

## **A Tribute to My Young Ben, Based on My Book, *A Boy Survives*; A Journey Through Polio...**

I want to give a tribute to my Young Ben. Here is a summary of his experience with polio.

In my book, *A Boy Survives*, is a “lament” in the style of the book of Lamentations as I might have written, if I had had the words (pages 94-96), about my experience of polio and the two hospitals in which I spent three months, at two years and five months of age. I follow this with the story of my discovery of what happens to children who are separated from their parents for a significant length of time at a young age: they emotionally detach. In an attempt to feel like I had some tiny bit of control over my life at that point, I concluded they weren’t coming back and detached from them. But I figured out a way to carry on.

Today, I begin the 80th year of my journey. I celebrate my relearning attachment through the almost 57 years of marriage and adventure with Maggie, some significant therapy along the way, and the gradual emotional understanding of what God’s prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace<sup>1</sup> means. So I give thanks for you, young Ben: you hung in, persevered, asked questions, sought answers, tried on things to see if they fit, and became the me I am today. I give thanks to God who has been with me, nudging, encouraging, inviting me forward to more and more life. I am so grateful for the gift of life today.

<sup>1</sup>“prevenient”-- love and acceptance that is present before we are aware; “justifying”-- making a good connection with God; “sanctifying”-- growing in a life in tune with God. Terms John Wesley used for a life of faith.

(Attached is the longer version of this tribute: how older Ben discovered a way to reconnect to the early experience of younger Ben and understand my life as a result of that experience.)

## **A Tribute to My Young Ben, Based on My Book, *A Boy Survives; A Journey Through Polio...***

As an experiment in 2010 as a part of the Bible study *Companions in Christ: [The Way of Grace](#)*, I chose to write a lament from the point of view of me as a two-and-a-half-year-old child who got polio.

### A CHILD'S LAMENT

God, you are good.  
    You gave me life and fun.  
I can run, jump, and laugh.  
    You bless me.

I hurt—bad!—all of a sudden!  
    Why do I jerk and freeze? Why do I become stiff as a board?  
Why does no one know what to do with my screams?  
    When will the pain stop?

Please let it stop—now. Please.  
    Yet it keeps on and on and on.  
The doctors think I should be able to stand up.  
    They even think I refuse to stand.

Why can't they see that I can't?

What is happening to me?

My cries bring little relief and I feel like nothing will help.  
    No one will help.  
Nothing I do, nothing they do takes away the pain.  
    It keeps on and on and on.

I smell the smell,<sup>1</sup> I feel the heat.  
    It feels good. Pain is less. I can move—a little.  
I feel the hot water,  
    holding me up.

Mommy and daddy have left me here with them.  
    Why did they leave me?  
Why couldn't they do anything to stop the pain?  
    Where did they go?

The time passes so slowly. Day after day they don't come.  
    Will they ever come back?

Some of these people are really nice.  
    Some are not.  
Some are wonderful, loving, warm. Will you be my mommy?  
    Some are sneaky and do things to me.

I go to a different place. At least there are more children here.

It was good to see mommy and daddy.  
Why did they have to go?  
Will I see them again?

Why, God? Why?  
Have you left me, too?  
I want to see you again.  
I want to have fun again.

Will I ever have fun again?  
Where did you go?  
Is that you in her warmth to me?  
Are you really here?

If I lie still, is that you whispering to me?  
Is it you holding me close?  
Is that you down the hall?  
Is that you in the far-off bells?

Please come back and love me again.  
I yearn for that day.

If I ask you to help, will you?  
Please help me get well.  
Please help me walk again.  
Please help me run again.

Please let me go back home.  
Please let me see my sister,  
My mommy  
My daddy—at home.

The sandbox gives me pleasure.  
I feel the grains in my hands, on my legs.  
I see them on my toys.  
I can build things.

I thank you that you are in the sand,  
in the stillness, in the quiet.  
I praise you for the sun, the grass,  
the songs of church and the music.

You are my sandbox,  
you hold me in your hands.  
You give me life and fun.  
God, you are good.

Thank you.

You can hear the feeling of abandonment in this lament. But also hinted at is a vague memory feeling that somewhere in that whole experience I was being held and comforted, and thus seen and affirmed in the painful reality which was mine during this time.

A pastoral counselor in 2010 once commented, “I can imagine you might have some attachment issues.” I bought a couple of books on attachment and found them too emotionally difficult to read.

But then I decided to work through the book *Mindsight*, by Daniel Siegel (2010). I became emotionally much more aware of the feelings of abandonment: after all, I was two years and five months old when I got polio and was in isolation for a month at University Hospital, and then in Children’s Hospital for two months, with a visitation policy that allowed only weekly one-hour visits from parents on Sundays. This made it nearly impossible for my parents to visit because this was the day my dad preached at least twice at towns a hundred miles away. My dad tried confronting the prevailing visitation practice at that hospital, but was no match for the weight of the institution.

I found Siegel’s book enlightening, helpful, and painful: the resulting heavy emotions and deep sadness and tears were a breakthrough and led to an acknowledgment that I had indeed felt abandoned, and that led to some insight into why I was so distant from my parents. I became more aware than ever before of the source of the loneliness that has dogged me all my life.

The abandonment I felt in those early hospitals was the major factor in this, especially when I think that I, to some degree, rejected both mom and dad for abandoning me. In fact, psychiatrist and researcher John Bowlby found in his research that children separated from their mothers for a significant time go through three stages: protest, despair, and detachment.

Detachment: a consequence of the extended separation from my parents. The thought that “I, to some degree, rejected both mom and dad for abandoning me” at least gave me a sense of agency over something that I had no control over, no say in, and could do nothing about.

I was on my own to figure things out by myself.

Another of Siegel’s books, *The Power of Showing Up* (2020), emphasized how important attachment is to the development of a healthy self. So, my curiosity led me back to the concept of attachment, the importance of relationships with early caregivers—and the possibility of “earning” attachment in adulthood. Remember that I had two years and five months with my parents before polio struck, time to establish a basic attachment style, which I think may have given me some hope of a better future even as I detached from them. Two years of listening to my dad’s preaching and worship leadership probably also gave me an instinct towards hope.

Today, I begin the 80th year of my journey. I celebrate my relearning attachment through the almost 57 years of marriage and adventure with Maggie, some significant therapy along the way, and the gradual emotional understanding of what God’s prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace<sup>2</sup> means. So I give thanks for you, young Ben: you hung in, persevered, asked questions, sought answers, tried on things to see if they fit, and became the me I am today. I give thanks to God who has been with me, nudging, encouraging, inviting me forward to more and more life. I am so grateful for the gift of life today.

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<sup>1</sup>The smell referred to is the smell of hot wet wool, one of the treatments for the pain of polio. That smell is an instant trigger of memory. From what I know about the warm water tubs and hot wool treatments and the Sister Kinney treatment upon which they are based, this part of my treatment regimen helped the spasms and involuntary muscle contractions that come with acute polio.

<sup>2</sup>“prevenient”-- love and acceptance that is present before we are aware; “justifying”-- making a good connection with God; “sanctifying”-- growing in a life in tune with God. Terms John Wesley used for a life of faith.