**An Accidental Leader**  
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I’m going to talk to you a little bit about leadership and I suppose I titled this the ‘Accidental Leader’ because I not only ended up in the arts, in some ways by accident but also ended up in a leadership position by accident, sort of. I chose as my object, this quite old telephone. I’ll tell you a little bit about why I chose it in a moment but I want to start with the story of this telephone because it struck me, listening to the conversations this morning that there was a lot about identity and where we’ve all come from as individuals.

I was born in 1970 and because of my visual impairment my parents were given a very stark choice when it came to my education. When I was around the age of four my parents went to see my optomologist with me and he said to them, ‘Now you need to start thinking about his education.’ and my mother started to cry because she actually knew what was coming next. He just said to her, ‘Madame it’s you or your son you, decide.’ and walked off. Those were the stark choices that parents were expected to make. So I went away to school in Dublin, 120km away from my home when I was only four and a half.

My parents then started to look for a telephone so they could actually call me when I was away in school. This is inconceivable now because actually my mobile phone is in my pocket. My children have never seen a phone like this. It actually took my parents four years to get this telephone. I remember when we got the telephone I said to my Dad ‘What do you think?’ and he goes, ‘Well do you know, when we really needed it we didn’t have it and now that we have it it’s not quite as big a need.’ And actually that was true and in those first few years the closest telephone to my parents in the countryside in Co Roscommon was three and a half miles, about six kilometres. I just wanted to tell you that story because I suppose when I actually dug out this telephone and saw the original telephone number it just reminded me.

Now the real reason for choosing this telephone was very simply because of its connection for me to the arts. I was very fortunate in some ways in Ireland that I was the last generation of people with disability and in particular with visual impairments who was obliged to go into set careers. In other words there were careers, pre-defined careers like piano tuning, physiotherapy, basket weaving, bed making and telephony! And the one thing that terrified me more than anything else was becoming a telephonist! I just did not want to become a telephonist. I know with the passing of technology that really telephony is no more because it is outdated. We’re still stuck with telephones though!

The thing for me was that it was all about choice and we need to be able to make choices. Afterwards I’ll pass this object around; it’s a little too heavy for the moment so I’m just going to put it down. So for me what I suppose that I’m trying to say is that when I was going through school I was kind of interested in art. I liked it! I liked clay, I really enjoyed handling the material and I kind of thought to myself I’ll go and do this art thing because then I won’t have to do telephony. Not only that I can step outside the visually impaired and blind world because while I ended up going to an integrated secondary school where we were in some ways mainstreamed. There were about 50 visually impaired kids in secondary school and there about another 470 non-disabled children in the school. The thing for me was that I wanted to step outside that environment so I decided I wanted to become an artist. So I managed to get the grades and went off to the National College of Art and Design in Dublin where I studied craft design and ceramics. What I found fairly quickly was in fact, craft design ceramics is a visual design course and I still couldn’t see. Although I wanted to step into the sighted world my visual acuity hadn’t changed at all. I still face the same issues of my visual impairment as I did when I was in school. But in fact I was now in a fully sighted world that didn’t understand me at all. At least when I was in school some people understood me and so I had to figure ways while I was in college of taking what was my love for ceramics and a tactile material and that visual design course I was on and turn that into something that was very useful for me. So for example I moved from creating designs for pieces of ceramic in a drawing format to working with machetes and then drawing those up or sometimes working from machete to final piece in ceramics. Eventually that led me into creating tactile work. Using massage techniques as mark making, then that lead in many regards I suppose to me completing a degree which was all about touch and clay. In many ways was totally referencing my visual impairment in that mainstream environment.

We touched earlier on, on education. Role models are one issue but in fact a bank of knowledge for tutors is another really big issue. At the time I was the third visually impaired person we knew of who had ever gone to the National College of Art and Design. Most of my tutors had never worked with a visually impaired person. I remember when I started my experiments of touch one of my tutors said to me, ‘I don’t know what you’re doing but when it comes good I’ll know and I’ll tell you!’ At degree level that isn’t good enough. I don’t blame the individual tutor he was responding in the most honest and best way he could but actually that did not give me what I would feel was equality within that course that I needed to compete with my peers. It certainly didn’t give me the critique of my work on the same level as my peers were going to have their work critiqued. I suppose what ended up happening was I left college as this visual artist with a visual impairment who was very much out there exploring my world as a visually impaired person having never intended to end up in that place. That for me was never intended, it was an accident.

I then did a number of things. I spent two years as artist in residence at the Richard Attenborough Centre at Leister University, which was a centre for disability in the arts at the time. I had a very interesting set of experiences there, which was really really valuable. During that time I worked with school children, I did my own art practice, I spoke at a lot of conferences and lectures and very much immersed myself in the UK disability arts scene as well. I went on to study a postgraduate teaching qualification at Breton Hall in West Yorkshire. One of the reasons I chose West Yorkshire and Breton to study in was because one of the things that they explained was that they had 90 places for postgraduate teaching students and they wanted 90 different people and I could be one more different person within that group of 90. That for me was a very exciting opportunity. I decided subsequently to return to Ireland and set up my studio practice.

Although I enjoyed teaching there was a part of me that wanted to explore what it was to be a full time artist. In many ways having decided I didn’t want to be a telephonist and wanting to be an artist it was really important that I didn’t lose sight of that dream. From 1998 through until 2003 I ran my own studio practice doing large scale tactile architectural sculpture which was influenced by using massage techniques as forms of mark making. It’s quite abstract work and alongside that charcoal work, very much photorealistic landscapes. Over that time what I found though was more and more of my studio practice was being eaten up in time terms with ‘Will you speak at this conference?’, ‘Will you sit on this consultation panel?’, ‘Will you be part of this steering group?’.

We have a saying in Ireland and I’ll try help people understand it. In many ways what I felt like was a hurler on the ditch. In many ways you could say a footballer on the fence. Someone who would give their opinions til the end of time but never really got to play the game. That was one of the things that in some of the discussion this morning, there was a talk about role models and there was discussion about people speaking on behalf of and representing people with disabilities. What I found was loads of people wanted my opinions but I never really got a real part to play in implementing those opinions. That was very important for me and so I decided in 2003 I would go to the UK and work for Equata and see how working for an organisation who could change things.

In 2005 I came back to Ireland and took over as director of Arts & Disability Ireland where I am now and have been in this September for 8 years. The important thing for me was that as an artist I couldn’t change the things that I saw that were wrong. For example as an artist if I wanted to exhibit my work I was given a slot in August, who the hell wants a slot in August when everyone’s on holidays? I was given the opportunity to exhibit in Museums that most non-disabled artists get to exhibit, in fact most of the artists that are in those museums are dead. In other words my work wasn’t been seen alongside my non-disabled peers. I felt as an individual artist I couldn’t change that just by making my work.

So deciding to move into the area of arts administration for me was really important about making a difference on a bigger scale. I feel very strongly about this: not every person with a disability needs to be a leader or should be a leader, everyone should be able to speak and advocate for themselves and has the right to be listened to but not everyone needs to or wants to take on that responsibility. David spoke about the fact that he’s now 20 years making art, making dance. For the last 10 years I haven’t made art. The world would be a poorer place if David didn’t make his art and actually my best contribution is in terms of trying to advocate and lead for change so that other people can get on with the job of making their art. I just think that that’s not just something to bear in mind but to be really clear on. I do sometimes think it’s a pity that people with disabilities are almost forced into the position where they have to make a choice, but sometimes that’s what you have to do. I don’t regret making that choice.

Arts & Disability Ireland does a whole range of things; we’re a national resource organisation for arts and disability. We describe ourselves as an organisation that champions the creativity of people with disabilities, we promote inclusive experiences for audiences with disabilities and we work in partnership with the arts sector to make that happen. One of the things I’ve succeeded in doing since I returned to Ireland 8 years ago is setting up audio description and captioning as services within the Irish theatre sector. Last year ADI audio described and captioned 47 performances around the country. Pre 2006 that service didn’t exist, we have our own equipment, we have our own audio describers, and we have our own captioners. We now have reached a point where the Arts Council are saying they want to build that audio description and captioning into the national tours that they fund. That for me is another key point of leadership. I don’t know everything about arts and disability in fact it has been said that in fact the biggest fear of most people in leadership positions is that they will one day get found out. And it’s true.

The key thing for me is to surround myself with people and to build relationships with people who can make things happen. For example with the audio description and captioning, and I take that as one example, we now are speaking to the Arts Council; the Arts Participation officer, the head of Theatre, the head of Venues and the head of Touring and without that combined involvement we could not embed that service as a national service. That’s only one example, another example in a visual arts sense is that we’ve just recently completed a symposium which resulted from a series of residencies that we hosted with the Fire Station Artists’ Studios for visual artists with disabilities. Part of the logic behind hosting those residencies with the Fire Station was they had an accessible studio but people with disabilities weren’t taking up those studio places. Part of our work with them was to figure how we could get people to take up that space.

The thing that is important for me is building those networks. Another aspect of what we do in fact, and it struck me listening today, a lot of the attitudes that we heard about before lunch. I’ve heard many of those attitudes in my own country, not as much in recent times. I’m a little bit more cynical, in that I’m not convinced that it’s changed. I think people in Ireland now, not as many of them may have had those attitudes that we heard expressed this morning around the attitude towards people with disabilities. However I also think that there are another group of people who actually do have those attitudes but they know how to play the language now so they say the right things. They know how not to offend but that doesn’t mean that privately, secretly with the stroke of a pen or behind a desk or in an office they do not discriminate. Attitudes take a long time to change. One of the things that Arts & Disability Ireland has tried to do is we pick our battles very carefully. And we pick our engagements very carefully. One of our key pieces of work that we do with the arts sector in terms of trying to embed change and I know that this is something that has gone on in the UK for many years is using Disability Equality Training and Access Audits or arts venues and the Disability Equality Training for arts organisations with an arts focus so that we can change how they do their business. One of my disappointments actually as I was listening to this morning’s session is that somebody didn’t ask me as part of InArte, that they didn’t ask me to do a Disability Equality Training session because I do think it can be a key resource in changing attitudes.

We’re very fortunate in the arts that quite often particularly around a show, a production, a visual arts exhibition that we do start with a blank space, a blank canvas. Although some of those spaces may be inaccessible, but if you starting from nothing sometimes you can choose where the work goes. If you know what the choices are at the very start, if you know what the budget might need to be to make something accessible well at least you can make the ask. If you don’t know at the start, well then you never make the ask, you never have the money and you never put the work into the right spaces. So for me, it is the planning, the thinking and getting people to move their attitudes. I know in Ireland that we find the arts community are very receptive, they are terrified we’re going to cost them a fortune in putting in a new lift but in fact when you say to them that large print programme won’t cost you a cent more than the A4 paper you’re going to print it on they kind of go ‘Is that how you do that?’. In some ways it is about educating our sector so we can actually help it change.

Lastly what I would say is don’t do any project on your own. I know Gus had his three. I would say I have one, work in partnership, build your allies, broaden the base of them, get more people talking and thinking about what you want to do. I’ll leave you with this thought, it’s something that Nabil Sheban said to me many years ago when he was working on a play in Dublin. Nabil was one of the founders of Graeae Theatre Company and he said a piece of advice he was given when he couldn’t get started in the arts. When he couldn’t find a way in to be an actor, to be trained to go and act. ‘Write yourself into a play that only you can play the part and start from there.’

There are unique stories, there are unique points of perspective that people with disabilities have. I know my UK colleagues use disabled people and Deaf people; the language believe it or not, although we speak English, varies quite a bit even though the two countries are right beside each other! Network, network, network, partnership, partnership, partnership it is the only way. Broaden it out, make as many people involved as you can over time.

Thank you.