

## **Things I am not good at.**

### **Pam Thomas**

*(This is a late draft of an article that appeared in GMCDP'S Coalition Magazine Spring 2004).*

I can't sing, well that is probably not quite right - I am a bathroom singer I suppose. I enjoy doing it but it is less of a pleasure for those who can hear it. I don't know what key to use and change key as and when it suits me (so I am told, I would not know the difference). Then I forget the words and go back a bit to try and remember. I like to listen to Radio Head and Stereophonics – but my sons tell me to also like Cold Play is selling out. Ah well better not listen to that anymore.

I am no good at drawing and painting, I never learnt how to get the perspective right. I don't understand modern art, I like some of the more traditional paintings, the ones showing people and places. I just don't get that unmade bed malarkey. I have been told it is all about interpretation and what it says to you. Anyone want to depict my kitchen? What that says to me is the fridge and larder have been raided and now there are dishes that need washing and a bin that needs emptying - to put it simply it is a mess, just like that unmade bed, although I have seen messier. Still there could be a few bob in transferring the lot to an art gallery somewhere I suppose. But I have to ask myself if I did that and made a few bob, whilst not really appreciating the artsy stuff, would I be selling out? Maybe.

I am no good at telling jokes, I can never, ever remember the right order to put the whole thing in – so the punch line, if I remember it, will not work. But I do like comedy not all of it mind, because comedy is usually about someone's misfortune, and to laugh at that would be selling out on the butt of the joke. Quite a few people make a few bob out of it, the likes of that stomach churning Jim Davison for example. Others don't use or need that sort of material to get a laugh.

I've always been against non-disabled people portraying disabled people. I watched 'Phoenix Nights' in order to find fault – a non disabled man playing a cripple? But Brian isn't the tragic but brave

type, he encounters disabling barriers and gets on with his non-heroic life. I was proud of him when his new found love admitted she was in fact a DSS spy - he kicked her out of bed. I don't think Christopher Reed would play the part like that (never mind write it) and he is a crip whether he likes it or not.

I am no good at making sure I don't eat too much (especially chocolate) and so I always feel I need to lose a bit of weight so my clothes are not too tight. But I can cook and I like to cook. I go down to Stuart the greengrocers where he knows my name and remembers the sorts of things I like to buy and asks after the family, puts all the stuff in little brown bags and lifts the lot into my car. I am not going to sell out to the evil supermarkets who put the likes of Stuart out of business. I love doing all the chopping and sautéing, roasting and all. I throw away things that are past the sell by date – sometimes enough to feed a few people for a few days. Am I selling out on the majority of the world's population who don't have enough to eat? Certainly, does that make proud? No.

Am I selling out on deaf people by liking music? Am I selling out on disabled people with a visual impairment when I look at paintings? Am I selling out on any disabled people with a physical impairment by seeing the humour in the wheelchair user character played by a non-disabled man? Am I selling out on people who are obese or have eating disorders by being concerned about a bit of extra weight or by having a bit too much food around for myself, my family and friends? Maybe I am.

Another thing I am not much good at is walking. I am no good at all at running, hopping, jumping or climbing ladders. That's because I am a crip. But loads of people can do those things and some are really good at it and make a few bob because people pay them to do it. Footballers and their supporters for example, are they selling out on crips by making so much money out of running around after an inflated thingummy? What about people who make their careers out of dancing and their audiences - River Dance, Lionel Blair. Wayne Sleep. As Terry Wogan once said on 'Children in Need' of some participants (not crips of course) "Fine Physical specimens, every one!" – selling out on crips? Could be. (I know there are crip dance groups but they don't get big audiences or big money do they?)

Much more worrying to me are those systems that ensure disabled people are excluded and discriminated against. The whole structure of our society does this, which makes it all a bit tricky really – just what can you do that could not be taken to be selling out? Not much.

Take Local Authorities for example. Have they got a good record on making sure we are taken into account in housing? No. Have they got a good record on our education? No. Have they got a good record on making the streets friendly for us? No. Have they got a good record of not only asking us what we think but acting on it? No. Have they got a good record on employing disabled people? No. Have they got a good record of having disabled Councillors who speak out on equality (not “care”) for disabled people? No. Do they run segregated services? Yes. Do they employ non-disabled disability expert professionals who think they know better than us? Yes. Do they give contracts to evil segregating charities? Yes.

Hmmmm. Better not have anything to do with any of them then. Oh but hang on a minute aren't they the ones we all want to give us the core funding and contracts for our organisations? Oh dear that's a bit of a problem then isn't it? Best get them to improve their record on employing disabled people and having radical disabled councillors to bring about the changes we need. Yes that will do it.

And when we have got disabled people into these positions we will give them loads of support because that is going to be damned hard work and they haven't got a magic wand. We will recognise the major hassle they get every day because they are fighting for disabled people in the very seat of oppression, yes they can be confident they will have us to back them up.

The other thing we need is our own organisations run by disabled people to take over the things currently run by non-disabled professionals and those oppressive charities we hate. Of course they will need to be able to make sure the money is properly managed and all that personnel stuff is done right and no laws broken. We want to make sure the staff work to the agenda set by disabled people we want the job doing properly. We don't want our organisations to muddle along and never get anything done. We want our organisations to be up there showing them how it should be done, of course that will involve talking to some organisations

we would really rather not talk to – but they are in our way and we need to get them to move over to let us in. That will take quite a bit of time and a great deal of skill – not many people are good at that. But there are some.

And when we have got disabled people managing these organisations we will give them loads of support because that is going to be damned hard work and they don't have a magic wand. We will recognise the major hassle they get every day because they are fighting for disabled people in the big bad world of business, yes they can be confident they will have us to back them up.

We need disabled people to get into those ivory towers where we are the subject of masses of research, academic papers, and conferences. Where the exclusion of disabled people is kept going through ideas and oppressive theories which are passed onto the next generation of professionals. That is not just the health and social services but in all those other areas where we are not taken into account (like architecture and urban regeneration) and they all think it is ok that we are not included.

And when we have got disabled people into the universities researching and teaching we will give them loads of support because we know that is going to be damned hard work and they don't have a magic wand. We will recognise the major hassle they get every day because they are fighting for disabled people in the academic world, yes they can be confident they will have us to back them up.

Yes we need disabled people to be everywhere, we will support others to get there, pass on what we have already learnt so they can carry things forward. Is it realistic to think we can do this?

It is easy to be self righteous and a critic when you have not been into the belly of the beast (as David Hevey put it). These big organisations are powerful and well established. They work against disabled people being in there. Perhaps it is unrealistic to think we can get in there and change anything. But when disabled people do get there and are speaking out about equality and justice, whilst still fighting for their own inclusion in these places, can they really be confident of us being there to back them up? Or will we reject them and give them hassle for having sold out?

Like every one else there are loads of things I am not good at and some things I am good at. If I am one of those that uses what I am good at to get into the belly of the beast to try and get it to change, what does that make me? Am I still a radical disabled activist or have I sold out? And who decides?

I think the key to not selling out, wherever you roam, is to stick to the principles of equality and justice, always remember your roots and make time to touch base – often. If you do this and you are still criticised then you are the one that has been sold out - by those that refuse to recognise what you have done and just go on about what you haven't.

I could not think of any way of not including the lines from “A Message from Telethon to You” written by Cathy Avison and put to music and sung by Ian Stanton over a decade ago. “Where does realism end and selling out begin?”

Who can say? We all sail close to the wind one way or another.

## **References**

David Hevey (1992) *The Creatures Time Forgot*. Published by Routledge.

‘A Message From Telethon to You’. Written by Cathy Avison published in ‘Coalition’ September 1990 and recorded by Ian Stanton on ‘The Incredible Shrinking Man’ (both GMCDP)

‘Phoenix Nights’ written by Peter Kay, Dave Spikey & Neil Fitzmaurice, Copyright Channel 4 .