

From Henry's Desk by Henry Holland

The Polio Generation

In 1998 Tom Brokaw wrote his best selling book on the *Greatest Generation*. This generation was the generation of Americans who grew up during the years of the Great Depression and as young men and women fought and defended our country during World War II. This generation benefitted from Roosevelt's New Deal and many benefitted from the GI Bill that allowed many to achieve higher education and buy homes with low interest GI loans. This was a time when our country was greatly unified in order to help the Allied powers defeat the Axis powers. These Americans willingly used ration stamps, did without new automobiles and later produced the generation of Americans known as the baby boomers.

The incidence of polio in the United States began to rise with 10,000 cases in 1942. The graph describing the incidence of polio in the USA generally follows a bell shaped curve from 1942 to 1960. You may visualize this graph on the Internet at http://www.geocities.com/harpub/pol_all.htm. The highest point on this curve was in 1952 when 60,000 cases of polio were reported in the USA. There were many known and unknown people who lost their lives because of the polio virus. There were many known and unknown young adults who gave their lives for this country in World War II. The average age of polio survivors is currently around sixty-four years of age. I would like to equate the polio generation with the great generation of World War II.

The polio generation was also a victim of a surprise attack. Those who were old enough to remember this attack will never forget it. Those too young to remember the actual polio attack still had to live with the results of that attack. That attack was too often fatal, but more commonly that attack left a variety of motor nerve damage. Many others recovered from that attack with no visible damage. Those with mild or severe motor nerve damage had to endure painful physical therapy and learn new ways of dealing with a barrier filled environment.

Returning to the able bodied world as a child or teenager with the mark of polio was a beachhead of its own. This beachhead consisted of stares from the able bodied, the expressions of pity from adults who were more fortunate, the intense effort that was often involved in climbing stairs or getting off of the ground and even hidden feelings of guilt as to why God had allowed this to happen to us. Many wearing braces or with deformities that could not be hidden often encountered uncomfortable and painful feelings of low self esteem and self-consciousness in the social "dating" arena.

Over the last score of years the majority of the polio generation have encountered a new beachhead, that is really more like a swamp.. This swamp has been identified as Post-Polio Syndrome (PPS) and has progressively slowed many of us down at a faster rate than mere aging. Some of us never got out of this swamp and have passed on. Others have made good adjustments and can move through this swamp at a slow but steady pace. No one chooses to get mired down in the swamp and be physically and spiritually submerged, but that is the risk in the swamp.

Every week I hear about the death of another polio survivor. Most are remembered for their accomplishments despite polio. Just last week I heard of the death of a polio survivor. I was informed of this death by a high school principal who went to the this survivor's funeral. The note reads:

Henry,

"Last week I attended the funeral of my brother in law, Randolph Partridge, of Chase City, VA. Rannie was born in 1938 and came down with polio at the age of 18 months. He spent his life in a wheelchair, but managed to graduate from Hampden-Sydney College and teach Trig and Calculus for 40 years at Bluestone High School in Mecklenburg County. He was in his first year of retirement. Twenty-some years ago he married a wonderful woman with an elementary school age daughter, so Rannie experienced the joys of marriage and fatherhood. His funeral at the First Baptist Church in Chase City was packed with relatives, colleagues, and former students who said, "I never would have passed Math if it weren't for Mr. Partridge". He was a pillar of the church, rolling in every time the doors were open. His personal warmth and huge sense of humor endeared him to all. Rannie's polio attacked him again about a month ago, and specifically his diaphragm muscles. He refused to live on a ventilator and requested to be disconnected. The Lord took him in 30 minutes. His was an amazing, courageous, and Christian life. All who knew him were blessed."

Two weeks ago I learned of the death of a polio survivor who had polio in 1952 at the age of twenty-nine. This lady, Dorothy Becker, was also an extraordinary woman and lived in California. I mention these two real people; not because they are the exception among polio survivors, but because they represent what is often commonplace among polio survivors. Every month when I attend our support group meetings I can look around the room and see people who have accomplished similar achievements, just like Rannie and Dorothy.

I hope the polio generation will not be lost in the recording of history. Hopefully no future generation will ever have to be subject to a surprise polio attack. As the prophet Isaiah wrote in the fortieth chapter of Isaiah: May we all "find our strength renewed and rise on wings like eagles. We will run and not get weary; we will walk and not grow weak."