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Footprints, Wheel Tracks, and Stirrings of a Movement: Positioning People with Disability and the Disability Rights Movement within Australia

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August 2007

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the School of Social Work and Community Welfare at James Cook University

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ABSTRACT

The Disability Rights Movement, which emerged internationally as a major force operating to emancipate people with disability, can be identified as leaving only fragile footprints within Australia. In contrast, there are other new social movements that have received a higher level of recognition, prominence and influence within Australia. A sampling of two of these movements—the Women's Liberation and Indigenous Rights Movements—were used to develop a tool for analysing the struggle of people with disability and the Disability Rights Movement in Australia. This research was framed through the critical inquiry, disability studies – emancipatory and critical pre-action paradigms. A documentary method was used, where annotations were made from literature representing the sampled movements. A study was presented of the sampled movements, with the aim of learning from these movements. An analysis tool was then developed for application to the Disability Rights Movement from the information gained. This tool involves three aspects: domains, which explore the roots of the struggle; details, which investigate significant visions, events, and voices within a context of local conditions and international influences; and dimensions, which explicated the levels of consciousness that develop through new social movements.

This analysis tool was then applied to disability literature in Australia. People with disability were identified, as a group within Australia, as having been oppressed and 'othered' by their non-disabled counterparts who have assumed medical, professional and economic dominance. This study established the positioning of people with disability in Australia as one characterised by exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence within the medical, professional and market domains. The struggles of the disabled 'other' were framed through the denial of citizenship, segregation within institutions, living on the margins of society and the Disabled Body. These themes were identified and explored as areas of oppression for people with disability in Australia.

Through an initial critical analysis, this study then revealed a fragmented picture of the Disability Rights Movement in Australia. An explanation was presented for these tensions, where two streams were identified within the movement, namely the ability stream and the disability pride stream. These streams were identified as running concurrently through the movement, creating a confluence which inhibits the movement from leaving significant footprints within Australia. Each of these streams, including their motivations and visions were evidenced.

This research concludes that disability in Australia is still considered within modern thought, and thus the 'othering' of people with disability within an hierarchy of dominance continues to be reinforced through regimes and institutions, and is evidenced through the privileged control of public and private spaces. The Disability Rights Movement in Australia was reviewed as individually fragmented, collectively divided and publicly restricted, allowing the privileged to maintain control and impose multiple definitions and interventions on the disabled 'other'. This research provides an alternative picture for the Disability Rights Movement in Australia, which frames

disability within post-modernity, evidencing counter-hegemonic strategies to challenge privileged control, a commitment to liberation, a celebration of diversity and a reclaiming of private and public spaces.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of my colleagues and friends, Dr Wendy Earles as my Principal Supervisor and Dr Greta Galloway, under whose supervision I developed this topic and completed this research project.

I would also like to thank James Cook University for the Australian Postgraduate Award which supported me during the length of my research.

Also, I must thank all the authors of works cited within this research. In particular I would like to thank those who recorded their movement histories, wrote their autobiographies, or voiced their opinions through the written word. Many of these authors have been an inspiration to me. This research would not have been possible without the recordings of each of these voices.

I cannot end without thanking my family, on whose constant encouragement and love I have relied upon throughout my time at university. In particular I would like to mention my parents, Stan and Francy Carling, who have seen me through too many years of study☺ and my husband Gary who met and married me during the course of these PhD studies (brave man).

This work however is dedicated to my son, Terry, who has borne the brunt of a distracted mother over the past three years. I started out on this research journey so that he may grow up in a better place, always optimistic in the value and contribution of academic work. For you, Terry, I promise to continue working towards this goal.

Prologue

The following is a rendition of an ancient parable, a story of the power of respect, a lesson in community building and a timely reminder for those of us who want to make a difference, but get discouraged and disillusioned against a backdrop of individualism, terrorism, economic rationalism and a widening gap between groups.

The Rabbi's Gift

(version written by Dr M Scott Peck, *The Different Drum*, 1987, pp.13 – 15)

The story concerns a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Once a great order, as a result of waves of anti-monastic persecution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the rise of secularism in the nineteenth, all its branch houses were lost and it had become decimated to the extent that there were only five monks left in the decaying mother house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. Through their many years of prayer and contemplation the old monks had become a bit psychic, so they could always sense when the rabbi was in his hermitage. "The rabbi is in the woods, the rabbi is in the woods again… " they would whisper to each other. As he agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to the abbot at one such time to visit the hermitage and ask the rabbi if by some possible chance he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. "I know how it is," he exclaimed. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things. The time came when the abbot had to leave. They embraced each other. "It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years," the abbot said, "but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?"

"No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, "Well what did the rabbi say?" "He couldn't help," the abbot answered. "We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving—it was something cryptic—was that the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant."

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbi's words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often *very* right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah. Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for You, could I?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant centre of light and spirituality in the realm.

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