



Exploring Psychology

Exploring Psychology: Identity and Disability 2

Peter

I'd like to bring in Lois if I may, Lois Keith. I know you actively dislike recycling the story of the accident that caused your disability. So I won't necessarily ask you to do that except in the terms that you want to. But why do you dislike that form of identification so much?

Lois

Well I often think about it like a hinge in your life. You know there's before, and then there's afterwards and my story, like many people's stories is a kind of quite dramatic story. So you could use it as a complete show-stopper and the world would love to listen. They might be bored by anything else important you have to say but this would be one story they would like to listen to and actually I don't think it's relevant. A, it's very personal, and B, I don't think I, maybe I don't have a kind of such a cheerful and positive constitution as Mike. There was a lot of pain involved in it. I had two very young children at the time and when I first started to write and think, I like to think intellectually, about the position of being a disabled person and questions of identity and all sorts of things. What I am prepared to say, in a public sphere and mostly in a private sphere as well I have to say, is that I was 35, I'd had all my education, I had quite a sort of solid conventional sort of life. At the time I was married and had two young children when this complete change happened in my life and I had to quite significantly re-make a life.

Peter

So really, unlike Mike, who was at the beginning of adult life, you were in the middle of it. So how much did your sense of identity change?

Lois

Well I suppose the time I had my accident, the most important thing in my life, I had a home and a husband and a part time job and I had these two very young daughters and they I think, if I had to identify any single factor, as the most important in my life It would have been being a mother. And people don't see people in wheelchairs of what it could normally conventionally described as a severe impairment, as mothers and I couldn't quite see how I would be a mother myself because my children were at quite a physically dependant stage so that was really very tough. And actually although I learnt quite a lot about how to see myself as a disabled person in this world, from writings like Mike's writing, I didn't see a lot about being a disabled woman and being a mother and being a female sexual person, all that sort of thing. So that was the beginning of my writing because I felt that there was a whole lot I had to do and like most people who write you do it to discover yourself and I sort of was lucky enough to have a lot other disabled female friends in that process.

Peter

But did you, before that kicked in as it were, did you feel essentially different to the person you'd been before?

Lois

Well I had to hold on to it and I think that I did and I sometimes feel in the public arena I still do a lot of pretending. So that the essential person who is me, is there and unchanged and a physical sense you had of yourself, as 35 year old, no great beauty but not tolerably awful either so that remains unchanged. And the people who loved you before, carry on loving you and the people that irritated you before, carry on irritating you, and so on. But the problem is that every time you went out into the world, even your personal world, people look at you completely differently. And the wheelchair is, as we know, a kind of symbol. It's like a symbol

of impairment dependency. It's the kind of logo which tells you where disabled people should go and so on, even though a vast majority of people who are disabled, don't use wheelchairs. So in the one sense the children normalised me because I had these two adorable three year old and a one year old.

Peter

Who were too young to care.

Lois

Who couldn't give a bugger really and that was very nice. But on the other hand you go out in the world and nobody quite believed you were a mother, or you could be a mother or you'd ever go back to work. So I think that there is a sense of your inner self, which does remain surprisingly strong and this going out into the world. And that took me quite a long time to deal with and still catches me unaware now sometimes. Of course there was this enormous practical changes because I happened to be living in one of those classic London Victorian terraced houses which is on five different levels, and three floors. So I was made completely dependant by the physical circumstances in which I lived. Now after about a year we moved into a flat and then we sort of moved into a house and that physical change made an enormous change to your independence. I think that in a discussion about the psychology. It can be forgotten how much the balance of independence and dependence and you're sense of yourself is based entirely on your physical place where you live. So once I moved into an adapted house, I could actually physically look after the children and while I didn't I was quite dependant and I had to do a lot of thinking about dependence and independence. And I had to redefine independence for myself and I had to accept, as it true of everybody, but you don't usually think about it in this way, that being independent and having any sense of myself as a sort of separate and adult person might have to rely a lot more on other people than it did before.

Peter

But that wouldn't necessarily make you want to meet people would it?

Lois

Well I just.. No. It just seemed to be absolutely essential because in order to understand things and I certainly needed to do a whole lot of new understanding. In order to understand things, you have to be able to name them. You have to be able to have a vocabulary for them. And that I realised quite early on, couldn't possibly come from my family and friends from before because even though friends together, particularly women friends had done a certain amount of thinking and talking and so on, reading, about issues feminine issues. I think it was just very, very difficult. And I don't know why, I was just lucky enough to understand quite quickly that the support I needed, and the framework for what clearly had to be a new world had to come from disabled people and I feel I was very lucky to make one or two very good I hope lifelong friends who are disabled, quite early on.

Peter

You see I find that quite interesting. Because having gone to a special school, I went through a stage when I didn't ever want to see a blind person ever again. It's quite an odd thing to say, for the person who presents a programme for blind people now but it was true. And it still happens to m that sometimes you're in a pub and someone will say 'Oh there's someone you must meet over there.' And it turns out that I must meet him, or her, because they're blind. We may not have anything whatever in common but there is that link.

Mike

When I was discharged from the spinal unit I know I went through a number of years when I didn't want anything to do with other disabled people. That would have somehow been seen as a kind of betrayal. But then when I got political I went through a period where I only wanted to associate with disabled people. And I hope that now I've come through, I used to have problems with what to do in Sainsbury's. You know, when you're out shopping in Sainsbury's, and another wheelchair comes down the aisle towards you. Do you speak to them automatically because there's a bond or do you ignore them. I now do what I do, to other people. I don't speak to everyone else in Sainsbury's. So just because someone's in a

wheelchair I don't speak to someone in a wheelchair. So I have a much more kind of reflective kind of view on that now.