

From Henry's Desk by Henry Holland

Falling Again and Again

At our regular Central Virginia Post Polio Support Group Meeting on March 7, 2009, we had a general discussion among the approximately twenty members present. The weather was unseasonably warm, but six days earlier we had had a 6 to 8 inch snow storm and many of us recounted some difficult times we have encountered with snow and ice. Some of our members lost electric power and this circumstance can lead to increased feelings of anxiety. We also talked about our dependence on others in stressful situations. Some of our members live alone and have increased vulnerability as a result. Among the members at this meeting twice as many of the polio survivors had sustained fractured bones from falls compared to the able bodied members present. In 1996 I wrote an article entitled "Falling." Seven years later in 2003 I wrote another similar article entitled "Falling Again." This article is a composite of both articles with some updates.

Some of us have vivid and unforgettable memories of falls we had in our youth because of the residual effects of polio, and others have equally memorable accounts of falls that we have had because of the effects of Post Polio Syndrome (PPS). An additional problem now is that we are older and probably do not fall as gracefully as we once did. Also, the risk is greater for injury because of weaker muscles, softer bones, and the same factors of aging that everyone experiences. Falling is no fun, but dealing with its reality may build character.

Some years ago, I made a list of all the falls that I could remember. Of course, the bad or spectacular falls are more easily recalled. My list came to about twenty-eight falls. The first occurred in 1950 in the halls of the Medical College of Virginia Hospital when I first learned to walk with two long leg braces and two crutches. Somehow, I lost my balance and fell backward like a small tree that had been cut at the base. My head hit the marble floor and I almost lost consciousness. However, I was picked up, and walked back to my bed. My most recent fall occurred in 2006 when I accidentally pushed against the forward switch on my power wheelchair while I was transferring from my bed to the chair. I was standing and the moving chair knocked me over. Fortunately with the help of my wife Brenda and one of my summoned patients nearby I was pulled up on the bed and could get back up. I was fortunate in that I did not sustain any injury. Some of my falls have produced considerable pain, swollen joints, large bruises, and anxiety. Pain is no fun, but dealing with it may build character.

For many of us the experience of terror occurs during that second or less when we realize that we have lost our balance and recovery of balance is impossible. To put it another way: "I have lost control and I am going to hit something for sure." A lot does depend on what we hit, and what part of our body hits first. I have fallen on

marble, slate, wood, rugs, grass, dirt, concrete, snow, ice, and stairs. The part of the body that usually hits first is any one of the four extremities (elbows, hands, knees, hips) or unfortunately the head or chin. During that split second of falling weightlessness, our autonomic nervous system kicks into the fright or flight mode. We cannot flee, thus, we have more of the fright mode. By the time we land, our hearts are racing, the respiratory rate is increased, and we are probably breaking into a sweat. If we did not sustain a serious injury, this extra adrenalin helps us get over the immediate effects of the fall. Of course, later, we are quite sore and fatigued, but grateful that nothing really bad happened. Fear is no fun, but dealing with it may build character.

Falls can result in serious injury or life threatening situations. About twenty years ago when I was leaving my office rather late one night, I fell on ice about midway between my office and my car. It was very cold. Because of the slippery ground, I was unable to get any traction, and could not get up. I was totally alone. I decided to crawl to my car. With my last source of energy, I was able to pull myself into the car, and get it started, and eventually I warmed up. This experience taught me about vulnerability, and having better options for help. Even with precautions, bad things can happen.

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 of our membership. Depending on each person's degree of physical handicap, our falls may have been more frequent and more dangerous. Decades ago, 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 and in 2003 I acquired a power wheelchair. I use this same power wheelchair today. Also in 2002, I became totally ventilator dependent to prevent respiratory failure. I care a portable ventilator on my wheelchair. With these adaptations I have 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.

Often I feel that my vulnerability is almost overwhelming or too frightening to think about, but I cannot escape reality. Sometimes I think of my faith as a source of strength. I think of the faith of the Apostle Paul and how he dealt with adversity. Just before his 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 on the ground, concrete or whatever it may be I have never seen or heard an angel of the Lord, but I have felt the presence of loving souls, in essence saying, "Don't be afraid, Henry."

Many falls I will never forget. 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 systems. 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. 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.