

Gay with the experience of disability: the ideal man!

Philip Patston

I know what men want. Men want to be really, really close to someone who will leave them alone — Anonymous

In 2004, in making a radio documentary on romance which played in 10 countries around the world, I spoke to several people who experience disability. For the blokes, the theme of being disabled and male in society came up repeatedly, including issues of responsibility, dependence, dominance, and public perception.

Compared with the traditional role of the strong male provider, men who experience disability are often perceived as vulnerable, needy and dependent. Over the years, I have come to understand that in many ways, like gay men, disabled men can choose to feel either shackled or liberated by the perception that they are less “manly” than their non-disabled counterparts.

As a gay man who experiences disability as a result of cerebral palsy, I have a unique experience of being male. I am bound by neither heterosexual nor non-disabled role stereotypes. I feel no compulsion or expectation to be “a real man”. And yet, at the same time, I cherish my distinctive maleness, which I experience to be a healthy balance of masculine and feminine. In some ways, as I argue here, I am the ideal man.

Men, function and disability

The four themes that emerged from my conversations with men with disabilities — responsibility, dependence, dominance, and public perception — correspond to a set of traditional male role attitude items that I stumbled across in an article about masculinity and its impact on adolescent male heterosexual relationships.¹ Here are some laments of the real man:

- It is essential for a guy to get respect from others.
- A man always deserves the respect of his wife and children.
- I admire a guy who is totally sure of himself.
- A guy will lose respect if he talks about his problems.
- A young man should be physically tough, even if he's not big.
- It bothers me when a guy acts like a girl.
- I don't think a husband should have to do housework.
- Men are always ready for sex.

I subscribe to a definition of disability based on a model that acknowledges that attitudes and barriers in society disable people more than their impairment, and this may lead to a loss of function. But what is function? Function has a vast array of meaning, ranging from the very pragmatic and physical to the somewhat esoteric or spiritual. Function is implied in all of the following:

Task — work or assignment, often important or difficult.

Job — paid trade or profession, something needing to be done or dealt with.

Utility — the quality or state of being useful.

Occupation — an activity on which time is spent; may be paid or unpaid.

Role — the usual or expected function of someone, the part played in a given social context.

Meaning — what something means, what someone intends to express.

Purpose — the reason something or someone exists.



The ideal man — Philip Patston, comedian, consultant, columnist and (among other things) recovering social worker and human rights activist. He is gay, disabled, vegetarian and English. Six years ago, Philip created Diversityworks, now a multi-faceted enterprise that includes a business group offering expertise in managing diversity and change, and a trust that runs projects to improve diversity and professional participation in the arts <<http://www.diversityworks.co.nz>>. Philip lives in Auckland and travels regularly in New Zealand. His work has taken him to Australia, the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Belgium. ♦

I believe that, in our culture, men are mostly valued for the more pragmatic, physical realms of function (task, job, utility, occupation), whereas women are more valued for the esoteric, spiritual elements (role, meaning, purpose). This is, of course, a generalisation, but one that corresponds to the traditional male role attitude items listed above.

When I compare what disabled and non-disabled men are valued for, aspects of function stand out as the great divide. For example, I am seldom asked the obligatory question, “What do you do?” People assume I don’t do much of any import, because I have a physical impairment. I’ve also noticed that men are far less comfortable than women with issues of impairment and disability. It’s women, far more often than men, who offer assistance, unless it’s something overtly physical like putting my wheelchair in my

car. And it's women who are far more prevalent as workers in the disability sector. However, when you examine the impact of the loss of function for men, women and people who experience disability, one thing is very clear: men have a lot more to lose. Loss of function particularly pushes blokes' buttons.

Why? It seems to me that, in a primal sort of way, male identity is situated in the realm of physical function. Male creativity is concerned with external manipulation — making things, building things, doing things — so impairment and disablement fundamentally threaten male identity. I have argued that the essential difference between the sexes is that men create “without” and women create “within”. Consider these differences between men and women: men's sexual organs are outside the body; women's inside. Men cannot conceive and create children, as women can — inside them. Men gather information primarily through their sense organs located primarily on the outside of their bodies whereas women gather much information through their intuition, their feelings, inside their body. And finally, without getting too much into the sex stereotype debate, look at household roles — women's domain is generally inside and men's, outside.

My conversations with the men in the documentary made me realise that when men are threatened with loss of function, they experience huge levels of fear. I consider fear to be the absence of love (and, conversely, love the absence of fear). When people act out of fear, their actions are characterised by drive (fear of not succeeding), low creativity and judgement. Conversely, when people act out of love, they are passionate, highly creative and accepting. The idea of losing function leaves men uncreative, intolerant and driven by the fear of losing control, independence, positive public perception and responsibility.

The ideal man?

So how does all this make me, a gay man who experiences disability, an ideal man?

Firstly, I think I have successfully surrendered control. There are aspects of my life — the result of stigma, disablement, homophobia and the like — that I cannot control. I no longer expect to

control everything. More than anything, I have developed the ability to trust that everything is perfect.

Secondly, I accept that, to live the busy, autonomous lifestyle that I have chosen and created, dependence on personal assistants and funding to employ them is necessary.

Thirdly, I ignore public perception. Simply put, though it is still hard sometimes (especially when he's cute), I have learnt to reject rejection.

Finally, I take responsibility. I am not a victim of circumstance. I've moved away from my personal “fight for rights” towards a quest for creativity and identity, and a spiritual understanding of the purpose disadvantaged people have (and choose) to help humanity evolve. Sure, disabled gay men have rights and we are not yet well afforded them — this is indeed the last bastion of human rights, and breaking it down will require recognition by society that the mix of disablement and homophobia that blokes like me experience is a complex social construct, not a catastrophic personal tragedy. But while humanity catches up, I've chosen to move on and create an identity based on who I am rather than who I am not. Part of my creative process has been to understand and believe I am here to raise human consciousness about diversity. At the same time, I am empowered by the notion that even though it's bloody hard at times, my soul made a choice to live this life.

Which leads me to believe that that soul must be a masochist, but such is the sacrifice one makes to be the ideal man!

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