

## **From Henry's Desk....."Where are the scales of justice?"**

Works of fiction do not often focus on polio. Some years ago I wrote an article on *Crossing to Safety* by Wallace Stegner. In that book one of the main characters is a survivor of polio. She is an educated woman who is married to a college professor. During a trip to Italy she is looking at a work of art, which was a painting by Piero della Francesca in Arezzo Italy. The painting revealed a recently resurrected Jesus, half in and half out of the grave. There was still some of the look of death on Jesus' body. A passage from the novel described the scene.

"But I (Larry, Sally's husband) noticed that Sally stood a long time on her crutches in front of that painting propped temporarily against a frame of raw two-by-fours. She studied it soberly, with something like recognition or acknowledgment in her eyes, as if those who have been dead understand things that will never be understood by those who have only lived."

I can identify with many interesting passages in this novel. Larry, Sally's husband, tells this story in the first person. Larry comments on the uncertainty of life with these words: "You can plan all you want to. You can lie in your morning bed and fill whole notebooks with schemes and intentions. But within a single afternoon, within hours or minutes, everything you plan and everything you have fought to make yourself can be undone as a slug is undone when salt is poured on him. And right up to the moment when you find yourself dissolving into foam you can still believe you are doing fine." This sounds a bit like the process of PPS. Many of us have "fought" to be contributors and not burdens to our individual worlds, only now to feel undone by the "salt" of PPS.

Near the end of the novel, Larry writes of his observations upon living his adult life with his polio-disabled wife.

"One of the peculiarities of polio is that its victims, once they have recovered from the virus and settled down to whatever muscular control it has left them, live a sort of charmed life. Crippled as they are, they are rarely ill, they are surprisingly tough and durable, they astonish their sound companions with their capacity to endure. But that is not forever. There comes a time in the life of every such patient when the whole system--muscles, organs, bones, joints---begins to fall apart all at once, like the wonderful one hoss-shay. Every polio patient is warned to expect that time, every polio family lives with the foretold doom waiting for it at some unknown but expected time in the future. One learns to live with it by turning away from it, by not looking. And yet on occasion one is aware of an intense, furtive watchfulness, and the victim, the doomed one, must surely have just as often the vulnerable sense of being watched."

In my mind, the above paragraph is describing PPS. The author of this novel, Wallace Stegner, lived from 1909 to 1993. *Crossing to Safety* was published in 1987, around the time PPS was being identified as an entity.

More recently I read a novel entitled *Nemesis* by Philip Roth. This novel was published

in 2010. The story is about a twenty-three old young man named Eugene “Bucky” Cantor who lived in a Jewish neighborhood in Newark, New Jersey. The story follows the polio epidemic during the summer of 1944 in New Jersey. Cantor grew up in the neighborhood where the story evolves. He was the Phys Ed teacher at the local school and in the summer of 1944 he was the director of the local neighborhood. His mother had died during his childbirth and his father had embezzled money and went to prison. Bucky was raised by his maternal grandparents in a third floor apartment. Bucky had poor eyesight and wore thick glasses. As a result he was ineligible to serve in the military during World War II. He felt guilty about this as many of his best friends were in Europe. Then polio hits the neighborhood and one by one some of the boys that come to the playground contract polio including two that die. Bucky goes to visit the father of one of the deceased boys and the following conversation occurs.

Where are the scales of justice?” the poor man asked.

I don’t know, Mr. Michaels.’

“Why does tragedy always strike down the people who least deserve it?”

“I don’t know the answer” Mr. Cantor replied.

“Why not me instead of him?”

Mr. Cantor has no response at all to such a question He could only shrug.

“A boy - tragedy strikes a boy, the cruelty of it!” Mr. Michaels said, pounding the arm of his chair with his open hand. “The meaninglessness of it! A terrible disease drops from the sky and somebody is dead overnight. A child, no less!”

Bucky has a girlfriend who is a daughter of a local Jewish physician. The young lady is working at a summer camp in Pennsylvania. She communicates to Bucky that there is a job opening at the camp because one of the male counselors has been drafted. She begs him to take the job to escape the risk of contracting polio. With ambivalence he accepts the job and goes to western Pennsylvania. The tragedy of the story is that one of the young boys at the camp contracts polio and then others. Bucky concludes that he is a carrier of polio. Eventually Bucky contracts polio. Unlike most polio victims he does not possess the will to fight and try to overcome the resultant paralysis of one side of his body. He rejects the love of his girlfriend despite her declarations that she loves him and his disability does not frighten her or change her love for him.

In my opinion this is not an uplifting polio story but it does reveal feelings that many of us felt to some extent. It describes the fear of polio, the random selection of victims, the guilt that can be associated with being a victim and some theological issues. I highly recommend this novel and I emphasize the fact that the story is fiction as there was no polio epidemic in Newark in 1944.

References:

*Crossing to Safety* by Wallace Stegner. Penguin Books. New York. 1987, pp. 274-275, 201, 288, 336

*Nemesis* by Philip Roth, Vintage Books, New York, New York, 2010, page 48.