

Unit 9 SUE AUSTIN

Deep Sea Diving . . . In a Wheelchair

Part 1

. . . I started using a wheelchair 16 years ago when an **extended illness**¹ changed the way I could access the world. When I started using the wheelchair, it was a tremendous new freedom. I'd seen my life **slip away**² and become restricted. It was like having an enormous new toy. I could **whiz around**³ and feel the wind in my face again. Just being out on the street was exhilarating.

But even though I had this newfound joy and freedom, people's reaction completely changed towards me. It was as if they couldn't see me anymore, as if an **invisibility cloak**⁴ had descended. They seemed to see me in terms of their assumptions of what it must be like to be in a wheelchair. When I asked people their associations with the wheelchair, they used words like limitation, fear, pity, and restriction. I realized I'd internalized these responses and it had changed who I was on a core level. A part of me had become **alienated**⁵ from myself. I was seeing myself not from my perspective, but vividly and continuously from the perspective of other people's responses to me.

As a result, I knew I needed to make my own stories about this experience, new narratives to reclaim my identity.

Part 2

I started making work that aimed to communicate something of the joy and freedom I felt when using a wheelchair—a power chair—to **negotiate**⁶ the world. I was working to transform these internalized responses, to transform the

preconceptions that had so shaped my identity when I started using a wheelchair, by creating unexpected images. The wheelchair became an object to paint and play with. When I literally started leaving traces of my joy and freedom, it was exciting to see the interested and surprised responses from people. It seemed to open up new perspectives, and therein lay the **paradigm shift**⁷. It showed that an arts practice can remake one's identity and transform preconceptions by revising the familiar.

So when I began to dive, in 2005, I realized scuba gear extends your range of activity in just the same way as a wheelchair does, but the associations attached to scuba gear are ones of excitement and adventure, completely different to people's responses to the wheelchair.

So I thought, "I wonder what'll happen if I put the two together?" [Laughter] And the underwater wheelchair that has resulted has taken me on the most amazing journey over the last seven years.

So to give you an idea of what that's like, I'd like to share with you one of the outcomes from creating this spectacle, and show you what an amazing journey it's taken me on. . . .

It is the most amazing experience, beyond most other things I've experienced in life. I literally have the freedom to move in 360 degrees of space and an ecstatic experience of joy and freedom.

And the incredibly unexpected thing is that other people seem to see and feel that too. Their eyes literally light up, and they

¹ The expression "an extended illness" is often used to refer to a serious illness that lasted a long time.

² When something "slips away," it slowly disappears.

³ To "whiz around" means to move quickly through the air; it is often used to talk about going quickly on a vehicle with wheels, such as a bicycle, motor bike, or wheelchair.

⁴ The term "invisibility cloak," refers to a magical cape that makes you invisible. The term is best known for being used in the Harry Potter series by British author J.K. Rowling.

⁵ Someone who is "alienated" is isolated or feels alone.

⁶ When we speak about "negotiating" in reference to a place or space, the verb means to move through or over that space, often with special effort. It is often used to talk about overcoming an obstacle, but can also be used generally, as in this case ("the world").

⁷ When "a paradigm shift" occurs, people start thinking in a completely new way.

say things like, “I want one of those,” or, “If you can do that, I can do anything.”

And I’m thinking, it’s because in that moment of them seeing an object they have no **frame of reference**⁸ for, or so transcends the frames of reference they have with the wheelchair, they have to think in a completely new way. And I think that moment of completely new thought perhaps creates a freedom that spreads to the rest of other people’s lives. For me, this means that they’re seeing the value of difference, the joy it brings when instead of focusing on loss or limitation, we see and discover the power and joy of seeing the world from exciting new perspectives. For me, the wheelchair becomes

a vehicle for transformation. In fact, I now call the underwater wheelchair “Portal,” because it’s literally pushed me through into a new way of being, into new dimensions and into a new level of consciousness.

And the other thing is, that because nobody’s seen or heard of an underwater wheelchair before, and creating this **spectacle**⁹ is about creating new ways of seeing, being and knowing, now you have this concept in your mind. You’re all part of the artwork too.

This is an edited version of Austin’s 2012 TED Talk. To watch the full talk, visit TED.com.

⁸ A “frame of reference” is a set of ideas or assumptions that we use when forming preconceptions about something.

⁹ The noun “spectacle” refers to an especially exciting display to watch.