

**From Henry's Desk** *by Henry Holland*

## Polio and the Meaning of Life

Has your life with polio provided you with more insight and understanding regarding the meaning of life? Many of us were invaded by an invisible virus early in our lives. For some that virus killed or severely damaged anterior horn cells (motor cells) in our spinal cords. That virus could also invade the brain and result in death. Even if we survived the initial invasion many of us were left with the mark of polio. Four years ago I wrote an essay on the "Mark of Polio." You can refer to that article on our group's website at <http://cvppsg.org/henrydesk/>

If one has memory of this initial invasion, a question that one would wonder is "Why is this happening to me?" Many of us were children or young adults and trying to understand the randomness of polio attacks is still a puzzle today. We were innocent victims and for a variety of reasons our individual bodies did not resist this viral invasion or overcome it with no resultant damage. Many did experience non paralytic polio and may have never known that this virus invaded their gastrointestinal tracts. All through history many people of knowledge often connected evil events as being controlled by God or some other deity. If God brought about this evil, then the individual or his or her family must have committed some sin to justify this punishment. Infectious diseases have ravaged humans since recorded history. The number of lives lost to bubonic plague, tuberculosis, typhus, cholera, pneumococcal pneumonia, human immunodeficiency virus and many other infectious diseases can only be estimated through history. When compared to many infectious diseases polio does not rank high with great numbers or in causing a great number of fatalities.

The biology or pathogenesis of polio became better understood during the last century. This understanding helped bring about the development of two vaccines to prevent polio. We all hope that these vaccines will eventually eradicate polio from the earth. Without polio there is no Post-Polio Syndrome (PPS). Thus, the eradication of polio will also eradicate PPS in time.

The psychosocial impact of polio on individual lives is difficult to measure. For so many this disease caused emotional withdrawal, lowered self esteem, a feeling of disadvantage and being unable to compete with peers in physical endeavors. Many of us never ran again or skipped again or even walked again without braces. Others were not able to walk even with braces. The message from those that encouraged us was that "If you try hard enough, you can walk again."

Failure to overcome the adversities of polio damage often increased the feelings of guilt that many of us already felt. Fortunately studies and biographies have revealed that many of us achieved by sublimating our lost abilities into other achievable pursuits. The social pain during adolescence in relating to peers and in the "dating" behavior of the time often led to a self perception of not being normal and of being unattractive. We now know that the vast majority of handicapped polio survivors married and often parented children, much like our physically healthier peers.

Many of us have sought spiritual or religious insights to better understand and cope with the polio reality that life had brought on us without warning. That search might lead us into involvement in an established religion, the religion of our parents or it might be a totally individual soul searching pilgrimage that is independent of an established religion. Personally, I have remained in an established religion. That religion is Christianity and my denomination is protestant. I have found the church to be a community of loving souls and many who attend have experienced a broken spirit. I admire the late theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's definition of the church:

"The Church is curiously a mixed body consisting of those who have never been shaken in their self-esteem or self-righteousness and who use the forms of religion for purposes of self-aggrandizement; and of the true Christians who live by a "broken spirit and a contrite heart."

I have my doubts as to whether God intervenes in human lives. However, there are certain unexplained blessings that have entered my life. The event of polio in my life was probably random choice, but the resultant experience has been a blessing. Yes, I really mean that, a blessing. Also, I really cannot explain how I got through college and medical school and graduated debt free. I was so naïve as to how vulnerable I was at the time. As a hospital intern I contracted and survived pneumonia and its long aftermath and hopefully have given something back. I cannot explain the miracle of Brenda (my wife of forty-one years) entering my life when I least expected such a blessing. I saw myself as the doctor in *Of Human Bondage*, but Brenda changed all of that thinking. I cannot explain the blessings of the three pastors in my life, the many teachers and my many friends. I feel blessed as a physician because of all I have learned about life from my patients over the last forty years. Again I was unexpectedly blessed when I first attended a meeting of the Central Virginia Post Polio Support Group in September 1991. To see, hear and feel a reflection of my own experiences in what other polio survivors and caregivers shared helped me to expand my understanding of the meaning of life.

Because of polio many of us had to confront the feeling of not loving ourselves. That feeling could often result in feeling unloved. Hopefully, many of us learned to love ourselves, often because others loved us. This dynamic is alive in our Post Polio Support Group. We have learned to love one another and readers; I feel that is the meaning of life.

About a century ago another physician gave us these words that speak to his understanding of his quest:

"He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side; He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow thou me!' and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is."

*References:*

- I. Niebuhr, Reinhold, *His Religious and Political Thought*, edited by Kegley and Bretall and published by MacMillan in 1961.
- 2 Schweitzer, Albert, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Translated By: F. C. Burkitt, Reviewed Edition: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998