

Foreword

Richard Daggett's autobiography presents a clear and comprehensive view of his experience with polio. Every episode he reviews is stimulating and told with candor. His ability to attain the equivalent of a college education, despite being physically unable to enter the classroom, is a subtle but strong display of his strength. The vision and determination which became evident during this long challenge were, without a doubt, significant elements which enhanced his effectiveness as an advocate to improve the welfare, comfort, and safety of the severely disabled patients who lacked adequate resources.

Several distinct events impacted Richard's polio involvement. They display the challenges faced by the medical services in Los Angeles County, as the clinicians responded to the dynamic changes presented by modern poliomyelitis epidemics.

My Early Years

I've always enjoyed poems, those childhood rhymes that most children were taught when I was young. I especially liked the works of Robert Louis Stevenson. We had an early edition of *A Child's Garden of Verses*, and my parents read to me as I looked at the illustrations. Later, probably by the age of eight or nine, I discovered the difference between poems and poetry. My ears would perk up if I heard someone reading something by Robert Frost. One of my favorites is Frost's "The Road Not Taken." It ends with:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

I liked that thought—taking the road less traveled. A psychologist might analyze my feelings and presume that this is based on the fact that my life has been different. This analysis might be right. I've certainly taken the road less traveled, even if the decision was not entirely my own. Circumstances surely had a role in which road I took.

Then, recently, a new book of poetry was given to me. In it was "The Road Not Taken." As I read it again, savoring the flow of Frost's words, my thoughts were suddenly interrupted. It was as if my brain yelled, "Hey! Wait a minute!" I re-read the last two lines:

I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

The questioning part of my brain exerted itself and seemed to ask, "How could a person know if one road, 'made all the difference' without traveling both roads?"

Mrs. Truxaw, my sixth grade teacher, taught her students to read with a critical eye. She urged us to decide for ourselves if an author's words spoke truth to us. I guess I'll have to blame her for my skepticism.

But, as my mother would probably say, I'm getting ahead of myself. I guess I'd better start from the beginning.

Growing Up

In 1949, my parents bought a lot in Downey, California, right in the middle of an orange grove. Our street was named Wiley-Burke Avenue. At that time Wiley-Burke was just one block long, ending at the edge of another orange grove to our north.

My parents designed our house, and we took many trips back and forth from 109th Street to watch the progress as it was built. We had a big front yard and wide areas on each side of the house. My father planted the lawn in a low ground cover called dichondra, which was very fashionable in the 1950s. It made a beautiful lawn but required a lot of attention.

The living room was at the back of the house, with large windows looking out to the covered patio and backyard. We removed quite a number of orange trees on the lot to make room for the house, but we still had eight trees left. The smell of the orange blossoms was wonderful. We moved into our new house the day after Christmas in 1950.

The families on our block were mostly upper middle class. Most of the fathers had management positions in large corporations or owned their own small businesses. Most of the mothers were stay-at-home moms, involved in church and civic organizations.

I was in the middle of the fifth grade when we moved. The closest elementary school was Gallatin School, a little over a mile from our new home. It seemed quite a long distance compared to the walk to 109th Street School, which had been only two short blocks. At the end of my first day at Gallatin, I got on the wrong school bus to come home. I had never taken a school bus before and realized something wasn't right when I was the last one left on the bus. The driver asked me where I lived and brought me to my stop. About half the time I walked to school. I would walk east on Lubec Street, or through the orange grove to Paramount Boulevard. Then I'd work my way north to Gallatin Road and east to the school. On the way home, I'd sometimes go south from the school to Florence Avenue, then west on Florence to Wiley-Burke.

Taking a Detour

We got home from Rock Creek in time to sign up for my second session of swimming lessons at Downey High School. At least that was the plan. Of course, things don't always work out as planned. The first indication I had that something was wrong was waking Friday morning, July 17, 1953, with a stiff neck and back. It was not only stiff, but it really hurt too. Putting my clothes on was very, very uncomfortable.

I had a couple of severe headaches the day before, but they both went away after an hour or so. I don't remember ever having a headache as a child and, in any case, I wasn't going to let these headaches spoil my summer fun. I ran down the street and, with every stride, my brain felt like it wanted to leave my skull. It hurt, but I wasn't concerned. I'd occasionally hear friends and family members complain of headaches, and they always seemed to feel better later. This back pain was different. I'd never known anything like this. I stayed in bed until mid-morning, when my mother called my father at work. He came home and they took me to see Dr. Hershey at the Ross-Loos Clinic in Huntington Park. The doctor did some tests, mostly to do with my reflexes. He said I should be taken to the Los Angeles County General Hospital.

We arrived at County General and entered the Communicable Disease Ward. The ward was housed in a very old, red brick building on Zonal Avenue, just west of the main hospital building. Everything inside seemed old too. I was put in a bed and they began giving me

more tests. Every time a doctor came by he would ask me to try sitting up in bed without using my arms. This seemed to have some special significance. I did this about a dozen times and had no difficulty.

In the afternoon they did a spinal tap. They told me it was a test to see if I had polio. Everyone in the early 1950s had seen March of Dimes posters with iron lungs and kids with leg braces and crutches, but polio was not something I thought about much as a child. I didn't think any more about polio than I did about getting hit by a truck. I don't remember my parents making much of a fuss over it either.

The tap itself was very painful, but what hurt even more was trying to get in the knees-to-chin position that a tap required. They kept asking me to bend forward more, but the pain in my back was really intense.

I spent the rest of the afternoon in a small alcove off a much larger room. I could see other children in the larger room. Although they were all in bed, they didn't seem to be very sick. Some of them appeared to be playing games of some kind.

That night my legs began to ache and, shortly after midnight, I started to have trouble sitting up. I needed to urinate and I could see a urinal on the nightstand next to my bed. I tried to reach for it but my arms wouldn't cooperate. With great effort I finally reached it, but I was completely exhausted.

I didn't know how a person was supposed to feel if they had polio, but not being able to sit up told me I had it. I distinctly remember saying to myself, "Uh-oh, I think I have it." When my parents came to visit on Saturday I told them the same thing, "I think I have it." I said it almost apologetically. I knew my parents didn't want to hear this.

Moving On

I continued school with a home teacher. In those days, students with a disability were not encouraged to attend regular classes. There were some differences in the courses offered to me too, although it might have been just a peculiarity of my teachers. Course requirements included "Senior Problems," a mixture of things that included a mild form of sex education called "Family Life." My teacher said of Family Life, "We can skip this if you want. I'm sure you know it anyway, and you'll probably never need it." I was too polite to tell him he was showing his ignorance about people with disabilities. He probably thought, like many people do, that if a person is disabled he or she loses any interest in sexual matters. The funny thing is, another course requirement was driver education. Although it was very unlikely that I would ever have the upper body strength to drive, he still made me take the textbook part of driver education. He probably felt more comfortable teaching me how to drive than he did talking to me about sex.

I know I benefited academically by having a home teacher, but my social life surely suffered. My neighborhood friends would come over occasionally, and I was invited to a few parties, but not very often. I was, however, getting very good grades. I had always gotten good grades in Reading, English, Art, and Social Studies, but only acceptable in Math. I still struggled with Algebra, but Geometry and Trigonometry were a snap. And having a teacher on a one-to-one basis meant I couldn't fake it. If I was having a problem with a certain subject, the teacher knew it immediately. Overall, it was probably good for me. But I missed taking science lab courses and mixing with the other students.

Polio Déjà Vu

The years from the late 1950s to the early 1980s were my best, physically. I walked well, if stiffly, and had a high level of function. I needed help with some tasks but was fairly independent. However, because of reduced pulmonary capacity, I didn't have the energy to work all day, every day. A regular nine-to-five, five-days-a-week job was not possible. This is one reason I volunteer with many organizations. I can pick my hours and tasks.

My left hand was most affected by polio, but the middle finger on that hand had some strength. It could flex and hold weight. I'd use this finger to hook onto a belt loop of my pants as I pulled them up. One morning in the early 1980s, as I sat on the side of the bed getting dressed, I discovered that the finger wouldn't work. This was probably my first noticeable symptom of what we later came to know as post-polio syndrome.

Post-polio syndrome, or the late effects of polio, affects most polio survivors. My problems started thirty years after my initial recovery period. It was almost as if my warranty had run out. I still functioned reasonably well but I noticed a loss of strength, and I was tiring more easily.

Summing Up

Through all the twists and turns my life has taken, whether public or private, I've had the support of my family. My parents always encouraged me in whatever tasks I undertook. Living with them was certainly to my advantage. Not just because they could provide the assistance I needed in daily activities, but because we enjoyed doing so many things together. I know I would not have traveled as much, nor had as wide a spectrum of experiences, if it were not for them. I've also had the support of my brothers and sister and the encouragement of many friends. In this respect I have been blessed.