

Images of Ourselves: women with disabilities talking, edited by Jo Campling (pages 15 - 35 in the original text)

JULIE

Julie, who is 25 years old, lives with her parents in Hertfordshire. She was badly injured in a car accident when she was 18 and is now tetraplegic, paralysed from the armpits downwards. She is confined to her wheelchair and is incontinent and severely hypothermic. She has studied with the Open University and writes for *Spare Rib*. Last year she and her mother travelled to Africa. She has three boyfriends but says she is short on girlfriends.

If a disabled woman is unable to go out to work she is at a great disadvantage in terms of meeting other people. During weekdays when I see young women leaving for and returning from work, I feel quite apart from the outside world. Whatever activities you take up, whether it is painting or an Open University degree, nobody can convince you that it is the same as being active within a normal work situation. This can make you feel inadequate both physically and mentally, especially if you worked prior to disability. If you have boyfriends, girlfriends or a husband, it is extremely difficult to join in a discussion of their working day. Sometimes I find myself switching off or disappearing into the corner of the room. The outcome can be self-destructive. It helps if you take an interest in your partner's or friend's career. Even if it is just a case of making the appropriate noises! But equally they must take an interest in your daily activities.

Encounters at parties or other social functions vary, but tend to follow certain patterns. One is complete rejection, where even eye contact is impossible, because people are embarrassed or indifferent and you are written off. Another is over-enthusiasm, when you may be treated as a novelty and the fact that you are the only wheelchair guest can draw excess attention, not so much for yourself but your situation. Sometimes you receive too much admiration, often from older, married men, who will then pour out all their troubles. Often, promises are made at the end of what may seem a fruitful evening but will you ever see him again? Even if sincere at the time, parties can be a superficial basis for a relationship.

Personal relationships can be difficult if you live with your parents, in a 'disabled family'. (I define this as a family whose existence revolves around the disabled member. My mother gave up a highly paid career to care for me, thus leaving a greater financial burden on my father. Unfortunately state benefits and services can't bridge this financial gap.) The situation can be frustrating if you are at the age, as I am, when you would be living independently, working and travelling. Parents can be over-protective. They may interrogate your partner more than in normal circumstances because after all you are more vulnerable to maltreatment. You are unable to create your own atmosphere in such a situation - making coffee, or just moving around. In intimate relationships there is also that first moment when the mechanics of your bladder management are revealed. This is the major test. How will he react to a mature woman who wears plastic knickers, pads and requires help when going to the loo? Rejection on this count is painful and inhibiting.

If your relationship passes the bladder test, the next hurdle is arranging a time and a private meeting place. Time is an important factor because a considerable amount of physical preparation is required for intercourse and unexpected visitors or disturbances are impossible to cope with. The disabled person is unable to quickly get up, dress, wash. Even when sexually aroused, the spontaneity can soon disappear when your partner has to help empty your bladder and carefully clean and position you. Over exhaustion, especially if orgasm is achieved, can make the disabled woman feel inadequate. The mind may be willing to try out new positions and experiences, but the body function is that much weaker. I suppose we all have sexual fantasies. Mine relate to spontaneous sexual behaviour -sex in a lift, in any room of the house, and in numerous positions, on the floor, up against the wall, etc. A successful sexual relationship is impossible to define. If you are praised, there is always a feeling of doubt. No one can really convince you of sexual prowess when half your body isn't really normal. You may also worry about your body shape. Most disabilities come equipped with drooping breasts, a thin rib-cage and a lax tum, due to lack of muscle-tone. You may compare your body shape with how it was prior to disability and wonder whether your partner is comparing your body to someone else's. The inability of the disabled person to be purely physical, showing body movement, posture, wearing attractive clothes, can be a great disadvantage within the 'market place' of relationships. Seeing such physical abilities in others can result in jealousy which is hard to admit. To compensate in some way I sometimes find myself putting on a front, pushing my personality and 'sitting pretty' in order to be noticed. This can be exhausting and humiliating.

I think that cultural differences can play a great part in attitudes towards disability. During a trip to Kenya I was pleasantly surprised and relieved by the black Kenyans' attitudes. Many asked frankly and intelligently whether sitting in a wheelchair was caused by illness or an accident. Once the problems were explained, it was a case of 'okay no problem'. They looked upon my disability realistically, no psychological hang-ups. This seems part of a fatalistic philosophy absent in the West, plus natural acceptance of daily hardships. 'Okay, so you wear baby-type knickers but everyone has their problems,' said a black male friend, who found me mentally and physically attractive. Our relationship involved minimal pushing on my part and I felt really relaxed.

'Is your boyfriend a nurse or homosexual?' This question has been put to me (or implied) many times. It always annoys me since it implies a prejudice against homosexuality and also that it is unnatural for a male to take on a caring role. Essentially in a media-orientated society, caring goes against the male macho image and certainly research has shown that disabled men have a greater chance of marrying able-bodied women than the other way round. Perhaps with greater sexual equality and a more flexible attitude towards male and female roles, as husbands, as wives, as breadwinners, as carers, this will no longer be the case. But at the back of my mind there is always the question 'Will any man take on the responsibility for me as a severely disabled woman that my parents have?'

SU

Su, who is 25 years old, was born in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. She has spina bifida, which has resulted in her being paraplegic. She was educated at home until she attended Walbottle Grammar School from the age of 12. Su went on to the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne where she obtained a BA (Hons) in Politics. From there she moved to Manchester University to do postgraduate work and was awarded an MA. She is now working for her doctorate at Newcastle University.

An increasing number of people now subscribe to the notion that being both female *and* disabled is a double handicap. Is this a valid analysis, or are male paraplegics, for example, treated in the same way as women who are paraplegics - and so on? In my experience, I believe that the former is probably true - for instance, people will often rush to help me in putting my wheelchair into my car, yet if I were a man, they would probably be far more reluctant to assist, the male ego being such a fragile blossom! If only people would realise my muscles are almost as well-developed as those of a Russian discus-thrower! This leads one to the conclusion that the age-old cliché of men treating women as beings which should be cosseted and pampered is compounded when that same woman happens to be disabled. I believe that most disabled people have to possess a certain amount of aggression in order to achieve some degree of independence - it would possibly be stretching the point to say that most successful women are aggressive, and therefore a disabled woman must be doubly aggressive. However, it would be true to say that had I been a disabled man, I would still have been determined to attain my independence, but being born a woman may have given that facet of my personality a sharper fighting edge.

The problem of discrimination is just as complex. When I left the University of Manchester after completing my post-graduate studies, I found it very difficult to obtain employment. This could have been due to one of three factors: my lack of experience in most of the jobs for which I applied; my disability; the fact that I am a woman. Or could it have been a combination of all three? I am sure that some discrimination in terms of sex and/or disability did exist - this is underlined by the fact that most application forms ask (a) the sex of the applicant, and (b) whether the applicant is disabled. When being interviewed, my disability was always mentioned - for instance, how mobile was I - would I be able to cope with the work? This is as ridiculous as asking a person with red hair whether they could cope with the work, and whether the colour of their hair would affect their performance - one wouldn't apply for the job if one was unsure about coping. The only interview at which I wasn't asked any of these patronising questions was when I was recently interviewed for a studentship at the University of Newcastle - it could be significant that my application was successful. The panel concerned obviously took into account that I had completed a full-time degree at Newcastle, and then a year's postgraduate work at Manchester, and weren't influenced, as many academics are, by the still-prevalent concept that women don't make serious academics.

In terms of personal relationships, I have never found my disability a problem. True, many people still wonder - in suitably hushed tones - whether it is possible for a disabled

person to enjoy sex. On the other hand, I think that some men are fascinated by the idea of having sex with a disabled woman - perhaps they see it as an interesting variation! But even when not enjoying a fulfilling relationship with a member of the opposite sex, this doesn't worry me unduly - I believe my attitude would be the same if I weren't a paraplegic, since at the moment my career is far too important for me, and any heavy relationships would probably be an unnecessary digression. That's not to say that I am a totally unfeeling person, but I don't think that managing to hook a man is the only way a woman can find fulfilment. This brings me neatly to the matter of marriage and children. My personal feelings are that I wouldn't want to be married and have a family - marriage is now redundant (for me at least). In addition, I don't think I would ever have the urge to rear children, partly for practical reasons - there is a strong possibility that spina bifida is hereditary - partly for the reason that I value my independence - I don't think I could invest as much of myself as is needed in order to bring up children properly. However, I do think that if a disabled woman wants to have children, then nothing should stop her, despite the fact that some people still find this totally unacceptable. Perhaps this is due to the reactionary views of some people based on the elimination of the weaker elements from society - but that is another argument in itself.

I sometimes think that women in general find it easier to accept a disability, since it is still a widely accepted norm that women are dependent on men economically. When a man becomes disabled to such an extent that it prevents him from filling his role as breadwinner, he must find this much harder to accept. But when a woman becomes disabled (I am referring here to people who have once been completely fit and mobile), although she may find it hard to come to terms with the fact that she may not be able to carry out all the tasks she could once perform, the position of woman as dependent on man would seem to lead to a greater degree of acceptance. However, I do not think this is necessarily a good thing if it makes a woman even more dependent both economically and physically on her husband, for example.

Although attitudes towards disabled people are changing - albeit slowly - there is still a long way to go. Many people still do not realise that inside a body sitting in a wheelchair there is usually a lively mind waiting to express itself and show that disabled person to be every bit as independent as the able-bodied majority. For independence is not just a physical thing - it is a state of mind, it is saying, 'I want to do something, and even if it takes me a bit longer and I may have to ask for help if I need it, I'm going to do it.' The crucial thing here is asking for help if it is *needed* - people often assume that I am helpless, even when doing something simple, such as pushing myself along the street. If I need help I will ask, but if I am offered it and I don't need it, I will usually politely refuse. Perhaps disabled men have the same problem, but the fact that it is usually men who offer me assistance makes me wonder if more women offer disabled men assistance!

Finally, a few words on condescension. Occasionally, people 'talk down' to me - again, is this because I am a woman, or because I am disabled, or both? When they find out that I have been to university, they often express admiration and wonderment - 'How marvellous', they say - why is it marvellous? Just because I can't use my legs doesn't mean that I have performed some superhuman feat in managing to attend some lectures

and sitting a few exams - after all, I use my hands to write, and my brains to answer the questions set in exams, not my legs! This problem is something which faces both men and women who happen to be disabled, and who have achieved some measure of success, both in their careers and their personal lives. But until the role of women in society is viewed differently, the role of disabled women cannot be totally transformed. Since women are still seen as the 'weaker sex " it logically follows that the disabled (especially disabled women) will continue to be seen as the weaker and less able members of society. Therefore, I conclude that the total acceptance of disabled people as no different from anyone else in society is necessarily connected with the equality of the sexes in society.

MICHELINE

Micheline was born in 1950 with a congenital disability called osteogenesis imperfecta (brittle bones). She spent most of her first four years in hospital, but gradually her bones lost their fragility and by the age of 10 the periods in hospital had come to an end. Nevertheless during these ten years she had had over forty major fractures. Micheline had home tutors as special schools were not willing to have a child with her disability and the education authorities were not keen to send her as they said she was 'too intelligent'. She passed her 11+ and won a place at the county grammar school, who were also not willing to accept her. At the age of 14 she went to the Florence Treloar Boarding School, the first grammar school for girls with disabilities to open in this country. She left with 6 'O' levels and 2 'A' levels and went to Art College for three years. She realised that commercial art was not going to suit her and eventually went to work for a small charity, first as a volunteer and later as assistant to the director. During this period she left home and went to live in a bedsitter. She resigned from her job in order to preserve her own integrity and started her own association - GLAID. In 1979 she published a book, *Creating Your Own Work*. Micheline studied re-evaluation co-counselling which she now teaches. Using these skills, she initiated and now co- leads the London Support Group for People with Disabilities.

Animals have it easy. I mean, for example, that it is very unlikely that a horse wastes much time wondering if she is really a horse, whilst human beings seem disposed to spending vast amounts of totally unproductive time wondering if they are really human beings at all. Well, some do.

The first time the doubt that I belonged to this particular planet struck me, was a glorious, calm, blue-skied day when I was twelve years old. Lying flat on my back in the garden, staring at the sky, I was thinking about growing up. Until that moment I think I had somehow believed that when I grew up I would become 'normal', i.e. without a disability. 'Normal' then meant to me, 'like my big sister', pretty, rebellious, going out with boys, doing wonderful, naughty things with them, leaving school and getting a job, leaving home, getting married and having children. That momentous day I suddenly realised that my life was not going to be like that at all. I was going to be just the same as I had always been - very small, funnily shaped, unable to walk. It seemed at that moment that the sky

cracked. My vision expanded wildly. My simply black and white world exploded into vivid colours which dazzled and frightened me in a way in which I had never been frightened before. Everything familiar took on an ominous hue. At that point I saw life, especially with regard to other women as a huge competition, and I believed that I was just not equipped to compete. My girlfriend from next door came out and suggested a game as she had done many times before. I remember her look of confusion and hurt when I said I didn't want to play any more.

The next two years seemed like a dark roller-coaster ride, sometimes happy, often plunging into despair. My main preoccupation seemed to be desperately trying to deny the awareness of my difference which had started on that day. I spent hours making my hair seem 'right', playing with make-up, fighting with my parents to wear the clothes that were fashionable, studying the 'pop' charts, talking in what I fondly imagined would be with-it language, looking in the mirror to check on my developing shape, hoping that puberty would alter my body past all recognition. It didn't. It just added a few bulges here and there and gave me period pains. No one seemed to understand or be interested in what I was going through. 'She's trying to be like everyone else', was one comment I remember very clearly. I filled in for myself the silent, 'but she isn't'. Sex was distinctly not talked about. Nor was the issue of my having children which I had started to worry about from that day onwards. I dared not ask anyone for help because I knew they could not give me the help I wanted. People said to me that I would accept, in time, my restricted life. They said that I had many things to be thankful for, such as my talent for drawing which I would no doubt develop so that I could work at home and derive all my satisfaction from Art. I just wanted to be told that I was beautiful and that everything would be all right.

I guess when you go about feeling like a mouldy artichoke, people tend to react to you as though you were one. I was so shy, especially with boys, that very few managed to overcome their reactions to my disability and my self-consciousness enough for any conversation to last more than five minutes, thus affirming my belief that I was unlovable. However, one or two confident souls broke through to me despite all this. I experienced my first real kiss when I was fourteen. I didn't like it much, but I think from that moment on the grey clouds began to part. At some point during those two years, I worked out that the cosy future my family had planned for me would be so boring that I would rather die than make their gloomy prophesies come true. When the chance came for me to go to a boarding school for girls with disabilities, I jumped at it. I saw it as the beginning of my road to freedom.

Our boarding school had rows of adjacent loos. One day, very soon after my arrival at the school. I was sitting in one loo whilst a new friend was sitting in the loo next door. 'Micheline,' she said, 'Do you think you will ever get married?' A flood of relief came over me then. I knew the question was coming from someone who had asked herself the same question many times already. There were other people who had gone through all that doubting too! Nice people! Other young women who had had their self-image as women so severely damaged that they too had wondered if they were entitled to anything life had to offer. My three years with nearly one hundred young women with disabilities

began a slow healing process. We laughed and cried together. We experienced illness and even deaths amongst us. But we felt so strong! There I realised how strong women are, especially when we have to fight to overcome something - in our case our disabilities. There I discovered what sharing meant, and accepting people's differences whether they be of colour, class, religion or experience of disability. I began to accept my differences, my uniqueness, as something to be proud of.

When I left that intense community and went back again to join the 'real ' world, I felt my battle was just beginning. I wanted a relationship with a man to prove to myself, and the world, that I too was lovable. I believed at that time that the able-bodied world was paradise, and I, an outsider, was constantly knocking on the door asking to be allowed in. Being 'let in' meant sex. When the big event happened after a great deal of manoeuvring by me, I was disappointed to discover that music and shooting stars and little pink hearts did not magically appear. Nor did the gates to heaven open. In fact, on that first occasion, the other person involved turned over, lit a cigarette and said, 'I don't really love you, you know', and I realised then that the key to ever- lasting joy was not so simple to find.

I cannot pinpoint when I first began to listen to the experiences of able-bodied women and relate them to my own. It may have been when someone said that she couldn't go out of the house because her skin was too spotty, or when a beautiful black woman told me how all her life she had wanted to be white and blotchy like her friend at school, or it could have been when a friend of mine who had always been my envy for being followed around by drooling men, said that she was so lonely because people only reacted to her stunning body, and never to the person inside it. It may have been when my family began to talk about one of its female members who had put on weight and had, in their eyes, become not only unattractive, but somehow outrageously undutiful in her role as an ornament. It may have been none of this that made the turning point for me, but instead it could have been the way some of the women put their arms round me and called me their beautiful sister, that made me begin to see that we are not so different after all. We are all made to feel that our role is firstly to be beautiful in a highly stereotyped way, secondly to be interesting and amusing company to men, and thirdly, good servants. My experience of finding that I was not necessarily any of those things is the experience of most women sooner or later . I have been lucky enough to discover that I am still a whole and worthwhile person and feel that all those dark years linked me profoundly to other women, particularly those who have not only been oppressed for being women, but also have been oppressed for being 'different' and have laid the foundations of a magnificent joint struggle for liberation.

MERRY

Merry, who was born in Kenya, is 30 years old. When she was born her left hip joint was completely missing and the femur was very short. Her family decided to return to England as it was clear she would need a lot of medical attention. Contrary to the doctors' predictions, she was able to walk given a shoe with long metal struts and a rocker on the bottom. At the age of 11 she had to start to wear a full-length caliper, but by then she was already keen on several sports and managed to continue with tennis and swimming. Until she was 14, she attended a school where the teachers had enough sense to let her do what she enjoyed. Unfortunately her family then moved and at the new school things were different. She was never allowed to forget that she had an impairment and was discouraged in many ways from continuing with sport. On leaving school, Merry first trained as a psychologist and then taught for a couple of years so that she could become an educational psychologist. Whilst teaching she found her impairment to be a positive advantage because she taught in a deprived area and many of the youngsters desperately needed to be needed. Merry says she almost never did her own shopping or cleaning because there was always at least one youngster begging to be able to do it. There were also invariably queues of pupils waiting to carry her bags and books in school. She went on to work as an educational psychologist but had increasing back pain and finally had to stop wearing the caliper after spending months on her back. Her own specialist recommended an amputation but it was the doctor to whom she was sent for a second opinion who worked out that it was the design of the caliper which had caused the curvature in her spine and the resulting back pain which is why she has never used the caliper again. Unfortunately it proved impossible to design a problem-free caliper so she has used crutches ever since. Very recently, however, she has had an operation to give her an artificial hip-joint and this may help her to walk at least round the house on the same sort of shoe that she had as a child. Merry is now completing doctoral research on the effects on people with impairments of their treatment in society.

My growing awareness of myself as a woman who is physically disabled has come about very gradually and in three phases that I can identify. Although the phases didn't really happen separately, it's easier to describe things that way. First of all, women's liberation entered my world. That women should have equal choice and do whatever appealed to them most, seemed obvious to me. I couldn't at the time see the significance of women 'burning their bras' and I was annoyed at what seemed to me to be nit-picking about words. ..all this fuss about '*chairman*' for example. Slowly, though, I understood more and more. I came to see how the system (education, the law, the norms of marriage, medicine and language, etc.) subtly and not so subtly works to ensure that women occupy a certain position in society: a dependent and inferior position. I began to understand the power of the assumption about us and the images of us in papers, films, etc., to shape our lives. And myself? I saw myself as quite liberated at first and then, rapidly, very liberated. I stopped plucking my eyebrows, shaving my legs. ..and wearing bras! I started insisting that mechanics explain to me whatever I could usefully know about my car. I started being very careful about words, aware now of how they influence our behaviour

and thoughts. I fell in love and chose to live with a man who willingly shared housework, and more, encouraged me in my career and my many activities, including those that kept me from him. The list is longer, but would probably be tedious.

The second phase is about my disablement. Although my leg was deformed from birth, I can't say I was disabled, or handicapped until my teens, when I began to find my activities limited by back pain, caused by the caliper which forced a curve on my spine. Anyway, plenty must have sunk in by then about my status in society, because when, as a sixth-former, I ran a club for people who were disabled, I used to rush about efficiently, trying to appear as different as I possibly could from the club members, and as similar as possible to the able-bodied helpers! Many years later, whilst lying on my back trying to recover from the results of wearing the caliper all those years, I began to think about how much of the language used about us (who are disabled) is negative. Youngsters would look at me and ask, 'What's WRONG with that lady's leg?' and parents (if they didn't shut the child up and rush away guiltily) would reply, 'She's got a BAD leg.' Not, anyway, the most instructive answer! People talk of us as invalids - in-valid! Well no one was ever going to call me that again and get away with it! Slowly I realised what had happened to me; how I had been condescended to and treated according to people's stereotypes about what I ought to be like; how my leg had so often been politely ignored. I began to see how much energy had to be spent on preventing people from making me look as normal as possible (i.e. as able-bodied as possible). Even more slowly I began to see how, all my life, I had worked hard at being 'well adjusted' and making sure that that was how others saw me. And it started to become clear what that meant. It meant smiling when I was in pain and reassuring whoever I was with. It meant only discussing my leg if I could find something funny to tell about it. It meant accepting whatever the doctors did to me (psychologically as well as physically) with unquestioning courage. All in all it meant being very untrue to myself. (By the way, if you're prepared to take the risk, you can have wonderful fun acting MAL-adjusted, especially if you're with a friend who's also disabled and who is doing the same. Once my friend and I decided to act out the stereotype about not knowing how to act in public. We were eating a meal with a lot of other people and when we saw that some 'hundreds and thousands' - those little bits of coloured sugar - had been spilt on the table, we took our opportunity. We licked our hands very noticeably, squashed them down on the hundreds and thousands and then licked them off again, laughing and nudging each other. We seemed to laugh away the strain of all those years of trying extra hard to be sure of doing everything right.) Then suddenly the system's role became clear too. I saw that WE are an oppressed group, like people who are black, women and so on; that segregated and sub-standard education, a physical environment that does not take our needs into account, job discrimination, housing discrimination, lack of aids and services and the threat or actuality of institutionalisation keep us dependent and always ready to please. To justify this treatment, people are taught, through the media for example, to view us in certain rigid and negative ways - as stupid, unable to look after ourselves, uninterested in the world and so on, and so on.

This helped me to understand more about my behaviour, by seeing how I'd taken in so many of these oppressive ideas and values. I'd behaved the way I did in the club because I had learnt to look down on other people who were disabled unless they too acted

'normally'. Even more, I was scared of being categorised like them and therefore treated like them, by the able-bodied. I had this strange desire for respect! Somehow, at least a little of my humanness remained intact in relation to others who are disabled because I made firm friends with another woman who was visibly disabled, who helped run the same club. Somehow, deep down, I'm sure we always know what's right. Anyway, now I laugh when I remember how I used to walk faster if I saw another person on crutches, trying to prove I wasn't as feeble as they were! That's the in-group competitiveness that oppression breeds, just like women trying to be more attractive than the others.

That, in a way, brings me on to the third phase, where my understanding of the oppression of women and the oppression of those who are disabled comes together. Well, I kept asking myself, 'What is it about me that permitted me to understand about women's liberation and *act* on it so quickly?' The answer wasn't long in coming. It has been rare in my life that my femininity has been acknowledged by girls or boys, women or men. I went to ordinary schools and my school friends (with a thankful exception of one) did not see me as part of the teenage scene, or as a competitor for boyfriends. When I went out with my first ever, very good-looking boyfriend, school friends were openly amazed that *I* had been able to capture such a creature. I was not seen to be a woman, so I did not really see myself as a woman. Stopping all attempts to look like a pin-up was therefore easy - I had nothing to lose and everything to gain. Increasingly my long-buried feelings of differentness have come up. When I listened to, or read about, other women growing up as women, I felt a numbness which said 'What are they talking about?' and 'Where was I?' It's not that I'm saying I hadn't tried to look 'pretty', for instance, and even thought that I looked pretty sometimes. It's just that the implications of that were different for me. The phrase 'Never mind about your leg, dear, at least you've got a pretty face' rings loud and clear in my head. My prettiness was not about being feminine, for them. It was a let-out; it redeemed me from being just a freak in their eyes and permitted them to normalise me in their minds. It has been rare in my life that I have feared men getting sexual with me, because most men don't see me as a sex object in the same way as they see most women. For THAT I am profoundly grateful! ! ! ... But if only more women had made me feel like a woman. ... Besides all this, I began to see the extra-heavy push to dependency that women who are disabled experience, and the costs (not forgetting the benefits) of fighting against that (psychological, physical *and* financial costs). It's hard to hang on to your good feelings about yourself when you're being accused of being unrealistic, too independent, overcompensating, etc., etc. On the other hand, it's true that the rewards are enormous, and it's good to know that there are others also determined to get things right.

So where am I now? Well I'm in all sorts of exciting and tingly places. For a start I'm doing what I can to change the system that relegated us to dependency. To that end I've joined the Liberation Network of People with Disabilities. We've still got a lot to learn, but we've already got a lot to offer and a lot to teach. Over the last few months I've made lots of close friends with people who are disabled and know a friendship with them quite unlike my friendships with the able-bodied. Some of the other women who've written pieces for this book are people I love dearly and share with so much. We understand a great deal without need for words. We can be human with each other about things that the able-bodied are usually too impatient to wait for or too bound up in only one way of

experiencing things to appreciate. We laugh helplessly together, cry together and are highly committed to each other. We know that when we are fighting to get things right for everyone in our oppressed group, we are fighting for each other, and when we are fighting for each other, we are fighting for everyone. We know we have a whole lot of treasures to offer to the world and are happy to know that we still have a lot to learn. And about myself as a women, particularly? Recently I ventured to tell a woman friend that I felt I wanted to call her my sister (the first time ever) and wept long and loud with her. And she just loved me.

Note: I feel a need to add a little about words. A short while ago, a member of the Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation pointed out to me that the phrase 'people with disabilities' makes our lack of abilities sound like an inevitable result of our physical condition, whereas it is usually the result of society failing to provide us with the necessary aids, etc. Society actually does have both the necessary technology and financial resources to enable us to live independently, if it chose to allocate its resources in this way. To refer to the actual physical condition, the Union speaks of the physically-impaired, and to refer to the results of society's attitudes towards us, they refer to disablement. Thus when they say a person is disabled, they mean disabled by society. Unfortunately lots of my friends react unfavourably to the word 'impaired' and also say that it's not much good using the word disabled to mean something quite different from what everyone else means unless you say so each time. So there is a bit of a search going on for good, perhaps quite new, words.