

Sex and the Woman with Disabilities

By Anne Abbott

Communicating Together, Volume 15 #1, March 1998
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Everything seemed so simple when I was a child. Sure I had cerebral palsy and had to have assistance with all of my daily needs. But I also had a family that loved me, supported me and tried their best to give me as normal a life as possible. With them behind me I felt as if I could do anything or become anybody I wanted. When I told them that I wanted to be a doctor or a nurse or an actress when I grew up, nobody made fun of my dreams or said that they were impossible. When I told them that some day I wanted to be a wife and mother they would say: "That's nice, dear, I am sure that will happen one day for you if you really want it to."

Childhood

Like any other child I liked playing with other children. My brother and I were very close, so it seemed natural for me to be included in his circle of friends. I went to a school especially for children with disabilities, and there I made friends with girls and boys my own age. My girlfriends and I would play with our dolls, pretending that they were real people living within a real family setting acting out real family situations. In a sense, like other little girls, I think we were preparing ourselves for what we supposed our lives might be like when we grew up. I had boyfriends, too. Like my girlfriends, some of the boys had disabilities and some were able-bodied. Somehow, even at so young an age, there were often romantic feelings between myself and these boys. Even back then, I was beginning to be aware of my sexuality. I had my first kiss on the lips from one boy when I was eight, and then got "married" at age ten to another boy who was in my class.

The Teen Years

When I reached my teens, however, everything seemed to change. Gone were the days of playing with dolls and the mock marriage ceremonies during recess. The age of innocence had seemingly disappeared overnight. The rules had suddenly, inexplicably changed. Everyone was becoming concerned about their body image, trying to fit in, trying to find their own place in the world. Like other teenagers, we began to find fault with the way we looked, becoming over-critical at the sight of the slightest flaw. The people on television, in movies and in the music industry really didn't help any either. They seemed to be so beautiful, so perfect, so flawless. Would we ever be like them? It seemed as if society and the media were saying that you had to look perfect in order to succeed in life. It didn't help that people with disabilities were rarely shown or mentioned in the media either, and if they were, they were portrayed as helpless and asexual. I felt terribly confused and inadequate during my teenage years. My mother unwittingly added to these feelings by trying to give me some advice. She told me to try not to become romantically interested in able-bodied boys. Her reasoning was that she thought that they would never want the responsibility of taking care of someone with cerebral palsy. It was her experience, she explained, that men liked to be taken care of, but they didn't particularly like to take care of someone else. I should stick to boys with cerebral palsy or other type of disabilities who would understand my needs, she told me. My mother wasn't trying to hurt me when she said this. She just wanted to save me from rejection. Unfortunately, rejected I was - by both able-bodied boys and boys with disabilities! I found that a lot of boys with disabilities only wanted to become involved with able-bodied girls. They didn't want to stick to girls who happened to have disabilities. Indeed, they didn't think they should have to. One boy explained his feelings to me this way: "You live with your disability every day of your life. Why would you want someone who is exactly like you to remind you of your own limitations?" There were some, admittedly, who didn't care whether a girl was able-bodied or not. Unfortunately, I just never "clicked" with these guys. Either they weren't my type or I wasn't theirs. I learned that sometimes you cannot help who you are attracted to. And so, despite my mother's warnings, there were times when I tried to catch the attention of able-bodied men. I was like any other woman. If I saw a good-looking guy I would want to sit and talk to him, maybe even flirt with him. A lot of these guys liked me, sure, but never in "that way". They said they just wanted to be friends. It was unbelievably frustrating for me, and very demoralizing as well. I felt as if I were invisible, as if I were somehow a non-person. I felt as if society expected me to suppress my sexuality and act as if it didn't matter, that it was just something that I would

not, could not do. There were some people who assumed that I was void of any type of sexual feelings to begin with and needed to be protected from any kind of sexual intimacy. Outwardly I was the same person I had always been - cheerful, outgoing, optimistic. Inside I began to feel angry and resentful of these kinds of attitudes, and of all the restrictions that were being put upon me. I just could not understand what had happened to my life. As a child I was included in all aspects of life. Now I was excluded from a big part of life that most people took for granted. As a child people assured me that my dreams of having a husband and family of my own would be easily attainable when I grew up. Now that I was actually a grown up, it seemed like someone had suddenly changed the rules on me. I was still a nice person, wasn't I? I was a good person with a lot to offer. Perhaps I wasn't one of those perfect beauties on television or in movies, but I had my own type of beauty, didn't I? Why couldn't anybody see this? Why couldn't anybody get past my disability?

Young Adulthood

When I was twenty-three my parents put me into Participation House (a home for people with physical and mental disabilities) for "parent relief" while they went away on their yearly two week vacation in the Caribbean. It was there that I began having a relationship with one of the male attendants. He pursued me, kissed me, told me I was beautiful and desirable. After I came home from Participation House we started dating for a while. Finally, I thought, I had found a man who liked me "in that way", who knew I had the same feelings and desires as any other woman. Finally, I could have a romantic relationship with a man just like any other woman. I was in love with him, or thought I was at the time, but I never fooled myself into believing that he loved me. Even so, when he broke up with me to marry another disabled woman it hurt terribly. Later on, I realized that what hurt most was the fear that I would never find anyone else, that this man was probably my last chance at happiness.

Romance At Last

At twenty-nine I was resigned that I would die an old maid, a virgin, forever without a mate. If that is how things were going to be, then so be it, I thought. I had tried my best. And then, one day, something happened that changed my life. A friend of mine talked me into purchasing a computer and a modem. My friend also showed me how to access a computer bulletin

board system (BBS) and communicate with people. From then on, I spent up to three hours a day in on-line "chat rooms" with total strangers talking about just about anything and everything. One day I logged onto a BBS and began chatting with a fellow named Rob. He seemed sweet and funny, and I liked him, as he liked me, almost instantly. We chatted for hours and soon found out that we had many things in common. Even so, I didn't feel comfortable enough at first to tell him that I had cerebral palsy. I was afraid of how he might react. I couldn't face another rejection! However, because he kept asking me if he could meet me and because he told me he thought he was falling in love with me, I felt like I had to break my silence. Amazingly, Rob didn't care about my disability. He still thought I was a wonderful person, he said, and wanted to meet me. All my family and friends thought I was insane to go meet someone I had only chatted with for a month over a BBS, but I didn't care. I knew Rob would be just as he had seemed in the chat rooms of the BBS. I was right, of course. When we met that day, it was as if we had known each other all of our lives. We started dating after that, and soon fell in love. Neither of us could have been happier. It was as if we had been made especially for each other. We have been married now for two years and are trying to start a family of our own. In fact, I was pregnant this past spring, but, sadly, I had a miscarriage. My family thought I was crazy for even considering getting pregnant the first time. Now they really think I am crazy for trying once again. After my miscarriage, one of my relatives made a rather glib suggestion to me that Rob and I should go out and buy a puppy instead of trying to get pregnant again. My family doesn't mean to hurt me. They are just concerned about my welfare. They think because of my age (I am thirty-nine now) and my disability, that I am too frail and fragile to give birth. I don't share their views and neither does Rob. Neither, in fact, does my obstetrician. The obstetrician I went to when I was pregnant has had several patients with cerebral palsy under his care who have successfully given birth. He thinks it's perfectly fine for me to do the same thing. I want to have a baby with Rob, a small being that we can love, care for and raise together. But to just say that I want a baby does not nearly cover how I feel. It is not like wanting a pizza, a car or a new dress, nothing so mundane as this. It is a deeper feeling than that, more like a physical yearning, a terrible longing inside of me. The female members of my family must have experienced similar feelings when they decided to have children of their own. Why then can't they understand that it's the same for me? It has always been like this: one set of rules for me, one set of rules for everyone else. It is so frustrating, and it gives me a terrible headache to think about it! I am not giving up, though. Rob and I will have a beautiful healthy baby one

day, of this I am sure. And, I'm even sure my family will come around to accepting our decision and understand that we know what we are doing. They do love me after all. This is just one more of life's little hurdles that I have to get over. I mean, if finding Rob has taught me one thing, it is that if you want something badly enough you should never give up or be afraid to take chances.