

The Victories and Challenges Related to Post-Polio Syndrome

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Along with a sore throat I was feeling feverish. It was Saturday; we were shopping when I told my parents that I wasn't feeling well and wanted to go home. The date, September 1951-- in November I would turn eight-years old. Unknowingly, at the time, those symptoms were to lead to a diagnosis of polio several days later. I can recall, after a couple of days resting in bed, getting up to use the bathroom and falling to the floor. I wasn't too concerned until after picking myself up and entering the bathroom falling a second time. I knew this was not good—I was scared. Physician house calls at that time were not unusual. After examining me I was told I needed to have tests done at his office. As long as it wasn't the hospital I felt safe, but that didn't last. We were referred to General Hospital in downtown Los Angeles where, following a spinal tap, I was told that I needed to remain in their care. Although my parents visited every evening, I was frightened—they did not tell me the diagnosis for fear that would weigh even more on my emotions. The unknown was more frightening. I struggled with fear of abandonment for many years. I began treatment immediately. Kenny Packs became a daily ritual, usually twice a day.

After a week of initial treatment I was transferred to a rehabilitation center in Santa Monica, several miles from our home. Prior to the arrival of LA freeways it made my parents trek time consuming. I felt much more comfortable at this facility than the hospital. There were children my age, we shared a ward and I felt more caring from the medical staff than was the case at County General. The disease affected my left side, specifically; atrophy of my left calf and, to some degree, the thigh. I progressed from wheelchair, to crutches to leg brace over a period of a few months. The rehabilitation included exercise; a good deal of my therapy took place in

the pool at the facility. This was to become my lifelong routine. I've been swimming for over 60 years.

Although I returned home after several weeks in the hospital, I continued rehabilitation at the Santa Monica facility for a couple of years. Polio left me with a limp which is still the case today. My doctor was pleased with my progress; however, I did require surgery at the age of 13. The operation was to reduce the likelihood of a dropped foot which required that my ankle be fused. Although compared to others who contracted polio, I probably would be considered "lucky" to the extent the illness did not leave me without the use of my limbs. However, the psychological impact was probably as crippling as the physical. I struggled for years feeling "less than" others. The combination of walking with a limp along with the atrophy resulted in my being self-conscious and concerned that because of these physical differences, I would be seen as not good enough. Although at times I received messages that I was as good as others, the messages that reminded me of my condition had more of an impression. In my final year in elementary school I was selected to play on the school's softball team, but when I entered middle school (which was known as junior high school) I was the last to be selected on the sport teams because the school enrollment was a combination of several elementary classes, which made me an unknown other than the limp and not being a particularly muscular kid. In fact, I was quite skinny, short for my age with a high voice. In middle school and high school I wanted to belong to the "in groups," but that did not happen. I had a number of good friends, but wanted to be desired by the popular crowd.

However, my father was a significant influence in restoring, to some extent, my confidence. During my teenage years he would often join me and my friends playing golf and bowling. His support, I believe, was significant in helping my development and allowing me to feel better about myself. The summer after I graduated high school, I grew several

inches and suddenly had a male voice. About this time I also began lifting weights. I was maturing physically. I became more attractive—girls were now approachable. I began to date regularly. Although I generally avoided going to the beach or to the pool on dates—that would have been too risky, my condition would be visible and I couldn't chance exposing myself to the possibility of rejection.

I completed college with a business degree and was hired as a Financial Analyst. I held a number of responsible positions over the next few years—I was progressing professionally. In addition, I had a serious relationship; however, I married too soon and was unaware of what a successful marriage required. In fact, over a 10 year period I married and divorced twice. To what extent being a polio survivor led to these outcomes I'm not sure, but the need to be accepted motivated me to commit, yet being loved by one woman, perhaps was not sufficient. Throughout this difficult time I continued my education leading to a Ph.D. and a position in academia. As my career ascended I was satisfied professionally, however, without a life partner I did not feel "complete." I began psychotherapy in an attempt to sort out the issues that were keeping me from achieving fulfillment. With the insightful work of a psychiatrist I was able to make sense of my resistance to commitment, which in part was related to the psychological issues surrounding my bout with polio. I've now been happily married for 29 years with a step-daughter who I refer to as my own and a 6-year old grandson.

In the early 1980s I became aware of the findings associated with post-polio syndrome; however, I was not experiencing symptoms and, therefore, assumed I dodged the bullet. Unfortunately, that was not to last. At the age of 57, at the beginning of the millennium, I began to experience drawing pain in my affected leg when I stood for long periods. I noticed this first when attending cocktail parties or events that required me to stand for 10 or more minutes. The discomfort continued to the point where

shaving became painful as the strain on my lower leg was pronounced. Fifty years from the onset of polio, 2001, I was fitted with a brace prescribed by the polio maven, Dr. Jacqueline Perry. Initially, it was a challenge accepting that after so many years of continued improvement, I was reverting to the early stages of polio. The recognition of my plight was particularly bothersome because I was not only in good health, but was an active hiker and swimmer. As has been my *modus operandi*, I decided PPS would not define me.

Twelve years later I remain full of life. I've maintained my 5-day per week aerobic workouts. We travel quite a bit. I have a healthy eating regime. I only wear the brace when walking distances or standing in the kitchen (I'm the cook in the family). Later this year I turn 70 years old—how did it go by so quickly? But I also need to report the struggles—to be true to the title of this article. My balance stinks, and is getting worse. If I'm not standing with both feet firmly planted I lose stability. Clearly, my left leg is getting weaker. I notice this particularly when climbing stairs. With the brace it's easier, I have better support, but I'm trying to avoid dependence on the appliance.. I suppose my current situation is exacerbated by age. That is, even without PPS, the reality is that aging could lead to the weakness I'm experiencing, however, the combination of PPS and getting older works to aggravate the condition. With that said, however, I don't plan to slow down. I will continue my regimen as long as possible. It's the only life I know.

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