

"The Blessings of Life"
by Dianne Odell

I'm so pleased to be able to speak to the Rotary Club this afternoon. You are a diverse group of people who have come together for so many worthy causes. This organization helps give life to our community. You have already helped thousands of people through your program that seeks to eradicate polio.

The title of my talk today is "The Blessings of Life". I would like to share with you how my faith, my family and my friends have blessed my life and given me the courage to face whatever obstacles have come my way.

First let me tell you a little history about polio. For those of you under the age of 45, you may have never known anyone who had polio. For some individuals polio was only mildly disabling, for me, and thousands like me, it was a catastrophic life-threatening disease. Although Jonas Salk discovered a vaccine for polio in 1954, this vaccine is still not available in many third world countries. Thankfully your organization and others have taken as their goal to eliminate polio forever.

When polio was rampant, parents feared this dreaded disease and kept their children away from public places such as pools, theaters and ballparks. I couldn't say where I contracted the disease, but one night as a three-year-old I woke up in sweat, with a headache, and my legs hurting. I went to my parent's bedside and told my mother. She sat up with me all night and took me to the doctor's office the first thing the next morning. At first, I was diagnosed with strep throat. She was told I would be fine. However, through that day my fever climbed, and the pain in my arms and legs increased. My mother carried me back to the doctor the next morning. They did a spinal tap, diagnosed me with Polio and sent me to John Gadsden hospital in Memphis.

For a three-year old girl it was a frightening experience. The polio patients were placed in isolation units. I was taken from my parent's arms and they were told to go home. They could not see me for two weeks. My parents would not return to Jackson, but stayed in Memphis awaiting news of my progress. There were stringent rules in those days which parents prevented parents from touching their children or the iron lung. There was also no instruction given regarding the lung's operation. The treatment included wool rags placed in hot water, which were then wrapped around your body. This treatment was for the most part ineffective. I also had Bulbar Polio, which paralyzed my respiratory system. Even though I am paralyzed I have complete feeling in my body. Only the muscles are paralyzed, not the nerves. It is ironic with polio that the mind continues to grow and develop, even as the body weakens.

I was blessed with an exceptional nurse named Mrs. Reich while at John Gadsden Hospital who would wait until the doctors had left at night; She would feed me Hershey bars and milk, which was strictly forbidden. To me she was an "Angel of the Evening". This wonderful lady remained a part of our lives until her death.

After 16 months my parents said, "We are taking her home." The doctors had done all they could do.

My parents were given no instructions on the Iron Lung, but they are intelligent and taught themselves how to manage this massive machine. They soon found out that they did not have to sit up all night and that the respirator was reliable.

My education came from Jackson City Schools. I had homebound teachers throughout my school years and graduated with honors in the class of 65. While in junior high, Mrs. Estelle Helm encouraged me to enter a national essay contest entitled, "Why I want to go to college?" I won first place and a \$5000.00 scholarship. My dad helped install an intercom system into two classrooms. I attended Freed Hardeman College in 1968, but had to return home due to health problems.

People may ask, "Why would my parents take on this responsibility?" The answer is, their faith; Faith with God's help, that they would find a way to take care of my needs. Faith that would help them to they tackle each obstacle one day at a time and trust in God to provide for tomorrow. This faith they taught all three of the children. This same faith binds Donna, Mary and I together through every challenge that we may face. We have learned that we are never alone with our problems as long as we have God in our lives and each other.

When I was a child I was strong enough for several years come out of the Iron Lung for brief periods. I was even able to attend church. In the evening my parents would read me Bible Stories and teach me the examples of faith of Bible characters such as Sara, Joseph, Martha and Mary, and the apostle Paul. At the age of thirteen I was baptized in the bathtub of our home, against the recommendations of the doctors. I have never felt such a feeling of joy, a feeling of being born again. Members of our congregation have kept my faith alive by their beautiful acts of charity and encouragement.

Next I want to tell you about my family. My family never told me I could not do things. As a child I wanted to learn to write, but having no use of my arms, my family helped me to learn to write using my toes.

My father, Freeman Odell, worked for South Central Bell for 41 years and turned down many promotions, because it would take him away from home overnight. Many nights, after my father would work a full day, he would sit up all night watching a generator when there were power outages due to storms. He would then go to work the next day. He would often work 16 or 24-hour shifts to keep up with the medical bills. I remember Daddy would bring the world in for me to see. He would bring me flowers, bugs, butterflies, berries, and leaves, teaching me about nature. My parents worked as a team. When my mother would sit up with me all night, my daddy would get Donna and Mary off to school.

To this day my parents continue to care for my basic needs. My mother Geneva Odell is a three-time cancer survivor. Even through rounds of chemotherapy she cared for me without complaint. About three years ago while removing a turkey from the oven, she received second and third degree burns on both feet. Although she was told to stay off her feet she continued to care for me, enduring enormous pain.

A few years ago my father tore both rotator cuffs in his shoulders, yet he would continue to try and care for me. He currently is scheduled for more shoulder surgery, yet he is still taking caring of me.

My sisters Donna, Mary and I are very closely knit. We are total individuals, yet we our bound together in love and God has brought to them two of the finest men I have known. My sister Donna is married to Larry Lewis and Mary is married to Will Beyer.

Donna has been my confidant. We shared our secrets, dreams and tears. Both girls brought their boyfriends home for my approval or disapproval. For years Mary has come and spent the night caring for me when mother and daddy were exhausted. Both of my sisters had less of Mom and Dad's time because they had to care for me, yet they do not complain.

Let me tell you now about my friends. Friends are like flowers that add a beautiful fragrance to our lives. They are there for you in bad times and good. They accept you as you are. My friends do not see me as the "Woman in the Iron Lung" but just as Dianne. They stop by to visit, to invite me into their lives. They feed me dinner and we talk. Oh how we love to talk! About everything! I can't imagine how people can say they feel bored when there is so much to talk about, to learn and do. My parents have made sure that our home was always welcome to our friends. My mother is a wonderful cook and there have been so many joyous occasions celebrated in our home.

Over the years there were many challenges. Twenty-seven years ago an ice storm hit West Tennessee. This was especially frightening because the generators began to fail. Trees had fallen across the lines and it was expected to be days before power was back on. The men from the Southwest Utility Company arrived quickly. They worked under very hazardous conditions day and night to get power back to the house. Friends, neighbors, and relatives were working through the night clearing trees from the road so the National Guard could bring a diesel generator for our use. I met so many new people who already knew me. They came simply to help when help was needed, asking nothing in return. There have been countless fundraisers for respirators and equipment I needed over the years. I hate to think of the number of chickens and pigs that have sacrificed their lives for me. But in West Tennessee we do love our barbecue. The recent benefit Christmas Gala was like a dream come true.

I remember the movie, "It's a Wonderful Life" with Jimmy Stewart. Clarence the angel writes in the book he gives to George Bailey, "No man is poor who has friends". If that is true than I must be the richest woman alive, and bells are ringing all over West Tennessee for there are many angels among us.

When you have Faith, Family, and Friends, you have more than enough to get you through any rough times in your life. The late John Denver wrote, "Some days are diamonds, some days are stones, sometimes the bad time won't leave you alone. Thank you for this diamond of a day to look upon when the stony days come.

How fortunate I feel to have grown up in Jackson. The people here have been involved in helping others with all sorts of difficulties. The Jacksonian spirit of compassion and giving is known throughout the world.

I would be amiss, if I didn't say a special thank-you to West Tennessee HealthCare. Their ambulance drivers have not only transported me to the hospital, but also to events such as this. I would like to give a special thanks to Frank McMeen and his staff for their coordination of fundraising for my benefit.

Thank you!

Read a related article about Dianne Odell in [The Rotarian](#).