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Reflections on My Life: Confessions of a Baby Boomer

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Confessions

Can you recall what you were doing on October 11th, last year? It certainly was a great day – a very important one for me. Because, despite some medical experts predicting that I probably wouldn't survive infancy, on that fine and sunny day (it was a nice day/night, wasn't it? I was too much on cloud nine to notice...) I 'cerebrated' my 50th birthday. For me this was really the social highlight of the year, of the decade, of the half-century! All of my life I have thought of myself as an extrovert, but that night proved it: the more people arrived and the more friendships were rekindled, the more energy I acquired and the higher I got. I think I had only half a stubby all night – but I wasn't really counting.

I am not here today to talk about my 50th, though I would love to, and I am sure you would enjoy hearing about the wide and varied group of people whom I am so fortunate to have as friends. But all of this didn't just happen overnight. It took fifty years (with a lot of extra time crammed into that period!). Should I start at the beginning to try to set things in context?

Mum told me that when I was a young baby, I cried a fair bit – nobody knew why. Apparently my birth was quite traumatic, and I think one doctor said that things didn't look hopeful – what that meant in those days I really don't know. As I grew older, I wasn't doing the things I should have been at that age. When Mum finally took me to a doctor, he said that I was simply a slow developer, and that I would 'come right' in time. I didn't 'come right' as that particular doctor put it. Mum said she eventually took me to an osteopath and I said my first word on his table. *He* said that if he had seen me earlier, he would have had me walking. I personally believe that this was a fine bit of quackery – but we all have to believe in something don't we?

Somehow, someone figured out that I fitted the 'cerebral palsy' label – I never quite found out how that happened. I know that I was one of the first to attend what was called in those days the Queensland Spastic Welfare League. I started there aged three or four, being one of the first to attend their kindergarten.

By the time I graduated from kindergarten, the Spastic Centre had established a school, which was actually a State School, but of course, very unfortunately, only for 'spastic kids'. This was how it was in those days, and people thought it was great. I'm not quite sure why but I can vividly remember one day thinking "I wonder if this is very different from a convent school?". I really wanted to go a convent school, but it didn't seem to concern me all that much that I didn't or couldn't.

I enjoyed school. I enjoyed learning about things. I also think that I saw school as a social occasion. Teachers and therapists would fight for 'ownership' of me. I had the three therapies (physio, occupational and speech) daily, as well as standing in standing frames. Teachers weren't too keen about all of these therapists wanting to interrupt their teaching programs. On the other hand, the therapists thought they had a role to play for their 'guinea pigs'. At times I felt I was the meat in the sandwich – but, again, that's just *how it was* in those days.

Mum, like most mums, devoted many untiring hours to my upbringing. At first, she had to take me on public transport (two buses each way) to and from the Spastic Centre. She also worked voluntarily at the centre, three to five days a week, for a long time. In those days we had a hot meal in the middle of the day, and it was the mums' job to cook, clean, do the toiletting, etc.

One might wonder what effect my having a disability had on my family. One could speculate and postulate ad infinitum. I will just state the facts here. I am an only child, and on occasion my Dad drank quite heavily. Mum and Dad were always very loving and accepting of me. Mum was always my primary caregiver, but there was always a very special bond between Dad and I. We shared a common outlook on life and a similar sense of humour.

In those days, we had the scholarship exam at the end of primary school. It was decided that I really didn't have to sit for this exam – it would have made me quite tense and, it was felt, "What would be the use anyway?".

So, what to do now? Fortunately, at the time, there were three other kids in the same boat. It was decided to make a classroom available to us so that we could do our secondary schooling by correspondence, under the watchful (and encouraging) eye of the then head teacher, a volunteer retired high school teacher. This was a relatively good period of my life – I was still going to school, though I never sat for my Junior or Senior exams, again because it was felt there was no point. Low expectations indeed: utterly demoralising and potentially quite damaging.

Again the question arose: what to do now? I wasn't qualified to do further study. I had completed my secondary school studies but wasn't able to go on to university; my two placement options were to go to a Sheltered Workshop or an Activity Training Centre (ATC) but somehow I seemed to slip between the cracks. Because I use a head-pointer for all physical tasks, my productivity rate was not initially considered high enough for the Sheltered Workshop. But, because I was said to have a very active mind – exactly what that really meant I am still not quite sure – I didn't fit the ATC status either. Through some fated stroke of luck (or misfortune, depending on how and when I think about this!) I somehow fell over the line to gain entrance to the Sheltered Workshop.

I will never forget my first given task. One of the things they did was to make rubber door mats of strips from old tyres. My job was to pull the rubber strips apart. For some reason, when the strips were delivered, they were still in their original tyre shape. Though they were meant to be cut into strips, the cuts were incomplete. So I had to separate the strips of rubber. To do this, I would wrap one part of the tyre around a door handle, a table leg, (or anything!) and another part around my head-pointer, and pull the strips apart! Great stuff – especially if one wants well-developed neck muscles!

In time, it was determined that I wasn't best fitted to this kind of physical task. After doing a number of tedious copy typing jobs, I finally graduated to doing the invoicing and basic accounting for the workshop. Little did I know that later on down the track, I would hold the position of Treasurer of a Supported Accommodation Agency for four consecutive years!

As time went on, computers became the 'in thing'. (This was around the mid 1970s.) An Executive of the League had to find a Masters topic and chose 'People with Disability and Computers' (or something like that!) so for the first time in my life I became a *willing* guinea pig. I had played this role many times before in my life, but on those prior occasions I really didn't get a choice. I suppose I didn't get much of a choice this time either but just being involved in the process and the thinking behind the project seemed to make all the difference. It led to my feeling totally included – even though that particular activity was mainly to feather another person's nest! But it was fun and interesting. We were involved in a bit of research, we did a bit of wordprocessing and even computer programming. I really enjoyed this, because in many ways I was back at school again.

At the end of this relatively exciting period, things really didn't change as I had thought, and of course, hoped they would. Previously (apart from pulling apart old car tyres) I had a job of addressing envelopes. Now I found myself doing exactly the same thing. Granted, some people would consider using a wordprocessor is more sophisticated than a typewriter, but really a boring task is a boring task, however one tries to 'dress it up'. I suppose the biggest disappointment was the lack of opportunity to do any more computer programming tasks. Why didn't this eventuate? I really don't know; I can only surmise that here again people just didn't hold very high expectations for people with disability!

It was around this time – around the early 1980s – that I really started to wake up. I figured that if I didn't get out of that place fairly quickly, I could well end up rotting there. I also figured that probably my only avenue was education. So what could I do? What did I want to do? Having always been interested in people, I thought Psychology might be a 'goer' for me. So I made enquiries, saw people, and filled in the QTAC (Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre) entry form, stating only one option (nobody told me I could have more than one!). At the very last moment that year, the Psychology Department of the university decided it would curtail the intake of mature students. That of course put a sudden hold on my aspirations and I had another wasted year at the Sheltered Workshop.

The following year when QTAC time came around again I applied to do as many courses as I could fit on the form! My first preference was a Diploma of Community Welfare. Other preferences included Maths and Computer Programming courses. To my sheer astonishment, I was offered my first preference. But I wasn't 'in' yet – I still had to jump the course entrance hurdles. I really can't remember being fazed by this which, compared to experiences of my school days, was very odd indeed. Maybe this was just meant to be my time!

The entrance hurdles included being involved in a 'fish tank' group discussion and problem solving exercise; writing an essay on the reasons for wanting to do the course; and finally, being interviewed. I can remember being really enthralled in the first exercise, trying to work out what made all the others tick.

At the interview, I knew I had to sell myself, but the course lecturer who interviewed me was really great. He was confused with my speech (and probably everything else) but to his credit he tried his best to remain open and not confine himself to my obvious disability. This guy ultimately became my favourite lecturer, mainly because of the rapport and mutual confidence built up over the years, but also because he taught my favourite subject – counselling and interpersonal skills.

So again I was back at school – again I was happy. This was a major highlight of my life. I had finally got back into the 'swing of things'. The first few weeks were challenging (to say the very least) for me. I was in the midst of a big group of strangers, with little or no support. Everything turned out well – and after a few weeks I was even offered support at lunchtime. I refused it, fearing that it could interfere with my forming relationships with my fellow students. Frankly, I am still not sure whether this was sound judgement on my part. It certainly meant I got to know people quite well, and knew who felt happy about assisting me and who did not. I was able to build many meaningful and deep relationships, which mean a great deal to me, even to this day. Conversely, it meant that I only went to the university's toilet once in four years! (Isn't there a theory going around that we guys have the stronger bladders? I certainly wasn't the originator of this idea, at least, not directly!)

At the time I started the Diploma course, I was living in an institution especially built for adults with cerebral palsy. I put myself in there a few years after Dad died. I did this because I figured that if I stayed home, Mum would simply wear out.

In those days, the phrase 'Family Support' as we know it today, wasn't even coined. Toward the very end we did get support from a domiciliary nursing service, specially to assist Mum to get me out of the bath tub. But Mum, in her own inimitable way, would rush to get me out of the bath before the nurse came, just to 'make it easier' on the nurse.

My decision to try to talk Mum into letting me go into the institution was a very difficult one for me. It was contrary to everything I wanted for myself – probably because I was leaving behind my primary carer, the lady who really felt that there was no one else in the world who could or should care for me. But the fact that I was able to go without her putting up too much opposition indicated that the timing was right for Mum.

I would say the first few months in that institution were truly the worst of my life. What would those strange people, calling themselves sisters and nurses' aides, do to me? Why couldn't I have an orange drink first thing when getting up in the mornings? Why did I have to have a shower at 5.30 a.m.? Why? Why?

For at least the first year or so, I went home every weekend, public holiday, 'cracker night', and for any other reason I could come up with. But of course this was defeating the purpose of moving away from home. Eventually, I decided to bite the bullet – and never went home after that.

Why did I have so many problems living at the institution? Well, firstly, I wasn't used to living away from home – I believed Mum's feeling, that nobody could look after me except her. Secondly, I had great difficulty accepting and coping with the regimentation of activities which, for me, was carried out in such an utterly disempowering manner. I felt totally powerless, vulnerable and on the receiving end of any of the wild and wonderful whims the staff came up with.

But I survived the twelve-year period in that institution relatively unscarred emotionally – well, that's my story and I'm sticking to it! I did what I had to do. I suppose I just learned to become more 'streetwise' about things. I quickly became able to easily distinguish the staff 'goodies' and 'baddies'. I quickly learnt to 'hide' when the baddies were on duty, and to become 'more apparent' when the goodies signed on for duty. In fact, in a bizarre kind of way, this was one of the main things which helped me through what I consider to be one of the toughest periods of my life. Because of my utterly innate interest in (and concern for) people, just watching the various multidimensional power plays and gameplaying between staff and staff, residents and residents and, primarily, between staff and residents, was enthralling: at times very entertaining indeed, at other times quite frightening.

For me, the institution was a place of good, necessary learning. I learnt a lot about the human spirit. I learnt a lot about what makes people get out of bed in the mornings. I learnt about power, oppression, vulnerability. I learnt a lot about injustice, social injustice. I learnt about my own personal views, vision and virtues, particularly those pertaining to the general concepts of personal and collective empowerment, participation, self-determination, access to resources and opportunities, and a strong belief in building communities that are totally inclusive and accepting of the 'other'. For such insightful and precise learning, I hope that I will be eternally grateful.

But there comes a time when one must stop learning (disregard that last statement – we must *never* stop learning!) and take action. Whilst in the institution, I helped to establish the first Residents' Committee. (As it has turned out, being the inaugural president of this Residents' Committee was the precursor to becoming the inaugural president of a statewide advocacy organisation and a supported accommodation service – isn't it great how the wheel keeps turning?) The committee was able to influence change in small, mundane, yet very important things, for instance: scattered meal times, menu options, having a say in decor options, having some say in staff selection, etc. But it didn't take long to figure out how hard it is – almost impossible in fact – to change a *system* from within.

I did manage to escape the institution in a 'bloodless coup'. Don Grimes has spoken about the virtues of the Commonwealth Disability Services Act of 1986 (see Chapter One). One of the many virtues of this landmark piece of legislation was the credence it placed in 'Demonstration Projects'. I became one of four people in such a project with the label of having 'high support needs'. To this day, I am bemused as to what this term really means. Anyway, I must have fitted the box.

Leaving the institution certainly wasn't plain sailing – anything but! For Mum, the mere thought of my wanting to leave what she considered to be a good, safe place was total and utter insanity. Emotional blackmail came to the fore. Mum would do anything to bring about what she thought was the right thing for me and my life. Somehow I stood up to her onslaughts, but only just. More than a few times I nearly succumbed. What if this caused Mum to have a heart attack? How would I ever be able to live with myself? But I came to the decision that there are times in life when we must do what we must do – and this was one of those times for me.

Finally reason (or was it pig-headedness?) prevailed. Mum definitely thought I was doing the wrong thing, but somehow she coped and is still coping, at the grand age of 86. Over the last few years Mum hasn't experienced the best of health. Thus, I think that now she might worry a little bit more about herself and less about me, but I hear from others that although she talks about me in glowing terms, she still tries her darnedest to be overprotective!

At the moment Mum goes to hospital for a couple of days every three weeks or so for blood transfusions. Going up to the hospital so much, I have been able to develop a good rapport with the doctors and the nursing staff. When Mum goes in, I normally fax the doctor with any questions or concerns, and then ring him the following morning. If he can't talk to me himself, he usually primes his receptionist with the answers. Once recently I was up there when the doctor was doing his rounds. He included me in the consultation, but forgot to talk to Mum. While he was giving his dissertation to me, I kept looking down at Mum, hoping to put the focus back on to her. Mum just had a smile on her face. She knew quite well what kind of power plays were taking place and she also knew who was really in control – and somehow I don't think she was putting the doctor in that position.

When I left the institution the powers-that-be decided I could have only one month to change my mind. After four weeks my bed would be given to another 'deserving' soul. It's great to be so well-supported in life's major decisions, isn't it? I think this only made me more determined to make everything work out.

Don Grimes' 'Demonstration Project' worked out very well. It was based on an empowerment model, which eventually was included in the broader term of 'supported accommodation'. In our demonstration we were taught and told about how to hire and fire workers, and train and manage workers. For me, this was a great time. There were lots of people around – including researchers from the university, group facilitators and so on – apart from the four of us 'compliant guinea pigs'!

I had fun hiring and firing workers. Isn't it strange how the oppressed always want to become the oppressor and will do everything in their power to achieve this end? Yet another one of our wonderful phenomena; I tried very hard not to fall into this trap.

Meanwhile, there were other things going on in my life. I graduated with a Diploma of Community Welfare. I did a three-year Pastoral Care course. My first job in open employment was as an Advocacy Support Worker, which lasted only two years because of a complete funding cut to that particular project. I thought at this time (that is, the early nineties), jobs were going to be difficult to come by, so I had better go back to university and get another piece of paper (perhaps I really just wanted to go back to school again?). I did a three-year degree course in two years, because I was able to obtain credit from my previous diploma course. It somehow wasn't quite as good the second time around, and I suppose I was doing it for reasons outside of myself – I am not too sure.

The Demonstration Project was such a success, it eventually became a service. I lived there for five or six years but somehow I just didn't feel at home with congregated living – it often reminded me of the institution. So my aim in life was to get a place of my own.

I went about this in a very scheming manner – I had to. 'Mum' was the word – in more ways than one! I didn't feel comfortable confiding in Mum or my then service provider, so I had to become very sneaky indeed. I was fortunate to be able to gather some wonderful and beautiful people around me. They were people with whom I felt completely at ease sharing my deepest longings. I knew I could trust them completely. I knew they would follow me anywhere I wanted to go. Together we took on the Department of Housing and won. Together we took on the Brisbane City Council and won. Together we strategised everything – but I think most of all, we 'enjoyed' the battle.

So where am I at now, you might wonder? Well, I have a great little unit in the West End of Brisbane. I can walk to the shops, I can walk to church, I can walk to an accessible railway station. I am living in an area which endeavours to be more of a community than just a suburb. These were all criteria I set with my group of friends before setting out to find *my own place*. I have a part-time job, assisting in the establishment of a speech-to-speech relay telephone service for people with disability who need the assistance of a third person (a relay operator) to make phone calls.

What I Struggle With Now: an Internal Struggle

How do I really experience life at the moment – now that I am living in the community? Well, at times it seems like hard work. I have a mighty band of personal care workers, but they always need managing. Overtly or covertly, consciously or unconsciously, there are times when they try to get away without doing tasks. These times I find quite difficult. In any kind of relationship, power dynamics are quite tenuous – never more so than in these kinds of situations.

There are times when I feel quite alone – which can be a good thing in a spiritual sense – but not if it turns into loneliness. Maybe I have portrayed an erroneous picture to people. Because they see me going off to work three days a week, see me going off to meetings and the like, see my (personal care) workers coming in at least twice daily, they think I must be doing quite OK thank you very much!

What about my need for intimacy? What about my need to feel loved and to love unconditionally? What about my need to feel 'I belong'? Is this all related to having low expectations for and of people with disability? Maybe in this instance, I too have low expectations for and of myself?

As I said before, one criterion that I set with my group of friends was to live within 'walking distance' of church. Well, each Sunday I walk to church – which is a miracle in itself since I never get out of my wheelchair except to go to bed! (Incidentally, I often use the word 'walk' instead of 'wheel'. Is this because I want to be seen as an active participant in one of society's dominant paradigms? Or am I just endeavouring to use inclusive language?) But, unfortunately, I haven't experienced the church community as fulfilling my emotional and social needs. You might feel that church is not the place where this should occur anyway.

Like everyone else on this earth, I search constantly for life's meaning and my particular calling in all of that. Like everyone else on this earth, I have longings for meaningful, lasting intimate relationships.

I need love. I need *to* love and to *be* loved. My disability is not me! It is just an appendage, yeah, a fairly significant one, but I must do my utmost never to allow my disability to completely define me. I must not become preoccupied with it. I must *never* let this occur! Likewise *you* must never let it occur. When interacting with people, disability must become transparent. Otherwise it will always present barriers to connections between and amongst people.

Throughout my presentation, particularly this last section, I have endeavoured to be as open and honest with you as I possibly can. In so doing, I have exposed only some of my vulnerabilities and what some people may view as incompetencies. I choose to do this because I want to advance the cause of people with disability. My driving force has been to get to the crux of some of the issues that people with disability face when living in the community.

Unfortunately, bricks and mortar only make up a very small part of living – living anywhere and for anybody! But because it is so concrete (no pun intended here) it often gets top billing for debate, conjecture and funding. Granted support issues are now almost on a par. But these are service issues. We don't want a *service* – we want, and deserve, a life. Having relationships – reciprocal relationships – is a central component if we, as people labelled with a disability, as well as those without a disability, are going to achieve this, that is, get a life!

In sharing with you some of my intimate and heartfelt thoughts and feelings, it is my wisdom that tells me you will honour this risky action, and thus we will ultimately grow in knowledge and expand in understanding together.

Reflections

When negotiating the perimeter of this presentation I agreed to do a bit of reflecting on and confessing what I have learnt through my life experience. Well, you will get no more confessions from me now. I am open to bribes though...

Following my 'stint' at the institution, I have now been living in the community for twelve years. More than a few times during my life, I have had to ponder the dilemmas that face me personally, and the sector as a whole. I dearly would like to share at least some of these reflections with you now. If you find them complex and involved, they are – but this just reflects the type of society in which we live. Please indulge me. Hopefully my thinking and reflecting may engender some of your own!

We have to get *smarter* when trying to look at disability issues. Have we come a long way in the last period of time or have we just become a bit smarter at doing the window dressing? Are the hearts of people really changing? Not until this occurs can we even hope to experience lasting systematic changes.

There must be a significant paradigm shift. A 'dominant paradigm' is the sum of all assumptions that remain unquestioned that people share within a culture. The world of 'disability' is dominated by a modern, western paradigm of being 'human'. This paradigm is based on subtle ideologies that foster and support discriminatory practices. Foucault introduced the notion of 'the insurrection of subjugated knowledges'. Subjugated knowledges are sets of knowledge that are *disqualified*, or that remain low on the intellectual and philosophical hierarchy, beneath the level of science. For example, scientific and medical paradigms dominate and define the world and experiences of people with disability. The view and definition of people with disability themselves is relegated to the category of 'subjugated knowledge' in Foucault's sense. Firstly we must change the way we *think* about people with disability, and secondly about disability issues. Maybe we need the skills of a futurist. We need to do something to jolt us out of our present mediocrity, modes of thinking and analysis.

We must consider *power*. Power operates insidiously and unconsciously. Using power, a particular viewpoint can be presented as true and beyond question. All power invites resistance and struggle, at both the macro and micro level. In terms of disability, resistance occurs at the micro level by challenging what is done to disabled bodies, and at the macro level by challenging disabling structures. Foucault points to the importance of a movement of resistance, and strategies for emancipation such as the 'disability pride' movement. Since the late 1970s, people with disability have been more vocal. They started defining themselves and their condition as something of which to be proud, as a means of challenging the 'subjugated knowledge' of disability and the consequent effect upon them and their lives.

Forming and ultimately embracing an active, meaningful and reciprocal 'partnership' between people with disability and those who haven't been labelled as having a disability is vital. At a number of levels we are 'in this boat' together. Do we all at least acknowledge this fact? We all share a common humanity. Could pride, arrogance, and an inability to listen be a greater obstacle to 'partnership formation' than impaired speech, mobility, intellect or emotion? These are the issues we have to ponder. Inability to recognise *all* the disabilities that exist across society leads to the scapegoating of those whose disabilities cannot be hidden. In fact this adds to the latter group's stigmatisation and systematic abuse.

Issues for people with disability, and for their families, are not always the same. This fact must be acknowledged, and embraced. These issues must never be, nor even seem to be, in competition for credence, attention or funding. Both are separate as well as overlapping. Thus both groups have to be able to respect each other's difference, while at the same time acknowledging and embracing their commonalities. People with disability and their families must not only learn to coexist and support each other, but also to embrace each other.

We must also change our thinking about the service system. People with disability have to assume the major roles, otherwise we are simply placating the dominant paradigm. For such a long time now, people with disability have been inclined to just slip into the role of 'being done (un)to'. It is time that we took the initiative. Credence must be given to *our* knowledge, both experiential and learnt. This certainly needs to be implemented, but not to the total exclusion of people *without* a disability. Both groups definitely need to be in there together, but at the very least the partnership needs to be equal. The voice of people with disability, describing their wants and needs, the what, how, who etc., needs to be strong, loud, clear and direct.

Do we really know what we mean by the overused term of 'community'? We must do our utmost to glean a common and clear understanding of what we are actually talking about. There is not a more avid campaigner for deinstitutionalisation than myself, but do we really understand the how and why of driving an ideology of closing institutions and getting people with disability back to their rightful place 'in the community'? We must learn the best way of setting in place the most appropriate set of safeguards for each individual.

People with disability must also take part in the 'social exchange' process. People with disability *must be included* in the 'social exchange' process. If we are not, we can't prove ourselves or express our sense of being regarded as 'community assets'. When excluded, we virtually take on the role of outcasts and then we find ourselves implicitly or explicitly acting out such a role. Too often people with disability are seen to be on the receiving end of the 'social exchange' process. We are not presented with the opportunity or expected to have the wherewithal to GIVE! (Only in giving does one receive!) Society gives people with disability a particular role and expects us to play it out scrupulously without any freedom to depart from the script. We are certainly not supposed to act spontaneously or ad lib in any way!

The delicate issue of having a 'hierarchy' within the 'rank and file' of people with disability has to be acknowledged, addressed and ultimately *eradicated*. By this I mean any unjustified hierarchy of needs responded to, or of perceived abilities of people with disability. If *we* don't, how the heck can we expect the wider community to display the virtues of total inclusion?

We desperately need good, sound and innovative legislation. This has to be encouraged through effective and moral leadership. But we need more than good legislation. The good legislation must be complemented by good and sound practices. One might say that one begets the other – I am not sure. All I know is that we definitely need both – desperately!

Some people seem to go all-out to get and uphold what they perceive to be their 'human rights'. Such people always seem to take the moral high ground on issues. Sometimes I wonder whether being morally correct for human rights' sake alone, really benefits the cause in the long term. Being 'correct' and/or upholding one's rights is not good enough. If we believe we are correct, and that our actions are correct, we must combine the inherent wisdom, the leadership, the passion and the will with the drive to coerce others to become fellow travellers along the path to achieving social justice for ALL!

My final reflection is this: I think the human spirit really is a mighty and wonderful thing. If nourished and fed adequately and appropriately, we, as individuals or collectivities, can overcome ANYTHING we desire to, and I mean ANYTHING!

Conclusion

I will conclude this presentation with the same conclusion that I wrote for another presentation, *On Being Fully Human*, that I had the good fortune to give at a Spirituality and Disability Conference in Adelaide last month. I do this because I think it summarises the basic sentiments I have been endeavouring to convey here today.

Before I leave you... I want you to make me a solemn promise. On behalf of all people with disability, I ask you to assist and encourage me to attain and maintain my true and fullest potential in life. I want you to tell me that I really am a living and loving temple of a really living and loving God.

Will you assist me to attain equality in the 'social exchange' process?

This process of 'social exchange' is inevitably a process of relationship. Please encourage me to develop and sustain the relationships I desire. I need supportive relationships to make life endurable, as well as to give it meaning. Will you support me if I feel the need to have a deeper, more committed relationship with someone? Or, will you support me if I choose to pursue a single lifestyle? Either way, I need encouragement, acceptance and support as I pursue the call of God in my life.

Please try to do your very best to see past and through my disability. For it is when this moment arrives – not before! – that we can encounter one another as truly human beings. And it is only through encountering one another as true, full and complete human beings that we can encounter our God.

Thank you.

Peace.

This chapter is dedicated to the memory of Marie Duggan (1912–1998).