

Remembering James Murdoch

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I think it was 1957. I remember playing on the sidewalk down the street from our nice middle-class apartment building in NYC. I was 8, in the fourth grade at a local Catholic school that was overcrowded with baby boomers, and had been skipped twice along with my entire class to make room.

I was playing by myself, jumping over cracks in the sidewalk, feeling the incredible freedom without a back brace as my mother had just taken it away. That day, on the sidewalk down by the only empty lot, an unknown man walked up to me and said, "James Murdoch died." I looked at him and said, "Why?" No question of who this man was or why he was telling me this. James was a kid from my neighborhood who had contracted polio, and everyone for several blocks around knew that the tall thin blond girl who lived in the big building on the corner on the sunny side of the street had barely survived polio just a few years before.

People used to cross to the other side of the street to avoid me when I first got out of the rehabilitation hospital. The only neighborhood child allowed to play with me those first few months home was the small sweet girl named Pat who lived on the top floor of the apartment building next door.

When discharged, I was 5, not very strong yet, and matched Pat in playing-ability. She was smaller than me but was actually 10 years old. She had Down syndrome. Her mother knew who I was and let Pat play with me. She would sometimes stop to squat down and turn ashen. In retrospect, these were probably Tet spells (Tetrolgy of Fallot). About a year later, I had not seen Pat for a while and her mother came down one day and told me Pat had died of heart problems.

There had been no further polio cases. Kids were still not allowed to play with me, but people no longer crossed the street to avoid me. The Salk vaccine became available privately, then in the school system. Two more

neighborhood mothers allowed their kids to play with me, and Jorene and Susan became my best friends. I missed Pat, but I had recovered considerably and was now playing far more actively with these new friends my age.

James Murdoch, an older boy with curly brown hair and freckles who lived down the block and around the corner, was my idol at the time. When we both came down with polio in 1953, we were two of the four kids who developed polio on our block in NYC that year. He was 8, and I was 4, when we were admitted to the first hospital, one of the large NYC teaching hospitals. Then all four of us were transferred upstate to the New York State Rehabilitation Hospital at Haverstraw.

Back then, the wards were segregated as babies/toddlers, small girls 6 to 12, big girls 13 to 18, and the same for boys. I felt very grown up to be allowed to be on the small girls ward at just 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ when I was admitted. Every day, the kids in their assorted wheelchairs and braces raced (in our minds, at least) along the corridors and peeked into every office, lab, school room and kids' ward.

Four of the five wards had kids from my neighborhood block, so I always visited them. I remember going down to the boys wing and seeing James on multiple occasions. We looked at each other, but knew I was not allowed to go into his small boys ward, so we rarely talked. I don't think the boys were allowed to come down to the girls wing, as they only ran around on their wing.

James had one leg brace that was shiny and new, and very interesting crutches that looked like fun to me. I was stuck with my old wooden wheelchair and my hands were so weak that I could not do anything much with it. I could see that he did not have to wear a back brace under his shirt. So he was much better off than me at the hospital.

Later, back home in NYC, he continued to be well ahead of me in recovery, only the one weak leg held him back. We both went to the same school, so

I would look at him across the school yard, and we both knew we came from the same place. If we met playing on the sidewalk, we would talk briefly. By then, he had only one short leg brace, and no longer needed any crutch.

This is why it was not a surprise that someone would come up to me to tell me about James Murdoch. And death was not new to me. He was the second one to die in our polio group. One of the other kids who had polio that same year was a two-year-old boy named John who ended up in bilateral long leg bracing. His mother used to bring him out to their front stoop across the street from my apartment building, and I would cross the street to say hello to him. Again, I used to visit the toddlers ward at the hospital and had known him there, so he knew me. When I realized I had not seen him on the stoop in a while, I asked someone and was told he died. I think they said of “a cold,” which I now presume meant he had pneumonia. So, when this man told me about James Murdoch, I said, “Why?”

He said “They were doing another operation on his leg and he died during it, a problem with putting him to sleep. They don’t know why.” He said “They’ll announce it at church on Sunday.” I just looked at him, and he walked on.

It was devastating. I was 8 years old, but I had always felt permanently connected to James Murdoch. When I learned that people grew up and married I assumed that I would grow up and marry James Murdoch because of our shared experience. Now he was gone. Suddenly my future was empty.

That Sunday, sure enough, the priest announced at the 9:00 am children’s Mass the list of parish deaths for that week and at the end of the list he said “James Murdoch.”

That was the end of my polio era. I had shed the back brace, too soon as I now realize, and was no longer being taken for the many polio clinic

appointments both at the New York Hospital for Special Surgery and at the NY State Rehabilitation Hospital And now my best friend at the rehab hospital had died.

The following year, my mother switched me to another school as they had yet another program to skip baby boomers up to the next grade to deal with the overcrowding, and I was skipped for a third time.

Those kids at that school had not known me during the polio days, so that was no longer an issue. I was good at dodge ball, and that was how they saw me. By 15, I was attending a specialized high school for science, taking calculus and college biology, unusual in those days.

Thoughts of the polio years did not return until post-polio sequelae changed the focus of my life a couple of years ago. And what name appeared simultaneously in the tabloids for his notorious phone tapping of celebrities but yet another James Murdoch, the son of the publisher.

This immediately brought to mind the James Murdoch of my polio existence. I realize that I had lived an entire lifetime that he did not have. This past winter, when I brought my 2-year- old granddaughter in for a simple eye infection, the pediatrician told me she was having difficulty with multiple sets of parents refusing pediatric vaccines for their children. I told her that I knew from personal experience that these preventable diseases were killers and offered to talk to any parents or groups if she thought it might help. It is the least I can do for the James Murdoch of my memory.