

The Other Tradition: from personal politics to disability arts

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(This is paper based on personal recollections and interviews with Keith Armstrong, Ruth Bailey, Kirsten Hearn, Micheline Mason, Edwina McCarthy, Anne Rae and Nancy Willis presented at the Disability Studies Association Conference at Lancaster University, England on Tuesday 19th September 2006).

At the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, two organisations, the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) and the Liberation Network of People with Disabilities, were attempting to create a new politics of disability.

UPIAS sprang from a letter to the Guardian written by Paul Hunt in 1972, to which Vic Finkelstein responded.

The Liberation Network, founded five or so years later, sprang originally from an initiative by Micheline Mason, Merry Cross and Christopher Spence, disabled people who were involved with Re-evaluation Counselling (RC), also known as co-counselling, an American personal growth movement.

I think it worth noting that UPIAS was founded by two men. The Liberation Network was founded by two women and a gay man.

RC has been accused by internet conspiracy theorists of being a cult. I do not find that tenable, and still less do I believe that the movement is secretly part of Scientology, as has also been asserted. However, it does have certain features in common with religious cults and more restrictive political groups, including a single founder, a set of ideas that are not open to debate from the rank and file and a very hierarchical structure.

Mason, who had had some involvement with feminism, had come to the conclusion that disabled people needed a liberation movement. In 1979, she and her two colleagues organised 'Leap for Liberation', a weekend workshop at Lower Shaw Farm near Swindon, to which they invited about a dozen disabled people. These were not on the whole members of the Co-counselling movement, and did not on the whole already know each other.

Mason states that the people they invited were chosen because they seemed to the organisers to be trying to lead other people to think about oppression. All had taken some initiative around a particular impairment. Thus, for example, Maggie Woolley had been a leading figure in the Deaf Broadcasting Campaign. Keith Armstrong had edited a Disability Issue of Peace News. I had come to Micheline's attention because of 'Fall Down and Be Counted', a proposed film about being epileptic.

It was an extraordinary and emotional weekend, as we all talked about our life stories and the different experiences of oppression and discrimination we had each encountered. This was run in a very structured way. Micheline Mason states that the co-counselling background of the three course leaders gave them the skills to create a context in which people could feel free to talk about their lives and experiences that were sometimes very painful.

I think that is an entirely fair claim. Although a lot of us who became involved in the Network were uncomfortable with some aspects of re-evaluation counselling, we did need a tool for addressing the personal aspects of disability. Co-counselling provided that tool. As far as I am aware, the Network members who were already involved in co-counselling remained involved. Others benefitted from its techniques and moved on.

To understand why that weekend was such a powerful experience, one has to think back to how things were back then. There was no wider disability movement in the sense we would now know it. The social model was on the drawing board, but had not yet been named, let alone widely adopted. Just getting together in the same place was a significant achievement, given the lack of accessible transport.

We were having to work it all out from scratch and learn by experience.

For example, it hadn't occurred to anybody that at a course containing both blind and Deaf people one of the biggest problems would be how we all communicated with each other. But a couple of years later the Network's magazine 'In From The Cold' was one of the first radical publications to be available on tape as a matter of course.

The people at Lower Shaw farm, and those who joined the Network subsequently had all to a greater or lesser extent been trying to find some sort of politics around their own experience of impairment and of oppression. Most of us, men as well as women, had encountered the feminist idea that 'the personal is political', and seen that it applied to our situation as disabled people. But we had been trying to do that in isolation. For me, I arrived there not calling myself disabled. I hadn't met other disabled people. I hadn't, in 20 years of living with epilepsy, ever met anyone I knew to have my own disability. That weekend, I found acceptance and a disabled identity.

We were all making some such journey. To suddenly find ourselves with other like-minded disabled people, to suddenly be part of a group of disabled people was absolutely mind-blowing. We all wanted to continue that process, and we set up something called the London support group.

We soon found we were spending more and more time talking about politics, which was distracting from the basic purpose of the support group. We decided to form a separate organisation, which we called the Liberation Network of People with Disabilities.

At that point we missed an opportunity. We should have defined the relationship with RC more clearly. Most members of the Network, particularly those who joined later, assumed that it was a democratic organisation. The founders of the support group tended to assume that it still operated as part of RC, which made them to a greater or lesser extent the group leaders. This was to cause tensions later. The group contained what Jo Freeman, in her classic feminist paper, 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness' (1) calls an 'informal elite' - a controlling group who, because they have not been voted into power, can not be voted out.

The Network grew rapidly. By 1983 it had 150 members, the majority in

London and the Home Counties, but spread throughout the UK and also in Eire, Sweden, the Netherlands, West Germany and the USA. (2)

UPIAS had been going for several years at this point. But it had not reached out to the broad mass of disabled people in the UK. People I interviewed had on the whole been unaware of UPIAS's existence. This is partly because, as Colin Barnes (3) has pointed out, UPIAS functioned mainly through confidential correspondence circulated amongst its members. This literature had to be confidential because many UPIAS members were living in residential institutions. So there may well have been people who would have found their way to UPIAS rather than the Network had it had a higher public profile.

But it is also the case that UPIAS had defined a particular task - attacking the segregation of severely disabled people in residential institutions. They had also identified a need to establish a clear set of fundamental principles. What they had not done was to identify the fact that the great mass of disabled people were not shut away in institutions, but were disempowered by being cut off from each other. This strikes me as quite a serious failure by a group that had a stated aim of trying to build a mass democratic organisation.

I can't help wondering if there wasn't an element of dismissiveness about UPIAS's attitude, a presumption that the rest of us weren't really disabled, or were only dealing with personal issues instead of good big grown-up proper political analysis. Or that we were less seriously disabled, so that our issues didn't have to be looked at separately, but would automatically be covered by the existing analysis. Which would be to say that the degree of our oppression could be identified with the degree of our impairment. That would be interesting, wouldn't it? If the group who developed the social model turned out to have been viewing the rest of us through medical spectacles?

What I am suggesting is that if we were to have a disability *movement*, we had to overcome our isolation from each other, and we had to listen to each other's experience, to learn from each other. I think that the Liberation Network achieved those two things much more successfully than UPIAS.

The general political outlook of Network members was libertarian/left. One early member had trade union experience, I had been part of the radical news collective People's News Service, and I think the late Chris Harrison had previously been a member of IMG, but on the whole we had little experience of conventional left politics. No-one came to Network meetings selling copies of 'The Next Step'.

The most common political experience among the people interviewed was involvement with the women's movement. Others had had involvement with the squatting movement. So a lot of the membership were used to methods of organisation which were very different from the hierarchical structure of RC.

We were less politically sophisticated than UPIAS. I am not sure that that is necessarily a bad thing. UPIAS defined itself very clearly, and in the process defined a lot of people out. For example, its Policy Statement says 'Our position is similar to that of many people who are middle-aged or elderly, who have had break-downs, or are mentally handicapped'. In expressing solidarity, it also excludes. The Network had much fuzzier edges, which left it open to anyone who needed to find their way in. Though it too, in practice, failed to reach mental health survivors and people with learning disabilities.

The sharing of experiences was always an important part of Network activity. Meetings could be very emotional. I know that is regarded with a certain amount of derision by people outside the Network. One comment made to me was that, 'UPIAS made people think. The Network made people cry.' So I would like to emphasise how politicising it was to hear each other's detailed personal experiences. Finding out about Deaf issues or the difficulty of accessing political discussion if you have a visual impairment, or what it feels like to come round from a fit and see people crossing the road to avoid you. We moved from feeling distressed about our personal circumstances to feeling angry for disabled people as a group. We did have a tremendous sense of solidarity and Network members took that into the wider disability movement.

When I interviewed former Network members for this paper, a lot of them talked about finding friendship. Many of those friendships have lasted

longer than the Network itself. A couple of my interviewees talked about having fun, which is not a word I have ever heard applied to UPIAS.

The Network's activities included demonstrations such as the 1981 picket of the Human Values Conference at the Festival Hall, a key event of International Year of Disabled People, opened by Prince Philip, but not actually including disabled people.

We sometimes worked with UPIAS, for example on pickets of the Stoke Mandeville Games in protest at the presence of a South African team.

But the most important concrete achievement was the production of a magazine, 'In From The Cold'. We financed it ourselves, and had to sell the first issue before we could afford to produce a second. 1,000 copies of each issue were printed. Micheline reckons, judging by the letters the magazine received, that each copy was read by about six people. So the Network's ideas reached far beyond its formal membership.

No-one I talked to seems very sure how the Network came to an end. There certainly wasn't any massive rancorous break-up. The problems of structurelessness and questions about how the Network stood in relation to Re-evaluation Counselling certainly caused tensions. It didn't help that the people most likely to have problems with the tenets of RC were those with the most political experience, who took it for granted that the organisation would operate in regular democratic fashion. So the people most likely to drift away for that reason were some of the most active members of the Network, and also the members who would have been most likely to take the Network into greater involvement with the rest of the disability movement.

There were also problems arising from the insistence of some key figures that the Liberation Network was not an organisation. That reached its silliest at a meeting where the decision was taken that the Network should not join BCODP, because it was not an organisation, it was a Network. The implication seemed to be that the BCODP should be joining the Liberation Network. But if the Network was not prepared to work with other disabled people and their organisations, it was condemning itself to the sidelines.

The Liberation Network was a really important and effective entry point to disability radicalism. It was approachable, where UPIAS could seem a touch forbidding. It recognised that people who have been oppressed and isolated are likely to have a lot of feelings of distress, but gave them a way of dealing with that. It was open to a wide range of disabled people who consequently learnt about each other's situations.

Its legacy has been its members. The disability movement has gained a lot from all those empowered people with a strong sense of disability solidarity, imbued with the idea that we have to struggle for the rights of all of us. Because they were a younger generation of disabled people (which was one reason for the lack of political sophistication), a large number of them are still active.

Network members were influential in the development of disability equality training. They formed an important part of a number of significant organisations.

Network members were a significant part of the Alternative Talking Newspapers Collective, whose two publications 'Left Out' and 'Women's Tape-over' made radical material available to blind people -something the RNIB had never done.

They also played a major role in Fair Play, the campaign for Disabled People in the arts, founded in 1984.

Kirsten Hearn points to influence of the Network's methods in the Campaign for Accessible Transport, which regularly brought Central London's traffic to a halt in protest at the lack of accessible buses. One reason it was effective, she suggests was that, 'We did support each other. We'd make sure people were doing things they weren't scared of'.

Since the demise of the Network, the personal politics of disability has, I think, been under-valued in the subsequent development of our movement. I think our movement has been the poorer because of it.

Interestingly, one area where some kind of synthesis between the two

approaches has occurred has been in Disability Arts. The standard definition of Disability Arts is that it is art that is informed by personal *experience* of disability. In that statement, disability is being used in a social model sense, but the emphasis on lived experience is pure Liberation Network.

Former members of UPIAS such as Vic Finkelstein and Sian Vasey have been extremely influential in creating the organisational structures of the Disability Arts movement. But the content of Disability Arts has been heavily influenced by the Liberation Network. There is a large area of artistic practice that overlaps with personal politics, and much of Disability Arts falls into this area, so it is inevitable that there should be links. But Disability Arts has also been shaped by the fact that a lot of Network members always were working artists, including figures such as Sue Napolitano, Nancy Willis, Keith Armstrong and Mary Duffy.

Non-disabled members of the Network included Richard Tomlinson, the co-founder of Graeae Theatre and Gina Leveté, the founder of Shape. Shape's first disabled Director was Chris Davies, a Network member. Who was followed by Maggie Woolley, one of the people on that very first weekend. Ruth Bailey, one of my interviewees is a former editor of Disability Arts in London, the movement's journal of record.

Disability Arts gets some stick from disability politicians. It's messy and unstructured and doesn't always define its terms. It's full of lots of different people or different groups providing different approaches without stopping to vote on which one of them is the official line. It carries on in a way that is abhorrent to some of the more anal-retentive members of our movement.

But that's how democracy works when it's flourishing. I'm glad we have disagreement, because that means we can have debate. I'm glad disability arts has never defined exactly who its membership is, because that leaves it open for new groups of people to push their way in through that open door - and they have done so far more successfully in disability arts than in some other parts of our movement. Survivors and people with learning disabilities and people with neurological impairments have all made their way in and become part of what we do, extending our idea of who we are.

And the next time some group we haven't even thought about yet makes the case for being a part of our movement, it could be that they get together, produce a manifesto, write a letter to the Guardian. It does not follow that we will take any notice if they do. It's just as likely to happen because some individual artist reaches out us. And we hear their song, or we see their dance or we read their poem and it touches us. You don't necessarily need a huge intellectual exercise to get that moment of identity with someone else's experience that lets you know they share the oppression too.

Because the fact is that our movement needs a heart as well as a head. That heart beat in the Liberation Network and it beats today in Disability Arts.

References

- (1) Jo Freeman: The Tyranny of Structurelessness. Berkeley Journal of Sociology, Vol. 17, 1972_73, Ms. magazine, July 1973
- (2) Liberation Network of People with Disabilities. List of members - January 1983.
- (3) Barnes 2006: Understanding the Social Model of Disability: Background notes to a verbal presentation at the 'Reasonable Access to the Built Environment for Persons with Disabilities' Research Seminar, Weetwood Hall Hotel, Leeds.