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A Declaration of Interdependence

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“Need help with that ladder, Grandma? No? *Splat!* Oh, no! Grandma fell from the ladder! She’s grimacing in pain and can’t get up! Call the ambulance! There goes Grandma off to the hospital. Sigh. I wish Grandma knew that asking for help isn’t a cop-out. It takes courage at first, but after that, it would make life a lot easier for all of us.”

It seems that many people who are living into later life resist asking others for help in the name of independence and “not wanting to burden anyone.” But what might life really teach us about managing its never-ending onslaught of challenges?

Maybe sharing my experience will be useful. As a polio survivor for 67 years who has used crutches, leg braces and now an electric scooter to get around, I was taught searing lessons early on about the difference between dependence and independence.

Dependence was a bad word. It conjured up images of being shut away in a medical institution or in a back bedroom somewhere, sick and infantile, totally reliant on others. I was also taught as a child not to be a burden on others and was chastised when I was moving in that direction.

Now I wonder about that. A burden? What does that mean? I guess it means being emotionally and physically needy, being a taker, childishly weak, unable or unwilling to participate in reciprocal relationships with those around us. When we are too dependent, do we become a thorn in the side of those near us, an affliction imposed upon others?

Independence, on the other hand, was a good word. A very good word. As children of the polio epidemics of the 1950s, we were indoctrinated with the goal of becoming fiercely independent as we went through our initial rehabilitation from acute polio. “Do it yourself! You fell? Well, figure out how to get up on your own! It’s a cold, cruel world out there! You will always have to prove yourself to others,” were messages I often heard from my parents and therapists. And those lessons worked well for me for a long time.

Now, as a mature adult who continues to live with a physical disability, I contemplate: could it be that dependence versus independence are two unreasonable extremes? Too much dependence can lead to dysfunction and low self-esteem. Conversely, too much independence can lead to burnout—always giving, always super-achieving.

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What, then, is the most sensible way to manage our daily lives now? Our greatest American document, other than the Constitution, is our Declaration of Independence. For people who are growing older with the late effects of polio or simply growing older with the late effects of life, I say we need to draw up a more evolved document: our own Declaration of Interdependence! Not wilting dependence. Not blazing independence. But interdependence.

Interdependence. It's "the quality of being mutually reliant on each other."

Trying to be that timeworn kind of independent doesn't work as we grow into our later life years. Trying to do everything without help is not only isolating; it can be dangerous. Climbing a ladder to hang curtains? A broken hip is no fun. Traipsing in the snow and ice to my roadside mailbox instead of arranging for front door mail delivery with the post office? Let's think outside the box (or in this case, the mailbox) about that issue! Asking for convenient mail delivery wouldn't be viewed as a cop-out by anyone. It's a smart thing to do. For me, front door delivery has become an opportunity to share a smile and good words with my mail carrier. And I know by her friendly tidings that she appreciates our positive rapport. Our new arrangement may also have spared her the horror of finding me stranded and struggling in a snowbank trying to retrieve my mail the old way.

These days, painting the fence or planting a garden could easily result in a fall, and then a popped bicep when trying to push up from the ground. My Declaration of Interdependence advises me to find a few twenty-year-olds who love outdoor work. Then give them some of my best home baked cookies, some money and my full attention as they do the work, share their interests and tell me all about their life plans. This way, everyone gains from the experience.

At first it might feel humiliating or distasteful to ask for new assistance, but it can be done. In fact, in my own medical situation, I discovered the hard way that it *must* be done. When I unexpectedly faced new debilitating pain, weakness and fatigue, known as polio's late effects, I had to ditch my uninformed ways of managing medical and lifestyle challenges. Now I pace myself and take the elevator instead of the stairs.

I also make sure to tap into the advice of physical and occupational therapists regularly. Since the early 1980s, polio survivors numbering in the hundreds of thousands around the world have, in the spirit of interdependence, created and participated in our networking organization, Post-Polio Health International (PHI).

Through PHI, post-polio medical professionals and survivors have learned from each other about the late effects of polio. They have become healthcare-interdependent. Banding together, they have supported cutting-edge medical research, built an extensive library of scientific and historical information (www.polioplace.org) and continue to advocate for resources. It's powerful to witness medical professionals and their patients become each other's experts as they come together in conferencing, publishing newsletters, and linking up on a variety of web-based platforms.

Interdependence. It's "the quality of being mutually reliant on each other." Under the guidance of this new Declaration, my neighborhood buddies and I now have added opportunity to enjoy each other's company because we are more open about expressing our changing needs. As we talk, we agree to show up for each other in new ways.

In the process, we have identified one key to success. I make sure that what I ask others to help with is something they genuinely like to do. Some enjoy running errands. Others treasure their cooking skills. Still others love to help with craft or sewing projects. And they, in turn,

know what I would do best for them. Drawing upon our specific talents almost always guarantees that our exchange will be mutually rewarding.

My Declaration of Interdependence also extends to willing strangers whom I encounter in public places. Often, I ask unsuspecting shoppers at the grocery store for assistance in reaching items on high shelves. My reciprocal gift to them can be sizeable or simple. A warm hearted thank you and recognition that their kind assistance is truly valued may be the only boost they have had all day.

Adopting a renewed level of mutual exchange makes sense because we have always needed others and they have needed us. Surprisingly, I have found that life can be even more deeply gratifying as I risk receiving and giving in unexpected new ways. Living out my new Declaration of Interdependence has been different. It's also been delightful. ■



About the Author

Ms. Sunny Roller was paralyzed from childhood polio in 1952. She is semi-retired from the University of Michigan. Sunny currently serves on the Board of Directors of Post-Polio Health International. She also works as a freelance writer who may be contacted through her blog on living well into later life with a disability at www.sunnyrollerblog.com.

PHI Signs Agreement with University of Massachusetts Amherst

Post-Polio Health International is pleased to announce that we have entered into an agreement with the University of Massachusetts Amherst whereby UMass Amherst has agreed to add PHI's archives to its special collections. The agreement will ensure that material in PHI's archives—collected over several decades dating back to the 1950s—will be preserved and made available for future use.

As PHI Vice President Dan Wilson, who spearheaded the effort, describes, “The PHI archives will join a fine disability collection at the University of Massachusetts’ Special Collections and University Archives. The University of Massachusetts will preserve and digitize our archives, making them available online to polio survivors and researchers worldwide.”

UMass Amherst currently has twenty-five collections related to various disability issues. To peruse their current holdings, go to <http://scua.library.umass.edu/umarmot/category/social-change/disability/>.

In the coming months, PHI will begin the process of organizing and selecting appropriate materials from our archives for preservation. When this process is completed, the materials will be sent to UMass Amherst, where they will begin the digitization process. PHI will post a notification in our publications when the materials become available online.

We are excited to have found a permanent home for our archives so that these valuable materials can continue to educate and enlighten others about polio and its effects even beyond the life of the organization. ■