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## Teaching What I'm Not: An Able-Bodied Woman Teaches Literature by Women with Disabilities

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*Teaching What I'm Not:  
An Able-Bodied Woman Teaches  
Literature by Women  
with Disabilities*

BARBARA DIBERNARD

I had no awareness of disability issues when I saw a sign at a busy intersection of carpeted footpaths at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival in 1985: "Be aware of slow-moving Amazons." This sign made me look at my surroundings in a different way. When I did, I realized that women with many kinds of disabilities were participating fully in the festival, and that I wasn't used to seeing these women in my daily life. Yet I knew instantly that they were there; it was my awareness that had changed. Since inclusiveness was one of my goals as a feminist teacher, I resolved to seek out literature by women with disabilities and teach it. This was the beginning of a journey that had a profound impact on me and on my teaching.

The first writings by women with disabilities that I read were in *With the Power of Each Breath: A Disabled Women's Anthology*. I knew immediately that I would use this book in my teaching. In the fall semester of 1988 I ordered it for a senior graduate-level course, Twentieth-Century Women Writers. I looked forward to the class, a night class that I knew would have a number of nontraditional students, and was quite pleased with my decision to integrate litera-

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ture by women with disabilities into the class. However, my complacency was quickly shattered the first night when a woman in a wheelchair wheeled into the room. My first reaction was, “How are we going to talk about disability with *her* here?” I knew then that I had a lot of work to do in coming to terms with my own relationship with and feelings about disability and my identity as an able-bodied person. One of the complications of “teaching what you’re not” I had not foreseen is “teaching what you’re not in the presence of those who are.”

Joni, who had had polio as an infant and had therefore lived virtually her entire life as a person with a disability, helped to educate us all. One evening when students were getting very excited and angry in discussing the way the media portray women as sex objects, Joni stopped us cold. “Who are you talking about when you say ‘women’?” she asked. “I have never seen a woman who looks like me used as a sex object to sell a car. In fact, I would like someone to look at me as a sex object sometime.” It was one of the most profound moments I have ever experienced in a classroom. In an instant, Joni revealed that our use of the word “women” did not include her, a woman sitting in the room with us at that moment. On a broader scale, her comments showed one of the problems with “identity politics” — we are allowed to “be” only one thing at a time; our identities are reduced to one dimension, and differences are erased or overlooked. Joni was visible as a person with a disability, but not as a woman. The rest of us in the room, all of whom would be seen as “able-bodied” by others, had not taken account of our able-bodied locations. Without a doubt, we saw ourselves at the center, Joni at the margin, ourselves as “women,” Joni as “disabled.”

Through my teaching of literature by women with disabilities, I have tried to do what Adrienne Rich suggests we must do with other privileged locations such as whiteness: “to experience the meaning of [our able-bodiedness] as a point of location for which [we need] to take responsibility” (219). Although I started out at the

first stage of curriculum integration by “adding and stirring” literature by women with disabilities into a course on twentieth-century women writers, reading and teaching the literature have changed my perceptions of myself and the world. I feel my identity now not as a woman who “happens to be” able-bodied, but as a woman whose able-bodiedness is a location for which I need to take responsibility. I need to acknowledge it overtly as the place from which I experience the world and from which I do my work. I hope the same for my students by the end of the semester, although developmentally it’s a long journey to make in fifteen weeks if people with disabilities have not even been visible before.

While Joni was a significant resource and teacher for all of us, while she generously and thoughtfully shared her experiences as a person living with a disability, she also made it clear that it was important to her that an able-bodied person had chosen to teach this literature, that I saw it as important to teach “what I was not.” It was also the first time in four years at the University of Nebraska, she said, that this aspect of her experience had been included in a class. First, it was affirming and empowering to her; second, it made the lives of women with disabilities visible to the other students; third, it complicated the category of “woman” in a way that made a unitary identity politics of gender impossible.

In order to take account of my own location, it seems necessary to ask some seemingly elementary questions. What does it mean to be “disabled”? What does it mean to be “able-bodied”? What are the implications of these identities in terms of the title of this book. *Teaching What You’re Not*? Is there an identity politics in disability studies that enables me to be “not” disabled? Unlike some (but not all) identities, being “disabled” can be changeable for some people. Some people who have been blind recover their sight; some people with disabling diseases and conditions go into remission. Being “able-bodied” is a changeable condition as well. I could become disabled in a moment, through accident or disease. Joseph Shapiro

points out that “Fewer than 15 percent of disabled Americans were born with their disabilities” (7). Does this make my being an able-bodied person at this time (or “temporarily able-bodied”),<sup>1</sup> teaching literature by women with disabilities, different from my being a white person teaching African American literature? After all, a white person cannot become African American. Of course, other identities also seem changeable; for example, many people who have lived for years as heterosexual later come to identify as lesbian or gay. Are there some identities that are immutable, biological, and some that are not? Underlying these questions is a larger question about identity politics. Are there some identities that “count” in identity politics? “Gender, race, and class” is a trilogy we often hear recited in academic work. However, I think we must ask what this trilogy excludes, and we must complicate our notions of identity beyond it.

Is disability an identity that “counts” in identity politics? A wide range of conditions and experiences is covered in the term “disability.” The editors of *With the Power of Each Breath* write in their introduction that they began working on the book “with a strong political commitment to produce an anthology representative of all disabled women. We wanted the impossible: that this collection would be *the* definitive statement by and about disabled women. It is not” (11). As “disability” is used in the United States, it includes people with visual and hearing impairments, people who are quadriplegic, people who are paraplegic, people with other kinds of mobility impairments, people with heart conditions, people with multiple sclerosis, people with epilepsy, people with medical complications due to diabetes, and people with mental disabilities, among other things. It’s clear that the experience of disability will be very different depending on what kind of disability a person lives with. What we call “disabled” is a multiple, not unitary, set of conditions and experiences. Can it then be an “identity”?

Michelle Fine has pointed out that other factors also influence a

person’s experience of her or his disability, although most researchers have not acknowledged this in their work:

To date, almost all research on disabled men and women seems simply to assume the irrelevance of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or social class. Having a disability presumably eclipses these dimensions of social experience. Even sensitive students of disability ... have focused on disability as a unitary concept and have taken it to be not merely the “master” status but apparently the exclusive status for disabled people. Paralleling what Hester Eisenstein (1983) has described as the “false universalism” of feminist writing of the 1970s, the disability rights literature has chosen to stress commonalities among all disabled people rather than differences. (141)

Since the term “person with a disability” falsely universalizes as much as 1970s feminist writing did with “woman,” it is important to take account of the degree to which the category is socially constructed and the effect this has on a person’s identity. Fine states,

It is ironic to note that the very category that integrates this text, “disabled girls and women,” exists wholly as a social construct. Why should a limb-deficient girl, a teenager with mental retardation, or a blind girl have anything in common with each other or with a woman with breast cancer or another woman who is recovering from a stroke? What they share is similar treatment by a sexist and disability-phobic society. (144)

Another way of talking about the socially constructed nature of “disabled” as an identity is to distinguish between “disability” and “handicap.” Debra Connors writes that a classmate of hers made this distinction: “A disability, she explained, is a physical or mental impairment. A handicap is a set of social conditions which impede our independence” (92). Michelle Fine elaborates:

Likewise in the past twenty years, both the study and the politics of disability have undergone transformation. Activists and scholars have insisted that the *disability* (the biological condition) be conceptually disentangled from the *handicap* (the social ramifications) of the condition. Obstacles to education, community and political participation, independent living, employment, and personal relation-

ships derived not from the incapacities, for example, of individuals in wheelchairs to walk stairs but in the existence of the stairs themselves. If people with mobility impairments could not enter buildings without ramps or ride inaccessible buses, the fault was in the structures and the transportation system, not in their bodies. If people who wished to work could not because of the medical standards that barred anyone with a history of heart disease, cancer, epilepsy, or obesity or anyone with diabetes or visual or hearing impairments, the problem might be one of arbitrary medical standards, and not of a person's inherent incapacity to perform specific job tasks. If young adults with sensory, motor, or learning disabilities were not attaining a postsecondary education, perhaps the problem lay not in their biology but in the institution's architecture, testing requirements, or admissions standards. (143)

Debra Connors analyzes the social construction of disability in a historical context: "Disability is not a medical problem; nor is ableism just a set of prejudicial ideas about disabled people. Disability is a social institution which has developed alongside capitalism. Our societal position has been shaped by history and is inextricably woven into the fabric of American culture. There is no reason to assume that medical conditions are disabilities or that they should necessarily be stigmatizing" (93).

People with disabilities report consistently on aspects of a "disabled identity" that are attributed to them by other people. They are considered childlike and often treated like children; they are considered asexual, mentally impaired no matter what their disability, dependent, passive, lazy, and unemployable.

However, it is also true that with the advent of a disability rights movement in the United States, many people feel proud to claim their identity as people with disabilities, acknowledging that both the physical and social elements of disability have shaped their experience and therefore their identities. In the film *Positive Images: Portraits of Women with Disabilities*, one woman states that she is insulted when a person says, "I don't even notice that you are disabled." She says that a close friend would never make that state-

ment, because a friend would know how much her disability is a part of her. Joseph Shapiro begins his book *No Pity* with a similar example:

Nondisabled Americans do not understand disabled ones.

That was clear at the memorial service for Timothy Cook, when longtime friends got up to pay him heartfelt tribute. "He never seemed disabled to me," said one. "He was the least disabled person I ever met," pronounced another. It was the highest praise these nondisabled friends could think to give a disabled attorney who, at thirty-eight years old, had won landmark disability rights cases, including one to force public transit systems to equip their buses with wheelchair lifts. But more than a few heads in the crowded chapel bowed with an uneasy embarrassment at the supposed compliment. It was as if someone had tried to compliment a black man by saying, "You're the least black person I ever met," as false as telling a Jew, "I never think of you as Jewish," as clumsy as seeking to flatter a woman with, "You don't act like a woman." (3)

Shapiro goes on to explain that while he knows that these speakers felt they were sincerely praising Cook, it is now possible for people with disabilities to have pride in being disabled, or at least seek not to hide it as a shameful thing. "As a result of an ongoing revolution in self-perception, they (often along with their families) no longer see their physical or mental limitations as a source of shame or as something to overcome to inspire others. Today they proclaim that it is okay, even good, to be disabled" (4).

My teaching rests on the assumption that there *is* a self-conscious identity of "a woman with a disability." The literature I teach is not by women who "happen to be" disabled; it is by women who have consciously thought about their identities as having both a physical and a socially constructed component. They are women who, even if they are first-time writers, responded to an external or internal call to write about their experiences as women with disabilities. Such self-identification obviously has a significant political component; it makes a political movement possible. This is an important time for people with disabilities to identify as such because previous

liberation movements in the United States have largely excluded them. During the 1992 election, for example, a writer for the *Disability Rag* pointed out, "It's the year of the woman in politics, heralded in the press, on TV, by the pols, the pollsters, and the pundits. It's also been the year of gay and lesbian issues. ... But neither party has given as much as lip service to disability rights" (i, 4).

As a feminist, I know that all oppressions are linked; they have a similar dynamic, and we cannot erase one without working against them all. I know that a woman with a disability experiences her identity as complex, with gender, race, sexual orientation, class, physical ability, and other aspects all factors in how she experiences the world. I believe that including women with disabilities challenges many of our theories and generalities, making our descriptions of the world richer and more complicated. Sandra Harding's description of feminist standpoint epistemology is helpful here. This epistemology is based on the notion that knowledge is socially situated and that in a stratified society, "empirically more accurate descriptions and theoretically richer explanations" result from using the resources of a lower-status group to view nature and society (119). Harding uses gender, but I believe that disability standpoint epistemology operates the same way. Like gender, the standpoint of disability presents a "less partial and distorted ... picture of nature and social relations" (121) than a conventional view, because "in systems of domination the vision available to the rulers will be both partial and perverse" (Hartsock, quoted in Harding 120).

But Harding cautions that a standpoint is not the same as a point of view:

In a socially stratified society the objectivity of the results of research is increased by political activism by and on behalf of oppressed, exploited, and dominated groups. Only through such struggles can we begin to see beneath the appearances created by an unjust social order to the reality of how this social order is in fact constructed and maintained. The need for struggle emphasizes the fact that a feminist [I would substitute "disability"] standpoint is not some-

thing that anyone can have simply by claiming it. It is an achievement. A standpoint differs in this respect from a perspective, which anyone can have simply by "opening one's eyes." (127)

As an able-bodied woman, I see myself as a social and political ally by teaching literature by women with disabilities through the lens of disability standpoint epistemology. I am also an activist on disability issues. I have written letters to the editor about ableist language in newspaper articles; I have protested the lack of an adequate and working elevator in a new arts center, including letters to the editor, to university officials, and to a state senator; I have boycotted and urged others to boycott local theaters that are not accessible. For me, feeling I can use disability standpoint epistemology has been the result of reading, talking with people with disabilities, and attending workshops. I have read everything I have come across by and about women with disabilities, disability theory, and disability politics. I subscribe to and read the *Disability Rag* regularly. Women with disabilities have been generous in talking with me and helping me understand the reality of their lives. Workshops by Connie Panzarino and Mary Frances Platt on ableism as a parallel oppression to other oppressions have also been extremely helpful.

Although disability standpoint epistemology requires that we identify a disability perspective, it does not push toward erasing differences or regarding disability as a unified experience. Following standpoint theory, the more multiple our standpoints, the more complete view of the world we will have. Harding specifically explores race and sexuality in writing about feminist standpoint epistemology, for example. This has implications for teaching. As with any other "group" we "teach," we need to be careful to talk about people's experiences as complex and individual, not "the woman's experience," or "the disabled experience." I try, through a variety of teaching techniques, to make this part of my classes, but it's difficult, especially when it is most students' first effort to consciously focus on the experience of people who are different from

them. We are always balancing disability as a physical and socially constructed identity and human experience as individual.

What has actually gone on in the classroom when this white able-bodied woman has taught literature by women with disabilities? What has happened for the students, and what has happened for me?

A look back at my syllabus shows me that the first time I used *With the Power of Each Breath*, it was one of ten books I asked the students to buy and read. It was the only anthology and the only non-fiction book besides May Sarton's *Journal of a Solitude*. I asked the students to read approximately 90 of the 350 pages, and I surmise from the fact that we spent only one class session on the book that I didn't quite know what to do with it. My discomfort, I believe, stemmed from the fact that the authors were not "professional" writers and their autobiographical stories were not amenable to the usual types of literary criticism. The students were not bothered, however; they found the book very powerful and urged me to use it again.

Through my feminist reading and teaching I have come to see that the standards of "good" literature have often excluded the work of women and other marginalized groups. Reading and teaching Tillie Olsen's *Silences*, Joanna Russ's *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, and Virginia Woolf's *Room of One's Own* in conjunction with Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" have radically broadened my notions of "art" and "literature." In her book *Silences*, Tillie Olsen, incorporating the words and ideas of Virginia Woolf, speaks eloquently of what we need in and from writing:

Read the compass of women writers in our infinite variety....

Teach women's lives through the lives of the women who wrote the books, as well as through the books themselves; and through autobiography, biography, journals, letters. Because most literature concerns itself with the lives of the few, know and teach the few books closer to the lives of the many... .

Help create writers, perhaps among yourselves. There is so much unwritten that needs to be written.... It does not matter if in its

beginning what emerges is not great, or even (as ordinarily defined) "good" writing.

Whether that is literature, or whether that is not literature, I will not presume to say, wrote Virginia Woolf in her preface to *Life As We Have Known It, Memoirs of the Working Women's Guild*, but that it explains much and tells much, that is certain.

The greatness of literature is not only in the great writers, the good writers; it is also in that which explains much and tells much (the soil, too, of great literature). (43-44)

As I enacted Olsen's, Woolf's, and others' ideas about literature and art into my teaching, I became more comfortable teaching literature by women with disabilities and more thoughtful about how and why I'm using this literature in my classes. In the past several years, I have integrated writing by women with disabilities thematically into my courses, and have enlarged my sources beyond *With the Power of Each Breath*. For example, in the same class where I once taught ninety pages of *With the Power* in one isolated class period, I now use a packet that includes writings from *With the Power*, *With Wings: An Anthology of Literature by and about Women with Disabilities*, and *Voices from the Shadows: Women with Disabilities Speak Out*. I have included readings from these books in the sections of the course dealing with growing up, education, creativity, sexuality and relationships, mothers and children, and women bonding and strength. I have also regularly shown the film *Positive Images: Portraits of Women with Disabilities*, which interviews women with three different disabilities about their childhoods and education, and shows them going shopping, at work, dealing with sexual and other relationships, and generally going on with living their lives. What I'm trying to do in my thematic approach and the groupings of the readings is to keep us from unthinkingly theorizing "woman" as white, middle-class, heterosexual, and able-bodied, to avoid any unitary essential concept of "woman." In other words, it's a pedagogical strategy that complicates identity politics. When we did the section on mothers and children, for example, we read about the experience of a black slave woman

(Brent, excerpts from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*), an impoverished white woman during the Depression (LeSueur, "Annunciation"), a black lesbian (Lorde, "Now That I Am Forever with Child"), a white middle-class woman (Kumin, "Making the Jam without You"), a black woman in the rural South of the United States (Walker, "Everyday Use"), an unmarried Chinese woman whose story is told by her Chinese-American niece (Kingston, "No Name Woman"), a woman with MS who was not physically strong enough to hold her baby and who could not make eye contact with her because of vision loss (LeMaistre), a woman paralyzed from the waist down who had a tubal ligation after three miscarriages (Matthews), and a woman with polio whose daughters were twenty months and three weeks when she became disabled (Matthews). I have also taught Anne Finger's *Past Due: A Story of Disability, Pregnancy and Birth* and invited Finger to speak at our campus, and have taught Connie Panzarino's autobiography *The Me in the Mirror*.

One technique I use sparingly, but at least twice a semester, is a round robin in which every student receives a number and speaks in turn. The main rule is that no one can be interrupted; everyone can have the floor for as long or short a time as she or he wants. I encourage students to take notes when others are speaking on things they want to go back to and discuss in more depth later. I have used this format a number of times when dealing with literature by women with disabilities, for several reasons. It allows us to get a large number of responses out onto the floor; it ensures a range of responses, from very personal and emotional ones to more distanced and literary ones; and it allows students to speak in what they feel is a non-threatening atmosphere. When I first used this technique, my goal was to get everyone to speak, so that students would realize that each of them had important things to say. It was a student who pointed out to me an additional, powerful effect of the round-robins. She told me that she liked round-robins better than usual class discussions because the person who spoke directly after her would be concentrat-

ing on her or his own ideas, not attacking her (which was what she expected, and experienced, unfortunately, in many other class discussions). This was an important insight for me. When I used a round-robin for *The Me in the Mirror* this past semester, students' comments ranged from feeling that Connie was overly demanding of her aides to worries about knowing how to react to people with disabilities to admiring Connie for her courage. I think it's important that students perceive the round-robin as a nonthreatening context in which they can voice things they have previously felt silenced about.

My students also write in their journals before we discuss each reading in class. Often in their journals students will express that this is the first time they have ever read about people with disabilities. Some will write about friends or relatives who have disabilities, including older relatives with whom bringing up the topic is forbidden, or friends their age paralyzed in accidents. Other students write about jobs or internships that involve working with children with disabilities. Many students write about their confusion and fear toward people with disabilities they meet on campus. What are they supposed to do? Should they say hello to a person in a wheelchair, even if they don't know the person? Is looking away from that person a form of prejudice? Should they offer to help open a door, to push someone up a steep ramp, to aid someone stuck in snow? Their questions are real, and most say they haven't had any place to ask them safely. They are often very concerned with the "politically correct" language to use in talking about or to a person with a disability and say that their avoidance of people sometimes has to do with their uncertainty about terminology and their fear of being deemed "politically incorrect." I respond to the questions they've raised in their journals privately, sometimes letting them know about experiences I've had, sometimes referring them to other readings, sometimes quoting people with disabilities who are my friends. In this way, students have another "safe space" in which to voice their concerns and fears.

When these questions come up in class, I usually try to get students to talk with each other about them instead of looking to me for an “answer/” although I am ready to share my own ideas and responses. What I want them to realize, both in journal responses and class discussions, is that there are no clear-cut rules. Situations and people differ; what is appropriate for one time and place will not be appropriate for another. I teach “what I’m not” as someone who has educated myself in the area, having done a lot of reading, having talked to people with disabilities, having attended anti-ableism workshops, and having engaged in activism on the issue. I don’t have the “answers,” but I feel I can help guide students toward a useful discussion.

Another technique I use in class is to ask students to temporarily take on the perspective of someone who is disabled. One exercise that I use regularly with different pieces of literature by women with disabilities is to ask students to imagine themselves as the woman with a disability that we have read about. In a timed anonymous free writing I ask them to describe, in detail, their day up until they came into this classroom. I ask them to be very specific. As a prompt, I ask them to think about how they would wake up, get out of bed, brush their teeth, get dressed, eat breakfast, and so forth. When we are done writing, I ask a student to collect all the writings and then redistribute them, so presumably no one has her or his own. Then I ask volunteers to read their writings aloud, and have several read before opening up a discussion of what it was like to do the exercise and what we learned. Some students seem simply unable to do the exercise; they cannot imagine what it would be like to be paralyzed or blind; they cannot imagine, even after reading the literature, what adaptations they could make to function. Others do extraordinarily well in putting themselves into someone else’s experience. Regularly, some students realize that they don’t know whether the building we are in has an elevator or where the accessible entrance is; they don’t know whether there is public transporta-

tion that accommodates wheelchairs; they don’t know whether the doors of our classroom are wide enough for a wheelchair. In this exercise, I want them to realize the practical implications of having this disability in our town, attending our university. I want them to realize that a woman who uses a wheelchair might be necessarily more concerned about whether or not she can physically get to a certain class than the fact that some women are often treated as sex objects in advertising. I want for them what I want for myself, to have a more complete view of the world. I believe disability perspectives and disability standpoint epistemology can help.

In other exercises I design for class, I try to help students go beyond their “politically correct” anxieties about which language to use when talking with or about a person with a disability or what to do on meeting a person with a disability on campus. Sometimes, instead of asking them to take on the persona of a woman with a disability, I ask them to take on the persona of an able-bodied person dealing with a person with a disability, a situation closer to most of their own standpoints. In the section on creativity, for example, we read Deborah Kendrick’s poem “For Tess Gallagher,” in which an aspiring poet wishes to talk with the famous poet after her reading. The narrator hopes to talk to Tess Gallagher “Of line and phrases and meter ... and laugh like conspirators, over children,/ Pets, and lovers we have known.” But the poem ends:

All we talk about instead  
Is the only  
Other  
Blind person you have known. (84)

I have asked the students to do the following assignment in small groups: “You are Tess Gallagher. Write your own version of the evening Deborah Kendrick writes about in her poem ‘For Tess Gallagher.’ This can be a poem or prose.” In response, students have been able to voice the complexities of a “famous” person meeting

someone she does not know who admires her, as well as of a sighted person meeting someone who is blind who wants to strike up a conversation. I have found that, in general, small groups work well for these kinds of assignments. Collectively, the students talk out complications within the still practical framework of getting an assignment done, and getting it done on time. It's good practice for community activism, I think.

In another small group exercise I have used with "For Tess Gallagher," I ask students to "Prepare a performance/reading of 'For Tess Gallagher' to present to the rest of the class." Obviously students must work closely with a poem and understand its complexity in order to respond adequately to this assignment. Most do well, and some absolutely astonish me with the creativity and risk taking they demonstrate in the limited amount of time they have to do the work.

In the section on creativity we also read Nancy Mairs's story "Shape," about a woman sculptor who has MS who is shaping a clay head (she has already had to give up working with wood after cutting herself several times). Because her energy is limited, she tells her daughter she can't take her and a friend to the movies that night. Her daughter responds, "No wonder Father left you.... Harriet's right—you're nothing but a damned cripple" (96). One or more groups have this assignment: "You are Abby, Pamela's daughter in 'Shape.' Write/ tell your own version of the events your mother tells in 'Shape.'" I should emphasize here that for me such class activities work well in a class in which students know they will be asked to interact with the material in a direct way in class, and in which we have developed some trust and experience in working together and hearing many voices.

My exercises are sometimes more pointedly activist. I have asked students to read a handout on language use called "Unhandicapping Our Language." In one group assignment I tell them, "You are responsible for introducing 'Unhandicapping Our Language' to the office where you work. How will you introduce the handout,

what will you do to let people know it's important? What will you do to help people begin to make the language changes it suggests?" Another group has this task: "Based on what we have read and seen so far by women with disabilities, what actions do you recommend that people can take to be allies to these women in eliminating barriers and discrimination?"

I added another dimension to my teaching of literature by women with disabilities in the fall of 1993, when I invited Anne Finger to campus. My sophomore-level women's literature class read her autobiographical book *Past Due* and was required to go to either a reading or a talk on disability that she gave. In their journals on *Past Due*, before they had met Finger, students wrote about a variety of things. One student wrote movingly about her profoundly disabled brother and the toll caring for him takes on her family, especially her mother. Another wrote about her own rheumatoid arthritis, and the uncertainty and scariness of not knowing how it would develop. Another wrote about her aunt who had had polio. Several students noted that they had never read a description of childbirth as graphic as Finger's. Some were uncomfortable with this; others thought about their mothers and the physical pain that their births might have caused them. A couple of students initiated conversations with their mothers about their births. The three mothers in the class wrote about their own childbirth experiences. Many students liked the fact that the book made them think about difficult issues. Specifically, a number of students thought about what they would do if they were pregnant and found out their fetus was likely to be disabled.

On the first day of class discussion, we did a round robin. Students spoke of many of the issues they had written about in their journals, although not some of the most personal. Most people commented in their next journals that they found the round-robin worthwhile and that they had learned a lot from their classmates' responses. The next class period I asked students to write down a passage that moved them emotionally, angered them, or made them

think, with a few notes as to why it affected them so. Then I asked them to share this with one other person. After that, I opened up class discussion by asking dyads to share what they had talked about. The discussion again was complex, serious, wide-ranging.

But some interesting and unexpected things happened when the students got to hear Anne Finger. For her evening speech, I had asked Finger to do what I called “Disability 101”—that is, to assume that most of the audience was quite new to disability issues. She did, I thought, an excellent job, using lots of personal examples from her own life and other people’s to show the kinds of institutionalized and unquestioned assumptions made about people with disabilities, and the handicaps in the form of barriers that able-bodied people put in their way. I felt that Finger’s tone was direct but mild and was effective for getting her points across. I was somewhat startled to hear that several of the students found her tone very negative and were uncomfortable with what they perceived as Finger’s anger toward them as able-bodied people. These students felt more negative after hearing her than after reading the book. One example that came up over and over again in their written reports on her talk was her remark that when she uses a wheelchair, many more people open doors for her than when she uses a cane, even if she is balancing a load of books on one arm and leaning on her cane with the other. Some students responded very defensively. They “heard” Finger saying that she was not grateful when people opened doors for her, and they expressed anger at her, saying they “were just trying to help,” and “she should appreciate people helping her.” They felt she was accusing all able-bodied people of being insensitive.

Another example was Finger’s analysis of the Jerry Lewis telethon. She talked about the way the telethon presents people with disabilities as eternal children; even fifty-five-year-old men are “Jerry’s kids.” She talked about the telethon’s “false promise of a cure,” implying that it was terrible to be disabled and that only a cure was worth our contributions, not technology to make living with a dis-

ability easier. She talked about the threatening implications of the pitches to send money—“You don’t want this to happen to you.” She talked about the broader issue of why people with disabilities have to beg on television for donations. But what some students “heard” was that she was being unfair to Jerry Lewis, that after all, he was just “trying to help.”

There is a consistent thread here. The students who were most uncomfortable and angry at Finger wanted to remain subjects and central, while Finger and other people with disabilities remained “other” and marginal. They did not want to take responsibility for their able-bodiedness, their privilege; they did not want to see it as the location from which they experience the world. They wanted to be in the position of choosing when to “help” unfortunate disabled others, and to receive gratitude for doing so. Finger had said, “If you are disabled and conscious, you go around in a state of rage.” They did not want to hear of her rage. To one of these students, I wrote this journal response:

maybe you can understand why Finger chose to tell us about *some* of the negative things about being disabled. Where else are we going to hear them? As she said, when we hear anything, it’s usually “The ——— Story,” of how someone triumphed over all difficulties, overcame all obstacles. Yet, what about the disabled women who are sexually abused, why is the unemployment rate among disabled people who want to work 66 percent, why did a person assume Finger was looking for the Communications Disorders Clinic when she said she wanted to return a key to the Communications Dept? She lives with this every day, and I guess I don’t mind if she tries to tell me, as an able-bodied person, what it’s like.

Still, I don’t think that students who had this response are going to come out of my class informed disability activists. They are perhaps conceptually not ready for the kinds of complexities Finger was talking about. They are fearful, I think. They do not want the world as they know it to be challenged or changed. They cannot see privileged locations as locations. They do not see knowledge as

socially situated. I don't think that in a fifteen-week semester I can completely transform these students' view of the world. What I can do is offer some reading, some experiential exercises in class, some challenging journal responses, and hope that someday they will have enough other experiences and have lost enough of their fear to look past their own supposed centralities.

This opens up the larger question in "teaching what I am not" — am I accomplishing my goals of being an ally of people with disabilities, creating allies in some of my students, and helping give students a sense of the individuality and complexity of the lives of the women we read about? I notice as I type this that there is a seeming contradiction between the first two goals and the third. In order to be a political ally, I must see myself as "able-bodied" and a group of other people as "disabled"; this kind of identity politics is hard to reconcile with the aim of seeing the complexity of anyone's individual experience, where disability will be just one factor among many. This is the dilemma I have been struggling with through my teaching and through the course of writing this essay. Like all dilemmas, it is too neat and false when it implies I must do one or the other. I believe that at this historical time and place, it is important for me to teach as if identity politics has a reality and unity I do not believe it has while actively teaching against it. It's important to me to be part of the disability rights movement as an ally, as an able-bodied person who also has many other aspects to her identity. It's also important to me to teach the complexity, individuality, and social constructedness of all our identities.

It seems appropriate to end with the words of some of my students. I ask them to write final journals in which they identify five aspects of the course that they felt had the most impact on them. Some of them pick the writings by women with disabilities. In the way they write about their perceptions and understandings, I worry sometimes that I may be encouraging stereotypes rather than breaking them down. The most notable stereotypes are those of the piti-

able "cripple" and the "Super-Crip," material for a made-for-TV movie. I also read in their journals, however, a struggle with the complexity of identity and how to deal with "what I am not" that seems to me real, admirable, and a place from which much more can grow. Each of these students has given me permission to use her words in this essay, hoping they will be useful to other students and teachers.

Connie Panzarino's book *The Me in the Mirror* was also a personal favorite. Issues that face individuals with disabilities have always been an interest of mine. Connie is an inspiring woman who has done so many things for Handicapped rights. I loved reading about her personal struggles and triumphs. (Michelle Karmazin)

Reading Connie Panzarino's book was an incredible revelation for me. ... Her story, her life, totally opened my eyes. I began to *see* everyone differently, people with disabilities and people without disabilities. My favorite class period when we were reading this book was the one that you had us write as if we were Connie. We had to write in detail everything we did from the time we woke up to when we went to bed from Connie's perspective. It was definitely an eye-opening experience. It literally *forced* me to think about life and what it would be like in a completely different way. It also made me extremely appreciative and more aware of my own ableness and how quickly it could all be taken away from me. I think that sometimes we look at people with disabilities the same way we do the homeless and serious criminals—if we keep them on the fringes of society they can't touch us, they can't affect us. If we keep a wall between "us" and "them" then what happened to "them" won't happen to "us." (Kim Hansen)

Reading *The Me in the Mirror* by Connie Panzarino was a definite learning experience for me. I had never before considered many of the struggles that a person with a handicap faces in their life. And, I had never stopped to think of what a day in the life would be like. This book was very eye-opening for me. The book offered a look at the personal and political struggles that Connie faced throughout her life. The experience of reading this book was immeasurable as to the increased awareness I gained. I began to question the construction of handicapped entrances in the backs and sides of build-

ings. And, sometimes I've looked for entrances and they haven't been there at all. The other day I met this woman named Michelle. It was cold and rainy and I was really happy that she asked for my help on our walk to class. She held my umbrella for us while I pushed. Her destination was Avery and we started talking about the total inconvenience of the entrance being so far out of her way. She also expressed concern about the low bushes that line the entrance. It scares her when she is out at night. I believe that if I had not been exposed to the book and the discussions that accompanied, I may not have felt comfortable talking to Michelle about her disability. (Sunshine Black)

I am so glad that you brought the issue of disabilities into our class. You know, you can learn about types and causes of disabilities, but nothing can educate a person more than to talk to a person with a disability. Connie Panzarino educates her readers in this way. She gives people with disabilities a voice by sharing her experience. I think that for so long non-disabled people tended to think that people with disabilities weren't real people—like they didn't have real emotions, ideas, and thoughts. I am so thankful that this is changing, it is literature like this that can change people's attitudes and lives. (Kelly Schreiner)

[The poet Chrystos] makes us feel like we are all connected and are standing in one huge, earth-sized circle, holding hands and supporting one another. When I read her poem "Ceremony for Completing a Poetry Reading" I can vividly picture thousands of women in the circle, with Chrystos standing among us with a basket of gifts, talking and passing beads and feathers and other things around the circle.... A few months ago, Connie Panzarino was not a woman I would have pictured in the circle of women I envision above. All the women would have been standing, able to pass the gifts around just as I would. Most would have been white, heterosexual, American—just like me. Now my circle includes women of different abilities and colors and personalities. This is not to say that I don't have any more to learn or I have completely conquered my prejudices and fears about other people. But the more I read and the more I learn, the bigger and more diverse my circle gets. (Christy Johnson)

## NOTE

1. This term "originated among disabled people and has recently been used by some U.S. feminists to refer to people who used to be called 'abled-bodied.'" Cheri Kramarae and Paula Treichler, *A Feminist Dictionary* (Boston: Pandora Press, 1985), 444-45.

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