

3 Discrimination I: Access

(From 'Disabled We Stand' (1981) Sutherland, A. T., London: Souvenir Press).

It is widely assumed that most disabilities impose considerable restrictions, such as lack of mobility, limitations in finding and holding employment, isolation and difficulty in integrating with able bodied people. People with disabilities do have to face all of these restrictions, and others, but such restrictions are not imposed by their disabilities. They are imposed by a society which discriminates against people with disabilities, creating restrictions by denying people the means to exercise their capabilities.

But we get fed the idea that we have to 'overcome' our disabilities, as if a disability is purely a personal misfortune and it's the disability itself that causes problems and has to be coped with - an idea which implicitly rules out the possibility that we are disabled by our oppression. The Douglas Baders of this world, people with disabilities who have performed feats that the able bodied find miraculous, are held up to us as examples to emulate. Such examples appeal greatly to the able bodied, but have little relation to the more mundane question of getting on with living our own lives in the face of widespread discrimination and failure to cater for our needs.

The most obvious area of discrimination, particularly for people with disabilities that affect their mobility, is access. One has only to walk down the street to see the extent of this type of discrimination, so widespread that Micheline Mason comments: 'There isn't much that *doesn't* affect me. Anything with steps, which is nearly everything, swing doors which are too heavy to open, public transport which I can't use. I can't use buses because I can't get on them, because the steps are too high. I can't use the underground because I can't use escalators without falling over, I can't cope with the crowds and I get caught in the train doors. Trains are okay. It's getting to the railway station that's a problem.'

All of these examples, with the possible exception of Micheline's difficulty in getting through crowds without being knocked off her feet, could be avoided by design and construction which took account of people with disabilities. It is perfectly possible to provide ramps as well as stairs, fit doors which open easily, construct underground stations with lifts as well as escalators and build buses with steps low enough for a person on crutches to mount without difficulty and a mechanical platform that will lift a wheelchair. The fact that such provision is extremely uncommon is simply a sign that very little importance is attached to our needs.

And occasional provision of facilities is of little more practical use than no provision at all. No matter how accessible an individual building may be, people who want to use it have to get to it first; if they can't get there, its provisions are useless. As Micheline points out, 'Most of these things are done, but they're just not done consistently. Dropped kerbs make an incredible difference to someone in a chair, but they have to be on every single corner of every single pavement, otherwise they're useless. It's the consistency that isn't there.' This lack of consistency frequently manifests itself in examples of almost unbelievably incompetent planning. The supposedly wheelchair-accessible toilet placed at the bottom of a flight of stairs, to which I referred in the last chapter, was not a hypothetical example. It wasn't even an isolated example; I have been told about several separate such cases.

Because different people have different needs, the type of provision required varies from individual to individual; the handrail that allows a flight of stairs to be used by a person on crutches is of little assistance to someone in a wheelchair. But it's not at all difficult to find examples of multiple discrimination against people with a variety of disabilities, indicating the basic principle that people who aren't capable of foreseeing one person's need for access are not likely to be capable of foreseeing someone else's. (The opposite is unfortunately not true: where one person's needs are provided for, it does not follow that anybody else's will be. Which goes to show that people with disabilities often can't have their cake or eat it.)

A fine example of such multiple access discrimination is provided by public telephones. Telephone kiosks have doors which are both narrow and heavy, impassable to people in wheelchairs and difficult for someone on crutches or anybody who is not very strong or loses their balance easily. Even where the phones are placed in booths rather than kiosks, they are still too high up for a person in a wheelchair to be able to dial with ease. And they are made unnecessarily unusable by deaf people by the lack of the extra earpiece which would allow a hearing person to act as translator or the amplified handset which would allow a partially hearing person to use the telephone by herself.

In a vast number of instances, the difficulties that are caused for people with disabilities could be avoided with little or no expense. Derek McCarthy draws attention to the problems that can be caused for partially sighted people by stairs: 'If they put a little white line or something, I could tell where the edge of the stair is. You can't always tell where the stairs end. Where I work, they've got a dark corner and as I go round it I can't tell where the stair ends. I actually know how many stairs there are now. Some places have a coloured strip going along the floor. And I have to stop and check to see if it's a step or not. Quite often it's not, and the strip is the same colour as the next step, and I go down it. I've knocked

Edwina over while I was pushing her -along, not seeing a kerb or something because of that.'

Derek encounters another, equally easily prevented, difficulty with glass doors. 'I've got a habit of walking into them. That's one reason I now wear plastic lenses in my glasses. That wouldn't happen if there was a border, a metal border, any sort of border around the door. Or even a slight tint in the glass. Anything to differentiate it, show that it actually exists. But they have solid glass doors which you just push, with your hand. There's no handle or anything on them. And I just don't see them. If you had a white line or something, you'd see this line sticking up in the air and think, 'Ah, what's that?' And you'd look twice.'

Micheline Mason makes a similar point in relation to mobility disabilities. 'There are innumerable places where ramps could be built instead of steps, very easily. And in places like cinemas it's very easy to take out a couple of seats so that there's room for people to sit out of the gangway in their chairs, so the excuse of fire regulations isn't valid. It's money that stops people doing that, it's just greed.' Or just simple thoughtlessness, which is still a form of discrimination; if people fail to consider our needs adequately, it is because they do not believe it is important to do so.

It is important to recognise that discrimination against people with disabilities which limit their mobility does not simply exclude those who are the immediate target of the discrimination; it also excludes anyone who happens to be with that person. That creates a further discrimination against anyone whose disability does not affect her mobility. First because, as those of us who do not have mobility disabilities start to overcome the isolation which forms another part of our oppression and build links with people who do, we also become subjected to restrictions which prevent them getting where they want to go. Second because, in any given situation where access is inadequate, many people with disabilities which would not hinder them if they were on their own may still find themselves at a disadvantage in relation to an able bodied person when they are with someone who is directly impeded. As Micheline explains: 'I happen to have friends who are in wheelchairs, and what happens to them is also a hindrance to me if I want to go out with them, because I'm not able to be the able bodied person who'll haul them up steps etcetera. I'm as restricted as they are'.

Similarly, the fact that I live in an eighth floor flat, with a long flight of stairs between me and the lifts, does not stop me from coming and going as I wish, but it does make it difficult for those of my friends who are in wheelchairs to visit me. Because I have weakened shoulders which dislocate easily, for me to try to take a wheelchair down a flight of steps would be hazardous to both me and its occupant. Those friends can only visit me if another person is on hand

to help with the wheelchair. In this way, this aspect of access discrimination has the effect of tending to cut us off from each other. One reason why it has taken us longer than oppressed groups to develop a radical awareness of our situation is simply that it is more difficult for us to make and maintain contact with each other.

But it is not only in the area of physical mobility that access discrimination takes place. People who have any form of hearing impairment have their own access discrimination: lack of access to communication. Maggie Woolley states: 'I use sign language myself, which means that I can mix with deaf people, people who were born deaf, prelingually deaf people. But there's a lot happening outside that deaf world that I like to be involved in, and also I have a hearing family and I want to be involved in their world. The only thing I can do, short of taking an interpreter with me, is to ask people to learn sign language. It takes years and years to learn to sign, but it takes ten minutes to learn to fingerspell. If people fingerspell first letters of words, that gives me beautiful clues to lipreading; it really helps, otherwise lipreading is very tiring, and the strain of concentration hurts my eyes. And that's the way I now manage to integrate, here where I live, with the people who live round me at a local level, it's the way I manage to join groups of hearing people. I'm in a women's group, I'm in a support group of people with disabilities and that's the way I manage to last out a whole afternoon instead of twenty minutes with these people.' This can be a very successful approach, for those who have the confidence to insist that other people take a share of the responsibility for making their mutual communication mutually comprehensible, but it is by no means a complete answer to the denial of access to communication. It can be used only by people who lipread comparatively well, and whose speaking voice is adequate to enable them to explain their needs, and is thus of little use to many prelingually deaf people. And it is only practicable in one-to-one conversation, or with relatively small groups of people who are sympathetic enough to the deaf person's needs to be prepared to spend a little time learning to fingerspell.

But such an approach cannot easily be applied to large meetings, lectures and conferences, and is of no use at all to someone faced with the inaccessibility of television and films. In such situations the deaf person needs an interpreter - either (for people who lipread) a friend who is willing to repeat what is being said, with clear articulation and fingerspelling, or a professional sign language interpreter.

At present, one practically never sees sign language interpreters at events outside the 'deaf world', except where an individual deaf person has made her own arrangements to have an interpreter present. As a result of this failure to provide for their needs, deaf people are denied access to all events in which spoken

language plays a significant part: plays, films, conferences, lectures, concerts, political meetings, church services. Adequate provision of interpreters would not only make all these and many other events accessible to people who already use sign language, but would be of great value to many who have not thought it worth their while to learn to sign - indeed may never even have considered that signing might be of value to them.

At present, the ability to sign is transmitted primarily by personal contact between people who have been deaf since childhood, the members of the 'deaf world'. People who go deaf in adult life tend to have little or no contact with the deaf world, and therefore never come into contact with signing. But if interpreters were regularly provided at events such as I have listed above, such people would not only be able to see strong concrete benefits to be obtained from learning to sign, but also be likely to have already picked up some signs when attending events at which interpreters were present while they still had enough hearing to make attendance worthwhile.

In practice, we manage to overcome much of the access discrimination we are confronted with, if only because if there's one characteristic that people with disabilities can generally be relied upon to have acquired, it's stubbornness. As Derek McCarthy says, 'There's virtually no place which is inaccessible, they're just a damn nuisance. On some days I've taken Edwina up twenty, thirty and on one occasion down a hundred and twenty stairs. It's just a nuisance and on some days you just don't feel like doing it.'

But, as Micheline Mason points out, accessibility is not determined solely by the presence or absence of such physical facilities as ramps, lifts and handrails: 'Almost any place becomes accessible if the people in the place want it to be. Inasmuch as, if they're being helpful about it, there's very little that can't be done, and if they're not (*helpful*) then anything will become a major obstacle. I've been with a friend in a wheelchair to ridiculous places, with rooms up three flights of stairs; and because they've been run by helpful people it hasn't been a problem. And also I've been turned away from much more accessible places because of a different frame of mind, a different attitude. It only seems to me to be that that needs changing. I don't see it being feasible, and necessarily desirable, to take away every obstacle for everybody's total independence.'

Micheline also casts doubt upon the idea of independence that is sometimes linked with demands for improved access. 'I've become suspicious of this idea of 'independence' now. Independence has been very widely held up as a goal to us, and I see it as meaning that we shouldn't be a nuisance to anybody. It can be seen in two completely different ways. There's a good way, which is

being able to use the abilities you have got. But the other way it can be used is a very isolating one: as long as you cause no problems, then you will be accepted within the community.'

'And it plays very much into people's idea of not being a nuisance. Not asking for help, not having to make contact with any other human being. And what you actually see is lots of people living on their own and going half crazy, but struggling to do it because it somehow seems better than being a nuisance. I remember someone I know saying to me that what she couldn't bear about people with disabilities was the way we use our strength to isolate ourselves. And I think we do that largely because we've had this idea of independence thrust down our throats.' Even where attempts are made to provide adequate access and facilities for people with disabilities, these often prove inadequate. This is sometimes the result of a gesture towards provision not being backed up by the will to see that the facility in question is made usable. This had presumably been the case with a cinema whose facilities I inspected recently, which turned out to have installed, at some time in the past, an induction loop system, potentially a valuable asset to users of hearing aids. But although they'd installed a loop, the cinema did not possess the amplifier which would have enabled them to put it into operation. Or the wheelchair-accessible toilet I was told about, installed in a new teaching block of a London medical school, which, since the flushing handle on the cistern broke, shortly after the toilet's completion, has been used as a broom cupboard. Examples such as these are so common that we perhaps tend to take them more for granted than we should. But they are not always easy to detect: the cinema's induction loop, for example, only came to light because two of us were making a detailed check of what facilities it possessed for people with disabilities, with the co-operation of the cinema staff.

In many cases where wheelchair access is provided, an implicit assumption is made that a person in a wheelchair will be accompanied by an able bodied pusher; accessibility does not necessarily extend to wheelchair-users who wish to go out on their own or with friends who are not able to act as pushers. Edwina McCarthy encountered a fairly typical example when visiting Nottingham: 'In Nottingham, in the subways, you have a nice slope. Fantastic! - Till you get to the other side, where there's a step every ten or twelve feet, to level it off so it's not quite so steep a ramp. Say I'm on my own, I'd be buggered, wouldn't I? They must think you need someone looking after you.' It is not easy to tell when such inadequacies are due simply to thoughtlessness and bad planning, and when they are due, as Edwina suggests, to a patronising assumption that we must automatically be dependent on able bodied people. But I am quite certain that, whether made consciously or (which is more

probably the case) unconsciously, this assumption is a common one; when it is made, it tends to act as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Edwina and Derek discovered an example of another kind of unthinking provision of facilities while on holiday in Belgium, as

Derek explains: 'We actually found one toilet that's fantastic. You go in, sit on the loo, and you get your bum wiped. As you sit back on the loo, there's a bar going right across, and it flushes the toilet. And apparently it's not an uncommon thing. They think it's going to be helpful, because you don't have to reach for the bar. So you sit back and - whoosh! We warned a friend of ours, but as she says, when she sits back she's got to have something to lean on. And unfortunately she had no alternative at all.'

Absurdities of this sort are essentially due to lack of consultation with the people for whom such facilities are supposedly being provided. This is an all too common problem. We are the experts on what we need, and are usually exceptionally willing to give advice about what we would find helpful and whether particular facilities would be of value to us. It is so rare for us to be consulted in this way that we would probably give the advice for free, though I see absolutely no reason why it should be taken for granted that we will; one does not, after all, expect a town planner to work without payment simply because she is likely to drive her car along the road whose course she is planning.

We might even suggest solutions to problems which had not occurred to the people who provide the facilities which we have to use, such as the strikingly simple idea put forward by Derek McCarthy: 'Disabled toilets. What they should do is put one lock on, which has one standard key, and issue people who need to use them with a key. Because what you have to do at the moment for quite a lot of them is actually go and find someone who's got a key. If you're on your own, quite often you have to go up a step to get into the place where they've got the key. It solves two problems in one. Everybody says they've got to be locked because of vandalism. But the people in the wheelchairs aren't going to vandalise disabled loos!'

It would be easy to assume that access is an issue of relevance to some people with disabilities, but not to all: that each example of access discrimination oppresses only those individuals whose own needs are not being catered for. After all, I, as an epileptic, am not prevented from entering a building that has stairs and no ramp; a deaf person is not prevented from walking along a street by the fact that the kerbs are too high for a wheelchair; a person in a wheelchair is not prevented from taking part in a political meeting by the fact that there are no sign language interpreters present. But that is not the point.

What oppresses one of us oppresses all of us. I know perfectly well that the attitude that does not care whether a building is accessible is also the attitude that leaves me lying unconscious in the street after a seizure; the deaf person knows that the person who does not see fit to provide dropped kerbs does not see fit to provide sign language interpreters; and if the person in the wheelchair does not protest about the lack of interpreters, it is probably because she is busy pointing out why the meeting should not have been held in a upstairs room.

As our awareness of our situation grows, and as we build contact with one another, so we become increasingly angry not only at our own personal discrimination, but also at the discrimination against each and every one of us. Ours is an anger that is not short of fuel, because we have only to make our way down the street to be confronted, over and over again, with examples of the discrimination against us.

This discrimination is even more clearly visible in cases where people with disabilities are actually banned from entry to places which the able bodied are permitted to enter. A particularly invidious example of this is the fact that blind people wishing to lobby their MPs are not normally allowed to take guide dogs into the Palace of Westminster. The official parliamentary position, as given by Michael Foot in reply to a question on 6 July, 1978, is that 'there is no ban, but each case is considered separately'. Nevertheless, the Serjeant at Arms of the House of Commons, Lieutenant P.F. Thorne, in a letter written on 13 June, 1980 in reply to a question from my own MP, John Tilley, stated that: 'Single dogs have quite often been allowed as far as the Central Lobby on quiet days, but for reasons of safety and hygiene not beyond this point.

'Our experience has shown that the best course is for the blind visitor to be guided from the Entrance by whoever he, or she, has come to meet and, if possible, to bring someone along to look after the dog - though the Police have occasionally been able to help in this respect.'

If one has to trail someone along to look after the dog, there is not a lot of point in having a guide dog in the first place. Lieutenant Thorne is talking nonsense, and he talks even worse nonsense in speaking of 'reasons of safety and hygiene'. Guide dogs are picked for their stability of temperament and put through a rigorous training, and are considered hygienic enough to be allowed into shops that sell food. I find it most unlikely that Members of Parliament have some particular delicacy of constitution that puts them at special risk - unless, of course, as has been cynically suggested to me, it was the safety of the dog that the Lieutenant had in mind.

The way I interpret this situation - and I am entirely sure that most other people with disabilities will take the same view - is that the Mother of Parliaments is simply not prepared to put itself out for a few blind people. In the process, it gives a very clear message as to how much concern the legislature of this country has for our situation.

A ban such as this is a form of artificially created access discrimination. But even where no immediate access problem exists, many places dislike having people with disabilities around, particularly when the disabilities are visible ones, as Derek and Edwina McCarthy have discovered: 'We went to a pub. And the bloke asked would we mind moving into the corner. I said no, I won't. They wanted us to move so we weren't so obvious. It wasn't said, but it was obvious. The implication was there, because at the time we went into the pub, there were about three or four people drinking and that was it. When you're asked would you go into that corner, when it's a virtually empty pub, I don't think you really need any more said.'

The most chilling example of this attitude towards people with disabilities being put into practice that has come to my attention occurred in a case brought before a German court. A woman who had been on a package tour sued the travel firm who had organised her trip, because they had booked her into a hotel at which a number of people with disabilities were also staying - which, she claimed, had spoiled her holiday. What is appalling about this incident is not the neurosis of the litigant - that sort of attitude is common enough, as Edwina and Derek's experience in the pub indicates - but the fact that she won her case.

A further form of discrimination springs from misconceptions about people's abilities and limitations, as was shown when Derek McCarthy took up judo: 'I was told I couldn't do judo, because my eyesight wasn't good enough. So I used to watch all the demonstrations with my glasses on, take them off and carry on doing judo. You don't need to see the opponent! If I didn't do the things I wasn't meant to do, I wouldn't do anything.'

Edwina supported this point: 'You're told what you're not meant to do, but you're not told what you can do. If you did what you were told, you'd probably end up in an institution. If I'd done everything I was told, I think I would have been in a home.' Judo is in fact one sport in which people who are completely blind can compete on even terms'. There was little problem for a determined adult like Derek in handling the relatively trifling piece of ignorance in the example quoted above. It's less easy for a younger person to deal with the more pernicious form of discrimination Merry Cross encountered at the age of fifteen: 'Although I was on a caliper, I was a very good tennis player. I'd learnt I think before I went on to the caliper, at the age of ten or eleven, when I was

slightly more flexible. My father-taught me, and what he did was to teach me to anticipate more than people, so that instead of having to do a sprint I was starting running earlier.

'I qualified to get into the school tennis team every week, by beating people who were already on the team, and every single week I never got my name put down on the list. And what's worse, I never got any explanation. Even worse than that, what it meant to me was that, increasingly, I couldn't practice with the people who were in the team, because they were practicing with each other, which meant I'd no one decent to practice with.

'My parents went to see the headmistress and the games teacher about it, and they said we think if we put her in the team, opposing teams would feel sorry for her, and they wouldn't play their best, and then she'd beat them and they'd be angry about it. Which was real crud. My parents said well I think you ought to tell Merry your reasoning, not just leave her off the list. And the games teacher promised to and never did.

'I was very badly hurt by that, very upset. It meant I got less enjoyment out of tennis, which was something I thoroughly enjoyed.'

¹ See Mike Brace, *Where There's a Will*, p98 (Souvenir Press 1980)