

From Chapter 8
We Can Fight for Our Rights

The meeting was in the living room of somebody's house. I recognized a few faces when I walked in with my braces and crutches. There weren't many people there, I counted eleven; someone else might have come after me. Six were in wheelchairs. I was glad I wasn't; there wouldn't have been room for another one. I sat in a high-back dining chair. There were newspapers piled up on the table. Rather than listening to what was being said, I kept looking around me – dark heavy furniture, some pushed against the walls. I stared at a pretty girl with blond hair sitting across from me in a wheelchair. I wondered if Audrey would have attended this meeting. Why couldn't I stop thinking about Audrey? How could I make my mind stop wandering and start paying attention?

I recognized Judy Heumann from her picture in the paper. But I had expected her to look more formidable, like someone capable of taking on the Board of Ed. Instead, she was cute, bright-eyed, and small. Maybe she looked small because her wheelchair was big. She wore a fashionable peasant style dress with short puffy sleeves.

When the meeting was over, I decided to introduce myself to Judy.

"It's a pleasure to meet you!" She gave me a sparkling smile and held out her hand.

Standing with my braced legs far apart for maximum balance, I slid the crutch out from under my right arm, and grabbed it with my left hand, tightening the muscles of my left forearm to keep the other crutch secure under it. I was able to bend down just enough to give Judy's hand a hearty shake.

I wanted to ask: How did you muster the strength to fight back? How did you arrive at the realization that being denied a license to teach was an act of discrimination, when the rest of us accepted such verdicts as the inevitable outcome of being disabled?

But I didn't ask those questions. We talked about what had been discussed. The Department of Motor Vehicles only agreed to issue us permits to park in front of our schools or places of work. They didn't think we should have any desire for frivolous activities such as going to a movie or a restaurant. I told Judy I agreed with the people who argued in favor of holding a demonstration in front of the DMV.

“Then you should come to meetings of my organization. It’s called ‘Disabled In Action.’ We hold demos and do civil disobedience.”

“Okay!” I exclaimed.

Then out of the blue, I found myself telling her about the Italian graduate program at NYU and about Teaching Assistantships. I told her I received the brochure with the application in the mail the same day the first article about her came out. I even told her the newspaper clipping and the page from the NYU brochure were taped to my wall, side by side.

"I've been thinking of applying, I'd like to teach Italian."

What the hell was I saying? I hadn't been thinking about doing much of anything lately.

Judy grabbed my right arm and almost threw me off balance. I hadn't put my crutch back under it.

"So what are you waiting for? Apply!"

I laughed, trying to keep my balance.

“Promise you'll apply!”

I could tell she wasn't going to let go of my arm unless I promised. "Okay, I'll apply."

“Right away!” She let go of my arm and pointed an admonishing finger toward my face.

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I didn't apply right away. I missed the application deadline for the Fall Semester of '71. I told myself I'd aim for the Spring of '72.

I did, however, start going to meetings, both of PRIDE and of Judy's organization, Disabled In Action. I liked DIA more than I liked PRIDE, which in spite of the great acronym seemed a bit tame. DIA meetings were often held in Brooklyn. But it was worth the drive. I listened in awe to Judy.

"It is not our disability that handicaps us, it is society that handicaps us. . . Disability only becomes a tragedy for us when society fails to provide the things we need to lead our lives. It's a tragedy when we're discriminated against, kept out, treated as inferior." She spoke the most amazing truths in such a sweet-sounding, girlish voice. She was a true revolutionary, our Angela Davis.

I thought my parents would be happy I was going out. But I could tell they weren't so enthusiastic about my interest in disability activism. Once, back from a meeting, when I started talking about Judy and some other disabled people I admired, my father interrupted me.

"I wish you'd make normal friends."

His words felt like knives stabbing me. I went into my room slamming the door, threw myself on the bed and cried.

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My parents were really tickled though, when my picture, taken at the demonstration in front of the DMV, was in *The Daily News*. My father must have gone around to every local store and newsstand. Every relative, every friend, in the US and in Italy, got a newspaper clipping. In the picture I was standing with my crutches holding a sign I'd made the night before the demo.

I was very proud of my sign. Some had made fancy ones, using boards and markers of different colors, drawing pictures of cars. Mine was simple: block letters in black magic marker on white board. It read:

IF YOU THINK WE'RE HELPLESS,
WE'VE GOT NEWS FOR YOU, MAN!
WE CAN FIGHT FOR OUR RIGHTS,
JUST AS WELL AS YOU CAN!

Susie couldn't stop laughing. She thought "man!" was funny. "Sooooo hippie," she kept murmuring, shaking her head.

But, hey, it rhymed. Others criticized my sign for being too general.

"This way I can re-use it," I conceded, "I'm lazy. I'd rather not have to make a new sign every time we have a demonstration."

But really, I wanted my sign to do more than demand a parking permit. I wanted those few words on that twenty-four square inch board to present, in a nutshell, what I saw as the big picture, our common struggle.

It was amazing to discover how similar our experiences were, once we started comparing notes. Until then, we had all considered our disabilities to be the problem. We believed we were supposed to "cope" as best we could. As we talked, we realized the disability itself was not that

big of a deal for us. We had all learned to accept our physical limitations. What made life difficult was not the disability but the lack of services and supports, the lack of accessibility, the unfair and stereotypical ways in which we were treated, the pity doled out for us all our lives. Often, after a meeting, I wrote my thoughts down in a notebook. It's not my fault that I'm disabled, yet I've been made to feel that it is, I wrote. My polio never made me unhappy, people made me unhappy. Ever since I was a little girl, people have always made me feel I was no good because I was disabled. From the Sicilian women and the nuns to the doctors that couldn't fix me, to my fellow students and prospective employers... and even my own parents. As I wrote, my tears fell and stained the pages – tears of anger, of relief, and of new hope.

I was thunderstruck by the realization that as a disabled person I had "rights." I'd been hearing and talking and getting excited about "rights," and never before had it dawned on me that the same arguments could apply to me, to us, disabled people. There were rights for black people, rights for women, rights for Native Americans, for immigrants, for workers, for gays, there were even animal rights... But I'd never before heard anybody talking about rights for disabled people. They talked about benefits and cures and charity for us, not rights.

I got so fired up at the mere notion of disabled people "fighting" – instead of asking pretty please, instead of begging, and of sitting around wishing and hoping and praying to be cured. The news that we weren't "helpless," as everyone seemed to believe and as everyone wanted us to believe, was one that I wanted to shout to the four corners of the earth. The best I could do for the time being was print it in big black letters on a white board.

I got to reuse my sign a few times. When we went on a march to the UN, I rolled in my wheelchair with the sign hanging around my neck, hitting my chin or covering my face when I went over a bump or a pothole. And I used it in October, when we blocked Madison Avenue to protest Nixon's veto of the Rehab Act. About 80 people took part in that demo. We were even joined by some disabled Vietnam vets. Judy and a few others got summonses from the police. My heart was beating fast, but I wasn't nervous, with the police all around us, just excited.

At other demos, I was often the only disabled person and had to endure the stares and the pats on the head, and the warnings to be careful, and the "so sorry!" and "thank you for being inspirational!" all reminding me that fighting for a common cause didn't make my presence any less of an oddity. At "our" demos, among so many disabled like me, I felt right, I felt strong, and powerful. Here we were all together as one, finally fighting back.

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I loved using the pronouns "we" and "us" in contrast with the pronouns "they" and "them." "They treat us as if we're sick, as if we can't do anything." "We won't take any more of their bullshit."

"But who are they? Who are these bad guys?" my father asked. He'd never had any trouble naming bad guys – the fascists, the greedy idle rich, the mafiosi, the corrupt politicians... It bothered him that my use of the pronoun seemed to include everyone who wasn't like me and my friends – who wasn't disabled.

"What about your mother and me? Do you think we're bad guys?"

Judy liked to refer to "us" as a minority. Like members of other minorities, we were treated as inferior, kept in the margins of society, denied equal rights and opportunities. However, in most minorities the children resembled the parents. Being disabled, I was different than my own parents. That realization made me want to cry.

"Of course you're not bad guys, you're my parents!"

I wished I could explain my feelings to my father. But how could I when I didn't fully understand them myself. What I knew for sure was that it felt good when "we" succeeded and made change happen. And it felt good to belong, to be part of something... I wasn't sure what that something was, but I knew I wanted to be part of it.

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