

My Polio- by John Howden-Richards

As I find myself approaching my eightieth birthday (dob 6.6.1944), I continue to be intrigued by my friends and acquaintances who have reached a certain age, whereby they, themselves, are now experiencing some of the symptoms, which, I myself, have encountered during most of my life. I would not say that it is satisfying, in the least, but it does create an element of understanding and empathy towards me, which was often absent, hitherto. Naturally, I, too, am experiencing reduced mobility, arthritis, and pain.

One Wednesday afternoon in June, 1953, my legs ached and I felt quite tired, as I struggled up the steep hill on the return two-mile walk from school. I went straight to bed, and was admitted to Taunton Isolation Hospital by the weekend, when polio was confirmed. All my toys were destroyed, but I was able to keep Ronnie, my mascot, following fumigation - he's still with me! A month later, I was sent to the Bath and Wessex Orthopaedic Hospital, where I received physiotherapy, and learned to walk with the aid of two full-length calipers, aided by two sticks. For my present mobility aids, I use two sticks at home, a frame outside, and a scooter and/or a car to drive around the village, and further afield. After nearly a year in hospital, and two further years away from school (I was fortunate enough to have a private tutor), my parents decided to send me to boarding school, in order to mix with other youngsters, hence my arrival at Wellington School in Somerset. It was the right decision, which I never rued, and for which I am eternally grateful.

Although I was not able to participate in sporting activities, or the CCF, I took advantage of the gymnasium, where there was an enlightened P.E. master. Together with his support, and that of Jeffery Archer (who was a great gymnast and athlete), and the 1st XV rugby team (who allowed me to join in their circuit training, as far as possible), I developed strength in my upper body and an improved balance; this proved instrumental in my ability to deal, thereafter, with both the physical and mental challenges, as they presented themselves. I went on to attend a course at Aberdovey Outward Bound Sea School, a few years later, where I gained the Warden's Award - rarely awarded for an outstanding performance (most of my friends don't know this, but, I consider that it's relevant to this article). Not a day passes, when I do not reflect on the attributes, which I derived from both these institutions.

On leaving School, I became articled to a chartered accountant in Bridgwater, Somerset. Keen to obtain a professional qualification of some sort, this seemed to be the most appropriate for me, in providing job mobility and security. After articles, I went into industry and, then, courtesy of Tube Investments, attended Aston University as a post-graduate, where Lord Plowden (chairman of TI), had established what was to become Aston Business School.

Unilever beckoned, and a move to Gloucester resulted in a couple of years, where I really enjoyed my role as sales accountant at Wall's Ice Cream. However, in 1971, it was clear to me that we would be joining the Common Market (as it was known), which I trusted would provide a necessary stimulus to the UK economy. My decision was to find work on the Continent, before we joined, since I reckoned that this was the likely outcome. We brought forward our marriage, and I left Unilever and joined a British-based company in Düsseldorf, Germany, which was a disaster. Soon after arrival, I discovered, through rather minimal investigation, that the directors were on the fiddle, and that the enterprise was unviable (and, eventually wound up).

On return to London, with no jobs, life took another turn, but with opportunities, too. I had always wanted to work in the City, and was fortunate to help rescue a secondary bank, successfully, for a couple of years, during the 1970's recession. I then found myself on the market, yet again, but the 1974 oil crisis came to my aid, and I joined the DTI and the Arabs in assisting in the establishment of the Arab-British Chamber of Commerce. Five years on, I set up my own practice of chartered accountants & management consultants, with a slant upon managing companies, non-executive directorships, company secretarial roles, and the traditional audit and accountancy - the latter never having been my original aim!

However, my entrepreneurial instincts led me to want to build an organisation, which was not so dependent on my constant input. Together with a business partner, in 1993, I formed a company developing and marketing traffic technology (speed cameras). The product, itself was very successful, gaining Home Office approval, speedily (excuse the pun) but it was the early days for this technology, and securing development finance was not forthcoming during that recession, resulting in the business folding in 1995. At least, I tried to fulfil my ultimate ambition, and don't regret the endeavour. I carried on with my practice, retiring in 2002.

My Christian faith has been my metaphorical anchor, in my ability to cope with, and confront, the many difficulties and frustrations, which have - and continue - to cross my path: it gives me the strength and confidence to cope with the problems of old age, and the infirmities, which accompany one in later life; and it enables me to look forward, enthusiastically, to the future, whatever that has to hold.

My hobbies and other interests range from vintage and classic cars (I had several Bristols et al), antiques, wine (I had a small wine business in the 1970's-80's), interior design, gardening, property refurbishment, classical music, cookery, current affairs. I enjoy good company, and sharing good food and wine; that's what makes me happy!

On reflection, in this momentous year, I consider that I have had my fair share of successes and failures, which must add up, in my view, to a life fulfilled. Without taking risks, you achieve nothing, which life can afford. As Churchill said: "success is moving from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm". I subscribe to that!