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Let's Clink Our Champagne Glasses!

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Hip, Hip, Hurrah! 1888, oil on canvas by Norwegian-Danish painter Peder Severin Krøyer

"We must SEE the delicious beverage – then TASTE the lovely wine – FEEL it on our tongue – SMELL the sweet aroma from the glass – lastly, we need to use our fifth sense so we 'clink' the glasses and HEAR the delightful sound ..."

It's time for us to have a wonderful party – a celebratory bash – to raise our glasses and communally toast having had polio. Three cheers for polio! We will clink together; then we will drink together!

What! Salute having had polio? Sound crazy? Maybe, but let's think about it. One of the smartest and healthiest things we might do at this time in our lives is to celebrate the gifts that polio actually gave us – the many wonderful life moments that happened to us *because we had polio, not in spite of having had polio.*

... we have become the masterpieces themselves. And we flourish.

This is a controversial, highly-charged topic because having had polio was not easy. But for the sake of debate, let's take a moment to broaden our thinking patterns here beyond the borders of "not easy." Let us invoke a little more expansive view of our lives, especially when it comes to renewing our personal sense of meaning. Yes, yes. We all want to see polio eradicated worldwide because it kills and paralyzes people. No. No. We would never wish polio on anyone, nor, if we could live life over, would we ever ask to have it again. However ... we got it, were disabled by it, suffered and struggled with it, and have been mastering the art of living well with it for decades now.

Looking back, we know it's true – a growing number of us have consciously turned living well with polio into not just

a goal, but a creative art form. We have not only been the adroit composers of our unique personal adaptations, attitudes and alliances; we have become the masterpieces themselves. And we flourish.

I believe one of our secrets to thriving with polio is that we, first and foremost, quietly dismissed all those who gawked at us with pity, volunteered to Biblically heal us, needlessly tried to fix us, or gazed at our bent feet rather than into our eyes. As we have matured, we have learned to reject the shame and stigma of disability. What a freedom! We found out that such negativity gets old and is not useful. Out of necessity, we have had to become introspective from time to time, which inescapably fostered our personal character development. We have learned to be assertive when needed, to

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surround ourselves with loved ones, to think positively, get educated, find good resources and enjoy life along the way.

Perhaps most importantly, we have learned to accept ourselves as we are. Many of us have evolved in our thinking to appreciate and lovingly embrace what used to be our primary nemesis – polio. In order to find peace and contentment, we have had to make friends with our disability. Not overcome it. Not hide it. And not fight it.

Someone at the recent PHI Conference in St. Louis reflected, “Life doesn’t get easier, but it does get better.” Perhaps one reason life with polio is better is because we have become wise enough to embrace all of it – cause and effect. Polio has made us who we are today.

Our physical differences don’t matter much anymore because we are all beginning to look like everyone else our age anyway. We, however, know a bit more about aging gracefully, because we started sooner than all of our friends. We are aging *with* a disability. Many of our friends are aging *into* disability. If they’ll let us, we can actually help them with their new adjustments.

Our polio experience has given us everything from spontaneous moments of delight to life-long personal relationships we never would have had otherwise. Let’s take a long moment to praise, appreciate and clink our champagne glasses to all we

have received, known and loved because of our polio ... these have been polio’s gifts to us.

“What gifts,” you may ask, “did polio *possibly* give to me?” What is there to celebrate, to be grateful for? To open your thinking process, here is what a group of fellow polio survivors have shared from personal experience:

- In 1964 I got to view Michelangelo’s Pieta at the New York World’s Fair for as long as I wanted to because people in wheelchairs were allowed to sit about 50 feet from the magnificently mesmerizing statue instead of having to stand on the conveyor belt being moved slowly past the statue. I could marvel at every fold in Mary’s gown carved from that huge hunk of white marble. *(Clink!)*
- First, through all the wonderful polio survivors I have met, I have gained so much insight into life and all its inevitable ups and downs. Second, I have grown personally and I believe I have become much more sensitive to “the moment” and the value of self-reliance. These are blessings that came with polio. *(Clink!)*
- I would never have been invited to travel to India to teach about the late effects of polio, ride an elephant and see the majestic Taj Mahal shine in the rain like a glazed luminescent pearl. *(Clink!)*
- I don’t think I will ever be grateful for having had the disease. However, I am grateful for the opportunities that have come my way while dealing with the disability ... the very special people I have met along my journey, the extraordinary experiences that I have encountered, and the drive I have developed to succeed in life. *(Clink!)*
- I would not have met and married my husband if it hadn’t been for how struck he was by the contrast between my strong personality and my polio enhanced body with leg braces and a cane. I moved with effort due to my severe scoliosis, but stood proudly in a line of therapist colleagues introducing myself to lead

Polio survivor **Sunny Roller** is a post-polio educator and researcher and has authored professional and consumer



literature on the late effects of polio and wellness programs for polio survivors. A PHI Board member, she has a new blog, Conversations on Living Well with Polio, sunnyrollerblog.com.

a discussion group at a conference he was attending. He picked my discussion group and pursued my attention. Forty years later we still wonder how, of all the people in the world, we found each other and how good it still is. *(Clink!)*

- A few years ago I had the opportunity to watch a superb young documentary filmmaker at work with her small crew, and to see how she turned much of what I said during a lengthy interview of more than an hour into images throughout the hour-long film. My voice was heard for no more than a couple of minutes but the film itself is crowded with images she found in the March of Dimes archives and other places – almost all of them completely unrelated to me personally, but some of which she spotted just by recalling our taped conversation. I learned a lot from this about the art of filmmaking. No doubt I could've learned roughly the same thing without the dubious benefit of having had polio. But in fact, in this case, the benefit arrived because of the polio. *(Clink!)*

- Polio has given me the ability to view life and situations “outside of the box.” This has enabled me to do the many, many challenging things that I have

accomplished in ways that would not be typical for most people. *(Clink!)*

- I learned to never feel sorry for myself; there are others worse off than me. *(Clink!)*

- It has enabled me to relate to issues others with disabilities are facing. *(Clink!)*

- I have met many wonderful, interesting people through my polio connections. Because of my polio, I have a worldwide network of supportive post-polio associates that I can link up with anytime. They are like “friends-on-call!” As a traveler, that’s an especially gratifying (and quite helpful) advantage. *(Clink!)*

- If I hadn’t studied post-polio treatments in Europe, I would never have encountered a European lover who made me feel like Sophia Loren on a scooter. *(Clink!)*

Now it’s your turn. Lengthen the list and join the party. It’s our time to celebrate! ■

Thank You

For recognizing your friends and loved ones with contributions to support the unique mission of PHI and IVUN. PHI strives to publish an accurate list. Please contact us if we made an error.

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