



## Sixth International Post-Polio and Independent Living Conference

### Strengthening Our Spirituality

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As you start to meet the declines that come with post-polio complications, I want to give you some of the ideas that have helped me along the way, particularly from a spiritual dimension. I have five steps — five steps for helping to keep you up while you're going down.

The first step is to just look at reality. Look the world square in the eye. What you see may be frightening and upset you, but remember that the truth will make you free. The first thing you're going to see is a post-polio thingamajig out there, whatever they call it, that's causing you trouble now, that's going to cause you trouble later. This knowledge can free you from the illusion that you can still go on and do everything. It can free you from having to try to prove that you can still do everything. Knowing that you have to slow down when the road starts to wind and go uphill may be a limitation you don't want to face, but it's a life-saving one — if you slow down.

Another truth that will make you free is the realization that the most important part of you is not your physical function at all: it's the spiritual part of you. The outcome of what you do, often beyond your control, is far less important than the intention with which you do it and the extent to which you put the best of yourself into it, regardless of the outcome.

Another truth that sustains me is that I'm not alone. I have a God that goes with me. This God is not an aspirin that I can take every time I get a headache or a muscle ache. And this God isn't a magic genie that runs ahead of me and removes all the barriers and all the troubles. Instead, it's a God who gives me the courage to go on. Some people say that we're all looking for a light at the end of the tunnel. Well, frankly, that's not what I'm looking for at all. I want the tunnel I'm going through to be brightly illuminated so that every day has its consolations and its accomplishments, and God is the light that guides me through the tunnel.

One of the mysteries of life is that almost anything worthwhile has to be done through effort and pain. And I wonder which is the greater miracle — to go through life without any pain, or to go through pain and turn it to gain?

As you see, the first step is rather gentle: accept; look at what's out there. The second one, I think, is that you must give yourself permission to punch reality in the eye — to give it a good kick in the shins. We see things out there that are injuring us. We learn about pain. We find troubles, and we sometimes feel resentment. We feel angry; we feel upset. God is unjust. Why did this

happen to me? I don't deserve it. Okay, we must give ourselves permission to express these feelings, to get this anger off our chest, even if doing so means shaking our fist at God. That's not anything new. Look in the Old Testament, look in the Psalms, and you'll find all sorts of expressions: "My God, why have you forgotten me?" "Why have you forsaken me?" "I ask you for help and where is it? I can't find it!" If we let this anger and this resentment build up inside us without letting out, we're just causing ourselves all sorts of trouble. We have to let it out: to express our grief; to express our anger in a way that doesn't harm others. Take your anger out on your pillow, not on your mother or your wife or your friend. You'll find that if you do express your anger, even to God, you'll wake up the next morning with its weight off your shoulders. And you'll find out that God was there all the time. You were so angry and upset that you didn't see Him waiting to help you along to the next step.

What is the next step? To open your eyes and look out the window. We tend to look in a mirror, seeing only ourselves and our problems and the difference between what we are now from what we used to be; but the more we look in a mirror at ourselves, the more depressed we get. We have to look away from ourselves. Look out that window: there's still a world out there; there are still people out there. There are still horizons that we can reach out for, even if they're different from the horizons that, at another time, we thought we'd be reaching out for.

Here's a verse I like — I don't know who wrote it or where it came from, but it goes like this: "Two men looked through prison bars. One saw mud, the other stars." The person looking only down misses a lot of the blessings of life. The person looking only up is in danger of getting muddy feet from the puddles. So we have to look both up and down. We have to see what's there and its possibilities.

And then we're at the fourth step, which is to close our eyes and reflect or meditate or pray, whatever we want to call it. Now that we see the realities of our own position, the realities of post-polio complications, we have choices to make, priorities to set. Perhaps we have to choose a new lifestyle or change some of the ways we do things. We need to reflect very quietly, to discern within ourselves what we really want. In a way, we are like heavy smokers — at some point they'll realize that either they've got to quit smoking or they may face terrible consequences for their health. Some smokers decide not to stop smoking. It's their choice. We, too,

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have to make decisions. Every day we should close our eyes, as it were, figuratively, and reflect upon where we are, where we want to go, and what we have to do — or not to do — to get there. God, if He's going to talk to us, isn't going to give us a telephone call or send us a fax or tap us on the shoulder. Generally, God speaks to us through the circumstances of our lives. But unless we quietly close our eyes and listen, we will miss the direction and the help He might have given us.

The last step is to just get out there and do it. Whatever it is you've decided to do, just do it. And do it not looking back and regretting that you're not doing something else, or comparing what you're doing with what other people are doing. Just do it. And even if your decision is that because of your polio condition, your age, or whatever, it's time to retire, then retire fully. Put your whole energy into resting and enjoying life. And if at the end of the day, you can say, "Well, today I had an enjoyable day. I had fun with my leisure and my rest," then you've had a full day, a day to be proud of.

Here are some lines from a poem that I read once and liked. They're probably not the exact lines, but what influenced me is what I remember, not what the poet actually said. They go something like this: "The woods are lovely, dark and deep, But I have promises to keep, And miles to go before I sleep." So do all of us have miles to go before we sleep. But the woods don't have to be lonely if we reach out to other people. And the woods don't have to be dark if we have a God or other support going with us. But the woods are deep. Well, that's what makes life interesting. Our lives are full of mystery, full of hidden treasures, full of we-know-not-whats ... that's what gives life spice.

I used to say, "Have wheelchair, will travel." Maybe the day will come when I must say, "Have wheelchair, will sit." Or maybe to go on to another step, I'll say, "Have bed, will lie." But whatever my situation, I have life, and to the best of my ability, I will go on living it as fully as I can, so help me God. □

**G.I.N.I.'s Seventh International**

SEVENTH INTERNATIONAL  
**POST-POLIO**  
AND  
**INDEPENDENT  
LIVING  
CONFERENCE**  
ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI, USA

**Post-Polio and  
Independent  
Living  
Conference,**  
May 29-31, 1997,  
Saint Louis  
Marriott Pavilion  
Downtown.

*Subscribers to G.I.N.I. publications will receive registration information. Please feel free to duplicate.*

One of these centers is Support Dogs, Inc., 3958 Union Road, St. Louis, Missouri 63125, 314/892-2554, which breeds and trains service and therapy dogs.

From age 49 days to around 18 months, Support Dogs' trainees are socialized in foster-care homes, which provide love, environmental stimuli, activities, and obedience training. The foster-care providers attend class with the puppy-in-training to help it prepare for the next step — college. From age 18 months to 24-32 months, the puppy is officially in finishing school, where professional trainers evaluate its attitude, aptitude, and work ethic.

If a dog loves to pull, is strong, and has no health problems, it may train to do "para" work, helping someone who uses a manual chair. If the dog is a "couch potato" that just wants to be a well behaved companion who plays fetch for fun, it may train to become a home companion for a child with a severe disability or an elderly person.

The list of applicants for service dogs (which are placed nationally at no cost) is long, so no dog has a long wait for its new job. In fact, after its professional training, it is matched with a partner of like interests, attitude, and aptitude and trained for an additional 30-day period with its new partner. During this time, they both learn to problem-solve, custom-train, and, of course, fulfill the bond between canine and human.

Support Dogs also trains dogs for therapy careers, toward which are two paths: one is facility-based, for the dog that wants to serve more than one person. Austin, for example, is a dog trained to work with a speech therapist who works with children with autism or behavioral problems; another example is a retired service dog now working with a psychologist who teaches elementary-school children responsibility.

The second career path in therapy work for a dog is volunteering to help people in hospitals, rehabilitation centers, or long-term care centers. This dog's vocation is being a pet; his avocation is being a therapist. If a pet and his owner want to be volunteers in this program, the dog must pass an entrance examination, and both owner and dog must attend a 14-week training program for two hours each week. After graduation, they may help children get over the trauma of hospitalization or help people in elder care enjoy the pleasures of walking a dog. They can even help people forget the pain of stretching sore muscles as they all participate in an active game of toss-and-fetch. These dogs are always pets and do their work as volunteers. □