



## Living with the 'rock' in my Life

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What is your "rock" that lies in the center of all the many paths that you walk on your journey through life? Is it a child who dies? A marriage that crumbled? A disease that is eating up your body? A memory of being raped? A physical disability? An emotionally or physically abusive parent? For many there is that "certain something" that gnaws away at us, that comes up at inopportune and unexpected times, that subtly affects our lives, and that we wish had never happened. For me – my rock is polio – it crippled my right leg when I was two years old.

Most of us want to get rid of that rock. We do not let ourselves think about it or we deny that it ever happened. We may ignore the way a past event still impacts on us today. When I took off my brace at the age of twelve, I thought polio was over and done with and that I could now live a "normal" life. Ignoring the fatigue, pain and limitations that I continued to experience, I played baseball, tried to water ski, and often worked 70 hours a week.

We may try to get rid of that rock by telling ourselves it is not that important. Minimizing it, we may say, "I am making a mountain out of a molehill . . . others are so much worse off than I . . . what do I have to complain about?" I know I felt that way when I looked around the waiting room at the doctor's office. A tragic thing happens when we minimize our own pain and struggle: our emotional and physical pain actually increase! It is similar to a child wanting attention: when ignored, she puts up a fuss until she gets the attention she wants and deserves.

Two different feelings which can be very destructive – anger or depression – may arise as we try to rid ourselves of the rock. We get angry because, no matter what we do, the rock will not go away. This may lead to real bitterness which will make life miserable for us and for those around us. Depression is really the flip side of that coin: it is

the unexpressed anger we feel because the rock will not go away. A feeling of hopelessness ensues and can lead to a depression that drains us of our energy and takes the enjoyment out of life.

It is not easy to confront the reality of the rock in our lives and to recognize that the rock will not disappear. I will never forget the painful night I looked squarely at my rock and said, "I had polio. I cannot deny it or ignore it anymore. It is never going to go away. I have to learn to live with it."

Acknowledging the presence of the rock in our lives can bring up many questions: Why me? Why did this happen? Is this why I have so much trouble with intimate relationships? What important life decisions have I made because of this reality? Is God mad at me? What did I do wrong? Is this my punishment because (Fill in the blank)? Why is there suffering? If God is a God of love, why did God let this happen? Is not God all powerful? Is there even a God? Why? Why? Those paths around the rock is part of the process of learning to live with the rock. So much of our energy (usually unconscious) has gone into trying to get rid of the rock that, as we walk on new paths, at first they feel very confusing, strange and frightening. When I was 35, I was told that I needed to start wearing a brace again; I was very upset. It was both an emotional and physical adjustment. After six months, I was still experiencing difficulty; my orthotics specialist said that I had physically put the brace on, but I had not emotionally decided to work with it. Once I learned to be a friend to my brace, the pain disappeared.

Looking for new paths around the rock can lead to new energy and new life. So much energy can be telescoped into denying the presence of the rock that we have little energy available for the rest of life. As we learn to walk around the rock, we are pointed in different directions and find our world much bigger and richer than it had been. We have to learn that we do not have to do things the way everyone else does. We do things in ways that work for us.

Therapy was extremely helpful for me as I learned to walk new paths. In therapy, I found a place where I would talk about my pain and not feel I was full of self pity. My therapist acknowledged the reality of my pain and basically said, "Okay,

that is the way it is. What are you going to do about it?”

While anger is destructive when one tries to get rid of the rock, anger can be very constructive as one learns to live with the rock. Life is not fair and as we experience its unfairness, anger churns inside. A woman with cancer needs to get angry because the cancer is cutting her life short. A teenage boy who breaks his neck while skiing needs to be angry at the fact that he will never ski again. Parents need to be angry when their five year old suddenly dies. Many ask, “What food does it do to get angry?” While the fact that the woman has cancer, a boy cannot ski and a child is dead cannot change, people still are angry that those events occurs. Those feelings of anger need to be respected just as much as the realization that certain things cannot be changed. We cannot learn to live with the rock until we have listened to and felt all the feelings that arise as we come to terms with the reality of that rock. My friends in my polio support group know how difficult it is for me to express my anger over polio. One person gave me a nerf bat and ball to hit around my home when anger starts to build up within me. It feels great!

As we learn to live with our rock, the most important paths we will walk are those we will pave for ourselves. Each of us is a unique human being; what is right for one person is not necessarily right for the next. It is important to recognize our own uniqueness and respect the uniqueness of others. I have to wear ugly orthopedic shoes and a brace. When I wear a skirt or dress, it is hard to look down and see my feet. However, I do not want to wear pants all of the time. I have had to forge my own definition of femininity.

In a Greek myth about a king named Sisyphus, Zeus, a powerful god, was angry at Sisyphus because he tried to help Asopus find his daughter. For his punishment, Sisyphus had to try forever to roll a rock uphill which forever rolled back on him. Day after day, Sisyphus pushed the rock up to the mountain peak, but it never rolled down the other side. Sisyphus had no choice but to push the rock daily up the hill only to have it fall back down. We do have a choice. We can be like Sisyphus and expend all our conscious and unconscious energy trying to get rid of the rock, thus having it roll back, hurt us more and leave us frustrated and bitter. Or we can leave

the rock where it is, learn to live with it, be aware of the feelings that arise because of its presence, find all kinds of new paths around it and live much happier, fuller lives.

