

**Convocation Address, Ryerson University,
Faculty of Community Services**

Bonnie Sherr Klein, L.I.D. (hon.)

June 10, 2003

Thank you, Melanie Panitch, for that generous citation.

Chancellor Eaton, Chair Guerriere, President Lajeunesse, Dean Williams, dedicated faculty, proud families and friends (my own are here: my husband Michael, our daughter Naomi, my Sister Razelle, and old friends who came to share this occasion). None of us would be here today without the love and support of our families and friends.

And most of all, graduates in the Faculty of Community Services.

I'm deeply honoured and thrilled by this unexpected Award.

I'm especially pleased that among you – the new kids on the block – are the first nine graduates of Ryerson's visionary programme in disability Studies. I share this honour with you. Congratulations! You've been learning to challenge the old notions of "disability" as a tragedy, and to wrestle with sometimes contradictory new ideas about the meaning(s) of disability. Your proud faculty has told me of your passion, and they expect you to be leaders in making change for people with disabilities.

All of you in Community Services – Disability, Midwifery, Nursing, Social Work, and Health Services Management – are heading for a life in the helping or caring professions. It won't be easy, especially in these politically mean-spirited times. You chose your field because you want to be of service to your community. Doing Good has gotten a bad rap, but thankfully you have not succumbed to cynicism.

When we help others, we are at our most human; we feel good about ourselves. But that kind of satisfaction on its own will not sustain you over the long haul. The idea of service is usually one-way, from the top-down. You who serve – the Helpers – have authority, resources, power over those in need – clients, patients, recipients – the Helpees. We cannot escape the influence of the charity model – those poster children and Tiny Tim telethons.

However, a two-way relationship with the people you seek to help will bring you both insight and joy. There is wisdom in all those marginalized populations you serve, the perspective that comes precisely from being outside the centre or mainstream. When you see your client in a wheelchair dancing with her partner on her lap, you may recognize how much you can learn. As the midwives know, it is the birthing woman who is the leader, and the professional who follows.

Norman Kunc, a popular disability consultant, teaches: "Do not see me as your client. I am your fellow citizen. See me as your neighbour. Help me learn what I want to know." This openness and reciprocity is what will nourish and sustain the passion you feel today.

It might seem from Melanie's citation that I slid easily from making films to making radio documentaries and writing a book. That is the narrative in retrospect, but there were many months and years when I had no hope of working again, no notion that I could be a contributing human being rather than a physically dependent and emotionally depressed one. When I discovered there was no place for me in society – no accessible transportation,

for example, no facility to rest in a crowded supermarket or lie down in an exhausting airport – I began to doubt I belonged, to feel useless, even to hate myself. I won't dwell on the bad stuff – it's in my book – but it's important for you to know that it is not easy, especially for the large majority of people with disabilities who have many fewer privileges than I. Never give up on anyone, or on yourself.

Question authority, and never take No for an answer. If Michael had accepted the terminal prognosis given me by some pretty top-notch medical authorities at McGill, I would not be here to receive this degree. He was persistent, defiant, and resourceful in finding alternative opinions which led to a life-saving solution. That's not easy to do, especially if you're not a physician, but experts make mistakes, and people fall through the cracks. I encourage you to advocate for your own loved ones and your clients, because you will be in a position that they are not at the moment. Don't be afraid to be pushy. Change occurs when someone dares to question the way things have always been done.

And I hope that you will not only advocate for the individuals you serve but challenge the larger social and political context when necessary. Professionals often feel pressure to defend the status quo – the agency or institution that employs them – rather than to ally themselves with the people they are trying to serve. This may mean taking risks or whistle-blowing. If you really care, become part of the movements for disability rights, or affordable housing, or against privatization of public resources – there is no shortage of causes essential to individual and community well-being. We need your support and professional credibility.

I learned a lot about the health care and rehabilitation. I was in intensive care, breathing on a respirator, semi-comatose and locked-in, which means I was not able to speak or move. However, I was often conscious and could hear what was going on around me. Most of the staff acted as if I weren't there, often talking about me – my "case" – to each other. One nurse, Rick Vanderlee, modeled a different type of behaviour. Rick made a point of communicating with me as if I were there. (Not easy in my state.) He conducted entertaining monologues about himself: like what he was doing on his days off, and what a klutz he was on the sailboard. I can't tell you how vital this simple behaviour was – he made me feel alive! Rick was remembering the whole human being he was serving. Importantly, he was also remembering the reason he had entered nursing in the first place.

When I was ill, I was a model patient in rehabilitation. I did all my exercises earnestly and even with extra repetitions. As I recovered and regained a sense of my Self, I realized that there was something wrong with rehabilitation which forced my body to do things it could no longer do. I was being taught to do battle with my own body! Even as I progressed, I was doomed to failure if the ultimate goal was a return to, quote, "normalcy." When I asked my physiotherapist about getting a scooter so I could get around on my own and get back out into the world, he said that would be an admission of Failure. I remained in a manual wheelchair for another year, unable to go outside my house without being pushed. Whose failure, I wonder now, his or mine? When I finally got my scooter, Gladys, she became my ticket to liberation. I have happily become a bit of a poster child myself for the rehabilitation therapy professions. I remind them that the purpose of rehabilitation is not to "regain Function," but to live and be joyful.

I've learned, with difficulty, to slow down. And you know what? Slowing down is not a bad thing. Speed is not inherently a valuable goal. Those of us with limitations are forced to live a more conscious, more balanced, life. It's a trade-off for which I'm frankly grateful.

Disability teaches that life sometimes unfolds in totally unplanned and unpredictable ways. We are all vulnerable as human beings. So savour the moments. Have as much fun as you can, as much of the time as you can. You will not benefit anyone if you are frazzled and unwell.

People with disabilities have enormous gifts to contribute to society when we are fully included, supported, and welcomed to participate and lead. We have come to value diversity, not as a corporate PR slogan, but as the very essence of our lives. While others may see us as deficient or broken, we see ourselves as different – deliciously different. Our variety challenges dull standards of uniformity, false notions of perfection. Difference means options to explore. Disability requires us to be patient and resourceful, as we circumvent the challenges of our impairment itself, and the physical barriers and discrimination which disable us more. We know how to adapt. We know and appreciate and embrace our own differences and those of our friends. Besides being aesthetically pleasing and intellectually stimulating, variety is ecologically healthy and necessary. Our very survival as a species and ecosystem depends on it. Darwin, of all people said: *“It is not the strongest of the species, nor the most intelligent that survives...it is the one that is the most adaptable to change.”*

I was inspired by one of your faculty, Catherine Frazee, to explore the blossoming of a new culture of disability, which has transformed my own understanding. So I'd like to leave you with a poem by one of my new friends, Neil Marcus. Objectively, Neil is significantly disabled. When I first met him, I was afraid to speak with him because he has such a hard time getting his words out and his limbs thrash uncontrollably. Neil does not see himself as disabled, however; he sees himself as a dancer and poet. Lucky for us!

When you walk into a room
And there's a disabled person in the room
And he scares you
Or you want to avoid him
Or she mystifies you
Or you want to reach out and help
But don't know how...

When this happens you are on
The cutting edge of liberation.
See a disabled person clearly and
Chances are you'll see yourself clearly.

That is when there are no limits
And there are no limits as to
When that will happen
It will probably happen...now.

Dear graduates, in your practice, your inspiration and hope will come from and with your helpees. Develop collaborative relationships with them, rooted in mutual respect. Work and laugh together to make all of our lives better, more inclusive, and more richly diverse. Lucky for you! And thank you again.