
“Would You Open That Door, Please?”

From the beginning, I knew I would heal. I knew I would not be permanently installed in that cursed wheelchair. Walking without pain was something that would come.

It would be a temporary but still frustrating handicap.

I run. A lot. Long distance, cross country, up and down basketball courts, racquetball courts, Charleston forward, back, forward in aerobics classes.

So when my left calf started cramping after running just a few miles, I worried. I've had varicose veins in my left leg since college, but until the cramping, they never hindered my fitness work.

I have an Emily Dickinson line written on my desk calendar, "The greatest vitality cannot exceed decay." Decay was catching up with me. So, with visions of my mortality limping in my head, I went to a surgeon.

"If you want to keep running, the veins will have to be removed. They're just too far gone."

Second opinion?

Same response.

Ken Greenman teaches English at Takoma Academy, Takoma Park, Maryland, and has authored a play about the Great Disappointment of 1844. Now recovered, he is jogging and running marathons again.

In mid-April of 1986 I had in-in-the-morning, out-in-the-afternoon surgery on my swollen, useless veins.

I have never felt such pain.

Just to stand was to cry.

To walk was to die.

So it was a wheelchair, then crutches, then a cane for five weeks. And, believe it or not, it was more of a shock for my mind than it was to my body. It was being nailed down to a wheelchair, leg elevated in bed, hobbling on crutches, with a cane. . .

And with the use of those supports came a glimmer of understanding for those who must use them, always. But only a glimmer.

When I decide to run a road that I have only driven over I am always surprised by how hilly the road becomes (a good car maketh all roads flat). Such was the case when recovering from the operation. Consider a simple set of stairs; just a few steps to a door that opens out at the entrance of your school. You navigate it a few times a day. No problem!

Now put yourself in a wheelchair. The steps become Everest. The door becomes a fortress gate. That entrance is no longer an option for you. Where to go instead?

Down the sloping sidewalk, across a grass patch to the ground-level side entrance. But it's amazing how shallow cracks, pits, and seams in concrete sidewalks become bone-jarring cre-

vasses when your wheelchair rolls over them.

Then you must spend part of your time looking for someone to push you up that sloping sidewalk at day's end.

And what about that someone. All those someones you'll have to rely on, whenever. . .

A cafeteria line, too crowded with people, a corner too narrow to turn, a counter with food placed too far back to reach. . .

Sure, the first week, someone, in fact everyone, will offer to help. It's fun to push the wheelchair up the slope and ride it back down doing elbow dips on the handles. It's great! Twice! Three times! Four. . . But six gets old. Seven. . . well. . .

"Can I carry your tray!?"

"Carry your tray? Sure!"

"Carry your tray? I guess so."

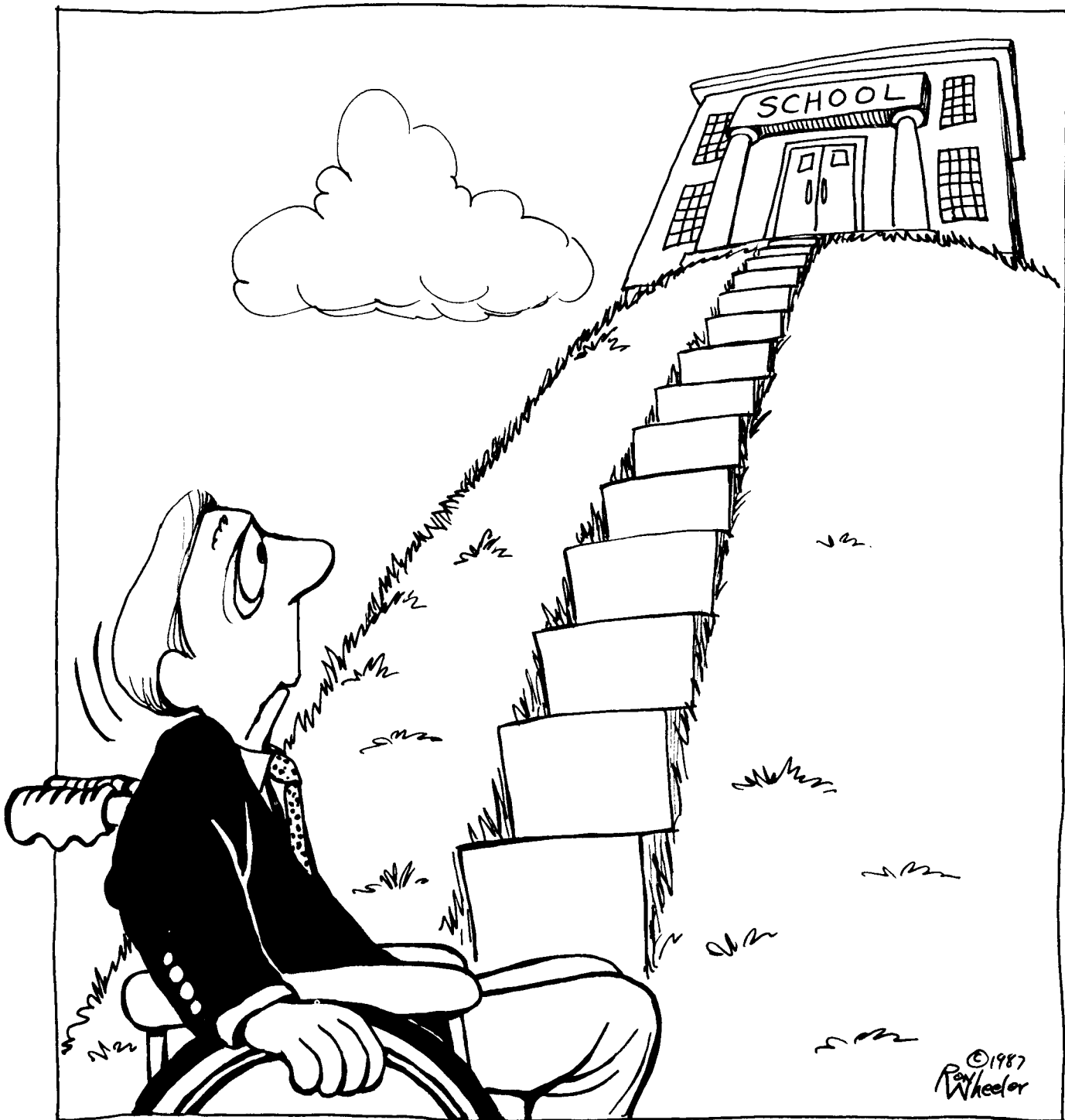
And it's understandable. I mean, everyone has his own load to carry. Is it fair to be always asking for help? Shouldn't we, even under the toughest circumstances, be self-sufficient? It's bad to be weak. Isn't illness, breakdown of your body (mind, soul), really your own fault?

After all, aren't you liable for the consequences of your own sins?

With physical breakdown comes the nagging needle, "What did this man do that he suffers affliction?" It's surprising how easily guilt grows.

And we don't want to impose.

BY KEN GREENMAN



No longer being able to be self-sufficient, self-responsible, upset me as much as anything else.

I mean, just to take a shower. . . make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, hobble among my students for one-on-one instruction, get to the teachers' lounge to use the phone. . . It took so much extra energy just to get through the day that I found myself concentrating on surviving, rather than on accomplishing anything. So much extra planning was required to do the

simplest things. I felt frustrated by my limitations and by the need to ask for help.

Accompanying physical dependency is a necessary self-surrender to other people's altruism. We don't like to rely on others. But we have to. Pride bends hard.

So, for me, my temporary handicap meant more than fighting steps and one-way doors. (Although, certainly, that fight was sufficient unto the day thereof!) It was a tapestry of difficulties

that had to be dealt with one thread at a time.

I think that was the major insight gained during my time of difficulty. How much more intricate are the problems of the handicapped than we realize. How delicate the balance between dependency and self-sufficiency.

And how much we can help by building ramps and push-button doors in our schools and in our minds, so the handicapped may come among us, undeterred. □