

Polio and Awakening—A Personal Story

By Greeley Wells

In 1946 I contracted polio. At the time, I was a three-year-old war baby so, effectively, I have had no other eyes, mind or body to look out of but that of a polio "victim." The experience has certainly colored my whole life. First, when I carried my "curse" for close to thirty years, then when I was freed of that curse. Here is my story.

There are only two first-hand memories I carry from those childhood years. I think the first was when I was in a hospital. I remember holding on to one side of a crib and, intending to walk to the other side and surprisingly fell face down. That might have been the moment I realized I couldn't walk. The other memory fragment was of standing on the inside of a crib gripping it for support and looking through what seemed like several layers of glass at a person being helped to a seat on a bench. That's it—two fragments. The rest of my early life is not in my conscious memory.

Next I have snippets of three operations. One to my right "polio" foot followed by two to my good knee to slow its growth so my legs would end up the same length, which they did. I remember a terrible enema, a rough nurse, the gas mask going over my face and, finally, the terrific pain and nausea of coming out of unconsciousness while throwing up. Mom told me stories about advocating for me with the nurses and finally the doctors to ease my pain even though the clock did not dictate a painkiller shot yet.

I learned to walk again and spent many nights in braces, enduring the long process of strapping me in while listening to "The Lone Ranger" and "The Shadow" on the radio. Great and imaginative memories. I lost a year of school, which—though I was still smaller than my contemporaries—made me a year older.

Sports were not my forte to

say the least. I was the last to be picked alongside the fat kid. Predictably perhaps, art WAS my forte and I was always the best artist in class. I slowly began to realize that knowing what I could do well and having it be what I loved to do was a great and rare gift.

There is one more pivotal moment that happened a few years later, maybe at six or seven years of age. In the memory I'm running along the side of a pool I'd just climbed out of, to run and dive in again. As I passed a boy walking in the other direction, I realized that he wasn't looking at me, he was looking at my foot. And the look on his face was one of disgust and disbelief—or maybe horror. It was a chilling look and probably the one that made me self-conscious about my foot. From then on I did all I could to hide my foot by holding it behind the other one when standing or sitting. Its misshapen form destroyed the shoes I got from the store, adding to the disgrace and the curse I thought I had.

When walking with friends I learned to take larger strides to keep up. My foot was the first thing to get tired long before anyone else and held me back. I marveled at how others had no thought for their bodies—they just did everything asked of them, while mine had to be in pain, compensated for and hidden from view. These were the formative and foundational experiences I lived with until I was about thirty. Then another quite surprising shift blessed my life.

In the human potential movement of the late sixties/early seventies, I found myself in front of a hundred and fifty people describing my own personal curse: my polio foot and how ugly and distorted it was and its grossness to everyone all my life. From the audience came things like: "Which foot?" "Didn't notice, we thought you were graceful." "Didn't notice at all..." Oh my God. I suddenly realized that I was the only per-

son in the room who was thinking what I was saying! No one else was; and probably no one outside that room was either. An unfounded assumption, unchecked, I carried my "curse." This was one of the most freeing, startling and rejuvenating moments I have ever experienced. I woke up. I accepted my foot and myself. The curse was lifted.

Upon reflection, I realized that the curse had never existed but in my head. From that moment on I was free, from that and every other assumption in my life. I accepted and finally settled comfortably into myself. What a gift: unself-consciousness!

Another gift was the realization that we all have our own version of this "curse," even if it's as small as a pimple or a balding head or as huge as a wheelchair. We can accept who we are "blemishes and all." I also could accept and feel comfortable with all my fellow humans who were "blemished" with a wheelchair, crutches, deformities, pimples or whatever. I now have a common trust and ease with them and with everyone to just be real. This is all so liberating for me. What happens to us is who we are. What happens to us makes us unique and great. Look at Helen Keller for a much more dramatic example.

I have read there is around a fifty-fifty chance for post-polio syndrome, so this all may come down on me again. But now, at 66, with my awakening behind me, I'm at one with what is. Should it be so, so be it. I face it with love and embrace it. It will be my continued reality, which has never harmed me since I awoke and has actually given me a great gift instead.

Thank you for letting me share my story with you. Feel free to pass it on or comment back to me.

Greeley Wells
541-840-5700
www.greeley.me

greeley@greeley.me