

Why I Consider Myself so "Lucky"

Because I do not show a lot of sympathy to adults who suddenly find themselves sick or in pain I am accused of being "hard". This is not to say I am not sympathetic to genuine sickness.

The opposite of this are my feelings for children. With them I have the greatest sympathy and feel their pain, wishing I could take it onto myself leaving them free to enjoy their lives.

Why? Well, we have to go back to 1950 when I contracted polio in the last big epidemic in Sydney. Because of the after affects of this I have lived my life in pain, but have always considered myself "lucky" for the opportunity I have had to live a reasonably full life.

I have never sought, nor wanted, sympathy. When it is offered I brush it off as if it was an annoying wasp. Why should I accept sympathy when I feel so "lucky"?

Let me again go back in time to the "Coast Hospital" in Sydney.

It was 1950 and an epidemic of polio raged across the city. I was a fit 15-year-old whose family had only been in Sydney a few months when I was diagnosed with polio in March of that year. Consequently, I was transported to the "Coast Hospital", as this was where they were trying to isolate all who had contracted it.

At 15 I understood what was happening to me. My GP insisted I know what I was facing; that the expected outcome of polio was death or paralysis. In other words, if I survived I should expect to be paralyzed in one form or another. He insisted on me knowing so that I knew what I had to fight. For telling me this, and the support he gave me over the next 12 months, I will always be grateful to him.

I was "lucky" as I was placed in a single-bed room (maybe it had just become vacant, I do not know). As I was wheeled down the corridors I was rather shocked to see beds head to foot along all the corridors as the wards were full. The air was full of constant screaming, and the whoomph-whumph of respirators was another constant background sound 24 hours a day.

Even now when I am old, I can still see the room with its beautiful outlook across Little Bay; I can still hear the constant screaming of 100's of children who did not understand what was happening other than their little bodies felt like they were being torn apart. I was "lucky" as I was one of the oldest and understood what was happening.

I would associate a polio epidemic to that of what I have heard about a war zone.

Soldiers return from a war zone in a number of psychological states – there are those who return feeling "lucky" and continue to see the glass as half full and get on with their lives, while others return and fall into depression at what they have endured. They do not feel "lucky" and always see the glass as half empty.

However, both groups will never forget the horrors of what they went through.

This is how I see a hospital full of epidemic victims - a war zone; with effects that left us not knowing whether we would die or come out the other end crippled – and to what extent. Just like a war zone and its after-effects.

I often think of the doctors and nurses who gave their all to help us. The stress, the strain, the feeling of helplessness they must have endured.

I have always been a positive thinker and for that blessing I am grateful.

How did I come out? Well, my right leg was withered to about half the width of my left; from time to time I continued to have extreme pain in my chest to the extent I could not breathe properly and would finish up on the floor, passing out through lack of air, then it would ease off and allow me to breathe again. I had a certain amount of weakness in the legs and arms; my right arm did not function as well as it used to and I found I could no longer control the movement of my hand properly; my left leg seemed weaker than the withered right one so that I was unsteady on my legs.

This loss of control in my right hand seemed only slight, but it destroyed my life-long dream of being a commercial artist. Prior to the polio I won a scholarship to an art school - that dream became a shattered dream when my hand was not always as controllable as it needed to be for art. Although I could still draw it was not to the standard I had set myself and therefore I stopped altogether.

However, because I always considered myself "lucky", depression was never a consideration. I lived at Coogee Bay in Sydney and swam daily, plodding along out beyond the breakers in the smooth water for hours. This proved to be the best thing I could have done as, gradually, my leg regained its size. However, the swimming could not fix the underlying nerve and muscle damage.

I was "lucky"! I looked OK (walked with only a very slight limp), I was able to participate in sports – at least to a certain level before the polio damage to muscles and breathing would call a halt.

I was "lucky"! No iron lung, no respirator, no wheelchair, no leg calipers to assist me to walk.

However, I have lived my life in pain varying from medium to extreme (I normally feel like I have been worked over with a couple of baseball bats). So I have shown little (or no) patience with people who take "sickies" for little reason, or whine about some temporary pain or other. They were simply told to "get a life" – suck it up and get on with it. This is not to say I do not have sympathy for those who are genuinely sick or have life-threatening illnesses.

My attitude is the opposite of this with children. I see one who is sick or injured (for one reason or another) and my heart goes out to them. My mind is immediately transported back in time to the screaming and the sound of respirators and I wish I could take what ails them and carry it for them; for they represent the children back in the "Coast Hospital" all those years ago.

They also represent the many children I got to meet in the (then called) North Shore Crippled Children's Hospital. While working for the Gosford, NSW, newspaper, the owner got me involved with the Miss Australia Quest, helping by transporting the girls to various functions designed to raise money for that hospital. This meant a number of trips to the Crippled Children's Hospital where I saw many of the children whose lives, in many cases, were destroyed by various disabling problems.

I am "lucky", I didn't finish up there!

I am "lucky" as, when I was 33 I was told I would most likely be in a nursing home within a few years. I'm not there yet!

Today, I still suffer the effects. From time to time of recent I am relegated to using crutches, but I still say I am "lucky"! Regardless of what comes, to me the glass will always be half full!

Why do I not automatically show sympathy to adults? I think it has to be a mindset that, after coming out still on my legs, I rejected any offers of sympathy as this made me focus on my problems and could lead to depression; a place I did not want to go. Therefore, the block in my mind stops me from offering sympathy that may cause depression – may cause the glass to look half empty.

Like me, those adults are “lucky”! They have had a real life, unlike many of the 360-odd kids in the Coast Hospital at that time. I wonder how many of them were as “lucky” as me?

Consequently, whenever I have had the chance to help kids advance their dreams, or give them the encouragement to create dreams, I have done so.

I have been blessed with many opportunities to do this and, in helping them and seeing them develop, it has given me some of the greatest pleasures in life.

To see the look on a child’s face when he/she achieves what they thought was unachievable is the greatest vision and feeling for which you could ever hope. They are memories never forgotten.



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