

You Can Dance Too

by J. Estelle Reddin



Une personne affiliée au Réseau des femmes handicapées (DAWN) de l'Île du Prince Édouard a formé un groupe de danse pour femmes atteintes d'un handicap. L'auteure décrit les débuts de ce groupe qui s'est déjà produit en spectacle lors de quelques conférences et elle explique également l'impact du groupe dans la vie des femmes.

Dance with DAWN and the Prince Edward Island DAWN (DisAbled Women's Network) group is the result of seizing opportunities and bringing together various factors at a particular time and place. The belief that "you can dance, too" became a reality through the action of Peggy Reddin, a dance instructor in Charlottetown, P.E.I. Peggy is my daughter.

I have used a wheelchair since 1974 as the result of a car accident in 1961. The wheelchair made my disability much more visible but greatly improved my mobility and reduced arthritic pain and discomfort. Peggy was 12 years old at that time and had had a few years of ballet training. Intellectually I knew that exercise was important for my well-being, but it was so boring and solitary! By the time Peggy went on to the National Ballet School for their three-year teachers program, we had talked about the dream we shared of dance for persons with disabilities.

Eventually she completed her studies and returned home. Meanwhile several events helped us realize our dream. The International Year of Disabled Persons (1981) had raised awareness of the needs of the disabled community and the obstacles placed in our path by society (Smith). Feminist writers were calling attention to sexism and various forms of oppression affecting women's lives. The Secretary of State had begun to provide funding for projects for women and for the disabled, Health and Welfare Canada was involved in a survey of "Adults with an Activity Limitation" (Charette), and DAWN Canada was founded in 1985 (Meister; Doucette). It all came together.

A few of us took part in the Health and Welfare survey, which helped us realize the real need for an exercise program for women with disabilities, something other than competitive sports—in addition to our desire for some means of artistic expression. Peggy undertook to invent and set to music dance movements suitable for women with a variety of disabilities. We were successful in obtaining funding support from Secretary of State for a P.E.I. DAWN group with dance as an activity.

A dance program contributes routine and structure to our lives, and makes a contribution to positive physical and mental health.

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rather than how we deal with our disabilities.***

Health in its broad sense, including human connection and feelings of self-worth, is of prime importance to women with disabilities. But above all, dance provides an opportunity for artistic expression. At a conference on "The Spirit Soars," Michael Seary, the keynote speaker, said:

Artistic expression is central to human experience ... and needs to be accessible to all. It has to do with image and awareness; to be aware is to be truly human, fulfilled.... Differences dissolve, we sense our beginning, and we are as one with the universe.

Participation in dance enables us to transcend our disabling conditions. Our purpose is not dance therapy; ours is a self-help, not a medical model. Our interest is in how we deal with our lives rather than how we deal with our disabilities. The group functions as "we," not "they." We have performed in public twice at the annual Women's Festival organized by the P.E.I. Women's Network, and at the 1990 CRIAW/ICREF Conference in Charlottetown. Specially commissioned music was choreographed by Peggy for a set of senior ballet students and our dance group. We look upon ourselves as contributors and sharers through our dance activity, when we simply dance together or when we perform for others.

Our group is the only DAWN group in Prince Edward Island. Our active membership consists of women who live in or within a radius of 50 kilometres of Charlottetown. We hope eventually to spread out to other areas of the province. Transportation is a major problem for women with disabilities: there is no public transportation in the province and the special transport for people with disabilities is expensive. Our present membership consists of 14 women from 20 to 70 years in age, with a range of disabilities including impaired sight, hearing, speech, mobility, and mental ability. Conditions include post-polio, head injury, epilepsy, ms, arthritis, and disabilities from birth.

We participate in networking meetings and workshops with representatives of other women's/feminist groups in the province for information exchange and to become aware of goals and activities of these groups. We respond to various invitations for input from a multi-disability women's group. Ours is a geared-down time table. Things come about slowly, yet we have made progress over our five-year existence. Our time and energy is of necessity spent on nurturing ourselves, each other, and our group. Outreach and growth we may dream about, but we have learned to recognize our limitations.

Each year with the assistance of modest funding, we attempt one project as an organization. We have built up a small library in our search for information about other dance groups for

persons with disabilities; we took an active part in the 1990 CRIAW/ICREF Charlottetown Conference; and we have held two workshops to facilitate access in the arts, including music, painting, and drama. At present, we are working on a project to produce a directory of support and services available to women with disabilities who are particularly vulnerable to abuse. We plan to assess the usefulness of this assistance, and to present the information in a form easily accessed by women with various disabilities. We believe that accessibility to support and services that are available to non-disabled persons is a human rights issue. Progress is made slowly. As women who live with physical disabilities, we represent a group who in our society are kept invisible, cut off from the mainstream by structural, systemic, and attitudinal barriers. Such women are often feared as being so "different" as to be threatening. In reality, although women with disabilities may have particular concerns, many of the difficulties we experience, such as discrimination and lack of access, are common experiences to women as a whole.

We recognize ourselves when others write about women. Feminist scholarship and writing has given us the confidence to say, "I am woman breaking the silence with the truth of my life." Where some of our able-bodied sisters have led, we can follow. It is really when the authors are themselves persons with disabilities that we see the truth more clearly. Some recent sources of such writing include, to name a few, papers in *The More We Get Together* from the CRIAW/ICREF Conference, *Voices From the Shadows*, *Deaf in America*, and a series of position papers prepared by Jill Ridington for DAWN Canada. A special issue of *The New Internationalist* contains several articles written by both men and women with disabilities in several countries around the world. The keynote article by Vanessa Baird closes with these words: "And how can able-bodied people become allies of disabled people rather than oppressors? By listening, for a start" (7).

But we don't see ourselves as followers only. To be successfully disabled, according to our philosophy, requires a certain element of rebellion—rebellion against the status quo, rebellion against the prescriptions and scripts written by others for our lives. Language is one of our favourite targets and a good base for humour. Would you enjoy being "differently abled"? Isn't this a double put-down that says we must be different from what we are (who we are) and that "able" is socially acceptable? "Consumer" also belittles us; many of us subsist on welfare cheques. The cost of having a disability along with our low employment rate assures that we are not enthusiastic members of a consumer society. We don't fit. Leaf through a few popular magazines and substitute a woman with a disability for the women actually portrayed. You too will laugh. "Physically challenged"? Why should we accept



a label/tag that reminds us of the problem of getting out of bed in the morning and getting into our clothes and starting another day? Some challenge! I have yet to see any medals awarded. If we must be labelled we prefer "women with disabilities." This restores some dignity and acknowledges that we are first of all, women and persons.

In defiance of all these labels, one of our members came up with a private in-name for ourselves: "closet crocks." Others have written about underlying societal values and fears that necessitate "passing" in order to cover up and hide our differences and make life endurable (Todoroff and Lewis). Anne-Louise Brookes writes eloquently of victims of abuse who also learn the skill of "passing." Difficult although it may be, we need to come out of our closet and face "the slings and arrows of outrageous circumstance" if we are to reap the joys, pleasures, and sociability of dancing together.

We are pleased that *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme* has chosen to publish this special issue. We hope that those who read it will find something of interest and be better able to recognize and dismember attitudes that are obstacles in our lives; and know that we are women who share common hopes and needs for love, power, and freedom to create meaning in our lives.

Estelle Reddin has taught in the Home Economics Department at the University of Prince Edward Island since 1971, and has been a member of several Women's Studies committees at the university. Her research interests include foods and foodways of Atlantic Canada; and an ongoing study of the everyday life of the P.E.I. fisherman's wife.

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