Book review


The disability community – if I may call it such – is diverse. People with disabilities come in all shapes and sizes, all colors, all genders, all ages – indeed, in many ways they are not dissimilar from the ‘rest of the population’. People with disabilities do, however, have an additional trait or quality, if you will, that non-disabled people have not. They are in some way limited in the activities they can perform – confronted with unaccommodating environments that make it difficult for them to participate in society on a level equal to those who do not have similar limitations. Much of what really makes them ‘different’, however, is not what marks their physiology (reduced vision, or hearing, or difficulty in movement, learning, communicating or perhaps some cognitive ‘impairment’) but the barriers and challenges they face in order to compete, participate and be included on an equal footing with everyone else.

There are also additional groups of people who make up the disability community. There are those non-disabled parents of disabled children; parents who strive through their offspring’s infancy, childhood, adolescence – and, if they’re lucky – yes lucky, through early (and sometimes late) adulthood. Their efforts are focused on ensuring that their child with a disability is afforded the same rights and benefits as all other children.

And then there are also those like Leslie Swartz, the able-bodied children of a parent with a disability. In his memoir – Able-bodied: scenes from a curious life – Leslie provides the reader with a glimpse of what it was like to grow up the able-bodied son of a father with a physical impairment.

His “curious life” leads us through Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and South Africa from the early part of the last century to the present day and provides a kaleidoscope of personages who have flashed through or lovingly remained (sometimes obstinately stuck) in his life. And throughout the telling is the presence of his father; in the early years, the man himself with his “twisted feet”, “unusually shaped chest”, his “broken body” – and, after his passing, the specter of the man and his continued impact and influence on Leslie’s life. Indeed, the book is dedicated to “the (unreliable) memory of Alfred Mervyn Swartz”.

This journey is a coming to terms with the choices Leslie has made: his choice of studies, his career path and even some of the family decisions he has made over the years – all influenced to some extent by a father with a disability. The man left an indelible imprint on a young and developing soul. As a result, Leslie has throughout his life and career chosen to devote considerable time and effort to the study of disability – and though able-bodied, he has been welcomed, indeed sought out among those who would have guidance on the study of disability – to speak – not for them, not of them – but with them. Leslie found a common voice – perhaps nurtured through his experiences with his father – and developed that voice to speak with the disabled.

Often funny, at times shocking, always revealing Leslie Swartz invites the reader into the life of a family (both functional and dysfunctional in all sense of the words!) that did not let disability get in their way.
Leslie claims to be “determinedly, joyfully, nuts” – but in the end, this book could only have been written by a loving and devoted son. The telling is not at all about the disadvantages of growing up the able-bodied son of a disabled father – but how that man provided for and prepared Leslie for his chosen life and profession.

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