



## Exploring Psychology

*Exploring Psychology: Identity and Disability 3*

### **Peter**

Let me bring in Al Alvares, who's been sitting quietly taking all this in. On the face of it Al, your story seems more about resisting disability, or the idea of you're being disabled. Is that fair?

### **Al**

That's a pretty accurate way of putting it. Yes, I am here completely under false pretences. In that my disability relatively speaking I think compared with Lois or Mike, is very, very, very minor. My present disability, which I guess is what got me on to the programme, because I now have to go round with a stick and so on. There was simple a climbing accident in 1960. Four years ago I broke my leg and they mended it wrong and as a result, although I was back in action again. I was climbing again three months later. But over the time the cartilage wore away and now there's no cartilage in the joint, and the ankle and the leg and so it's just bone grinding on bone and walking has become very difficult, very painful. But I can swim, I do other things. But as you say, that's part of the resistance because I was actually born with a disability and had major surgery when I was a little baby and I kind of reckoned at some point, that this thing which hung around.. I had a kind of what turned out to be a benign lymphatic growth on my ankle, which used to go wrong when I got ill. If I got the flu or something, I'd get a fever from the thing. I got measles, you know all these silly childhood things that you get. The ankle would blow up and it would get inflamed and become very painful and I would run a fever and so on. So as a result I was always kind of fighting it and I think I was very much involved as a child, in beating it. I became extremely keen on games. I was a clever little bugger and never bothered with the work, because I knew I could do that but what I wanted to be was good at games and I went to a very strenuous public school where you had to be good at games in order to survive, so I became good at games and behind all this was this little cripple, who..., this little Jewish cripple like Franz Kafka when I went away to boarding school. I came out of my boarding school with a 17" neck. Not at all like Franz Kafka and playing rigger and so and so forth. So there have always been these two bits going on.

### **Peter**

There does seem to be a pattern with you, of kind of deliberating putting yourself into situations where the impairment is kind of made not to count. So it's learning to walk, and then it's playing rugby, and then it's joining the army, and then it's climbing. It's one thing after another really where you've deliberately sought out situations which you might not be expected to do.

### **Al**

Yes. I don't know I think I felt what I had to do was, I'd learn the lesson. Either I could be crippled for the rest of my life, which was very much on the cards, and I'm talking now at age 2 or 3 so I'm not talking rational thinking, I am talking behavioural thinking or some kind of, something more instinctive. Or I could fight it and join the human race which I felt was the alternative for me.

### **Peter**

But you define the human race, as walking, climbing, playing rugby.

### **Al**

Yes. Yes. It was what you do as a child for Christ's sake. I am now 71 years old, and it's seems to me that the impairments are just an accelerated form of aging.

**Peter**

You said at the beginning you felt that you were an imposter. But that suggests that you don't think of yourself as one of this group of people, who are disabled.

**AI**

Well I know I'm disabled. But for instance, in airports, I have unfortunately to be wheeled around because I can't walk the long distances involved. I used to spend a lot of time going to art galleries which I love and that I can't do anymore because I can't sort of walk too far. And ..

**Lois**

But you could do it in a wheelchair. Would you not like to do that?

**AI**

Yes. I don't like it. I do it, but I don't like it. Yes. No, I'm fighting it. I'm one of the people you would automatically resent I'm afraid.

**Mike**

I certainly would want to reject that notion. I mean I like Lois's idea about seeing what happened to you, your transition from non disabled to a disabled person as a hinge. I have always conceptualised it as significant life event, which we all have. Which doesn't diminish what's happened but it doesn't necessarily place it as this appalling tragedy. And the problem with AI's fighting metaphor is that it positions me in a way which I absolutely reject which is that if I've got to fight against something horrendous I can either only then be a hero, or a pathetic victim. And I'm sure in terms of Lois's work she can give us lots of examples of the way in which the disabling culture has constantly portrayed us as that. We can only either be hero's or victims. And I don't see my life in the last 40 years as either being heroic or as being victimised. I see my life as being a life which has been full and which has been enjoyable and which I don't in any way feel that I need to kind of reject or apologise for or that I somehow fought against something that's happened to me all those years ago.

**Peter**

Is the issue..

**Lois**

Can I just, I'd just really like to pick up on AI's saying why he doesn't want to be in the art gallery, or in the party, in a wheelchair which I can, sort of, completely understand but it has to be said that that whole view is a real problem in my life. Because what does being in a wheelchair do? It firstly put you, it makes you much smaller than everybody else. So everybody physically, as well as metaphorically, is looking down on you. Secondly, it infantilises you. So you're in a wheelchair. A wheelchair has to be pushed. Therefore you must be a baby. Going back to what I said earlier which is why having real babies was always rather helpful to me although confusing to everybody else because who was the baby here which was always a bit of a problem. Secondly, although we live in a world where the overview is you have to be nice and kind to disabled people. Actually it creates.., being in a wheelchair creates a sort of huge barrier. So how AI, with his reputation and his body of work is treated as a standing up AI, is I imagine, quite different to how he's treated as a sitting down AI and AI has, at the moment anyway, has this choice and Mike and I don't have this choice. So we have to find ways of fighting this and that's what it meant earlier. When I said sometimes I feel like I'm doing a lot of pretending. Because I am in the party, feeling rather like AI might feel sitting down but without any choice to be doing it, so what do I have to do to make like remotely bearable and pleasant and enjoyable for myself because I quite a sociable person, I had to pretend that none of this is going on. That I don't know what this standing up person is thinking, when they look at me although I actually know very well what they're what they're thinking of me and I have to pretend that I'm having the best of times and really I'm loving being at this party because ..when actually I'm hating being at this party and I feel that I do a lot of that.

**Mike**

Racism, sexism, disabilism, they haven't just disappeared because we've become more enlightened. They've disappeared because black people and women and disabled people have been prepared to challenge racist and sexist and disabilist stereotypes. We bear a lot of responsibility for that. We've been active agents in that improvement and that's why I see myself as a disabled person. Not a person with a disability.

**Lois**

Can I just pick up on this, this very interesting issue about overcoming, and the difference between Mike and my experience and Al's. There are people who have spinal chord injuries who are still waiting to overcome and I don't want to talk about Christopher Reeve personally. But certainly in the presentation of his case the media have been absolutely delighted to pick on this, and show what a strong will he has and how the power of his mind is going to help him get up and walk. Whereas people like Mike and I know that there is no research, there is no evidence and to believe that you will be cured, is a complete nonsense. And so you might as well get on with a different sort of life. Which is what we've both done and this is why I called the novel I wrote for young people, about such a situation 'A Different Life'. Because I think that's what we've had to do. If you are in a situation like Al's and particularly at the time which you are born, and that sort of notion of use the word 'cripple' in that kind of self conscious way, knowing that other people will see that as an insult but that's how you were seen. When there was the sort of possibility to "overcome" there was enormous pressure on people, even today, to do just that. I think psychologically there is an awfully big difference between people like Mike and I, who forged a new identity and make a kind of claim on the world to see us as we are, and people who are desperately trying to, through religion or the power of the mind, or some sort of new age thinking, or some as yet untested medical breakthrough to believe that they will be other, and my own view is that's a real burden and they would have a much better and more interesting life, if they just jolly well got on with living with the impairment as it is.

**Mike**

Twenty years ago now, I wrote a piece for The Guardian, called 'My Disability Was The Best Thing That Ever Happened To Me', and as a consequence of that, I appeared on a television programme with Miriam Stoppard, who couldn't believe that I could actually believe this, and she spent the whole of the programme trying to interrogate me, and to kind of force me to change my mind and in the end, she said exasperated to me 'Well but Mount Everest it out there, and you will never be able to climb it.', and I responded very quickly -and it's like one of these things, where your mind does actually work - 'Well the four minute mile is out there Miriam, and you'll never be able to run it.' And I think she then understood what I was trying to say: that we were all limited by our bodies and the environments in which we are placed and being a disabled person might impose more limitations but it doesn't somehow separate my experiences out from the rest of the human race.

**Lois**

The Daily Mail or The Express published a piece about me and took out, as the headline, 'I Never Waste Time Wishing I Could Walk Again.' There's a whole lot of things in my life I would like changed but that's not...sometimes it's incredibly frustrating and sometimes even now after all these years. You wake up, and you think 'Goodness me, is this me?' because you know you've had 35 years of my life not expecting this to me so it still surprising sometimes. But really it would seem like the most extraordinary waste of time if I spent every minute wishing I was other. And people find this impossibly hard to believe and so when this came out, was in the paper, I was at work and somebody who's known me, who knows me well challenged me on this, and said 'That's not true is it?' And I was very stunned by this because I thought if you knew me, surely you would know, she knew me quite well, she spoke to me every day and so on. It's so much goes against the grain of what we believe about positive thinking and being a strong person and a belief in yourself and particularly now and the whole kind of new age thinking that kind of moral foot. It's as if the interpretation of 'I Never Waste Time Wishing I Could Walk Again' was somehow I had just become a terrible giver in and terrible weak person whereas actually I was rather proud of my strength of character.

**Peter**

I would have thought it shows you'd grown up.

**Lois**

Yes. Exactly, but that's not how the world sees it.

*Music plays out..*