

My Left Leg

The fiftieth anniversary of the announcement of the successful trials of the Salk vaccine was observed on April 12, 2005. There was considerable media coverage of this historic event as well as an excellent HBO movie on Franklin Roosevelt's connection to Warm Springs, Georgia. Also many survivors of polio are recording some personal memories of their life long experience with polio. When I think of my own fifty-five year experience with polio I somehow feel compelled to remember with kindness and wonder about my left leg.

My acute case of polio affected my body from the neck down and with an asymmetrical degree of involvement. My right leg and right arm were more severely involved than my left leg and left arm. My right arm and hand made a partial recovery. I was able to use my right hand and arm to write again, tie shoes and button clothes. My right leg essentially remained flaccid except for some movement of the hip muscles. Thus, my right leg has been braced for fifty-five years. My left arm made almost a complete recovery and I thought my left leg made a complete recovery.

I cannot begin to estimate the work that my left leg has done in making it possible to lead a very productive life. Because of the strength in my left leg, that leg compensated extremely well for my flaccid right leg. After polio my left leg was not expected to get stronger. I left the Medical College of Virginia Hospital with two long leg braces and wooden crutches on Monday, December 18, 1950. I exercised my legs and arms daily and my left leg and left arm became stronger to where I discarded the left leg brace and the crutches three months later. I never succeeded to any degree of rehabilitation with my right leg despite a major effort over time. Now I know that the damage to the anterior horn cells of the spinal cord was too severe to make a return of function of my right leg possible, but at the time I remember feeling that I had not tried hard enough to "recover" that leg. What did my left leg do over the next twenty years? Maybe some of you can identify with some of these milestones.

My first goal was to be able to master climbing steps in order to return to public school. I did return to the sixth grade of my elementary school a year after contracting polio. I was able to climb steps one step at a time with my left leg doing the work. This school building had two stories with a full basement. My next goal was to regain the ability to ride my Roadmaster bicycle. This was quite dangerous as I could do nothing to prevent falling to the right side of the bicycle when I stopped. I mastered this one leg bicycle riding. All the pedal pumping power was provided by my left leg. Riding a bicycle again was a big step in increasing my mobility and participation in activities with my group of able bodied friends.

My third goal was to play some kind of sports again. I could still throw a ball or bat a ball but I could not run the bases. I could shoot baskets but I could not jump. I became interested in table tennis or ping pong and became rather skilled at this game. Later in my teens my left leg made it possible to walk an eighteen hole golf course and I enjoyed this game during my college years.

I entered junior high school (7th to 9th grade) in February 1952. The school had three stories and no elevator. Classes changed six times a day, much like in high school. The guidance counselor, a survivor of polio, allowed my best friend Harry Lanzillotti and myself to leave each class five minutes early in order to get to the next class without my being knocked over on the steps because of the rush of students in the hallways and stairwells between classes. Harry also carried my books as we went between classes. He also carried my books home for me as we walked a distance of four blocks. My left leg carried the burden in moving about this school as well as the three story high school that I attended for the 10th through the 12th grades. My left leg made it possible for me to participate and enjoy the many activities of adolescence.

The next challenge in my life was dealing with hills. I received a scholarship to Washington and Lee University. This college is a two hundred and fifty-six year old college located on top of a hill in Lexington, VA. For four years I climbed this hill carrying books at least two to three times a day. My left leg made this hill climbing possible.

Many of you know where the Medical College of Virginia is located in Richmond. It is on top of a hill and most of the parking in the 1960's was at the bottom of the hill. Even the able bodied students called the hill "heart attack hill." The main hospital had seventeen stories. I entered medical school in 1962 and I can remember climbing steps at MCV on many occasions because the elevators were too slow and time was lost waiting. My left leg did all of this climbing.

After graduating from medical school my left leg got me around in hospital parking lots, hospital corridors and in family activities. About a decade ago my left leg began to weaken and gradually pulling up steps became impossible. Now my left leg can still support my weight, but it no longer has the strength for walking or standing for any length of time. When this weakness began ten years ago, it really did not surprise me as I knew that I had Post-Polio Syndrome (PPS) and that "recovered" muscles could weaken as part of PPS. In addition my respiratory muscles have weakened. I am now totally electric. I use a power wheelchair and a ventilator 24/7.

Whatever the real cause of PPS might be I know that the overuse theory makes sense to me, especially when I think about my left leg. I am sure that many of you have similar stories of how stronger muscles did more work over the years to compensate for weaker muscles; and in many cases these previously stronger muscles are now much weaker and can no longer do all the work of the past.

We all have individual stories about our many challenges, triumphs, failures and adjustments made in life because of polio and now we are experiencing similar adjustments because of PPS. The difference with PPS is that we now have each other and we no longer bear our frustrations privately unless we choose to do so.

I watched the HBO movie "Warm Springs" with interest. The film was essentially historical fiction. However, the film did reveal the tremendous effort that Franklin Roosevelt made to help his own rehabilitation. His belief in the warm waters of Warm Springs, Georgia, led to his purchase of the resort. He transformed this old resort into a polio treatment facility. When he went to Warm Springs he would be among other polio patients. This proved to be therapeutic in itself. In the film, Roosevelt addresses the other patients as he leaves to resume his political career. His words were these:

"You will be with me, no question of that. Well I want to say how proud I am to be a part of this community, not based on birthright or privilege, but on compassion and courage. You know I believe the true power of these waters is that they brought us all together and our ability to help one another is what will make our victory over polio endure because what you have done and what we will continue to do until this disease is defeated is to come together like a family and do what we do best, lift each other up."

PPS has brought us together. We do help each other and relate to each other as a family. We will continue to lift each other up.