

76 and Still Adapting.

What a coincidence, I had just returned from a visit with the neurologist when I opened the email from Toni Dunlop asking for my polio story. I'm more than happy to share with others who have also dealt with polio, the disease that keeps on giving.

I'm 76 and had polio when I was 18 months old. That was 1949 and there was a big epidemic here in the states. I was lucky in that my grandfather was a physician. I was placed in Cripple Children's Clinic, Birmingham, Alabama. When my grandfather, "Wekkie" (short for Westcott) came to visit me and saw the conditions there, he swept me up out of the bed, put me in his car, and drove to Warm Springs, Georgia where I got state-of-the-art treatment at the Warm Springs Foundation which was well-known due to its patient, Franklin D. Roosevelt. I can't tell you what a difference it has made in my life. For all intents and purpose, it was a normal life, yet so far from it.

I played sports, not very well, but I played. In high school I lettered on the B-team basketball, and was state champion in the shot put. What a sport! It's all upper body strength, and you hop on just one leg. Luckily, it was my good left leg!

I know that I spent some time in an iron lung at age two. I don't know how much, but any time in Skinner's Box is a bunch. Here I am, a 76-year-old man and I still vividly remember that contraption. Someone ought to do a study on the psychological effect of the iron lung on infant children. I remember how frightened I was. I remember not being touched by another human being. I still don't do so very good with relationships today. I've really tried hard, but just can't make it work. Just another scarred soul due to polio.

I guess it's a triumph on my part that I don't feel guilty any longer and blaming myself. It was just the start of how polio warped my soul as well as my body.

After I got out of Warm Springs, I remained an out-patient. I started with a hip brace which gradually became shorter as I got older, and was only high-top shoes when I started first grade at age six. I started wearing non-orthotic shoes in the third grade (Just a metatarsal wedge on the soul of my right shoe).

In the fourth grade they discovered that I had scoliosis, an "S" curve in my spine. So, the docs at Warm Springs prescribed a brace for me. Their orthotic shop measured me and tailor-made a corset with stainless steel stays. It went from my diaphragm down to my hips, extending a little lower on the front and rear. I remember it was the strongest, thickest cotton I had ever touched. Down the back, there was a stay on either side of my spine with a steal loop welding the two at the top and bottom. I got refitted with a new brace every six months until the ninth grade.

Man, I can remember how the blood would drain from my face and hands with anguish when I contemplated going to junior high school wearing a bulky brace with GIRLS! Lucky again. I quit wearing the brace two months before I started ninth grade. And that was pretty much it for my treatment during my youth.

Growing up, the family never talked about me and my problems with polio. I guess it was because my mother could never fully accept it. It conflicted with her perfect life. As great as her father was, she was a bit lacking in support. Mom wasn't warped. She was just bent a little bit. Anyway, it was enough to make it hard to love her.

So, growing up was tough. I never had anyone that I could talk with about what I was going through. Too bad because I was a highly intelligent, very sensitive, very creative, ultra-shy and extremely introverted soul in the midst of a family of high achievers. I'm a little ashamed to admit it, but I felt shame. I, on the other hand, wasn't much of an achiever. I finished high school with barely a "C" average. A letter grade lower in any course, in any year, would have stopped me from graduating. Yet, I was a National Merit Scholarship semi-finalist. Interesting, huh.

Well, that's the story of my life up until now. As I said, I just returned from my latest visit to the neurologist. The good news is that a recent nerve conductivity test on my right leg compared favorably with another conducted five years ago. There's still no motor neuron activity from the knee down... dead. Oh, the pain nerves are working just fine. I'm aware of it every night when I go to bed.

My hip is withered and my toes are curled up because I can't move them. Every night I have to designate about 20 minutes of my stretching time to my poor little toes. My god, they can hurt so bad.

Remember what I said about small things? My goal in life is to stay loose. No one else knows better than us what it's like to have a part of your body in a constant, rigid spasm. It hurts.

Now pay attention because here's the part that nobody is talking to you about. On the affected parts of your body that are still running, you've got a reduced a reduced number of motor neurons due to polio. So, this means that when you have injuries, such as lower spinal injuries, you are more susceptible to injury than even you think you are. Case in point – my back.

A year ago I had a fall, and this fall was different from all the rest because I couldn't roll into the fall. My feet were tangled in the hose as I was watering my plants. I pride myself on my ability to take a fall, rolling on my shoulder where I don't get hurt, just dirty. But this time I fell straight back in a sitting position. You can imagine what this did to my spine. When I hit, the sound in my head was like a "thud" on the side of a jug. It was hard.

The shock of the impact went straight up my spine giving me a wedge compression fracture in T-12 and another compression fracture in T-11. Interestingly, the lumbar section held up just fine. That's because it was surgically rebuilt (my second back surgery) with fusions, bone grafts and titanium rods, and when they did it, they built it like a bridge. Before and after nerve conductivity tests and MRIs show an undamaged spinal column and nerve roots. Yet, peristalsis stopped when I fell.

The theory is that polio left me with a reduced number of motor neurons, and the few that remained to run my lower digestive tract were damaged in the fall. Seems reasonable. After all, I had already lost the ability to express my bladder without a catheter.

So, here I am. Performing a sensitive balancing act with Mira-Lax in order to keep my digestive system moving, and I've got diarrhea for the rest of my life. Oh, and by the way, I'm nearly two inches shorter than I was when I graduated from high school.

I've accepted myself as I am, not broken, just bent pretty good. Both physically and emotionally. I'm moving on with plans to remodel my bathroom and plant a peach tree in the yard. I'm moving forward. It's bound to be better than what's behind me.

I'll leave you with these words of advice. Learn how to take a fall if you haven't already. Find someone to teach you. You know that you're going to fall...sooner or later. Make the best of it.

Me, I'm going to stay loose, or loose as I can. Then I'm going to get high and bake some banana bread. Life is good, even when it deals you a bad hand. It's not the hand you're dealt, but how you play it. You can do it; you are some of the toughest people in this world. Keep on adapting!