

## **Internalized Oppression: How it seems to me** by Richard Rieser

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I only know what my life was like without a disability from what my mother told me I was like before I was 9 months old, when I got polio. Apparently, I was already walking around, and would have been very 'athletic' if I hadn't caught polio in the hot Summer of 1949.

I can't remember the next six months when I was in hospital alone. Parents were not allowed to stay in those days.

I can feel the scars on the back of my head where I endlessly turned my head while the rest of my body was incarcerated in plaster of paris. It was the theory then to keep the body completely still to prevent 'deformity'.

The Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital at Stanmore did not agree with these 'feudal' methods, and smashed the cast with a hammer when I arrived from Great Ormand Street after my parents had objected to my treatment.



Richard aged 3

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Unfortunately the effect on my mind of enforced separation and incarceration before my first birthday, cannot be got rid of in such a manner.

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My memories of my younger childhood were of pain from my treatment and forcing myself to do all sorts of things.

My parents were both of the view that I should learn to walk without a caliper or surgery. I underwent manipulative treatment by the Nurse Kenney method. Mrs Estrid Dane of Notting Hill Gate was to be my mentor. Looking back I shall always be grateful to my parents for this.

Daily we took the 31 bus after nursery, or school had finished. For years my limbs were stretched and twisted until they felt like they were being pulled off. I remember frequently lying in the road, screaming at my mum that I didn't want to go, but she always enticed and encouraged me. This treatment, together with my parents' and my own attitude seems to have been very successful as I grew up to walk without a stick for a number of years. In fact I found a letter from Sir Denis Browne, my Harley Street specialist who saw me when I was 18. He could not believe the progress I had made as he did not think I would walk at all. Physically I could do a great many things, but my personality was less resilient to growing up disabled.

With my parents 'strong' encouragement I attempted things like walking, swimming, climbing trees, riding my tricycle and later my bike. If I could do all these things with only one arm and one leg working properly, surely I was 'better' than all those around me who seemed to have everything in working order? Of course sometimes there were things I could not do, like running or balancing on a scooter. Reading and spelling always seemed to allude me in the same way, and my messy writing and drawings were much ridiculed in my kindergarten (as my dad called it) and at my schools, and indeed still are by my colleagues. Then I felt depressed and sad. Still I was 'tough' and was forever out leading adventures on local bomb-sites and around the streets.

These early pendulum swings of mood have stayed with me most of my life.

I recollect when I was occasionally to glimpse my lopsided gait in shop windows, not believing it was me, but at the same time knowing it was and being shocked and depressed.

I felt these changes of mood most acutely in my teenage years when I thought I was ugly and unattractive. Because I thought I was unattractive and I think I made myself so. I was also very unsociable and impolite.

Prior to my fourteenth birthday I had been a semi-illiterate bully, not getting on well at school, and referred to child therapy by Freud's daughter who helped run the school where I ended up for seven years, Town and Country.

The headteacher of our local LCC primary school, George Elliot, had refused to have me at the school. My parents would not send me to the local special school. They kept me out of school in protest until an 'ordinary' school was found which the LCC paid for.

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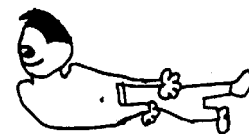
I was also very much against being put with 'those' children. I remember visiting Essendine Special School and feeling sick at seeing all the children with false legs, calipers and wheelchairs. My parents had over-compensated so much that I could not find any connection between 'those' children and myself.

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Town and Country could not really be described as an ordinary school. It was a private, co-ed 'progressive school' located in two large Victorian villas in Eton Avenue. It specialized in taking sons and daughters of diplomats and various 'creative' people's children. The teachers were largely eccentric, traditional and ineffective. I was disruptive, preferring to mess about than learn. There was a big emphasis on foreign languages which I found most difficult, probably because I could not understand the rules of my own language. I was able to act the 'hard' man in the playground and get away with it. This was because I spent most of my leisure time out with my street gang and Town and Country children were a lot softer and more middle-class.

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Things that  
Richard can do easily  
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He can swim.  
His body dont hurt then.



by Ashton

I remember wishing my dad worked in a factory or on the buses like my Scout/street mates and was not an artist and erstwhile teacher. I once told him to get a proper job much to his annoyance. I rejected his artistic side

and my own. I think it was also for this reason I blocked foreign languages as my dad could speak at least three fluently.

The need to be tough, to cope, to be what is now called a super-cripple left no space for sensitive feelings and 'soft' creativity.

These feelings of mine were much reinforced by my avid attendance at cubs and boy scout activities. The competitive, physical, cruel, jingoistic attitude that prevailed in the scouts was just what I needed to forget who I was. I threw myself into scouting, gaining all sorts of proficiency badges and eventually becoming the youngest Queen's Scout at 15. I put a brave face on things I found incredibly difficult or impossible. In one way they treated me as if I was just the same as all the others and I suppose that was why I like it. The problem was I wasn't just the same!

things That richard  
can't do easily

- 1 can't carry the baby
- 2 he can't stand without his stick.
- 3 he can't drive the car easily
- 4 he carries heavy thing with his weak arm so it is hard



At other times the cruelty of the boys was just too much with their calling me names and jeering at me. On one occasion I was pegged to the ground with we grass and slops smeared all over me and left in the hot sun for several hours.

This was because I could not peel the potatoes well with a knife, a task I found too difficult due to my polio arm.

This ritual was supposed to make a many of you, but it just made me and the others hard, uncaring an insensitive This was not good for me as I got rid of my emotions beneath a veneer of bravado. I was unable to feel the strength of character I later found from being open to my feelings and so being conscious of my disability and my limitations which also led me to try to be more sensitive and empathetic to others.

This contradiction was to make me most unhappy and a fair amount of my time was spent in doing damage to myself, either by excessive drinking or various 'accidents' which led to my damaging various parts of myself. From the age of 15 to 19 I used to arrive home 2 or 3 nights a week in a completely drunken state, quite often being sick all over the place. I broke

or damaged my left arm and right leg which I relied upon. I stuck a garden fork through my right foot and messed about with my toe nails which were in-growing so they got septic and required surgery about eight times, and there were many other injuries. This pattern of self-injury continued into my twenties and early thirties and was likely to occur whenever I was depressed. I didn't like myself and I was pretty sure no-one else did either.

I had a string of psychotherapists at the Tavistock Clinic, but they did not help me as their method was to strip away my defences without putting anything positive in its place. In fact it was not till I was in my thirties that I found a humanistic therapist who used bio-energy. She was really the first person to make me feel good about myself.

But I am jumping ahead. To go back to when I was thirteen. I was becoming aware that the Town and Country was not doing me any good. A lot of my mates in scouts were at the local secondary modern, Kynaston, and their stories of events at the school told round the camp fire made me want to go to a 'proper' school with workshops, laboratories, gyms, caning and prefects. I decided with some trepidation to leave the soft cocoon of Town and Country and immerse myself in an all male, streamed secondary modern. The headteacher himself was disabled and that was probably why he accepted me, although I was put a year below my age because of being so 'backward' - I could hardly read and write.

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Kynaston was altogether different to anything I had experienced so far. The kids and teachers were tough and there was really no mileage to a crippled bully so I quickly switched into competing with my mind and became more embarrassed by my body. I was also made fun of for my German name and for being Jewish.

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Anti-semitism was rife as it still is in most schools. I denied my paternal Jewish lineage. Anyway I justified this because my parents had brought me up outside the Jewish culture and as an agnostic. If goaded too far I would still lash out at the perpetrator. But it was the indirect avoidance of me, the

whispering, the staring looks that I couldn't hit out at that were far more damaging.

I was not often allowed to forget my body, being the butt of jokes and jostled and pushed in corridors or the stairs.

Most harmful was being told almost daily that I was an 'ugly cripple' and I would 'never have a girlfriend'.

(One of my therapists told me that if I worked hard everything would be alright at University where I would have girlfriends! I was so worried this would not come to fruition that when I thought I had failed my 'A' levels I seriously contemplated suicide.)

In PE and the playground I felt oppressed and belittled by the way I was expected to do things I couldn't do. I skived and joined clubs so that I needn't go to games or the playground and eventually I decided to get a note from my mum to exempt me from games and PE. I was not asked by any teacher if I wanted to use the lift in the six storey building for nearly three years. This was when I was obviously having problems with the stairs during lesson changes.

Later, although still suffering huge gaps in my formal education I was able to get five 'O' levels, then another three and three 'A' levels. I was not competing intellectually. In this my middle-class background became more of an advantage. My verbal arguing abilities that had really been my main defence against what I viewed as the stupidities of teachers, adults and other children, came to the fore.

I became more concerned with the wider good, equality and justice and by intellectualising these arguments moved in wider political activity.

For the next 20 years I was really concerned with Socialist politics, at University, in geography, in Trade Unions and teaching. I had blocked off those parts of me I found it difficult to deal with. Intellect rather than emotion ruled my life, I did eventually marry and have a child but I could only cope with life by thinking I could do everything.

In the last ten years sexual and personal politics including discrimination of various sorts has become much more important to me. This is also the time I

have had a relationship with Susie. When she first met me I projected a strong image of being 'able-bodied'. **I remember going to a pub together in the early days where the seats were all taken. I stood up all evening and was grumpy. On the way home Susie asked me what had been wrong. I had to think hard and then realised I had been in pain all evening. She said she would have asked someone for their chair if she'd known. I was horrified at the idea of admitting it or letting people know I needed help, and said they would use it against me or think me weak. She was the first person to question my view of myself!**

Over the many years I have been indebted to her for supporting me in looking at my own disability afresh which has made it possible for me to join the fight for the rights of disabled people. She has helped me to admit the things I cannot do, to the physical discomfort and pain I am in most of the time so that I can ask for help with dignity. This is still incredibly difficult for me but is very necessary. I feel I am much more open now. I have also come to terms with many of the spectres of my earlier years.

But also during this period my disability has worsened considerably. I now cannot walk at all without a stick. My old injuries to my left arm and right ankle cause me considerable pain and sometimes prevent me walking at all. I now sometimes use a wheelchair and my fear is that one day this will be a permanent necessity.

When my second child was born I found it much harder than with the first eleven years previously to carry him around and do all the things one has to do with a baby. Now he is nearly two, there have been times when I have feared for his life as I have been unable to reach him before he falls. Our local community nursery has never thought that the children of disabled parents should be a priority and despite much argument by us they still don't.

It wasn't until Summer 1987 when, against my wishes, my head teacher identified me for redeployment because my disability restricted my ability to supervise games that I saw the need to fight the discrimination against us disabled people collectivity and move towards the Disability Movement.

Now I know that I need to join with other disabled people who are campaigning and organising against Society's attitudes and discrimination towards us. But I also know that each disabled person has to work through the layers of oppression we have accumulated inside ourselves.

Our personal experiences as disabled people become internalised. Our perceptions of ourself mirror the attitudes and actions towards us. Dealing with this requires more than projecting the blame onto society.

Whatever social changes take place and most certainly these must be worked for, we will still have to deal with the discomfort and pain we may have or the things we want to do and can't. Living with out disabilities will raise questions of valuing ourselves, of self-image of self-criticism and of confidence that disabled peop0le will need to work through.

Even in a society where real equality has been achieved and we seem to be retreating a long way from such a possibility at present, we will still need to gain collective strength from other disabled people as we work through our situation and feelings anew. By sharing this we will continue to have the fortitude for the struggle for life that will always be ours.