

Anne Erlebach

"You seem a lot happier lately," my doctor said at my last check-up. "You're a lot closer to the edge than most people with post-polio and you really have to watch what you do but you finally seem to have accepted it and you're doing a lot better because of it."

Finally is the operative word here. I first began to suspect I might have post-polio syndrome in 1985 when my husband and I took an exhausting seven-week trip through Germany, running from one train to another, walking great distances and generally having a glorious time. Lee and I were both college teachers, I an English Literature instructor and my husband a Mathematics instructor, in our late 30's with no children and we customarily used our summer vacations to travel but that summer seemed unusually exhausting. The next year, having enjoyed ourselves immensely, we returned to Germany, only this time I had even more trouble. I was always exhausted and my legs hurt constantly.

One day, after our return home, Lee and I began our customary evening walk in the woods behind our house in the Upper Peninsula. I had only been walking for a few minutes when I was overwhelmed with exhaustion and my right leg seemed to become disconnected from the rest of my body. It was as if there were a loose connection somewhere. I shuffled back home and lay down on the couch. Within a few minutes, I was awash in sharp, burning pains which traveled down my legs and in terrible aches which, while less intense, were no less difficult to endure. I didn't sleep well that night.

I was diagnosed with post-polio syndrome. It sounds like an easy process but it was not. I had to endure a number of painful medical tests—not to mention the smugness of the local neurologist who thought it was all in my head—as well as the doubt in my own mind that maybe the neurologist was right. Eventually, however, I was diagnosed by two independent post-polio specialists. Knowing that I'd finally found the answer to what was troubling me was a great relief.

I did everything I could to help myself. I read medical journals. I got exercises from a post-polio specialist. My husband and I became charter members of the fledgling post-polio support group in the area. I went to PPS workshops and talks whenever I could find them. Mostly, I tried to rest.

Like most survivors of polio I was the quintessential workaholic. Although professors in my department have a teaching load of only nine hours a week, it was not unusual for us to work a total of sixty or more hours a week, doing research, preparing classes, meeting with students and doing committee work. That was no longer possible. I struggled with the then-provost (administrative official:-Ed) of my university to allow me to maintain tenure and still work part time but to no avail. (This was before the Americans with Disabilities Act, which would have granted me this option by law.) After a couple of years and a change in provosts, I was able to go to the three-quarter time, the minimum I could work and still maintain my retirement and health insurance benefits. If the university granted benefits for working less, I would eagerly have reduced my work load to half-time.

Like most professors, I believed I was my work. My worth was measured in publications and promotions. It was a blow to recognize that I had gone from one of the most productive people in my department to one who was barely keeping her head above water. There were times when I felt my life was over.

I pared down my work in every way I could. My husband took over the house work (he's previously done half—a remarkable feat for any husband), I paid a retired instructor to do most of my grading and my research ground to a halt. In an effort to conserve my energy, I used first a wheelchair and then an electric scooter to negotiate the long distances in the building at my school. I asked to teach all my classes in the same building as my office and my husband and I sold our two-story house and bought a new one on

one level. One benefit came about when Lee finally agreed to get a dog (pets are good for your health) and I bought a Norfolk Terrier puppy from a breeder in Kalamazoo.

We still traveled but not as extensively as before. In 1988, I drove a German friend of ours out to join Lee for a tour of the Southwest and did quite well. Lee pushed me in my wheelchair to countless viewpoints in countless national parks but my hiking days were definitely behind me.

Winters got harder and harder. We lived in the Upper Peninsula where it is beautiful but cold. I've always been partial to cold weather but no more. I'm much worse in the winter months. Last year, Lee and I spent the summer in Tucson at a National Endowment for the Humanities Institute and the 105 degree temperature felt just about right. Alas, however, I had to come back. I also discovered that since 1988 my ability to travel has eroded tremendously. In 1988, I drove from Salt Lake City to the U.P. in four days. In 1992, I found I was only up to driving 150 miles a day. With two cars, it took us three weeks to drive home from Arizona.

A few years ago, I went to the Kenny Institute in Minneapolis hoping they would help me out. They did but not in the ways I thought they would. Dr. Richard Owen, then the head of the medical program, examined me thoroughly. It turns out I was even worse off than I thought. I had only 16% of the muscle strength of a normal person my age but the weakness was so evenly balanced that I rarely showed obvious disability. I usually don't limp. I don't use braces. Nevertheless, I am severely disabled.

Over the years, I've decided that it's easier to live with a disability if it's an obvious one. My balanced muscle weakness made it easy for me to forget I needed to conserve my energy. The two messages I took away from Kenny were "Conserve to preserve" and "Don't worry about the future. No one knows what the future will bring." I learned to alternate work days rather than spreading my schedule out. For instance, I go in to work Monday, Wednesdays and Friday afternoons. Tuesdays, Thursdays and the weekends are sacred. No meetings. No errands. Nothing but rest. I can do work at home usually in a warm bed with the electric blanket turned on but I don't get up and around. When my legs are cold, It's a sign I'm tired and take a nap right then.

Despite the exercises and the therapy, the conservation and the rest, I'm not getting any better. As my doctor says, "I'm closer to the edge than most people." I don't have any reserves particularly in the winter when I'm working hard just to make it day-to-day. Yet the despair and the depression of the past few years seem to have lifted. For one thing, I'm not so concerned as I once was with the superficial signs of success: promotion, raises, research and publication. I'm more interested in doing what I can do well. I've changed my area of specialization from one with more opportunities for publication to one with more intrinsic satisfaction. I've started a new research project but I'm not planning on finishing it before the end of the century. I'm not concerned when friends come over that the house isn't perfectly straight; I'm just glad to see them. I don't care that the garden isn't weeded; the weeds have some of the prettiest flowers. Next year, I'll take a sabbatical but, instead of driving to the ends of the earth, I'll just stay home and catch up on some of the professional literature I haven't had a chance to get to.

I'm increasingly aware of a satisfaction with life and with myself and I realize that this satisfaction was missing from my life in the days before I had post-polio when I never seemed to be able to achieve enough to satisfy myself. I know my limits now but I also know that, regardless of what the future brings, I will cope. In a sense, while my physical limits have shrunk, my emotional and spiritual limits have expanded. It was not easy to reach this position. It took a number of dark and desperate years. I have concluded that, if I had the opportunity to be cured of post-polio, I would certainly take it but, if I had the opportunity to never have had post-polio, I would turn it down.

Anne passed away in 2010
From her obituary:

HANCOCK - Mrs. Anne F. Erlebach, 62, a professor emerita at MTU and resident of Hancock, died on Wednesday afternoon, April 28, 2010, at the Houghton County Medical Care Facility, where she has resided since 2005.

She was born in Oklahoma City on November 6, 1947, to Julius Falke and Pauline Walton Falke. After attending grammar and high school in Birmingham, Mich., Anne attended both the undergraduate Honors College and graduate school at Michigan State University, from which she received her Ph.D. in English Literature in 1974. Her thesis advisers were John Yunck and the famous Milton scholar, Lawrence Babb.

A great teacher, Anne was a professor of English Literature in MTU's Humanities Department from 1974 until Alzheimer's Disease forced her retirement in 2002. She taught mainly freshman English and a variety of literature courses - especially "Paradise Lost," Arthurian literature, Shakespeare and literature of the ancient world (Hebrews, Greeks and Romans). An authority on European Medieval and Renaissance Literature, she learned nine languages during her lifetime. Her other areas of expertise were WWII German U-boats, professional baseball and Christian theology. An expert quilter and seamstress, Anne made most of her own clothes.

Anne was married to Lee Erlebach, a math professor at MTU, from 1978 'till the present. They chose not to have children.

Anne recovered from childhood polio, but it returned in the mid-1980s in the form of post-polio. She suffered from this until she came down with Alzheimer's Disease beginning in 1998.

She was a member of Phi Beta Kappa and Phi Kappa Phi. She also became an elder of Portage Lake United Church in the early 1990s. She was preceded in death by her parents and is survived by her husband Lee (an MTU professor from Hancock), sister Jan Olsen (Anne's only sibling) and her husband Kevin, of Haslett, Mich., and Jan's three grown children: Jenna, Meg and Ben.

As she wished, Anne has been cremated. A memorial service will be held at 11 a.m. on Monday, May 3, 2010, at Portage Lake United Church in Houghton (across U.S. 41 from the MTU Administration Building) with Revs. Cindy Method and Phil Nancarrow officiating.