

## Living on the Edge

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I want to begin with someone whose disability put him on the edge but who learned to make the edge his home. I then want to spend the next 20 minutes or so exploring what it means to make the edge your home. When my cousin Tim was four years old his parents were told Tim was autistic. The consultant didn't mince words. 'You must bring him up like a dog', he told my aunt, stressing the need for clear instructions and boundaries, the need to bridle the boy's volatile frustration. The family understood that Tim was going to be a problem. His mother shaped his character carefully. For all the bleak prognostications, Tom found areas of life where he flourished. He played the piano. He sang, growing into a deep bass. He appreciated music so much that he could become ecstatic on hearing a Mozart concerto. He appreciated routine, and before she died, my aunt ensured that he would find a regular place volunteering at a local care home, doing odd jobs and gardening. He died suddenly, aged 46.

At his funeral there were the usual seats left for his brothers, their families, and for the extensive wider family. The seats for the wider family were mostly empty. They had always found Tim hard to relate to; they all knew about the dog remark; they could not pretend they really knew him: they stayed away. But behind those rows of empty seats, the rest of the church was overflowing with people. And as the service proceeded, one story after another was told that explained why. One woman recalled how, new to faith, for her first six months she didn't participate in the hymns but simply watched Tim's face as he sang with the choir: he was so enraptured – she wanted to be like him. Everyone realised that, had it been their own funeral, the church would have been much less full. Tim's life had begun with being thought of as a dog. But at his funeral it was abundantly clear how God had chosen what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, and what is weak in the world to shame the strong. Tim's life ended with him eating not just the scraps from the master's table but sharing the whole banquet, for evermore.

Human beings are storytelling animals. And that's not just about the past: it's about the future. When a child is born, it's not long before someone says, 'I wonder what you will become when you grow up.' And narrative plays a key role in suffering. When someone is debilitated by an accident, or a violent attack leaves someone injured or dead, much of the grief is about the future story that will be incomparably different or not be at all, the dreams unfulfilled, the opportunities missed, the happiness dashed.

But life is less like a narrative, and more like a drama. That's because we don't live life as a text on a page, we live it in interaction with other characters, and the plot is affected in a myriad ways by countless influences, many of which never come 'on stage' in the sense of relating to us directly in a face-to-face way. We are, as one philosopher puts it, never more than the co-authors of our own stories. When we grieve the loss of a promising future, we're assuming a level of control over the plot that no one could ever truly attain.

But even the notion of drama is inadequate, because drama suggests there is in fact a definitive text, whether written by ourselves, God, or an unseen hand, and that destiny simply involves fulfilling our role in that prescribed script. Yet there is no such script. There is no 'Mr Right' that the hopeful young woman longs to meet and marry, there is no guarantee of 2.4 children and a dog that the ambitions of suburban bliss might set their heart on. Life has many of the elements of drama, but a better description would be that it's a constant process of improvisation. Improvisation refers to the way actors in the theatre are formed by certain habits such that they learn to receive unexpected and even unwelcome events and interruptions as gifts and enrichments.

The connections and comparisons between improvisation and discipleship are things I've written about at length but I want to talk about just one aspect of improvisation today because I believe it describes as well as I know what it means to find yourself on the edge and yet make the edge your home. As we're all aware today's theme has strong resonances not just in relation to disability but

to a host of other conditions and contexts relating to difference, often perceived as creating disadvantage, and sometimes issuing in exclusion.

Imagine a game with actors sitting in a circle. One actor says a single word. This becomes the first word of a story. The actor next in the circle follows immediately with a second word, the next actor says a third, and so on as quickly as possible until the story is considered complete. Adverbs are disallowed in order to keep up the pace and avoid delaying tactics. Inexperienced actors invariably try to control the story. But this only succeeds in ruining it. Every person who adds a word has an incipient story in mind, and thus an idea of what word might follow. But each time they must instantly wipe that idea out of their mind – or else they will be paralysed. If the players relax, cease to worry about being ‘obvious’, remain highly attentive, and simply say whatever comes to mind, they will find the story seems to take on a life of its own, guided by some outside force.

The game illustrates three technical terms. Each new word constitutes an offer. Offers are not to be regarded as good or bad in themselves: the key is, what you do with them. The second term is ‘accept’. An actor accepts an offer by any response that maintains the premise of the action that constituted that offer. Each actor must be willing and able to wipe from their mind any thoughts they themselves had of actively controlling the outcome of the narrative, and resist the inclination to a passive refusal, such as ‘I’m not playing anymore.’ The third term is ‘block’. Blocking actively refuses to accept an offer and undermines one’s partner’s premise. It prevents the action from developing. It happens when one actor is overwhelmed by the danger or difficulty of keeping the story going. Accepting sees the future as an opportunity – blocking sees the future as a problem.

Let’s apply this to disability. In this sense, disability is an offer. It’s neither good nor bad. Some choose to block that offer, either passively by ignoring, overlooking, or discriminating against those with a disability. Others actively block that offer by assuming the only thing you can do with a disability is to try to remedy it, eradicate it, or prevent people likely to have it ever being born. Debates around disability often involve working out what it means to accept disability, whether one has the lived experience oneself or whether one is a member of society working out what practical and ideological adjustments to make to turn that acceptance into reality.

I want to describe to you something that goes beyond the binary choice to accept or to block. Imagine another game called Presents. It’s played in pairs. A thinks of a present they would like to give to B, and then mimes giving it to them. B has to guess what it is, and use it accordingly. The players then swap roles, and B passes a mimed present to person A, and so on. The trouble with this game is, of course, that it can be difficult to identify what the gift is and the players get frustrated with each other. The secret to making the game a success is to concentrate on cooperation rather than competition. The key is, not to think of interesting things to give, but to concentrate on making the thing one is given as interesting as possible. If A simply holds out two hands, as if proffering something in a box, B may wind it up and let it walk about the floor, or put it on and turn into a gorilla. If the game is played this way, the stifling sense of competition disappears, and great joy and energy are released.

Person B has three options when offered a present by person A. B can say, first, no, I am not going to receive this gift. This is a straightforward block. This preserves security but closes down life. B can say, second, what is this gift? What is it for? What am I supposed to do with it? This is the way the game is usually played, in play and in life. There is a third option. Person B can say, third, how do I want to receive this gift? It’s no longer a question of what the gift is supposed to be: it’s a question of what the gift *can* be. One does not say ‘What is this gift for?’ – and even less ‘Is this a good gift?’; one says ‘How can this gift be understood or used in a faithful way?’, ‘What does the way we accept this gift say about the kind of people we are and want to be?’, ‘What can (or has) this gift become in the kingdom of God?’

This is called ‘overaccepting.’ Overaccepting is accepting in the light of a larger story. Diana, Princess of Wales was asked in a television interview in 1995 whether she thought she would ever be Queen. She famously replied ‘I will be Queen of people’s hearts’, thus not blocking the awkwardness of her predicament, but overaccepting the sadness of losing her throne, and placing herself in what she saw as a far more significant narrative. Likewise at her funeral, her brother in his address equally famously claimed that ‘She needed no royal title’ to recognise her inherent

dignity and grace and the contribution she made to national life – thus not blocking her change of status after her divorce, but again suggesting a more significant context than mere royalty. The coalminers of the film *The Full Monty* had been stripped of their dignity by the experience of unemployment. They overaccepted their condition by developing a thriving male-stripper routine. Perhaps the best known overaccepting routine is the Monty Python ‘Four Yorkshiremen’ sketch, in which the four men’s conversation over a drink descends into a relentless competition of inverted snobbery, as each man’s tale of childhood deprivation is overaccepted with the words, ‘You were lucky.’

A concert pianist was on the point of beginning a performance when there was a scream from the audience. A child had left her seat beside her parent and was running around the auditorium. The concert pianist stepped away from his instrument in order to maintain concentration. The child ran up the steps onto the stage, sat herself down on the stool and began to play discordant notes at random as she pleased. The hushed audience gasped in horror and embarrassment. The pianist walked towards the child and stood behind her as she played. The pianist leant over her and, without disturbing her, placed right and left hands outside her two small hands on the keyboard. The pianist then began to play, in response to her notes, weaving their discordant sounds into an improvised melody. To have thrown the child out would have been to block: to have let her play on would have been to accept; to weave a wonderful melody around her was to receive her as a gift, to overaccept.

Once you start looking for overaccepting in the Bible, it’s everywhere. Since Noah, God has refused to block the creation. God overaccepts creation. The prophet Jeremiah describes how he went down to the potter’s house, and saw the potter working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, yet rather than throwing it away or accepting it as broken, he reworked it into another vessel. The Lord says to Jeremiah that he, the Lord, can do with the house of Israel just as the potter has done. The whole narrative shape of the Old Testament is a tour de force of overaccepting. Likewise the New Testament describes how God incorporates creation into the kingdom, through election, incarnation, passion, resurrection, and the sending of the Spirit. In annunciation and nativity, God overaccepts human life. In the end Jesus overaccepts death. Jesus does not avoid the cross, nor is the cross the end of the story. In the resurrection, God shows that even the worst ‘offer’, the execution of the Son of God, can be overaccepted – even death and all its causes can become part of the story.

Harry I didn’t know personally. His story was related to me by a friend called Robin. While studying for the Lutheran ministry, Robin was an intern in a parish in Akron, Ohio. Harry was a member of Robin’s that parish. Members of the pastoral staff of the parish went to see him at home once a week. They generally brought a tape of the Sunday service, a pew slip, and the sacrament. It tended to be the last role handed out at the staff meeting. The time came for Robin to take her turn on the visiting rota, and discover why.

When Robin first called on Harry, she got a shock. Harry lived in a run-down white clapboard house. He was a big person, sitting in an over-stuffed armchair with an oxygen tank beside it. His legs were virtually useless. The house was pervaded by a smell of must, urine, and dirt. It was repulsive. Nonetheless, Robin went a second time, and gradually Harry came to trust that she would return regularly. As he realised he was not going to be rejected by her, he began to talk more about himself and the way he saw things. Yet he seldom said much about his debilitating physical condition, or the squalor in which he was living.

One day Harry said to Robin, ‘It’s time for you to have a look in the cellar.’ Reluctantly, and somewhat uneasily, Robin walked to the cellar door. She carefully opened it, and looked into the darkness. ‘Go down the steps!’ Harry insisted, realising her hesitancy. To Robin’s astonishment, she saw a large and imposing weaver’s loom set up in the basement. There were piles of old clothes and torn strips of cloth. Robin stared in amazement. After trying for some time without success to relate the creativity of what she saw to the dirt and smell of the man she knew, she came back up the stairs, totally bemused.

Harry instructed Robin to bring him a pile of rugs from the kitchen. He took them from her and put them down in front of him, and began to tell the story of his life. He explained that he took in

any old clothes that nobody wanted, and scraps of cloth from the rubbish heap. He then wove them into something new, just like the concert pianist I described earlier. The something new was the pile of rag rugs she had found stacked in his kitchen. He then gave what he had made to people who needed a rug. Why did he do it? Because, he said, he felt he was like the old clothes and the waste cloth. He was on the rubbish heap of life - alienated from his friends and his family, unable to work, unable even to breathe properly. He was living on the edge, but he had found a way to make the edge not just his home, but a place of hospitality and ministry. He gave Robin his finest rug. Some weeks later, she conducted his funeral.

The time came for her to return to her seminary and complete her studies. At one tutorial she shared Harry's story with a group of her colleagues. After the session, a fellow student touched Robin's arm, took her to one side, and said 'Harry was my uncle.' The student was in tears, as she realised that she'd lost her chance of reconciliation with him. She'd thought of Harry as a pariah but she could now see he was a saint. He embodied everything about overaccepting. Robin retrieved her precious rug, which Harry had given her and gave it to her fellow student. Even after his death, Harry's ministry was transforming the lives of people whom he touched. As Robin told me the story she added, finally, 'I am still moved by his witness.'