

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

One thing of which all of us are conscious is that we are seen to be different from other people, in ways that go far beyond the actual facts of our disabilities. We are subjected to a whole range of false assumptions and hostile and depersonalising reactions based upon these assumptions. We are held to be visually repulsive; helpless; pathetic; dependent; too independent; plucky, brave and courageous; bitter, with chips on our shoulders; evil (the 'twisted mind in a twisted body'); mentally retarded; endowed with mystical powers; and much else. The fact that many of these characteristics are quite incompatible is an indication of how unreasoning such stereotypes are.

The fact that such attitudes are so illogical often leads to the same person being faced with criticisms which are not merely unjustified in themselves, but incompatible with each other, so that one just can't win. This was Merry Cross's experience when she changed schools at the age of fourteen:

'It is the accusation of over-compensating that instils a fear of doing well in something like sport. That was a thing that got thrown at me again at the same school where I was kept out of the tennis team. I was in a school in London until I was fourteen and it never got thrown at me. I'd been in that same school from the age of five and the staff simply assumed I would do what I could and not do what I couldn't do and encouraged me to do the things I seemed to be enjoying and managing. I think they had private heart attacks when they saw me doing things like walking round the edge of the pond with everybody else. They were very good; they didn't tell me, they just told my parents. Not as a complaint either. They didn't load any of that off on me and I didn't know any of that until I'd left school.

'But at this new school it was horrendous. I was accused of overcompensating with the tennis. I would walk into one classroom and be told I was too independent and walk into the next one and told I was too dependent. Literally. And told I was upsetting the older children by not letting them carry my case for me, which I knew was crap. But nevertheless it upset me, all these accusations.'

Micheline Mason, who, like many people who generally get about on crutches, occasionally has recourse to a wheelchair, draws attention to the marked change in attitudes she encounters when using the chair: 'One stereotype is that you're either in a wheelchair and helpless or on your own two feet and

capable. A total change of attitude happens when you can stand up. There's a lot of stereotyping about the wheelchair; that's become a very unfortunate thing in some ways, although in a way there's a good reason for it, because the person in a wheelchair has more problems with access and things like that.

`Unfortunately the access sign, which actually refers to wheelchair access, and shows a person in a wheelchair, has become synonymous with the word "disabled" and that connection is continually stamped into people's minds.

`If you're in a wheelchair that can mean either that you're deaf, dumb and stupid, or that you're a goddess on wheels. That's just the adulation thing, the hushed adulation. That happens to me quite a lot, I've had just as much of that response as the other. People approach you, when they wouldn't approach anyone else. Quite often in pubs or fairly public places people will come and sit and talk. They're drawn like flies to a honey pot.'

·Merry Cross was made particularly conscious of the stereotypes that are attached to people in wheelchairs when she was temporarily confined to one in place of the caliper she was then using: `When I was in the wheelchair for three weeks, I was appalled. People patted me on the head and called me "dear" and offered to do things for me that were ludicrous. They really did assume that I was mentally retarded. It was very evident to me that, had I been in a wheelchair, I would have experienced much worse discrimination all over the place. I really think most professionals are no better at it than the ordinary person.'

Stereotyped views frequently act as self-fulfilling prophecies, forcing the person with a disability into a role that can then be used to justify the original treatment. This probably happens most to people who are receiving institutional care, which minimises their opportunities to create a different role for themselves. Thus, if a child is assumed to be helpless, and is treated as such, having everything done for her, she will receive little opportunity to learn to be independent, and may well end up helplessly institutionalised. Someone who is assumed to be stupid is unlikely to receive much intellectual stimulation; if she is not in a position to provide it for herself, she may end up conditioned into stupidity. Merry spoke with justifiable anger of someone she knew to whom she could see this happening:

`Here we've got a man who's thirty-four, is paralysed down one side, lacks strength on the other, has extensive brain damage, but whose capacity for verbal reasoning, according to the intelligence test at least, is slightly above average. He has been systematically robbed of his dignity. I have been in the day centre and heard a member of staff call him a naughty little boy, and since I'm there hardly

any of the time it must happen a lot of the time - he calls himself a naughty little boy.

His one area of functioning that is left relatively untampered with by the effect of his stroke is his verbal ability. And this doctor today said to me he would be happy in a home, where he could feed other people and push their wheelchairs. And what she really means is, "It's intolerable for me to think of him making his parents' life a misery, lets. ." And she actually said that to me. And what she means is, "If we can get rid of him into one of these dumps, we don't ever have to think of him again." And the logic of feeding someone and pushing their wheelchairs keeping him happy, when his one area of good functioning left is his ability to think and reason, is appalling.

In fact, I did the intelligence test with him, because it had to be done before he entered this bloody place, this assessment centre, and at the end of it he said, "Oh, I really enjoyed that", which is very rare, "because it was so stimulating". Normally he has nobody to talk to who can give him anything of interest. I think that's outrageous, absolutely outrageous.'

For people with communication disabilities the self-fulfilling prophecy takes the form that other people assume that communication will be impossible and either simply walk away, or start a conversation with a defeatist attitude that dooms the attempt to failure. People who have either a hearing disability or a speech disability need other people to take the trouble to find out what their particular needs are and have the courtesy to take account of those needs. Someone who has already made up her mind that communication will be impossible is not likely to have the patience to do either. And so, for example, deaf people find themselves being shouted at, which, apart from being utterly irrelevant if they're profoundly deaf, makes lipreading impossible.

Edwina McCarthy experiences the same thing: 'Because I've got a speech defect, people tend to shout. And when people hear me talk when they haven't been introduced or are coming to meet me, I think when they hear me it's like a foreign language to them.

They think, "Oh God, I won't be able to understand her". And they come to meet me with this preset idea, so of course they've got a barrier straight away. But if they come and they listen, I've been assured by people that it works. They have to listen very carefully at first, but after a while it's like a second language to them.'

What's going on in examples such as this is that the able bodied person is exaggerating the extent of the other person's disability, which is one of the commonest forms of stereotyping of all. People with hearing impairments get assumed to be stone deaf; blind people find themselves getting mauled about by

people who take it for granted that they are incapable of making their own way along the street; people who admit to being epileptic are assumed to be subject to grand mal fits rather than any of the many other forms which epilepsy can take. And mixed up with these is a further attitude which consists of an inability to recognise that we know our own disabilities and are perfectly capable of giving the relevant information if we are asked for it.

It is difficult to know how to treat this. Is it a stereotype of stupidity, of helpless dependency or what? But certainly we find over and over again that people avoid consulting us about what our needs are. This does not apply simply to situations where people come unwillingly into contact with us, as for example when a deaf person attends a meeting and finds the other people there failing to make concessions to the fact that she has to lipread; one of the most infuriating versions of this unwillingness to consult us occurs when we are given assistance that is unwanted, unneeded or downright unhelpful. Blind people get dragged across streets they had no intention of crossing. People on crutches get grabbed by the arms, which actually makes walking less rather than more easy, because it upsets their balance. Or, in one example I was told about, a woman had just climbed, on crutches, one of the longest staircases in the New York subway system and was standing at the top, getting her breath back, when some well meaning cavalier materialised out of the crowd, grabbed her up and carried her down to the bottom again. Had he bothered to ask if she needed assistance no problem would have arisen. What is worse than the inconvenience caused by incidents such as this is the degradation of being continually robbed of control over our own affairs in this way.

Related to this -is the fact that people in wheelchairs repeatedly find that, when they have somebody pushing their chair, questions are addressed to their pusher rather than to them - an experience which suggested the title of the radio programme 'Does He Take Sugar?' Edwina McCarthy finds that this happens so frequently that it comes as something of a surprise when her presence is actually recognised: 'At the greengrocer's the first time we went in they asked me what I wanted. I was a bit taken aback.' (And Derek adds wryly, 'Quote. I got told to shut up, they were speaking to the young lady.') 'But in our local supermarket, some of the cashiers would ask Derek. And that's degrading.'

Perhaps it would be more accurate to regard such treatment not as any particular stereotype, but as the result of stereotyping in general. Because the feature that all stereotypes of disability have in common is that they depersonalise us. We are reduced to a series of two-dimensional characters, like cardboard cutouts from some Victorian peepshow: the plucky heroine, gamely struggling against a cruel destiny; the bitter, twisted villain; the superhuman hero; the blind sage; the tragic victim of fate; a chorus line of assorted grotesques; and a couple of deaf old men

for light relief. And the more people see us in terms of depersonalising stereotypes, the less they see us as individuals, until eventually they quite automatically fail to see a person behind the disability at all.

This depersonalisation is something for both people with disabilities and the able bodied to start getting very seriously worried about. Because as soon as one starts to consider any group of people as less than fully human, one accepts, whether consciously or not, that there may be grounds for treating them as less than fully human. If anyone so much as accepts the idea that it *is possible* for any group of people to be less human than any other, that acceptance cannot but have a brutalising effect upon the society in which it takes place; the most obvious current example of such brutalisation is probably the infamy of apartheid.

Because, for obvious reasons, we don't view ourselves in a depersonalising way, it may sometimes not be immediately apparent to us that other people are doing so. Thus it took Merry Cross a little while to realise the implications of other people's jokes about her leg: 'The first time somebody said to me, "What have you been doing - playing football?" I thought it was funny. But by the nine hundredth time I was so bored and annoyed and it's like each of these wits appears convinced that they're the first person who's ever said it, and really feel quite affronted when you don't fall to pieces laughing. I suppose what's objectionable about that is that they are actually not responding to you as an individual at all, they're responding to you as someone who comes into the category of you being able to say to them, "What have you been doing - playing football?" And then it got even worse when I met a man who actually lost his leg playing football. That just finally made the whole thing lose its humour altogether.' Micheline Mason suggests that the depersonalising treatment of people with disabilities springs from a more generalised fear: 'There is a very basic thing which happens, which is that there is a dividing line between people who have a disability or handicap and the 'disabled' person. And in people's minds, there's a line you cross over. When you cross over from a person with a disability to a disabled person you somehow are not quite normal, you're not quite a human being, there is something different about you which you have in common with other disabled people. And you stop being seen as individual. I think that is still definitely there, and I find it dangerous. The rest is laughable; the individual reactions are very quickly overcome when people meet you. But that underlying attitude is quite insidious and dangerous. It underlies quite a lot of the way society's organised.

'It's the idea that the disabled are a race apart, that there's a sudden division. And I think it's to do with the fear people have of difference, which can appear in many different forms. But it's very clear that the dividing line comes with the visibility of the disability. The wheelchair is often the point where it happens; you sit down and you suddenly become one of them.

`The fear of difference people have is what connects us to other people who are oppressed. You begin to see that what is given as the reason for the oppression is actually an excuse for the oppression, which is much more to with people's fear of differences.

`It seems to me very much a matter of divide and rule. The norm is always the ruler, the person in the ruling position. The model "okay" person is always young and white and handsome and fit and male and caucasian and happens to fit in with the ruling class. They've got the power and so everybody else is judged in relation to those characteristics.

It is instructive, in relation to the latter argument, to look at the case of Richard III, known to generations of schoolchildren as the evil hunchback who murdered his young nephews, the `princes in the Tower'. Many scholars now consider Richard to have been an unusually benevolent monarch by fifteenth century standards; certainly he was not remotely as nasty a bit of work as Henry Tudor, who usurped his throne. The story of the murder of the princes is a clear fabrication; it makes its first appearance in the writings of Sir Thomas More, a Tudor propagandist who was an infant at the time the event is supposed to have taken place, and is not an event that Henry, naturally anxious to blacken his predecessor's name, would have neglected to make use of if there had been any indication of it whatsoever. But the important point here is that it now seems that Richard was not a "hunchback". It strikes me as most illuminating that Tudor propagandists, faced with the problem of discrediting a creditable king in order to justify Henry VII's seizure of power, should have concocted a rumour that he was disabled. The notion of the bitter hunchback, with a mind as twisted as his body, has lent credence to the myth of Richard's murder of his nephews for four hundred years: (It has also, incidentally, distracted attention from the fact that the person to whom the young princes, as surviving heirs of the House of York, did represent a real threat was Henry Tudor.)<sup>1</sup>

Merry Cross points out how the stereotype of stupidity can interact with class prejudice: `There's a whole thing that if you've got an apparent physical impairment, people assume you're stupid. And I'm sure once they find out you've got one they assume you're stupid as well, even if it's not apparent. And then, if you're working class and you're dealing with middle class people, there's an extra thing that they assume working class people are stupid too. And so I'm pretty sure that if you're working class and you've got a physical impairment you're going to

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<sup>1</sup> A very readable summary of the arguments in Richard's favour, set within a fictional narrative, is to be found in Josephine Tey's *The Daughter of Time* (Penguin)

experience discrimination much much more, because people are just going to assume you're thick.'

Certain stereotypes, such as the idea that we are all innately dependent on the able bodied or that we all have a desperate longing to be 'normal', are applied generally, to all people with disabilities. Others are more specific; each disability has its own set of stereotypes that are regularly attached to it. Thus, the remnant of the biblical and mediaeval idea of possession by demons, that causes people with epilepsy to be treated as mad, is not particularly applicable to blind people. But epileptics are not, at least in modern Western society, assumed to be gifted with mystical visionary powers, which is a stereotype that is relatively specific to blindness.

These stereotypes may seem preposterous when presented in their crudest form. (Which is not to say that they no longer occur in such forms; remember Chris Pearson's experience, quoted in Chapter 4: 'He told me to clear off. He told me I was a nutcase . . .') But they can turn up in very sophisticated guises. Maggie Woolley describes an incident where she encountered a refined version of the idea that deaf people are stupid:

'An example of how subtle this connection between deafness and daftness can be is that I went for an interview at a teacher training college where the woman who interviewed me certainly knew a lot about deaf people. She'd been a teacher of the deaf for a long, long time before she started working in the college. And she was very understanding and sincere, I really liked her a lot. But at one point she said, "Have you got people you can go to help you when you find some of the language a bit difficult in the course?" I asked her to explain what she meant. She said, "Well, I'm thinking of some of the terms we use in audiometry, they might be a bit difficult for you to understand. Have you got people you can go to who will be able to explain them to you?" I knew for certain she would not be asking that question of the rest of her students, but she has this assumption that we are not bright enough, that everything has to be simplified for us, language-wise.'

Micheline Mason has pointed out to me that stereotypes are not always superficially negative. It's easy to see that the assumption that a person with a particular disability is mentally subnormal, or mad, or incapable of running their own life, is a harmful one; it is rather less obvious that a statement such as 'Children with that disability are often very intelligent' is also damaging. But it is, because by summing up a person's whole character in terms of their disability it robs them of their individuality; this particular example has the subtly demoralising effect of leaving the person to whom it is applied without a yardstick for their achievements.

Micheline also suggests that it may sometimes be difficult to know how to react to stereotyping, because it does not necessarily occur in a pure form, and may be mixed up with responses of quite a different nature: 'I see two quite separate things going on with people simultaneously. It's as if half the person reacts with a stereotyping response and the other half reacts in a very gut level human way, which can be almost the opposite. An example of that is people who have tried to help me in some way, they've felt the need to do something for me, and at the same time have leant on me emotionally like a ton of bricks. When you see that sort of thing, the stereotype of, "Ah, there's somebody who needs me", and at the same time the recognition of my strength, which is recognised on a completely different level. I think that happens to a lot of us, and it's a very confusing position to be in.'

The example that Micheline quotes here is a very common one. The need to feel needed, to have someone dependent on one, is a particular type of emotional weakness that is very widespread, for which we, as people who are popularly supposed to be *constantly* in need of help, make natural targets. Large charitable organisations, of the sort which purport to represent our needs but make little or no attempt to give us any say in how they are represented (or, indeed, to let us define what our needs are), are full of people who are guided by motives such as these.

More generally, this is true of all stereotyping: it attempts to make us into things that we are not, in response to the fears and emotional needs of the able bodied. But what makes things tediously complicated for us is the fact that different people have different needs, and try to push us into different moulds. So we get pressurised towards a psychological quick-change routine, being first the helpless cripple for the person who needs to feel needed, then the plucky independent spirit for the person who wants to be reassured that we won't burden them with responsibility, then the unhappy victim of fate for the person who needs to feel that someone else is worse off than they are, and so on.

Merry Cross describes how this works in practice: 'I think that now it's a consciousness of being seen to be different at a whole other level than just physically. I've become increasingly aware of people wanting me to be whatever is their particular group of stereotypes about people with physical impairments. People like my bank manager, who says things like, "Oh, you people are always so happy", so I instantly experience this feeling of, "Oh, I've got to come in here smiling all the time".

'People used to say to me things like, "Never mind about your leg, dear. At least you've got a pretty face." And I used to take that as a compliment about my face. And then gradually I became aware that what they were saying to me was, "I

don't want to have to acknowledge your leg, I don't want to have to look at it, I'm really relieved you've got a nice face I can look at instead". The terrible implication of that being that if I was ugly, they just wouldn't want to know at all. And I think in a mild way that does affect me a bit. I don't know whether I'm more scared than any woman is of my face getting ugly in some way. But it's something I'm aware of that I would face, this terrible rejection. And of course there are people who aren't attractive by society's standards, people who've got some physical impairment as well, and it horrifies me to think what they must go through.'

Or to put it another way, 'At least you've got a pretty face' could be paraphrased as, 'At least your face is pretty, even if the rest of you isn't'. The nonsensical idea that people with visible physical disabilities are innately ugly is very widespread, and springs from a narrow and competitive concept of what constitutes physical attractiveness, a concept which is oppressive to able bodied people as well as people with disabilities, as Micheline Mason points out:

'The ugly stereotype. That's also one that spills over a lot into attitudes which affect men and women anyway, about physical attractiveness and things like that. I'm personally convinced that if you feel attractive you are and if you don't you're not. It has very little to do with what you look like. But it has a strong influence on ideas about disability, because the stereotyping is that stupid. If you look like a magazine cover you're beautiful, and if you don't you're not. And the same with men: if they're big and handsome and strong and all the rest of it then they're okay, if they're not they're not.

'That sort of image of yourself is impossible; you know you're not that and you're never going to be that. But you get-so damaged that the emotional reaction to it - going round feeling hideous - then produces a reaction in other people which continually seems to verify your feelings.' Micheline also comments that, 'Nobody wins, because even the people labelled beautiful find that it brings with it its own isolation, its own distresses.'

A stereotype that we particularly resent is the one that says how brave we are. We find ourselves continually being put into the same position as the child who squirms with embarrassment as a fond parent boasts about achievements that she takes no particular interest in herself. We are not remotely as obsessed with our disabilities as many able bodied people obviously assume; we have our own lives to lead and we get on with leading them. So when we suddenly find ourselves being praised to the skies for some perfectly ordinary act that we've done without thinking about it, it comes as a sharp reminder that we are not being seen as people. We also resent this stereotype because we feel we are expected to live up to it; it is something of a strain being perpetually required to show superhuman

qualities. If we are foolish enough to try to live out this role, we are forced to deny some of our needs - to walk when it would be much easier to use a wheelchair, to risk getting run over rather than ask to be guided across a busy road, and above all never, never to complain.

The bravery stereotype is obviously an attractive one; we encounter it with monotonous frequency in our everyday lives and in the media. But it supports our oppression very strongly, by making disability a purely individual responsibility. We are praised for being brave, but not for being angry; when we are told how plucky and courageous we are, we are in effect being patted on the head for being good children and not making a nuisance of ourselves. So long as we react to disability by gamely carrying on, we treat it simply as a personal problem for each of us, and thus fail to confront our oppression. Which is, of course, very convenient for those who are responsible for that oppression.

This, it seems to me, is a major reason for the attractiveness of this stereotype. It can be very reassuring to the able bodied to be able to feel that we are capable of overcoming what they see as our problems; that way, they don't have to feel any responsibility towards us. (They are not, however, so happy if we show signs of being capable of overcoming what we see as our problems.)

A further factor in the stereotype's persistence lies in the fact that we are living in a society where both disability and pain are things of which most people have little direct experience. They hold the terror of the unknown, and are thus assumed to be far more difficult to live with than is actually the case. But human beings actually have a remarkable capacity for adapting to almost any degree of disability. It is easy to see how this can look like bravery when viewed from the outside; seen subjectively, it is much more mundane. Being disabled offers little scope as a fulltime occupation, and we get on with leading our lives for precisely the same reason as anybody else: we'd be driven mad with boredom if we didn't. By denying the essential ordinariness of this process, the bravery stereotype reinforces the idea that we are a group apart from the rest of society, and attributes to our disabilities an importance that they do not have in our lives. At its worst, the operation of this stereotype can take on some very unpleasant forms. As I write, the daily papers confront me with a particularly obnoxious example. They tell me that ten children have just been presented by the British Prime Minister with 'Children of Courage' awards for outstanding bravery. Perhaps this had some value in the case of the eight-year-old girl who helped her father fight off a burglar armed with a knife; but several of the awards were presented to children with disabilities. In one case, a nine year-old boy with spina bifida received an award because he had written a letter of encouragement to a

policeman who had been badly injured when a bomb he was handling exploded.<sup>2</sup> The presentation was a useful piece of public relations for the police force and the Prime Minister, but I fail to see how the making of the award can have done anything but harm to the child. A piece of mild hero-worship such as this is a perfectly ordinary action, of a sort performed by any number of children; that this boy should have it seized upon and presented as an 'act of outstanding bravery' is quite disgraceful. If a child cannot perform even such an innocent and straightforward action as this one without being forcibly reminded of his disability, he is bound to acquire the feeling that he is set apart from 'normal' people.

The other side of the bravery stereotype is that it can be turned against us if we refuse to play that role. We then get accused of refusing to face up to our disabilities, even though we may be choosing a very rational course of action, as Micheline Mason points out: 'I've known a few people who, as adults, have, for example, refused to walk even though they could, because it's just not worth the effort. And people have often got angry with them, often. They've been labelled lazy and all sorts of things. You're definitely considered odd if you choose to be in a wheelchair, in the same way as you're considered odd if you don't struggle to do something that you can actually do even though it takes you six hours.'

We can, therefore, refuse to accept the stereotypes which are thrust at us, and we are doing so with increasing confidence in ourselves. Happily we are, as Micheline suggests, succeeding in changing some of the attitudes towards us: 'I don't feel the stereotypes are as clear as they used to be. I think they're getting woolly now, because there are more of us around not being what we're expected to be. So I think it's not what it used to be in that way. I don't very often get what I did get a lot fifteen years ago - people talking over my head, talking to the person pushing me, talking as though I'm silly and all that stuff. That very rarely happens now, and it's much more of a surprise when it does happen. And I think a lot of the very rigid stereotypes are fading away.'

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<sup>2</sup> Daily Express 18/12/80