostle Paul expressed when confronted with adversity. Just before the shipwreck

(described in Acts 27) Paul states in verses 22-24: "But now I beg you, take courage! Not one of you will lose your life; only the ship will be lost. For last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship came to me and said, 'Don't be afraid, Paul!'" While lying helplessly on the asphalt I did not see or hear an angel of the Lord, but I did feel the presence of loving souls, in essence saying, "Don't be afraid, Henry."

I will never forget this fall. Turning over in a scooter or wheelchair, falling down a flight of steps, falling in the bathroom or shower, and falling in the comfort of your home can potentially be fatal. A head injury could lead to death. Fractures of major bones can lead to necessary surgery. The risk of surgery in polio-damaged limbs can increase the risk for clots. We are all older and do not recover as ably as in the past. The stress and shock of a fall can have an adverse effect on our cardio-pulmonary-vascular system. Many PPSers take medication for hypertension and diuretics to reduce dependent edema. A sudden added stress on our bodies can increase the risk for stroke, heart attack, and clots. We could live in a vacuum and still there is no absolute safeguard against falling and other accidents.

Pain and fear are the expected results of a fall, even when no real damage is done. How do we go about coping with the possibility of falling and the resultant pain and fear? Do we simply deny the reality of this possibility? Do we allow fear to cause an obsessive concern about falling, resulting in even greater life restrictions? I think we have to accept the risks inherent in living with PPS just as we did with polio. I think we should adhere to practical and doable precautions. We probably should avoid being alone as much as possible. If we are alone we should have a cell phone on our person or a phone attached to our wheelchair or scooter. By all means if you live alone, you should have a cell phone on your person at all times. I think it is also wise to have a flashlight within close reach whenever one goes out at night or in case a power failure occurs at home. I would recommend that Post-Polio Support Groups discuss the risks of falling as a program topic at a meeting. Many experiences can be shared and good ideas can result from such a discussion. I am confident that each of you has experienced the reality, pain, fear, and adversity of falling. There are many amazing stories that could be shared by all.