

MOVIE REVIEW and TRIBUTE to Dr. Brooke Mackenzie Ellison (20th October 1978 – 4th February 2024)

The Brooke Ellison Story.
Reeves, Christopher. (2004).

Kimberly. C. Anderson for A&E cable network

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“In life, we are taught to look both ways, as if there were only two...”

Quote from Brooke Ellison’s blog as she introduced her book *Look Both Ways* (2020)¹.

Dr Ellison was an American academic, Associate Professor in the School of Health Technology and Management at Stony Brook University, and an aspiring politician, disability advocate, non-fiction author and motivational speaker. She collaborated with director James Siegel to create the award-winning documentary *Hope Deferred* (2009) which aims to educate the general public about embryonic stem cell research. She also collaborated with Christopher Reeves (after his accident that had paralysed him) for his final directorial venture, *The Brooke Ellison Story*, a television film that journeyed her determination to Harvard ever since a near-death accident that left her paralysed for the rest of her life. The film chronicles the life experiences of Brooke Ellison and her family based on her memoir *Miracles Happen: One Mother, One Daughter, One Journey* (2002)

Cinematic depictions of disability have always been complicated. On the one hand, it claims to have created awareness and provided people with disabilities a platform to interact with society, yet on the other hand, it has added a layer of exclusion and disadvantage as very often the narratives are normative ableist society perceptions of disabilities rather than the lived experiences told first

¹ <https://www.brookeellison.com/blog/introducing-look-both-ways> Accessed February 20th 2024, 8:37am

hand. Not only does this pose a threat to their privacy, but the lack of accessibility also excludes them from more positive participation in society (Kent 2020, 264). The film begins with the young Brooke in a ballet performance, the movement signifying agency as well as fragility and vulnerability as the story drifts into the accident that paralysed Brooke neck down. The same ballet is performed when Brooke graduates from Harvard; the film technologies permit an imagination and representation of bodies in diverse ways. Besides, it can also have the body undergo a variety of experiences and talk back at the gaze that objectifies some bodies as 'abled' and some as 'disabled', showing that the 'disabled body' in fact thinks itself differently.

The film sensitively depicts the dynamic of family relationships that are re-aligned primarily to cater to Brooke's needs and aspirations. Coping all adversities resulting from unsympathetic healthcare providers, insurance systems and school systems, the film depicts the enormous effort of parents, siblings and Brooke herself in overcoming obstacles through determination and sacrifices. Yet, the portrayal is most realistic as estrangements that most families would face are portrayed in sensitive ways. Brooke's frustration and impatience with her mother as she's nursing a broken heart, and sibling insecurities as all parental attention is diverted to Brooke are events most convincingly portrayed. The family remains the primary focus throughout the film, and the harsh realities of quadriplegia, are depicted through the family's triumphs over adversities in inspiring ways. Hence, the film remains notable as one gets a very tangible sense of the difficulties without the usual graphic descriptions of injuries, medicines and hospital equipment.

A strong critique of the medical model of disability is illustrated as the film dramatizes Brooke's father Ed's confrontation with the doctor's clinical diagnosis of her being immobile for life and thus incapable of school. Another scene depicts Brooke's mother's confrontation with nurses and medical personnel who are portrayed as negligent and incompetent to deal with her needs and vulnerabilities. While the family prepares to overcome all difficulties to have the young Brooke back in school, the nurse at the facility asks them to be realistic and accept that she is paralyzed for life. In another scene the nurses rush to connect the detached ventilator and leave soon after the needful is done without

comforting the frightened Brooke; both these scenes present a negative image of the medical and nursing departments who, as caregivers, typically play a crucial role in the patient's life in hospitals and long-term facilities. There are some moments though; in scenes where the doctors provide solutions to help her verbalise her communication as well as the nurses teach Jean (Brooke's mother) all the care she may require to give Brooke at home. While it is true that the medical approach to disability as a personal tragedy- an impairment/ abnormality in the anatomical structure that produces an inability to fulfil functions considered within the normal range for a human being- predominates and organises all social, cultural and political systems of our life world; the film reinforces the stereotype of bad nursing which may be seen as a missed opportunity to portray the very important role that nurses play as caregivers.

Disability representation in films (also applies to television, print media, and advertising), has often been guilty of emphasizing disability as a medical case, reinforcing stereotypes either arousing emotions of pity or awe; both further estranging the person with a disability from others in society (Riley 2005, 9-10). Representations remain trapped in the binary of pity/heroism stereotype; individuals with disability as either helpless, deviant, pitiful, sad and have other negative traits that are understood as 'natural' consequences of the person's impairment. This comes to be used as a logical justification for the isolation and marginalisation of disabled characters by virtue of their alleged/assumed moral failings. On the other hand, the depiction of individuals with disabilities as superheroes presents a complicated case of inspirational narratives perpetuating the "superhero" stereotypes. The "supercrip" model depicts people with disabilities as having extraordinary powers and achieving feats considered far beyond established norms. What is considered "extraordinary" is generally categorized by society's low standards and expectations of what they assume a person with impairment can/cannot do (Leah Cameron et al.2022, 111). Late disability advocate Stella Young, in her speech at TED Talk in 2014 titled, "I'm not your inspiration", thank you very much summarizes this argument of "inspiration porn"². She says she calls it porn on purpose as it is the objectification of one group of people for the benefit of the other. Disabled people are often celebrated for

2 https://www.humber.ca/makingaccessiblemedia/modules/01/transcript/I'm_Not%20_Your_Inspirations_transcript.pdf. Accessed February 20th, 2024, 9:37am

trivial, average and mundane actions rather than for their genuine achievements. The intention is to create awe and motivation in the “non-disabled” audience and make them feel better about their lives. The sensationalised depiction of disabled bodies is rooted in the ableist assumption that disabled bodies are undesirable. Inspiration porn is a spectrum, ranging from mundane to an inspirational construct of the disabled person overcoming disabilities through heroic efforts. The problem with such narratives is that disability is constructed as a personal limitation and living with impairment as overcoming barriers (Leah Cameron et al.2022, 109). Such a narrative fails to take into account that disability is neither a personal tragedy nor a medical condition of dependency; rather it is a result of unequal social dynamics that renders some as ‘disabled’.

It is important to distinguish such a narrative from inspiration chronicles. Narratives of disability inspiration refer to inspiring activities that are considered beyond the norm for all members of society. Analysing media content on Brooke Ellison (such as the Wikipedia entry or obituary in *The New York Times*), she is often celebrated as one of the first quadriplegics to graduate from Harvard University with a Bachelor of Science in cognitive neuroscience. The language of such a narrative is meant to create a feeling of awe and sympathy in its readers; this is shaped by dominant societal beliefs about disability that come from the power of the dominant able-bodied culture that is fearful of the disabled body. Rather than perceiving it as a variation in physical bodies, it is stigmatised as a biological abnormality thereby shaping economic, political, social, cultural, technological and attitudinal issues related to disability (Leah Cameron et al.2022, 110). Contrary to these narratives, the film emphasises Brooke’s academic excellence, passion for the subject, thirst for knowledge and commitment to the cause that indeed is an inspiring event to celebrate on its merit, not because it was an accomplishment of a person with a disability. The camera at no point fixes the viewer’s gaze on her wheelchair, respirator, or the voice-activated computer that assisted Brooke in her writing, instead, it shows the viewer her passion for learning, undeterred as she asks her parents when she can resume school...and whether she would be “...left back in school...”(16:45) soon after recovering from a coma. Further, her determination to learn Latin was provoked by a challenge from a teacher who believed women don’t learn it well, not her disability. Yet, another scene depicts her joy in learning the language, as the camera focuses

on her mind grasping the words of the language in the inaudible din of doctors and parents discussing her medical condition. The film focuses on her academic brilliance, her superlative analytical and calculative skills along with literary abilities to appreciate and critically analyse the work of Joseph Campbell like no other in her class making her a truly outstanding participant in class. It realistically depicts her compassionate nature and brilliance, a combination of qualities so rare that it makes her attractive to a senior with whom she has a short romantic association. Overcoming that heartbreak and pursuing academic excellence through perseverance and dedication are inspiring narratives that illustrate her above-average qualities without making her 'superhuman'. Though the film has a few oversimplified moments such as being easily accepted by her classmates in Harvard (as she enters the classroom in a wheelchair on the first day); the film serves as a good prescription for change in depicting disability in mass media. People's physical, sensory, cognitive and other impairments can pose real challenges not always caused by social systems, yet persons with impairments are rendered disabled by the social dynamic of discrimination and lack of adequate medical and cultural support systems, economic, social, educational and physical inaccessibility. The film through Brooke Ellison's life illustrates how a balanced approach is needed that acknowledges both physical diversity as well as manner in which society contributes to disability; truly a fitting tribute to her life and advocacy.

References

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