



Dr. Henry writes about The Virtue of Self Denial

As many of you have probably ascertained by now, I enjoy a good movie. Many of you have probably seen the excellent English film, [Sense and Sensibility](#), based on the novel of the same name by Jane Austen. The book and the film are about a family of three daughters who lose their station in English Society when the father dies and his estate is left to the son of his first wife. The widowed mother and the three daughters are fortunate to be provided a cottage on the grounds of a generous cousin. The story reveals the reality of the absence of rights for women in nineteenth century England. The two older adult daughters have tormented love relationships that stimulate the plot throughout the story. The oldest daughter, Miss Dashwood (Elinor), played by actress Emma Thompson, is the ultimate in self denial. She denies her own happiness for others, she is emotionally restrained throughout most of the movie, and she is admirably virtuous. She is devoted, caring, courteous, and loyal. She is also lonely, unloved by a man, and seems doomed for spinsterhood. Her next younger sister, Miss Marianne, played by Kate Winslet, is a more emotionally expressive and impulsive young lady. Late in the story, Miss Marianne seems to be dying of pneumonia and is in a coma. Her sister Elinor is at her bedside and in a rare display of emotions, her defenses fail her, and she sobs with a plea for her sister to "please try....., do not leave me alone." Miss Marianne does recover. A little later when Elinor learns upon the visit of a former beau that he still loves her and is free to marry, she once again loses her composure and uncontrollably weeps with tears of joy. In the end the defense of self denial and self control are overwhelmed by the ecstasy of emotion.

I see many parallels in the practice of self denial and self control as displayed in this film and the similar practices that most of us have developed as a result of our experience in life with polio and now PPS. Most of us had polio as children and if we were left with some residual visual evidence of polio, we early on felt the pain of self-consciousness and resisted the perceived pity of others. As a result, we learned the virtues of self-denial. We nobly denied and accepted our insurmountable limitations and overcame numerous barriers, obstacles, and stares. In many of us, it created a strong outer emotional armor of defense, but left us with an inner emotional core of sensitivity and perceptiveness. In time, we gained the respect of others because of our determination, hid our anger, and were quite successful in being normal in every way possible.

Some of us seemed to completely recover from acute polio, or our residual weakness was not noticeable to others. Those fortunate polio survivors were called "passers" because they passed for normal. Perhaps these polio survivors did not need to deny or demonstrate self-control as much as those with an observable handicap. Many of these same passers are now having significant problems with PPS. They also seem to be experiencing many problems with depression, panic and anxiety problems, and a sense of losing their identities. This is my own speculation, but I believe that the passers had less need to develop self denial after the acute infection and now are less prepared to deal with the impact of PPS and the change it has brought in their lives. Do not misunderstand me. All of us are experiencing some of these same emotions just as the former passers. Thus, for many of us who have become experts at self denial, the impact of post polio syndrome has been less devastating emotionally, although still depressing and discouraging. Maybe

there is some virtue in self-denial.

I would like to share another professional observation. Many polio survivors had polio as young children. As a result, many under the age of six have only a few memories of their acute illness. Some have vague memories of being separated from their parents during isolation and remember certain aspects of treatment that was painful such as the spinal tap, PT, or the smell of the wool hot packs. Many of these memories had been repressed or barely recoverable. Now with PPS, many of these same survivors are having recovery of some memories, flashback experiences, and recurrent dreams (nightmares) of their earlier polio horror. Some of these survivors are having symptoms similar to a delayed post traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD). Symptoms such as being easily startled, panic, insomnia, weeping, and vivid feelings of déjà vu are common for PTSD. It seems plausible that the reality of PPS has weakened the defenses of childhood and these unexplained and repressed feelings are occurring again in a manner similar to childhood.

All of this is to say that what we are feeling as polio survivors and as PPSers is not easily understood, but perhaps the search for some explanation is good for the soul. Miss Dashwood discovered that when her defenses failed her, she felt the extremes of emotions, and as a result, she found a fuller life. The experience of emotion, be it joy or sadness, is a sign of a life being lived to the fullest. Most of us have done just that, lived life to the fullest.

Henry Holland, Richmond., Virginia, USA. Henry4FDR@aol.com

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["Sense and Sensibility" \(1995\)](#) in the [Internet Movie Database \(UK\)](#). Alternative sites: [IMDb \(US\)](#), [IMDb \(Italy\)](#) and [IMDb \(Home\)](#).

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The Secretary, Lincolnshire Post-Polio Network

PO Box 954, Lincoln, Lincolnshire, LN5 5ER United Kingdom

Telephone: [+44 \(0\)1522 888601](tel:+44201522888601)

Facsimile: [+44 \(0\)870 1600840](tel:+44208701600840)

Email: info@lincolnshirepostpolio.org.uk

Web Site: www.lincolnshirepostpolio.org.uk

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