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in from the cold

A LIBERATION MAGAZINE FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

first issue - june 1981

EDITORIAL

Welcome to the first edition of 'In From the Cold'. We chose this title after much soul searching because it best conveyed the feelings many of us had when we first came together as a group.
The feeling most of us seemed to share was relief at no longer being isolated; we had been 'out there', each fighting the whole world on our own, and were suddenly 'inside' a group of people with similar ideas. The 'battle' became an exciting and enjoyable challenge. Also, one of the hallmarks of the oppression of people with disabilities is being excluded from 'Life', so 'In From the Cold' seems like a good direction forward for us.
This magazine is, as far as we know, the first 'liberation' magazine for people with disabilities to be produced in the U.K. We are not a charity and therefore we are all free to say what we want without having to pretend to be non-political. The magazine is funded by donations, subscriptions, sales and loans from members of the Liberation Network.
We will be delighted to receive articles, letters, news items and illustrations for publication, although the editors reserve the right to decide what is published. We would especially welcome news of achievements people have made in combatting their oppression, to remind each other of how powerful we can be. If you don't want us to publish your name, we won't. (This may apply especially to those of you who live in institutions, and are therefore more vulnerable to the 'displeasure' of the able-bodied people upon whom you have to depend).
The editorial group at present consists of five members of the Liberation Network of People with Disabilities: Mary Woodhouse, Fiona Campbell, Allan Sutherland, Merry Cross and Micheline Mason. We hope that readers will get to know us through our contributions to this and succeeding magazines, as we hope to get to know you through your contributions.

CONTENTS

Letters	p. 3
Articles:	
Social Barriers and Disability	p. 5
Divisiveness	p. 6
Words and Actions	p.10
Speaking Out	p.14
Animal Rights	p.16
Reviews	p. 8
Far Friends (News from abroad)	p.12
New Groups	p.14
Little laughs:	
True Grit	p.13
A Memorable Memo	p.18
Cartoon	p.15
Information	p.15
Success Stories	p.17
Draft Liberation Policy	p.19

letters

Dear IFTC,

I heard about the Liberation Network from a member who sent a tape to me after reading an article in 'National Student' about disabled students, in which I featured. To tell you briefly about myself, I am 24, I am a registered blind person and have been for the last eight years. I am an artist by profession (textile sculptures) and am studying for a master's degree.

As for the draft liberation policy statement itself, I feel that there isn't much I can add, except that if one wishes to pursue the labelling idea, one should refer to persons with a visual disability or with an audio disability, or whatever the correct term for hearing difficulties might be. I do not like being referred to as a blind person, a visually handicapped person or even a visually disabled person. I am sure persons with hearing difficulties would not wish to be referred to as deaf people, but as something on the lines I have suggested.

I have been making investigations as to the availability of the United Nations' Declaration of Rights of the Disabled Person and have discovered that it does not seem to be available in braille or on tape, at least not to the knowledge of the RNIB. I would welcome suggestions as to how to rectify this. I have already requested it to be brailled or read onto tape, and the matter is being investigated.

But if we are going to pursue such matters our own camp must be set in order. The RNIB do supply two forms of duplicating in braille; one is a free service which will do up to about ten printed pages, which takes about two weeks. The other can do books and many more copies but is more expensive, 4p per braille page, roughly half to two-thirds of an A4 page.

I am most keen to participate as fully as I can in the activities of the Liberation Network. I look forward to hearing from you and being able to come to some meetings. I feel a great need to get moving...

Kirsten Hearn

Dear IFTC,

My name is Sue Whitbread. I am disabled, and very interested in your organisation which I learned about on 'HELP' on Thames Television. I am so glad that at last someone has brought to light that we are not stupid and how we have to put up with an able-bodied person's attitude towards us, though mostly I feel sorry towards these people, as I think they are a little frightened of us.

I suffer from nerve deafness and can only hear certain things, and others not at all. I am very active but I have to sleep on a ventilator (respirator) and I have a tracheotomy tube in my throat, which I've had since I was ten. I am now 26. I go Disco Dancing with a friend who is a nurse and some of the looks I get in the night clubs just because I've got a tube in my throat are so unbelievable that I have to laugh.

I love writing letters, and wonder if any of your members would like to become my pen-friend. I would be delighted to hear from any of you.

I hope that your organisation is doing well, and I wish you luck. I hope to hear from you soon.

Sue Whitbread

Dear IFTC,

I have just finished watching 'HELP' on TV about your group called Liberation Network. About six months ago I started work after being unemployed for two years. I am now a florist and because I am deaf had a great deal of difficulty finding a job. In the end I was prepared to accept anything - I went after cleaning jobs, typing/tea lady jobs etc, and was mostly turned down because I was not able to answer the telephone, even though I had previously been a typist for six years. I wanted to try a different field of work, but in the end I was getting quite depressed about my failures and very nearly made myself ill with disappointments.

I tried to get advice via social work for the deaf, eg Hackney and Breakthrough, as those were the only two organisations I knew of, but they couldn't help. What I would really like to have had was a chance to meet others who have had the same problems finding jobs and to discuss the disappointments etc.

Geraldine O'Halloran

Dear IFTC,

I was very pleased to see a whole page in Spare Rib about people with disabilities and the problems faced by us. For some time I have been trying to find a niche in which to fit. I am told by my doctor and other well-meaning bodies that I should be grateful for small mercies and 'sit down and be quiet'. I have written to people like DIG and though I would never knock them I was a bit put out to be referred to as a 'case'...So I feel a bit reserved about writing it down again. I am most of the time so very ANGRY. My anger chases the pain round and round in ever decreasing circles and at the end I come out of it totally exhausted.

I am 36 and have temporal lobe epilepsy, asthma and osteoarthritis. My sense of humour has remained in reasonably good order, but the lack of understanding and the way I am treated even in 'radical' organisations freaks me out.

A recent example is that I was to do a sponsored walk for the Legalise Cannabis Campaign along the Grand Union Canal towpath. It was a big event and they had borrowed a boat for a mobile first aid station and snack bar. I asked to take a friend who also happens to be in a wheelchair. There was a blanket 'no' from one of the men crewing the boat as we would have had to load the wheelchair onto the boat at times to manoeuvre the difficult bits. I got angry and tried to explain, and they just put me down as another emotional woman.

I need to channel this anger into energy. I find it impossible to live on my invalidity benefit; I live from week to week and have dreadful housing problems that I am sorting out slowly. I have explored the benefits maze and reckon I know it as well as anyone. I can't get a job; the competition for work is too fierce. I have lots of spare time and energy. In the summer I do voluntary work at pop festivals. I can get about and sometimes have to use a stick.

What else can I say? I am a feminist, I think, committed to having a better society and wishing to change injustice for all.

Vicki Stangroome

Dear IFTC,

I have had a copy of your Draft Policy for Liberation of People with Disabilities for some time, and have truly intended joining and to enclose a letter describing myself, my views and my feeling toward society in general and the way in which it treats disabled people, despite liberation.

I am a physically disabled person myself, from birth, and am in the midst of what's developing into a very long and tiring fight to regain my place in a society which I feel has shown to me anything but dignity or social justice. I'm going to find it difficult to write this letter without going into detail in some aspects; so please excuse me if I ramble a little. In short, I think society is committing an unforgiveable crime in the way it expects handicapped people, especially the severel handicapped, to be totally satisfied with the services that residential institutions and day/work centres provide. Institutional life is so far from the 'norm' that one rapidly begins to feel suppressed by it, and engulfed into what can be described as nothing less than 'a daily process' or compared with a fly trying to escape from a spider's web. It slowly destroys one's social acceptability and ways in which you try to kick back are very energy-burn-ing and have little effect.

I have known what it is to live a full satisfying day out of 'the system' in an environment of ordinary, everyday things; and I long to be able to reclaim that position. I have written to many organisation to do with disabled people seeking help to 'live' instead of being suppressed into a system in which it seems I'm expected to b totally content just to exist!

One of my biggest interests towards other disabled people is the field of independent mobility, on which I have done a lot o research, and have had years of first-hand experience, and so take every opportunity to teach others. My experience stretches from being able to get around my home to transporting myself half way round the world and back again!

I am no saint or example, just a guy who some say is more normal than most, and who wants to live in my own right, and not just exist,

Michael-John Wilkinson

SOCIAL BARRIERS AND DISABILITY

The barriers of disability can be many and on either side of a potential relationship. The disabled person may be unable to relate normally because of a physical difficulty in communication, because they have never learned how to relate, or quite likely, for both reasons together. The 'normal' person may have no experience of disability and may even be terrified and revolted by unavoidable contact. They may have rigid expectations of subnormal behaviour and refuse to allow any normal ability. Very few will have the time, imagination and openness to reach across the divide and find ways to relate.

The 'normal' person can turn away from the problem and get on with relating to their peers. The disabled person may spend their life locked in this problem, vainly seeking the key. Can it be called 'life' without fulfilling relationships?

Ideally the problem would never arise because the disabled would be thoroughly integrated with the rest of society, taking part at every level, even the most intimate. But there are practical difficulties and meanwhile, what can be done?

We can start, of course, with our own fears. Go where disabled people go; mix with them; talk as best you can; touch those who cannot move; let the blind touch you; explore their small world of pastimes and ingrown relationships. For the most part they will seem happy enough. We have no right to say that they should be living in the difficult, more fulfilling, world outside.

But go a little further and you will find those who are only there because there is nowhere else to go or who have no choice in the matter. Here you can make suggestions and small offers of help. But take care for now the ball is in their court. You have crossed the divide but their crossing is far more hazardous. They will fall and must suffer and try again as they learn or relearn the skills of normal relationships. There is little you can do but suffer with them if you can.

Somewhere in everyone are deep physical and emotional needs for love and satisfaction. They must also be admitted to the wider world, but sometimes this can be much worse than being a teenager if everyone your age got there years ago. How does the disabled person cope with this? How dare they learn and blunder in such an intimate and personal area with no-one else in a similar state? Yet they must try. If you are asked for help, be loving and very honest.

Of course, life is not all emotional and psychological problems. Mostly it is doing and sharing ordinary things that have no place in the sheltered world of disability; like planning how to live and shopping for necessities instead of for fun; like holding a baby while its mother gets ready to feed it; like having no time to talk now because something else must be done right away but having time later; like walking quietly in the country and absorbing every detail of sound and sight and smell and touch. As you share in their awakening, so it can reawaken you.

And somewhere in all this you can study the new aids that can reduce the effects of disability and how they can be financed.

So the barriers of disability can be removed if all goes well. You will have lost your prejudice and fear and they will gain the ability to share as equals in the wider world. There will still be pain but at least there may be real fulfillment. (Jonathan Griffith)

Divisiveness

What has kept us apart for so long? You may say that far from being kept apart people with disabilities have been involuntarily shut up together, segregated, that there are innumerable organisations for different types of disability; clubs, holidays etc. How can I say that people with disabilities have been kept apart?

Well, I can. When I say apart, I am not necessarily talking about being pysically separated. I am talking about the apartness of ideas, purpose, identification. For example, look more closely at the 'groups' of people with disabilities. How many of these people really chose to be there, instead of feeling that they had no choice, that there was nowhere else to go. Also, look closely at who took the initiative to bring those people together. Isn't it nearly always able-bodied people building the flats, staffing the hostels, planning the schools, raising the funds, running the clubs etc.?

Isn't it often true that people with disabilities are brought together (and when together sit and glower at each other thinking secret thoughts like 'I'm not as bad as him' or 'I'm not really like these people')? I think we have to differentiate between people being brought together because of having a disability, and coming together because of shared feelings and ideas and plans about having a disability. The latter is a completely different meaning of the concept of being together and it is this coming together which is what our network is about.

I think that it is worth stating that as a group we are not yet 'together' at all. We are unorganised in comparison to most other liberation groups. A large part of the reason for this is that we have been divided up into so many sub-groups that the realisation that we are one of the largest minority groups (10% of the population) has been hidden from us. This has resulted in our feeling that our needs are not common enough to be taken seriously by society's planners, and we have instead concentrated on becoming 'well adjusted' to society as it is.

How have we been divided up? Well there are a few major divisions. Firstly people with disabilities that can be seen are divided from people whose disabilities are invisible. In fact many people think of 'the disabled' as people in wheelchairs or using crutches, and do not take into account those with epilepsy, diabetes, glandular disorders, colitis etc. People with these disabilities often hide or deny them or refuse to call them a disability. This is primarily because they realise [illegible] that there has been, up to now, little advantage in 'coming out' in this oppressive society. There are many of our number in this position. We need to welcome them into our ranks as soon as they are ready to identify with the movement.

Next, people with physical disabilities' have been separated from people with 'sensory disabilities' i.e. people who have impaired vision or hearing. I've always been confused by this saparation as I always thought that an eye or an ear was a physical thing! In order to include these people we are going to have to overcome our communication problems. Deaf people will need to be considered at every meeting and their fight for more sign language interpreters will have to be taken on as the whole group's fight. People with visual disabilities will also have to be considered when any form of written communication is going to be used. The effort entailed in answering these needs is vital to our commitment to each other and to our liberation.

People with speech disabilities, too, need special consideration. After years of facing people's embarrassment, fear or impatience, people with unusual speech may well feel reluctant about coming to meetings or using the telephone. Again, this has to be remembered and they need to be encouraged to participate fully at their own speed.

The next division is harder to describe. It has to do with survival techniques and unlike the others is a response to the oppression rather than part of it.

It seems to me that if you have a disability, you appear to have one of two paths to survival. You can become what is expected of you by society - passive, cheerful, content with society's provisions and accepting of a life of difference; or you can go out into the world fists up, fighting every inch of the way whilst denying as best you can that, you have a disability at all, fiercely defending the right to be 'normal' and generally wanting nothing to do with 'the disabled'

It is important that these choices should not be considered better or worse than each other, but largely a matter of individual circumstance. For people who have been living in institutions most of their lives, rebelling has not been as easy as for people who have been supported well by their families in the community.

The problem for us to overcome now is how to assist the less confident so that they are not frightened to join us lest they appear to be 'biting the hand that feeds them'. We have also to show those with invisible disabilities that a disability is an important part of a person, not to be hidden, and that to choose to identify with others with disabilities is not to 'climb down'. It is also important to point out that one of the aims of the Network is to discover and describe a third alternative to the survival techniques already mentioned. It is immediately clear that it will be one that fights for our rights and identifies proudly with the group.

Going back to the theme of divisions, there are also people with what society calls disfigurements. A friend of mine introduced herself at a meeting of people with disabilities as having been 'burnt to a crisp - and these are my remains'. This led me to the following thinking: birthmarks, scars or burns do not actually disable anyone, but aren't people who are oppressed for having such things oppressed by able-bodiedism as surely as someone who cannot walk?

There are many other ways that we have been divided - by class, race, age, degree of disability ('Isn't my squint too trivial to qualify?) to name but a few, and by stereotyping which has kept us from thinking about who is and who isn't a person with a disability. For example, there are many men and women whose bodies are unable to create or bear children. I have not so far been aware that these people would consider themselves as people with disabilities, but why not?

Do you readers have more examples like this? I would love you to write and share your thoughts and experiences about the divisions between us, and especially any success stories about overcoming divisions in order to make a friend or ally of another person with a disability. (Micheline Mason).

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

This issue's booby prize for the most offensive comment we've come across recently goes to Time Out magazine:

One in Ten: a mixed show of photographs of disabled people going about their daily lives as *people* rather than Diane Arbus freaks. The motive is honourable, but pictures of deformed people *are* horrifying and set up a chain of unpleasant reactions. One comes away sickened and feeling guilty about one's own responses - maybe this, in itself, is a good reason to stage the exhibition.
(Time Out, 6-12/2/81)

If you read something that offends you by its handicapism, send it to us. If we receive enough examples we'll make them into a regular feature

REVIEWS

IMAGES OF OURSELVES

Jo Campling (Ed): 'Images of Ourselves: Women with Disabilities Talking' (Routledge & Kegan Paul, £3.95)

'Images of Ourselves' is a collection of twenty-five personal statements by women with disabilities. The most striking thing about the book is the huge variation in attitude to their disabilities of the women who are writing.

At one extreme is the hopelessness and isolation expressed by one woman in an exhausted recital of the innumerable physical difficulties she encounters because of her disability. At the other is a sense of the liberating possibilities of being unable to conform to the norms and expectations of society.

It seems to me that the contributors' views of disability are closely related to differing feelings about the womens's movement and the potential of feminism for changing the world and making it a more enabling (rather than disabling) place for all oppressed groups, not just women. Some of the women, who I think would not call themselves feminists at all, see their disability as having robbed them of their 'femininity'. They lament this fact and spend a lot of their energy grieving over it. Others, on the other hand, feel that their disability has released them from the restricting process of sex-stereotyping, and while they still feel bitter and angry about the way in which they have been marginalised, they nonetheless convey an exciting feeling of freedom.

A common theme running through several contributions is a description of the way society oppresses us by making us take a role which will allow able-bodied people to feel more comfortable and less challenged by our existence and rights. Maggie, a deaf woman, describes the way people have to lower their physical barriers and expose their vulnerability when using sign language by looking each other in the eye and making non-verbal communication. This is a brilliantly direct and clear explanation of why society's fear of the kinds of demand we make runs so deep.

As a woman with a disability, I see my own oppression and despair mirrored in the stories of all these women, but I also see, and I think any woman, and indeed any feminist, would see that, scattered here and there, and sometimes buried very deep, in the responses of these women to what society has done to them are some of the seeds of liberation. (Fiona Campbell).

SIDESHOW

Graeae Theatre is a company of actors with disabilities. The company received a tremendous amount of publicity and great critical acclaim when it was started, and played to packed houses at Riverside Studios in Hammersmith, an opportunity which is usually only accorded to very prestigious productions indeed. Fiona Campbell saw Graeae's first play, 'Sideshow', at Hammersmith. Her feelings about it differed strongly from those of all the critics:

I think we should respect the work of people with disabilities enough to judge their work by the same standards by which we would judge anyone else. The Graeae group talk about themselves as actors, and have given many interviews in which they expressed the view that they only wanted to be given the same opportunities as everybody else. Some of them have been, or are planning to go to, drama school.

All this indicates that they too wish to be praised or condemned by the same criteria as any other professional theatre company. I find it disturbing, therefore, that they have been universally praised for a production which would have been slammed or completely disregarded by the critics if it had been performed by an able-bodied company.

'Sideshow' uses the convention of portraying outcasts from society as clowns or fools (as in 'King Lear' or 'Godspell'), and suggests that such outcasts have a particular truth to tell which is not seen or is denied by 'ordinary' people. This device can work well, but has been used many times before and therefore requires a certain freshness and sharpness to reinvigorate it. This is simply not achieved by Graeae.

Their material is very derivative. They use old jokes (Is that a gun in your pocket, or are you just pleased to see me?'), which are delivered with an embarassing air of originality. And even by the standards of low-budget fringe theatre productions, most of the acting is weak and amateurish.

Worst of all, the whole production is imbued with sexism of a very crude kind, both through coarse innuendo and by ignoring the existence of women as an oppressed group. This sexism, which seemed to me glaringly obvious, was not mentioned by any of the critics whose reviews I read.
It is as if critics do not expect people with disabilities to have any sort of political awareness or consciousness of anything other than their own personal problems. That assumption is very insulting.
I know that people with disabilities have been oppressed by being denied opportunities to express themselves, and I am glad that Graeae have had their opportunity. But they have chosen to identify themselves partly by their disability, and because of that I feel that their opportunity is mine too.
I am angry that my opportunity has been abused, because I have a right to be spoken for in the most clear and direct way possible, and this Graeae have not done. I reject the patronising assumptions of able-bodied critics when they apply a different set of standards to Graeae.
I would like to show good faith and solidarity with other people with disabilities; but I think we can only retain our self-respect by not compromising with the standards by which society judges us. Graeae are making a plea for equality in their play while at the same time inviting the patronage of their audiences by the poor quality of their production. There must be a way for us to express our demands and desires with integrity, and Graeae should be looking for it.

SOME THOUGHTS ON 'TREASURE ISLAND'

Chris Harrison reflects on Robert Louis Stevenson's classic.

'Treasure Island is a book which I remember vividly from my childhood. I've chosen to write about it now for two reasons. The depiction of disability in it is very significant and related to the concepts of good and evil in the book; and I believe that many of the cultural experiences gained in childhood influence all of us in the way in which, as adults, we regard the society in which we live.

The essential plot of the story appears on the surface to be fairly uncontroversial and barely worth remembering. It concerns a young boy, Jim Hawkins, who visits an island where treasure has been buried by a bunch of pirates. The treasure is discovered; following a series of adventures caused by the treachery of some of the crew, the more desirable of the ship's company return to England in a considerably wealthier state. This is apparently the stuff of which any good boyhood classic is made.

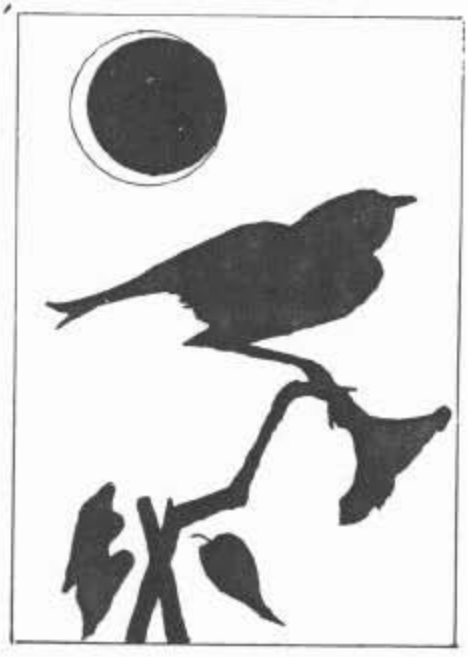
But what I remember now is the impact made on me by two characters in the book. The more villainous is of course Long John Silver. I think it is no accident that the deviousness and evil which he symbolises is given further credibility by his disability. He has only one leg and frequent references are made to his physical 'deserved deformity'. This 'Human Oddity' is rendered even more terrifying by the addition of a parrot on his shoulder. The bird resembles a witch's familiar and possibly even symbolises a chip on Long John's shoulder. Given such odds against which to battle, Long John ends up in a far worse position than does the hero.

The other character, whose appearance is more fleeting, is an embittered and thoroughly horrific blind man, Blind Pugh. Though his appearance is not so crucial to the development of the plot as Long John's, his presence is not merely intended to arouse our conscious disgust; his physical state and resultant bitterness are plainly intended to provide a child with enough nightmare material for a month.

I can remember that Stevenson's portrayal of Blind Pugh saddened rather than frightened me. I have never been able to see, but I have often experienced the identical feelings depicted in this character. The fear and contempt which I and others with differing disabilities face daily provoke an endless source of reasons to feel justifiably angered and alienated, but I do not think it was Stevenson's intention to demonstrate this.

I am no longer content to allow authors to aid society to define an image of anyone with a disability. Only by writing our own work and by challenging that of others can we understand for ourselves the labelling and oppressive nature of any cultural work which describes how we apparently are.

In addition to the campaigns against sexism and racism in children's books, I hope that my brothers and sisters with disabilities will begin to speak out and write against handicapism and all that it entails. By doing so we can make an important contribution to the struggle against our stereotyping and oppression.



WORDS→ACTIONS→WORDS→ACTIONS

As you read this magazine you may be stru by the range of different words we use to describe ourselves...the handicapped; people with disabilities; the disabled; e etc., all phrases commonly used in societ Does it matter what words we use as long as we all know what we mean?

It seems to me that it does. I reckon every human being is limited in their thoughts and actions by the words availab to them in the language/s they use. Eskimos can think about approximately thirty different kinds of snow and act according to each, because their language contains this number of different snow-words.

There were studies done (I seem to remember they were American) on what exactly adults and young people of both sexes imagined when they read the word 'he' where it had been used to mean anyone. e.g. "When a child first goes to school he may not know how to play with other children". It was found that almost ever one imagined a male figure. Consequently it is argued that our language steers us into thinking that women are less importa than men, since they don't appear so ofte in what is said.

In my experience, we (let us for the moment call ourselves something wild like people with sunflowers, to avoid any commonly used term) react very strongly to the words used about us. Many of my friends who have cerebral palsy can't bea the word 'spastic' since, apart from anything else, it has become a word of abuse in common usage. I don't like to have my leg referred to as a 'bad' leg as I don't think it is bad, nor do I think that the way other people talk should lead me or them to regard an important part of me as 'bad'

These more particular aspects of our language aren't too difficult to deal with (e.g. I encourage people to talk about my short leg) but all around meare people wi different ideas about the best word or phrase to describe people with sunflowers as a group. So I'm going to set out here some of the words and phrases with the arguments for and against each, for you to think about. Before doing that though, I will point out that the one thing on which the people involved in getting this magazine out agree is that any phrase should begin with the word 'people'. First and foremost we <u>are</u> people, members of the human race, and we believe that our langua should convey that. That said, here goes