

## Disability Liberation

### CJ Campbell

I often think of the quote that I've heard for years now regarding the climate that accompanied the rise of the Third Reich and the apathy that allowed it. It's a poem by a German pastor named Martin Niemöller (1946) who lived during the rise of Hitler.

First they came for the communists,  
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a communist.  
Then they came for the socialists,  
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a socialist.  
Then they came for the trade unionists,  
and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a trade unionist.  
Then they came for me,  
and there was no one left to speak for me.

Whenever I hear these words I cannot help but think of my past. I cannot help but think of the apathy that I used to have towards those around me who also had visible disabilities. It was my apathy that allowed me to believe the fallacy that I was different—that I was better. Living with cerebral palsy I never really looked at myself as disabled. I never really understood the societal stigma against disability. I never really understood the need for liberation from disability oppression. I was taught to believe that if I simply worked hard enough, that people's minds would be changed and I could be a success in this world. I didn't understand at the time that in a very masked way I was enchanted by the same propaganda that led millions to the slaughter: *Arbeit macht frei* [Work Makes You Free] (Sign over Dauchau Concentration Camp, 1940).

With this mentality, and apathy-laden lack of action, I became an oppressor. I let those with disabilities around me become “the Others,” instead of my brothers and sisters. The tools of massive, soul wrenching destruction known as a can-do attitude, and an oppressive interpretation toward the evolutionary principle of survival of the fittest, enabled me to become a champion of only one cause: the cause of myself.

I lived on an assumption based in pride; if I could adapt, so could they. I spent my childhood and adolescence in a home that had no structural modifications for accessibility. So I simply adapted, Whether that made my living conditions unsafe or not, it didn't matter. It was about making it to the next day, overcoming the obstacles, and proving everyone else wrong. Anyone else, crippled or not, should do the same. My home didn't even have a wheelchair ramp installed until I was 14 years old, and a Lutheran Church in my city scrapped one together. Until that time my wheelchair was left outside of the house. I functioned in my home without even the most necessary device to live independently. For me, that was just another badge of honor.

It's not that I did not understand that there was discrimination against individuals with disabilities; I just frankly didn't know how deep it was entrenched in our culture. I had really only experienced it within the teasing on the recess yard, and the rejection from flat chested girls from whom I desired nothing but their affection and adoration. I was naïve to the selfishness and greed, naïve to the unwritten creeds that are locked away in the hearts of the men who ruled our workplaces and our very way of life.

Even as I was forced into “special education,” I would always stumble upon the pictures inside my textbooks of smiling, wheelchair-bound children and adults enjoying full inclusion in the classroom as and full immersion into the corporate culture on the job.

On the days in which I needed to chase away boredom or depression I would daydream. I would imagine the people in these pictures deep in the throes of satisfying love lives, owning cars and homes, receiving accolades from both peers and superiors alike. These smiling faces were luminescent reminders that the triumph of the will was achievable.

During my latter years of high school I discovered two things that would ignited my conscience and forever changed my life: the teachings of Christ and my love of writing. These discoveries opened my eyes to the need of liberation in our world. The radical teachings of Christ that conveyed role reversal, service to the weakest among us, and most of all a rejection of the definition of enemy, began deconstructing the philosophical foundation that drove me to the mechanism of oppression. Writing opened the door was opened to a world of vast oceans of knowledge and wisdom for me to fish from. Writers such as Henry David Thoreau (*Walden*, 1854), Leo Tolstoy (*War and Peace*, 1869), and Jon Krakauer (*Under the Banner of Heaven*, 2003), helped me to understand the value of the earth and all its inhabitants.

However, I still functioned within a mentality of the slave's mind. So just as with any sort of other privilege I had, any gift or talent to use, I used it selfishly. In my final year of high school I was given the position of co-editor for the editorial section of my school newspaper. I could have been a torchbearer. I should have been the one writing about real issues. But my primary directive was to let others know how I thought and felt. It was all a ploy in hopes of snuffing out the assumption that I was mentally retarded.

My last year of high school was one of awakening. With a mere six months left until I would join the great graduation procession, ushering us into adulthood, my indoctrination began to lose its foothold. It all started when the governor of Illinois at the

time, Rod Blagojevich, came to our school to hold an assembly. After the assembly he searched for the best photo op—with a kid in a wheelchair sitting off to the side by himself. Me.

The governor asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I told him I wanted to be a pastor. While keeping perfectly in frame he sputtered out some platitudes, and waited for a flash. After the flash, he literally patted me on the head and walked away!. This was the catalyst of several events that would begin to strip away my uniform of vanity.

I realized that it did not matter to some people whether I was a gifted writer, or an intelligent and articulate person. To some I would only be defined as the lesser extent of the population, un-able to reach where the rest will go. In high school I can barely remember ever receiving guidance from a counselor regarding my path, unless it was required. I think back to this time with hindsight and understand why it was it was this way. It was this way because the expected path that was shown to me required little effort on their part.

A few months before graduation I had a more memorable meeting with a guidance counselor. Upon entering the drab office I expected to see brochures from colleges strewn in uniform rows about her desk, showing me all of the options. The only thing I saw on her desk was a small stack of forms from the Social Security office. She told me that I needed to immediately get on a waiting list for an apartment, and needed to fill out these forms so I would never have to worry about money.

When I brought up college, she explained to me that this was the better route, that Social Security made it easier for “people like me.” Did she not understand that I was

meant for greatness? She could not see that I had reached this moment in time, the precipice that separated me from childhood into adulthood. She didn't know that I planned on leaping from this summit to plunge into the icy waters of manhood and emerge to the surface with hands raised victoriously and defiantly over the hardships I had faced, reaching my true potential.

I knew at this point, like many things in my life, that I had to figure this situation out on my own. So I began the task of looking into and applying to Bible colleges. I kept running into hurdles, falling on the track of life and having no choice other than picking myself back up again. Most Bible colleges I couldn't afford to attend, because many didn't accept federal grants. Not only did I run into the financial hurdles, but the practical ones as well. The colleges did not have accessible facilities. After a few months of searching I found a college known for being tuition free. This was my only hope for higher education on my intended career path. This was my only hope to reach my potential.

An interview had been set up at the school with the admissions department. Upon my arrival at the college, I could feel I didn't belong. As I entered into the womb of this multimillion-dollar facility, watching the accepted students carrying stacks of purchased books and adorned in khakis and long sleeved button-up name brand shirts, I felt like a virus among the microcosm. I myself was coming from punk rock stock, wearing a brand-new pair of irregular sized blue jeans and a collared shirt from the outlet store. My intuitions were proven correct within the first five minutes of my interview.

After making introductions I was given the information that I would not be accepted into this institution for a number of reasons. I did not come from a Christian

home. According to what I had written in my financial background, they didn't think I would be able to pay the nearly \$9,000 it would cost to live on campus. But the staff's deepest area of concern was my disability. They explained to me that they had previously accepted a student who had sensitivities to light and sound, and that "it just didn't work out." They still wanted me to tour the campus, attend their chapel service, and enjoy a complimentary meal in their dining hall. I felt like I was being shown the world withheld from me while participating in the tour, like a hungry dog lying in wait under the dinner table. This would be a hunger I would feel nearly every day of my life.

I wasn't so much surprised by the outcome of the college interview, because my experience within the American church had already shown me where my place was, in most circumstances. Although it is not written on top of the front entrances, among many congregations the mantra of "work shall set you free" is subversively believed and peddled out as the sacramental decree given directly by G-d. I remember during my early years of faith going to my first summer camp, and feeling once again out of place because I could not experience camp in the same way my fellow campers did. In a rare moment of vulnerability for my 15-year-old self, I expressed to an older camper my sadness. His eyes lit up as he explained to me that I no longer needed to worry, because there was a woman who came to the camp every year, and she could heal me. I would be able to walk, run, jump, and freely express myself through dance and worship. I was shocked. Why had no one told me of this woman before? Why did no one ever tell me that I could just be "healed?" Why did every doctor fail me? What was the point of every surgery, every painful session of physical therapy? At this camp my imagined liberation

would come, and I would experience joy of a level that my young mind never knew was possible. I was to be finally set free!

Over the following days of the camp it became known that “the kid in the wheelchair” was going to seek healing. So, on the final night, it was announced that for anyone seeking healing from any affliction they could come and receive prayer. I made my move to the building where the woman was stationed. It seemed the entire camp was rank-and-file in procession behind me. Some of my fellow campers came forward with encouraging gestures. Some rambunctious boys told me they wanted to be on my team for my first game of basketball. More intriguing was that some of the prettiest girls in the camp were already claiming their spot to be my first dance. More troubling were the ones who would come up to me and say: “I asked during service tonight that G-d heal you as proof that He exists. I said that I would believe in G-\d if you rise to your feet and walk tonight.”

When I got to the room it was full of humanity and anticipation. The room was packed with young people hoping to be liberated from various ailments and impairments, whether they were those of the body, of the mind, or of the heart. I found a spot at the end of the line. The room was full of chatter—some whispering about me accompanied by the hushed mutterings and sometimes the wild outbursts of individuals praying in tongues. Many people were, in one way or another, placing some form of hope on me. I tried to keep things light hearted, cracking jokes and trying to bring laughter. Humor has always been my closest companion when trying to navigate this world. But humor did little on this night to keep the waves of anxiety from taking me over.

When it was finally my turn to be prayed over, the anxiety had quieted my voice to only soft replies. I approached a group of about a half-dozen people that was led by a woman with gaudy clothes and her hairstyle that reached near the heavens.(Not clear if the woman is reaching to the heavens or her hair is reaching. Can you clear up this description somewhat? ☺ She asked me why was there and I said I wanted to walk. I didn't *just* want to walk, though. I wanted most of all to be free. I wanted to be seen and respected. I wanted to be included. I no longer wanted to be subjected to every false notion, to every bit of weak theology that told me why I was the way I was, and that to be at my best I have to be walking on two legs. My fate rested on a mysterious god and these six individuals' ability to curry favor with it.

The ritual began with the anointing of my head with oil; and soon I became a spectacle for that room to watch as I was swallowed up in a strange chorus of unfamiliar prayers. Each individual plead for me, and some rebuked demons that I was not aware existed. The healer woman rebuked the spirit of retardation out of me. After my demons were told to flee I was hoisted up by each arm with the aid of a woman on each side of me, and I was marched around the room like cerebral palsy was my own wall of Jericho, in process of toppling down.

After about a half-hour of trying to get these atrophied legs of mine to hold up the hopes of that room, I asked to sit. I sat down in exhaustion and broke down and cried. I just couldn't be fixed, and I never knew until then that I needed fixing. I was offered a book of the Scriptures that reference healing, and a bottle of anointing oil. I was told that I could not experience G-d's perfect will and love until I was healed. I was to use these



tools every night, as long as it took, until I was walking. Then G-d would be able to “use” me.

This night did not mark my first dance with a girl after all. But it was the night when I saw myself in need of liberation. It was the night I declared war on disability. The powerful preaching brought from the pulpits for the workforce drowning became my battle cry. My resistance, my determination, my work would set me free.

I applied to a non-accredited pastoral school, knowing then that it was my only hope. I will be forever thankful to that school for giving me a chance. However, this small school was not prepared to make accommodations for person with disability to attend. And I was not prepared to ask for accommodations. I, like many others, deal with the burden that asking for help forces me to willingly accept the stigma of weakness.

For years I would opt out of “taking shortcuts.” I would take the stairs daily to show I could overcome them. I functioned within student housing without grab rails and safe access to the bedrooms on the second floor. For two years I labored in silence, and I felt a holistic strain within me. It was as if I held onto a terminal illness in secret, and was hoping to never be found out. I always had this fear that one day I wouldn’t be strong enough, and inevitably that day would come.

During my final year at this pastoral school I had begun to feel an inner and outward pressure to succeed. At the end of this year I would need to find a job and a place to live. I was given some small amounts of responsibility on top of my academics. From my perspective, there was no room for failure. I was forgoing sleep in order to maintain excellence

I focused my hope at the yearly pastoral conference in Phoenix. This is where I was told I would be able to dream, and where I could receive direction for my life, and possibly a job. The trip itself was not as dreamy as it was described. A 40-hour van ride, sleeping on many hard surfaces, and a primarily fast food diet took a heavy toll on my body. Instead of dreams and visions I received overwhelming isolation and constant lecturing from strangers on my need for “healing.”

In certain circles within the American Christian church, disability is a scarlet letter that needs to be washed away. It needs to be addressed and rectified. For some the idea to not try and fix me would be a disservice to me. So my deepest needs of employment and acceptance were left unfulfilled.

One of the greatest failings of our society is the tendency to search out what is easy rather than what is needed. It was on this trip I knew that there was no escape from disability without deconstructing the vision of the collective societal ethos. Those wishing to bring a curative salve of salvation to my body did not perceive that they were in need of liberation from their own disabled thinking.

The only thing I got from my time in Phoenix was a bad chest cold that weakened my body. Then came the day that my fear chose to manifest itself. I had spent the last two days in bed, and as I attempted to transfer from a sitting to a standing position in the bathroom I fell backwards onto the bathtub. This fall would leave me confined to a bed for the next two weeks. I was unaware of it, but during this time a common bacteria was wreaking havoc on my weakened body while it slowly made its way down to my lymph nodes. I would make an attempt to return to class after two weeks, but my body gave out and I was carted away in a wheelchair. I would spend four more months in bed. The day

had finally come to pass where the very weapons I wielded brought me—a self-described soldier of fortune—down.

Over those next four months I became a prisoner of my own body. The tool that I used to overcome was now the key that was keeping me locked away. I became starkly aware of every appendage that didn't work properly, every slowed motor function. I began to hate everything about myself. I wasn't strong enough; and I was a burden to everyone around me. I felt lonely. But I wasn't alone, not all the time. Those truest of true would be the ones to help me make it. These are the ones that you can call friends; the ones that help you get by.

I would barely graduate, but nonetheless I would be announced as Rev. C.J. Campbell on the night of my graduation. I could not allow myself to feel accomplished, though, because of the presence of a black cloud casting its shadow over my present and future. In a mere three days I would have to leave my dorm and be pushed out into an unknown. I was not called for a job; and I wasn't one of the select few asked to return as an intern. I only had the menial job of a movie theater ticket taker to look to for stability.

There are few times I can say wholeheartedly that I've been embraced by individuals or groups. But I can say without a doubt that Pastor Bob Kendall, along with his family and the congregation of the Breakabeen-North Blenheim Presbyterian Church in Breakabeen, New York have me feel more loved than I have ever felt in my life. I was a classmate with Bob's middle son. Whenever the Kendall family would come into town I was always welcome to join them for a meal. So it wasn't any surprise to me when the Kendalls invited me out to a celebratory dinner after graduation. What did surprise me is what came up during our dinner conversation. Bob had inquired about what my future

plans looked like post graduation earlier in the week. I tried to seem like I had some idea of where I was going.

The truth is I had no idea. I was about to head into full adulthood with a legal tender education, no steady place to live, and a part-time job that offered little opportunity for progression. So when Bob and his wife offered to have me move up to their small village in upstate New York I said yes without further pondering. During the summer I worked, and dealt with all the discrimination in stride, because I knew this job was just a steppingstone to dreams realized. During the period in which I was bed ridden I had become disillusioned and resolute at the very same time. I had become disillusioned with the expression of Christianity and its church that I had been taught. I had become resolute to find if another way was possible.

In August of 2008 I packed up my life into four storage totes and boarded a plane to once again start my life over. My life in New York was in stark contrast to any previous experience I had ever had. I had taken an unofficial role as an assistant pastor to the small rural congregation. Coming from a more modern suburban mega-church model, the reprieve from it into a small tight-knit community gave me new freedom and opportunity. I was asked to preach every couple weeks, and eventually was asked to take over operations of the food pantry that served over 300 families monthly. Coordinating the food pantry would also allow me to be given a small weekly salary of \$100. Although this sum of money wasn't much, it did allow me to give back so I wouldn't be a complete burden to the ones who opened their homes and hearts to me.

This is not to say that New York was a utopia for me. It came with its hardships as well. Living in a small village with little infrastructure left me little opportunity for

independence. I always had to depend on someone for something. For the most part, the only thing I could control was the ability to dress myself. Because of the small amount of income I received I could never really establish myself as a capable adult. This wasn't something mentioned out loud. It was more just an undercurrent of thought. I felt it in the tone of people's voices during meetings, when my responsibilities were referenced or discussed. It was not discrimination or intentional lack of respect. It was simply coming from the belief that I could not take care of myself. It wasn't that they didn't love my personality, or respect my intelligence. It was out of a perception that I needed to be taken care of, and I didn't have the tools to do it on my own. With the living situation I was in, coupled with my financial prospects, my capability was masked from their eyes.

In the time I spent in New York I was comfortable in a lot of ways. But I never really felt secure with myself, or with my place in the community. When the stock market crashed in 2009 my small rural church lost what financial security it had and was forced to make some sweeping budget changes. Including my salary, the church also paid my personal assistant to drive the 30 mile round trip to and from the office. I was asked to cut down on my office hours, but was reassured I would still receive the same salary. I continued to work for a few months, despite my growing feelings of uselessness and being burdensome. In my time of self-reflection I could see my future in New York as being comfortable but stagnant. That is why during a meeting with the church elders, when they were finally forced to ask for me to take a 50% pay cut, I offered my resignation and announced my plans to move back to the Chicago area with the potential job of working with homeless teens.

When I left the love, comfort, and stability of New York I had no idea that I was venturing out into a wilderness ruled by ravenous wolves whose teeth are sharpened by bureaucracy in the name of politics. I had not known at the time, but I picked the worst period to try to work in the state of Illinois as a social worker. Illinois at the time was ranked 51<sup>st</sup> behind Guam for social program funding. My plan was originally to take the summer off and live on my mom's couch as I waited for the program I planned to be hired by to receive funding. During that summer, the program funding fell through, I was dropped by my insurance, and then had three medical emergencies including complication stemming from a relapse of anorexia. I was on the verge of homelessness for nearly nine months, left with few options. I began to starve myself. I began to attack my body—the one thing I needed to depend on the all these years that repeatedly failed me.

In December 2010 I officially went on Social Security. I lost the battle for independence that I had fought nearly my entire life. Where I once saw myself as a soldier of fortune, I am now a soldier of poverty. At the end of every month I drowned in poverty; and at the beginning of every month I am rescued by it.

When I hear of the work of liberation movements, I think of the time I wasted—the time in which I ignored the plight of others until I became the Other. It is now that I battle depression and oppression that I now find myself pleading for the liberation of us all. I do not write these words to invoke pity, but to invoke the recognition of the need for freedom on all fronts.

Before we can end the systems of oppression we must liberate those that are dependent upon those systems for sustenance, to allow those who seek peace, justice, and

mercy to champion the cause. If you seek to liberate the earth and all its inhabitants I ask you to unlock your heart and eyes, your mind and imagination to see that liberty withheld on one end enslaves us all. It is you the sojourners, the seekers of another world, that I ask to recognize the collective human body, and to seek understanding that the human race collectively is impaired.

In our shared history we have been enamored with the idea of warfare. It is present in our folklore, our arts, and values. It has been used to conserve a present way and to forge new ground. It is for these very reasons why we must not forget the words of Martin Niemöller: “Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me.”

We must not allow ourselves to take on the debilitating blindness of apathy, lest we become ignorant and therefore become prisoners in silence to the structures we allow to continue. Those who seek justice and liberation, whether it is for the animal, the environment, or humanity must realize we are caught in the middle of a world war. It is the war between the world that is in our midst, and the world we wish to see.