



Love, sex, disability, coming out and John Travolta in New York and Jerusalem: A twenty-year journey

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Personal Narrative

Before getting into the details of my story a little background is important. My disability is both dystonia musculorum deformans and epilepsy. The dystonia is the most visible of my disabilities. When I first developed it, the disease manifested itself as paralysis on the left side of my body. My dystonia was an atypical case in that it affected my arm and wrist more than my leg. My left wrist and fingers were totally paralyzed and when I walked my left foot walked on the heel. The left dimple on my face was not as deep as the right dimple when I smiled. Sitting up required a great deal of energy because I did not know what to do with my left arm. My left arm could not be raised as high as my shoulder.

The dystonia began at age fourteen when I was in ninth grade, during which I applied to and was accepted into the Bronx High School of Science. This happened in 1970. However, my first non-masturbatory erotic experience happened in 1966 when I was ten years old and before my disability. In that year my father took me out for my birthday, just him and me. He was an alcoholic. After dinner we went to a bar that had a belly dancer. My father seemed to know her and he told her that it was my birthday. She made a big fuss over me. It made me uncomfortable. This being before Stonewall¹ and in a more innocent era, I didn't know why. I had to wait until I was twenty to discover why I had felt that way.

The world in which I became disabled and the world in which I came out were very different from the world of the early twenty-first century. This was a period preceding the US television series *Glee*. On *Glee*, as in today's society, both gay



and disabled characters (although they are not the same characters) are accepted. This was not true then and Stonewall was just starting to affect American society.

Stonewall, the event that triggered gay liberation, happened in 1969. I was only thirteen and not yet disabled. Very few people, at the age of thirteen, discussed the event or LGBTQ people (they were all homosexuals then or queers [and queer not in a good way]). I read a short article about it in the *New York Post* and was turned on. Yet I was still so very unconscious of my life, myself, and my desires that I didn't make the connection that reading about gay men excited me because I was one of them.

When I became disabled in 1970 society was also different than it is in the twenty-first century for the disabled and their sexuality. According to my understanding and limited experience as a young teenager, American society at that time had only two role models for the disabled: Dickens's Tiny Tim from *A Christmas Carol* and Helen Keller. Dickens describes Tiny Tim and his attitude towards being disabled as follows:

And how did little Tim behave?" asked Mrs. Cratchit . . . "As good as gold," said Bob, "and better. Somehow he gets thoughtful, sitting by himself so much, and thinks the strangest things you ever heard. He told me, coming home, that he hoped the people saw him in the church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember upon Christmas Day, who made lame beggars walk, and blind men see." (Dickens, 1988, 52–53)

In other words the disabled were to be an object of pity; a problematic and an asexual one.

The other role model for the disabled then was Helen Keller. Her story was well known and had been reinforced by director Arthur Penn in his 1962 movie adaptation of William Gibson's play *The Miracle Worker*. Not to take anything away from either Annie Sullivan or Helen Keller, but they work miracles! Helen Keller went on to graduate college. She learned to speak although her parents had been told she couldn't do so. She was "Super Crip." Although Sullivan flirts with James Keller, Helen's older brother in the movie, as soon as he sees her disabled eyes he drops her. That's all the disabled could look forward to in 1970.

Granted President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was disabled and had married, but his disability was hidden and not spoken about at the time. Things didn't change in

larger society until 1978. That year a film, *Coming Home*, was released. That film told the story of the wife of an American soldier in Vietnam, played by that year's Oscar-winner Jane Fonda who had an affair with a paralyzed returned soldier, played by John Voight. The film was a topic of general conversation both around "water coolers" and in the media. Not because Fonda's character and Voight's character had an affair! No, they were shocked and surprised that Voight's disabled character was sexual (Fonda has oral sex with him in the movie). The shock of finding out that the disabled were sexual beings started to change society and eventually my life too.

In 1971 when I was fifteen, I was lucky and was taken by my mother to upper Manhattan to Columbia Presbyterian Hospital's [now known as New York-Presbyterian/Columbia University Medical Centre] emergency room. They were not sure what was causing the paralysis and so admitted me. Columbia Presbyterian and now New York-Presbyterian/Columbia University Medical Centre is a teaching hospital. I was eventually seen by a doctor whose father was the head of neurology at Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York City. Because of his father's profession and connection with a Jewish hospital, he recognized my paralysis as Dystonia. I was told it was a rare Jewish disease and that there was no treatment. I took part in a trial for a Parkinson's medication called L-DOPA. The drug did not do an awful lot for me, but it did make it slightly more comfortable to sit up in a chair.

There was one other new Parkinson's treatment that could be tried. It was a brain operation that had been developed by Dr. Alan Cooper at St. Barnabus Hospital in the Bronx. My family had decided we were not going to try this operation until, or unless, the L-DOPA did not work. The reasoning being that whilst you can stop taking medicine, an operation is permanent. The operation is called a cryothalamectomy. Cryo means cold and a thalamectomy is the removal of the thalamus. So the operation destroys part of the thalamus using cold; in this case liquid nitrogen. I had the operation at St. Barnabus, but not by Dr. Cooper. I had it performed by his younger associate, Dr. Waltz, who I called "the dancing doctor." Anyway, the operation was a success. It released my left hand, but not my left wrist. My left foot relaxed to the point where I now walk on the sole of the foot, at least most of the time. My right dimple is still deeper than my left dimple, but I have a beard so you really cannot tell anymore. The operation is done while the patient is awake and uses only a local anaesthetic. The creepiest part of the operation is that while they were drilling through my skull in order to insert a needle into my brain

I heard the drilling going on. Once they had created a hole the size of a nickel in my skull they inserted a needle and stimulated various areas to see what they controlled. When they found the area related to the Dystonia they destroyed it with liquid nitrogen. They then stitched me up and I then went to the recovery room. I slept for two or three days after the operation.

During the time I was disabled I had received home instruction and graduated junior high school. Obviously, since I was disabled and stuck mainly at home I didn't date, nor did I meet people. After the operation, in the fall of 1972, I was able to return to school. Since I had been previously accepted into the Bronx High School of Science, a specialized school that emphasized science, it was arranged that I would start there as a sophomore in tenth grade.

I returned to school with a very pronounced limp and a bald head (my head had been shaved for the operation). My arm was stiff and fairly immobile, as was my left wrist. I was also extremely shy and had a low sense of self-esteem (after all, I was different. Although nobody said that, I felt it). I had almost no friends. I do not know if people dated, but being only four years after Stonewall, there was certainly no gay life at the school. In 1973, I graduated from high school.

In the fall of 1973 I started Hunter College of the City University of New York (CUNY). It was an interesting place. All the stalls or most of the stalls in the men's rooms had holes in their partitions. I was so innocent that I had no idea what these were. They were glory holes. You could make a connection with the guy in the other booth and he could stick his penis through the hole or you could stick yours through to be played with. Once I knew that it explained the many dried stains on the stall's walls. It took me a while at Hunter to learn that this was their use and to use and enjoy them sexually in this manner.

Since my major was in archaeology, I decided in 1975 to go to a school with a better reputation for archaeology, The Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Israel. It was and still is one of the premier schools for biblical archaeology. I applied and was accepted. I have no family in Israel, but I thought it would be like New York only in Hebrew. I was completely wrong.

In fall of 1975 I moved to Israel just to go to school. I was put in an ulpan, an immersive class, to learn Hebrew, and I began to make friends. My best friend had a girlfriend, but I did not yet understand that I was gay. I was very homesick. Jerusalem and Israel are nothing like New York in Hebrew.

As a whole, I did not run into any prejudice against the disabled. Israeli society was very accepting of the disabled since the country had a great many men and women who had become disabled as soldiers during the multiple wars Israelis had been involved in. They were treated very well by the members of society and completely accepted. In this respect, I felt that Israeli society was ahead of American society. But there was a catch! This only applied to the disabled who were disabled due to military actions. Citizens born disabled were seen as second-class citizens because they were unable to go into the army. Nonetheless, my fellow students in my dorm on Mount Scopus accepted me.

To combat my homesickness, I started going to the movies whenever I could. I began going to the movies they showed on campus and eventually started going to the Jerusalem Cinematheque where I commenced watching both old and foreign movies. I became a regular and began speaking with the people who like myself, were waiting for the doors to open both in the street and in the lobby. One of them was an older British Gentleman, L., who was in Jerusalem teaching English as a second language. I found him interesting in that he knew a lot about movies and he had travelled widely teaching. During this time I was spending more on movies than on food so that when he invited me over to his house for a meal, I accepted. That was the night I lost my virginity.

Both American and Israeli societies were still largely homophobic. However, American society was more explicitly sexual in general. The 1970s were the height of the sexual revolution in America. Jerusalem is considered a holy city, so my orientation had to be kept pretty much a secret. The only ones I told were my closest friends from America and they accepted me. In spite of that, Jerusalem and archaeology were not a good fit for me and, in 1976, I returned home. As stated, the 1970s were the height of the sexual revolution in America. I found a New York City full of opportunities for sex. I picked people up on the subway on my way to wherever I was going; I met them in subway men's rooms, in the street, and in Central Park. In spite of being able to find sex easily, I was unable to find a boyfriend. Granted, since sex was so easy to find, gay men were not looking for boyfriends, but because I didn't have the right look, the right clothes or the right style, I found fewer people interested in me as time went on. This got worse after 1977. In that year *Saturday Night Fever* was released and the country went disco crazy with John Travolta's character, Tony Manero, as the model and the ideal, especially in

his dance moves. My disability prevented me from making those dance moves. Hence I was a very poor choice for a date. Finally, in the middle of the 1980s just as AIDS was proliferating, I met someone who didn't care about style or dance moves. I don't know what happened in the dating world again until around 1996 when he and I broke up.

Finally in the mid-1990s I started dating again. The world had changed! It was a change I still see today. People see more of me and less of my disability. Part of the change, in my opinion, has to do with several images of the disabled as sexual beings that have been widely communicated throughout American society. Two of the most prominent of these are the character of Luke Martin, the quadriplegic played by Jon Voight, in the 1978 Academy Award winning film, *Coming Home*. Another more contemporary disabled character with a libido is Artie Abrams, the teen in the wheelchair in the television series, *Glee*. Several *Glee* episodes in the second season show him dating & kissing a girl, Brittany. As stated, it is nearly impossible to find a sexualized disabled character prior to 1978. With gay marriage and gay rights being prominent topics in the United States the stigmatization of LGBTQ people in the U.S. has waned in many states. All of this makes it easier to be a disabled gay man in the United States in the early twenty-first century as opposed to being one in the middle of the twentieth century. When all of these changes are added to the fact that general society has seen more openly gay people since the start of the AIDS crisis, such as Rock Hudson, has meant, in my opinion that, especially in urban areas in the United States, LGBTQ people are more visible and hence have become more acceptable to most people. Pro-gay Supreme Court decisions, such as the June, 2015 decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* that decided that same-sex marriage was legal in the entire United States or the 2003 decision in *Lawrence v. Texas*, that struck down homosexual sodomy laws, effectively legalizing gay sex, have also helped to make LGBTQ people more visible and more acceptable, although it should be noted that transgendered people are still experiencing a great deal of prejudice and transphobia.

Endnotes

- ¹ AKA The Stonewall Rebellion. Stonewall was a riot by gay men against New York City Police that took place in the Stonewall Bar, a gay bar, in Manhattan's West Village on the evening of June 28, 1969. This event is considered the start of the Gay Rights Movement.

References

Dickens, Charles. 1998. "A Christmas Carol." In *Christmas Books*, edited with an introduction by Ruth Glacy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 52–53.