

From Polio Patient to Polio Voice

Daniel J. Wilson

I was born in Wausau, Wisconsin, in December 1949. In 1955, when I was five, my parents decided not to put me in the public school kindergarten because I would be going to the local Catholic school, the next year. That September I became very ill, with what turned out to be polio. I remember Dr. Freeman coming to the house (doctors still made house-calls then) and diagnosing my illness. Unfortunately, during that first year of the Salk vaccine, there was a shortage in northern Wisconsin and they decided to give it only to children going to public school. That was a good public health decision, but a bad one for me.



I remember my father carrying me into the hospital and then my parents leaving me standing alone in my bed crying. Because of isolation they were not allowed to visit and could only look at me through the window of the door. Interestingly, because of the epidemic, the hospital needed volunteers to administer the hot packs advocated by Sister Kenny. So, my mother, who could not visit me as a parent, came into the ward to administer hot packs to me and the other children in the ward. (This, of course, makes no sense in terms of maintaining isolation). After 12 days, Dr. Freeman decided that my mother could do a good job of taking care of me at home, and I was discharged from the hospital. I don't have a lot of memories of this time. I do know that I needed to learn to walk again, that the hot packs continued, and that there was some physical therapy. The polio affected mainly my right side and left me with a very weak right leg and weak torso muscles. By the September 1956, I had recovered sufficiently to begin first grade at St. Michael's school. Most days I walked the eight blocks to school, home for lunch and back to school, and then home at the end of the day.

Over the next five years, my life seemed normal. I went to school, had playmates at home and at school, played sandlot baseball and football, and went sledding in the winter. At some point, as a result of the weak right side torso muscles, I began to develop scoliosis. I went through several braces that I wore all day, but took off at night. There were also exercises designed to try to strengthen the weak muscles. None of this stopped the progression of the scoliosis. When I was 11, my parents agreed that I should have a spinal fusion. Dr. Norton did the operation in the local St. Mary's Hospital, about a mile from our home. I spent six weeks in the hospital (before the surgery) encased in a body cast with a turnbuckle*. He came in every day to turn the bolt to straighten me out before surgery. I was in a double room and had a succession of roommates, none of whom lasted more than a couple of days as they were in for a broken arm or an appendix operation. When I was sufficiently straight, Dr. Norton operated through a hole in the cast. He took bone from my left leg and fused the thoracic spine. After I recovered from the surgery, I was sent home in the body cast to allow the bones to fuse.

The surgery was in the summer of 1960. I missed fifth grade lying on a hospital bed in our living room. The public schools had a visiting teacher program and Mrs. Klipstein

came once a week with my assignments and worked a bit with me. Today, we would say that I was homeschooled. I must say that I didn't do much schoolwork that year. But enough took hold that I was able to join the sixth grade at St. Michael's when I returned in the fall of 1961. I was in the body cast for most of that year. I got a smaller, lighter one in January.

Once out of the casts, I had to learn to walk once again. For about a year, I had to be very careful when at play. I couldn't run for quite some time, but the neighborhood kids made allowances. When we played baseball, I would hit and somebody else would run the bases. I often pitched, because I didn't have to move much. Over time, my left leg grew longer than my right, to the point where the difference was about an inch and a half. That necessitated a built-up shoe on the right. My father had played hockey as a youth, and wanted me to be able to skate. He persuaded our local shoe repair to take a new pair of skates and build up the right one. I learned to skate, though I was never very good. In 1962, I had an operation to stop the growth in the left leg in hopes that the right would catch up. A few years later I was able to dispense with the built up shoes. (That was the last time I was in the hospital as a patient until 2 years ago).

Following graduation from St Michael's in 1964, I went into the public school system. Again, most days I walked to school and back. In 1967, we moved from Wausau to Monroe, Wisconsin, in the southern part of the state. My father had died in 1963, and my mother found a better paying position as a county social worker. I graduated from Monroe Senior High in 1968. About my only limitation in high school was that I couldn't march in the marching band. I played clarinet in the concert band.

I attended college at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater in the southeastern part of the state, where I majored in History and English, with a minor in French. I continued to play in the band but didn't march. Instead, I was made band manager, which eventually turned into a paid position. I left the band after two years because I got interested in other things and didn't have the time to practice. I didn't think much about polio in my college years, though the scoliosis began to return above and below the fusion. I couldn't walk very far, but I could certainly make my way around campus and climb the four stories to my dorm room.

I graduated in 1972 and entered graduate work in American history at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. The focus of my graduate work was American intellectual and cultural history with an emphasis on American philosophy. I received my M.A. in 1974 and my Ph.D. in 1976 with a dissertation on Arthur O. Lovejoy, an American philosopher in the early 20th century. As in college, I didn't think much about polio except that I couldn't walk terribly far. After graduating from Hopkins, I stayed in Baltimore for two more years teaching part time and working at the Maryland Historical Society.

In 1978, Muhlenberg College hired me as an assistant professor to teach American history. I taught a wide variety of courses in American history and American studies. In 1981, in the snack bar, I was introduced to a new administrator at the college. Two years later? Carol and I were married in the College Chapel. In addition to teaching, I worked on my scholarship and during the 1980s published 3 books and a number of articles on the history of American philosophy.

Polio began to gain my attention in 1987 when I experienced new weakness in my right leg that caused me to fall a number of times. After visiting a number of doctors, the conclusion was that it was the beginnings of what came to be called post-polio syndrome. Though I had to be careful where and how I walked, Carol and I did a lot of travelling from 1990 to 2005, both in Europe and the U.S.

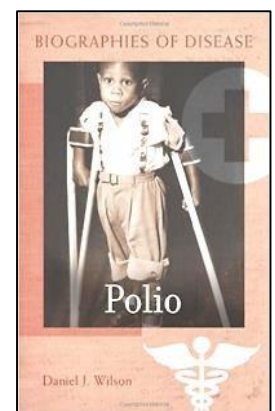
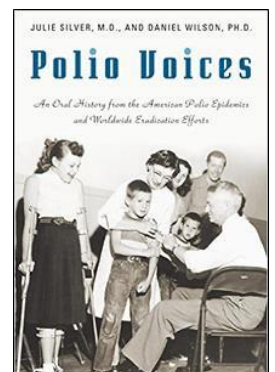
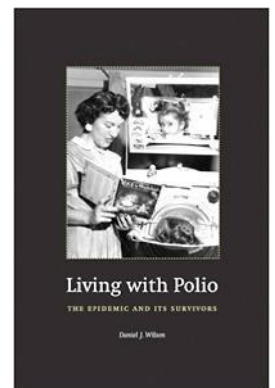
I published my last book on philosophy in 1990 and began to look for another subject for my research. Given my own problems with my polio leg and the stories emerging about post-polio syndrome, I decided to see what had been written about the history of polio. I discovered that a great deal had been written about the scientific side of the disease and especially about the efforts of Jonas Salk and Albert Sabin to develop a successful vaccine. I decided I would focus on the experiences of those of us who had the disease. I began to read as many polio memoirs as I could find. By the late 1990s I was able to make presentations at historical conferences and to publish several articles in historical journals.

Thanks to support from Muhlenberg College and the National Endowment for the Humanities, I was able to take time from my teaching to write what became *Living with Polio: The Epidemic and its Survivors* that was published in 2005, the fiftieth anniversary of the Salk vaccine. That year, I was privileged to be on a panel at the University of Michigan on the same stage that the Salk results were announced exactly fifty years earlier (April 12, 1955). I followed this book with two others, *Polio Voices*, which I edited with Dr. Julie Silver, and *Polio: Biography of a Disease*. I have also continued to publish essays on polio in both the history of medicine and disability history.

As my own post-polio problems became more pronounced, I also became active in post-polio groups. I joined the Lehigh Valley Post-Polio Support Group in the early 1990s and eventually became the editor of its newsletter. Unfortunately, a few years ago the group disbanded as our numbers had shrunk and our energies diminished. I have also been on the Board of Post-Polio Health International for about ten years.

Over the last decade or so, my post-polio problems have become more pronounced. Since 2000 I have slept with a bi-pap and more recently a ventilator with supplemental oxygen. I now wear a leg brace on the weak right leg that substantially reduces the pain of walking and standing. Since 2006 I have used a scooter for mobility at the College and elsewhere where I would have to walk any distance.

In large part because of the breathing difficulties that limit what I can do physically, I have started a phased retirement from Muhlenberg. I taught two classes in fall 2015, but am not teaching in spring 2016. I will teach two classes again in fall 2016 and 2017 and then fully retire. Not teaching in the spring semester enables me to avoid having to get out on snowy days. As I have told my students, my scooter is not a snowmobile! During the spring semesters I plan to continue my research and writing on the polio epidemics.



Polio has clearly had an impact on my life, both in terms of what I could and could not do physically, and as a subject of my historical work. I don't remember being terribly disabled as a child, perhaps because my parents treated me as a relatively normal child and because of the real possibility that I would improve substantially. Fortunately, I was a good student and my interests ran along those lines. I was able to complete my education through the PhD and become a college professor.



Muhlenberg has become very accommodating for individuals with disabilities both on the faculty and in the student body. As I have become more disabled, those accommodations have enabled me to continue to teach. Thanks to assistive devices I am able to sleep comfortably, continue to teach and research, get out to concerts, movies, and "walks" in the park. We are able to travel a little in the summer. My hope is that I will continue to enjoy both work and play for some years to come.

Reprinted courtesy of Pennsylvania Polio Survivors Network. Originally appeared in the March 2016 edition of their newsletter.