

# Run for the Stronghold: The Story of One Survivor's Source of Self-Determination – Self-Acceptance and Love

***By Sarah Triano, Co-Founder, National Disabled Students Union***

***“We need to tell the world, starting with ourselves, who we are and what we are, and it will give others the insight and courage to open up their hearts and minds as well.”  
– Jodi Ross***

In the spring of 1992, when I was seventeen and preparing for my high school graduation, the movie *Thunderheart* starring Val Kilmer was released. As a young woman with a disability, I was immediately drawn to this film – and for more reasons than just Val Kilmer. The film tells the story of an FBI agent with Sioux background, Ray Levoi, who is sent to a reservation to help with a murder investigation. During the course of the film, Ray solves the murder investigation, but more importantly, he also begins to wrestle with and discover his true identity. While he is at the reservation, Ray undergoes a transformative process during which he rejects the intimidating tactics and culture of his fellow FBI agents, learns about his Sioux heritage, and in turn, begins to embrace part of his true identity – the one he has been alienated from all his life – his identity as a Sioux. To get to this place of self-acceptance and self-love as a Sioux, however, Ray must first “go to the source.” Toward the end of the film, when Ray is struggling with the contradictions inherent in the different aspects of his identity, Grandpa Sam Reaches, the medicine man, tells him the story of Wounded Knee and how one man named Thunderheart was shot running for the stronghold. “It's his blood that runs through your veins, like a buffalo, “Grandpa says to Ray. “Thunderheart has

come to this troubled place to help his people. Run. Run for the Stronghold, Thunderheart, the soldiers are coming."

Soon after the release of *Thunderheart*, I too "ran for the stronghold" when I was invited to participate in the nation's first Youth Leadership Forum for High School Students with Disabilities in California. Like Ray, I was a member of a large community – the Disability community – but did not know the first thing about my community, or about my history and culture as person with a disability. I was diagnosed with a hereditary and incurable primary immune system disorder called Selective IgA Deficiency when I was thirteen, and later in life acquired the diagnoses of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Due to the insidious discrimination I experienced in school while growing up – such as the time in high school when another student glued a sign to my car windshield that read, "MENTALLY HANDICAPPED" – the message sent to me was very clear: as a person with a non-apparent disability, I had to do everything I possibly could to hide my disability and avoid contact with other disabled people. I had to pass and pretend like I did not have a disability if I was going to survive. I was deeply ashamed of myself and my disability. Here I was just seventeen - so young, and yet already ashamed to be who I was – I was ashamed to be disabled.

So when I arrived at the California Youth Leadership Forum for Students with Disabilities in 1992, I would not even shake hands with the other disabled people I met, let alone embrace them as sisters and brothers in a community. I will never forget that first day of the forum. As I was surrounded by all these disabled people, I sat there thinking to myself, "What am I doing here? I don't belong here. / don't have a disability.

I've *overcome* my disability!" Like many others with disabilities, I had "internalized the public's fear and devaluation of disability" and had been socialized to "reject people with disabilities as valuable companions" (Gill, 1997). By the end of the leadership forum, however, it was a completely different story. In less than a week, I went from being an isolated young woman who was ashamed of myself and a fundamental part of me - my disability - to being a member of a vibrant Disability community, fully confident in myself, my capabilities, and my worth as an equal human being. Like Ray in *Thunderheart*, at this youth leadership forum, I underwent a life-changing, transformative experience; an experience that not only led me to question and reject the societal definition of "disability" as a deficiency, but also an experience that taught me about my heritage and culture as a person with a disability; and an experience that ultimately led me to "the source," my personal "Stronghold": knowledge, acceptance of, and pride in my true identity as a disabled woman.

After I left the Youth Leadership Forum for Students with Disabilities in 1992 and shared my life-changing experience with others in an effort to better understand and explain it, people kept throwing the word "self-determination" at me. I had no idea what this big fancy word meant, and apparently neither did anyone else because no one could explain it to me when I would ask. The word "self-determination" to me was like "supercalifragilisticexpialidocious." "Even though the sound of it is something quite atrocious, if you say it loud enough you'll always sound precocious." It seemed to be one of those words – like "truth" – where everyone thinks they know what it is but no one can really define it. It means, at the same time, both everything to everyone, and nothing to no one. People kept telling me that what I experienced at the youth

leadership forum was part of the process of self-determination. I didn't know anything about any "self-determination," but what I did know was that I no longer felt a deep sense of shame about myself and my disability, and that I had finally begun to accept and love every aspect of myself, including those parts of my identity that are stigmatized by the majority culture. If that was what "self-determination" was, then so be it – consider myself "self-determined."

As I read the different definitions and principles of "self-determination" in the literature, however, none of them seemed to adequately capture my experience at the leadership forum or resonate with me at all as a person with a physical and psychiatric disability. All of the existing definitions of "self-determination" today seem to embody the values of Western culture (values such as "control," "choice," "independence," and "freedom") and focus on things that are external to the individual. Few, if any of these definitions mention what is arguably one of the most important aspects of self-determination: experiences that lead a person to what I call "the source," the personal "Stronghold" – knowledge, acceptance of, and pride in every aspect of one's true identity, what Dr. Carol J. Gill refers to as "disability identity development" (Gill, 1997).

There is nothing new about this theory on the importance of identity development in self-determination, nor is it unique to individuals with disabilities. As Sandra Lee Bartky notes in her book, *Femininity and Domination*, "Feeling inadequate' may color a person's entire emotional life. Under conditions of oppression, the oppressed must struggle not only against more visible disadvantages but against guilt and shame as well. It was not for nothing that the movement for black empowerment called not only for black civil rights and economic advancement, but for 'black pride'" (Bartky, 1990). In his

final published work, in fact, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. outlined what he considered to be one of the most serious barriers for black people in American society, what he referred to as “cultural homicide.” “One must not overlook,” he wrote, “the positive value in calling the Negro to a new sense of manhood, to a deep feeling of racial pride and to an audacious appreciation of his heritage. The Negro must be grasped by a new realization of his dignity and worth. He must stand up amid a system that still oppresses him and develop an unassailable and majestic sense of his own value. He must no longer be ashamed of being black” (Martin Luther King, 1967).

Thirty-five years later, the “cultural homicide” of diverse people everywhere continues, and is particularly apparent among people with disabilities. Even though I have never felt the sting of racial discrimination, as a young woman with a physical and psychiatric disability growing up in America, I know first hand what it feels like to be ashamed of being disabled. I know what it feels like to live in a society where the contributions of disabled Americans are largely ignored. And I know what it is like to be stripped of my personhood by a culture that defines “disability” – a fundamental part of who I am – as a deficiency, disadvantage, and limiting impairment. Although there are many barriers facing people with disabilities today, the single greatest obstacle we face in our struggle for self-determination is our own sense of inferiority, internalized oppression and shame. All you have to do is ask any disabled person today how they feel about themselves or how they define “disability” to know that the sense of shame associated with having a disability has reached epidemic proportions. I direct the nation’s first locally-based Leadership and Organizing Training Program for Youth with Disabilities at Access Living in Chicago, and in my work with disabled youth I am struck

by the overwhelming sense of shame they live with on a daily basis. Some of these youth will not even admit they have a disability, let alone take pride in it. Yet, according to existing definitions of “self-determination,” they are doing just fine. These youth are, for the most part, “controlling their lives,” “reaching goals they’ve set,” and “taking part fully in the world around them,” but deep down inside they hate themselves, or at least one aspect of who they are – in particular, their disability. That hardly seems like “self-determination” to me. How can you fight for freedom if you don’t feel you have worth as a person deserving freedom? As Dr. Carol J. Gill notes, “The attempt to fashion an identity that excludes important parts of the self, i.e. the disabled parts, then, results in a sense of self in conflict or a self-image riddled with significant gaps. In either case, the resulting identity is not sufficiently sound to support stable, resilient self-esteem. Without stable self-esteem, it is difficult for the individual to sustain her/his sense of worth and entitlement to a place in society” (Gill, 1997).

The Disability rights movement has made many gains in the area of civil rights over the past decade, but what good is an Americans with Disabilities Act, an Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or a Section 504 if people will not exercise their rights under these laws because they are too ashamed to identify as being disabled? Socialized by non-disabled society to think of ourselves as worthless, many people with disabilities are too demoralized to lay claim to the legislated rights we already have. “As long as the mind is enslaved,” Dr. King wrote, “the body can never be free.” As long as people with disabilities remain ashamed of who we are, we will never realize the freedom we often refer to in existing definitions of “self-determination.” We

must first learn about, accept, and take pride in our true identity as disabled people. We must no longer be ashamed of being disabled.

Dismantling centuries of internalized oppression, however, and finding ways to accept and love ourselves, and learn about our true identity as disabled people is easier said than done. Unlike other historically oppressed minorities, people with disabilities do not always have the benefit of a generational transfer of disability history and pride through the family structure. There are no “disability churches” per se, neighborhood enclaves, or other communal institutions where we can consistently receive positive messages about disability that counteract the depredation wrought by the onslaught of cultural terrorism. There is a tremendous need for our community to create safe spaces that promote this important foundation of self-determination; safe spaces where disabled individuals can come together and develop the inner strength and true identity that can only be found by knowing who you are, knowing what you are (what you believe and why), and knowing where you want to go and how to get there.

### ***KNOW WHO YOU ARE: THE IMPORTANCE OF KNOWING YOUR HISTORY AND CULTURE AS A DISABLED PERSON***

No one understood the importance of self-acceptance and love in the process of self-determination more than the great leader, Malcom X. According to Cone (2000), the dominant theme of Malcom X’s ministry was unity, and “unity depended on genuine love for each other.” “If blacks were going to achieve the unity necessary for the attainment of their freedom,” Cone writes, “then self-hate – according to Malcom the number one problem in the black community – had to be replaced with a love of themselves.

However, genuine love of each other was possible, in Malcom's view, only to the degree that blacks were able to acquire a true knowledge of their history and culture. Malcom told blacks that they were 'culturally dead,' alienated from their past and from each other. That was why they did not love each other and could not achieve the unity that was necessary for their freedom" (Cone, February 2000). As Malcom X so astutely noted, knowledge of one's history and culture is an essential component of self-love, unity, and the ultimate attainment of freedom. Like many other oppressed minority communities, however, people with disabilities have been systemically stripped of our history and culture. Even today, there is little, if any, mention of Disability history in schools, colleges, and university history courses and most people are hard pressed to even name one significant figure in Disability rights history. Not only is the dominant society stripping us of our history and culture, however. The gap in the historical record regarding disability is also being used against us to strip us of our civil rights. On February 21, 2000, the Supreme Court ruled in *Board of Trustees of the University of Alabama v. Garrett* that lawsuits under Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act for damages against states are unconstitutional. In their ruling, five justices said there were only "unexamined, anecdotal accounts of adverse, disparate treatment" of people with disabilities "by state officials" in the historical record. This, in spite of a large collection of state statutes, session laws, and constitutional provisions that illustrate pervasive state-sponsored discrimination against persons with disabilities, dating from the late 19th century to the present, compiled by over 100 historians and scholars (online, Sept./Oct. 2000). Disabled people have been alienated from our history and culture and we are paying dearly for it.



We are not only paying for it with our civil rights, however. We are also paying for it with our lives. In April of 2003, a 7 year-old girl with a learning disability in Connecticut named Sara was shot in the chest while sleeping with a .30 caliber rifle by her mother (Zielbauer). Less than 3 months later in July, in New York an 8 year-old disabled girl named Stephanie mysteriously died and her foster mother put her in a garbage bag and dumped her on the sidewalk (Brick & Kaufman). And in August of 2003, in Minnesota a 6-month old baby girl with Down Syndrome named Raya was killed by her mother when she slit Raya's throat twice with a kitchen knife (Donovan & Pina, 2003). All three of these disabled children's deaths have largely gone unnoticed by the general public and by the Disability rights movement in the U.S. Perhaps if we were more attuned to our history and culture, we would recognize this modern-day infanticide as a continuation of the eugenic thinking of the 20th century that resulted in the sterilization, institutionalization, segregation, social degradation, and economic exploitation of disabled people. Perhaps if the dominant culture were more attuned to Disability history and culture, parents of Disabled children would realize that Disabled people can lead fulfilling lives just like others, and that Disabled people have fought valiantly, contributed a great deal to our nation's history, and have maintained our humanity through centuries of the most unimaginable oppression. Perhaps if we were not alienated from each other as a community of people with disabilities – and so consumed with reactionary tactics to divisive policies created by and for non-disabled bureaucrats, we could unite together and fight for the one inalienable right that all human beings should have: the fundamental right to life. Like African-Americans before us, however, many people with disabilities today continue to be alienated from our past and from each other, which

contributes to our on-going self-hatred. As Malcom X taught, this self-hatred must be replaced with self-love if we are to achieve the unity necessary for the ultimate attainment of our freedom. Any meaningful definition of “self-determination,” therefore, must include reference to the importance of self-acceptance and love, and the role of knowing one’s history and culture in the attainment of that self-love.

### ***KNOW WHAT YOU ARE (WHAT YOU BELIEVE AND WHY): THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-DEFINITION***

As a disability rights activist, I am constantly amazed whenever I meet other self-advocates – persons who would be considered by most as highly “self-determined” individuals – who have never stopped to think about what their personal definition of “disability” is. When I ask them, “What is the first thing that comes to your mind when I say the words “disability” or “disabled,” most of them are caught off guard and hard-pressed to provide a non-stigmatizing definition that is different from the definition of “disability” in the dominant culture.

According to *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, “disability” is defined as “a disadvantage or deficiency, especially a physical or mental impairment that interferes with or prevents normal achievement in a particular area, or something that hinders or incapacitates.” This definition of “disability” is paralleled in most of the civil rights laws today that protect the rights of people with disabilities, including:

- **Definition of “Disability” Contained in The Rehabilitation Act and The Americans with Disabilities Act:** “Any individual who has a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more of such person’s major life

activities, has a record of such impairment, or is regarded as having such an impairment.” In other words, you are limited in what you can do *because of your disability*.

- **Definition of “Disability” contained in the Individuals with Disabilities**

**Education Act:** “A physical or mental impairment that ‘adversely affects a child’s educational performance.’” In other words, you can’t learn *because of your disability*.

- **Definition of “Disability” contained in the Social Security Act:** “‘Disability’ means ‘inability to engage in any substantial gainful activity...’” In other words, you can’t work *because of your disability*.

- **Definition of “Disability” contained in the Developmental Disabilities Act:** “A ‘developmental disability’ is a severe, chronic disability of a person five years of age or older which - is attributable to a mental or physical impairment or combination of mental or physical impairments; is manifested before the person attains age twenty-two; is likely to continue indefinitely; results in substantial functional limitations in three or more of the following areas of major life activity: A) self-care, B) receptive and expressive language, C) learning, D) mobility, E) self-direction, F) capacity for independent living, and G) economic self-sufficiency....” In other words, you basically cannot do anything *because of your developmental disability*.

Labeling people with disabilities by medical categories, and attributing the problems we experience in society to our disabilities, or to an internal “deficiency or abnormality” as disability is often perceived, is antithetical to the philosophy and goals of

the disability civil rights movement. According to the prominent Disability Studies scholar and activist, Carol Gill (1998), the experience of disability has been historically viewed as a “tangible flaw located within an individual’s physical or mental constitution.” This view comprises what has been commonly referred to as the “medical model of disability.” With the passage of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in 1973, however, disability rights activists and others began articulating a “social model of disability” which de-emphasizes “the significance of individual impairments (such as, paralysis, blindness or learning limitations) in causing the problems persons with disabilities face” (Gill 1998). It focuses, instead, “on such socially constructed barriers as exclusion, blocked access and disability prejudice as the ‘real’ problems of disability” (Gill, 1998).

According to a social model of disability, therefore, the educational difficulties experienced by disabled children in the classroom are not necessarily caused by their individual disabilities, but are rather the result of a poorly-structured education system that is not equipped to meet the needs of a diverse student population. The barriers experienced by people with disabilities in society are not necessarily caused by our disabilities, but are rather the result of living in a society that is designed by and for non-disabled people.

In my travels as a disability activist, I have asked many people across the country what the first thing is that comes to their mind when they hear the words “disabled” or “disability.” Without exception, the responses of most people (disabled and non-disabled alike) reinforce the dominant culture’s views of disability: “pathetic, weak, unable, not able, a barrier, a challenge, something that prevents you from doing something, not normal, a wheelchair.” In one instance, a woman said to me, “I have a disability. I’m

black.” She went on to explain that because of her skin color, she has experienced many barriers and challenges in the dominant white culture. The other typical response I get is, “Well, we all have some kind of disability.” In fact, the first time I heard this “we all have a disability” argument was when I was at the National Leadership Development Conference for Students with Disabilities in Washington, DC in 1998. One of the speakers, a noted Congressman, made the following argument during his speech at the conference: “We all have a disability, don't we? After all, I'm not 6 foot 2 and can't dunk a basketball like Michael Jordan, so in a sense, I have a disability, right?”

I was upset when I heard him say this, but at the time I couldn't quite express why. My comrade in the National Disabled Students Union, Kathy Coleman, expressed my feelings beautifully when she said, “The ‘everyone has a disability’ argument doesn't sit well with me either. I had a professor in a course say her disability was that she could ‘not spell when she was writing on the board in front of the classroom’ as her way of making an argument for the ‘everyone has a disability’ viewpoint (she does not have a learning disability). There is a difference between being weak at a skill and having a disability. Everyone has strengths and weaknesses that are not a disability. You don't get denied health insurance because you make a mistake spelling on the chalk board.” Similarly, I seriously doubt this Congressman has ever been denied health insurance or the right to equal education because of his “disability.”

Fundamentally what is at issue here, to me, is the definition of disability. Certain people define “disability” as a “limitation,” a “weakness,” a “barrier to be overcome.” If that is how you define “disability,” then yes, we all have a disability because we all have barriers and challenges we must overcome in our lives, including discrimination and all

the other “isms.” But I do not define disability that way. Over the years, I’ve come to define disability as a natural and beautiful part of human diversity that people living with disabilities can take pride in. I believe the barrier to be overcome is not my disability; it is societal oppression and discrimination based on biological differences (such as disability, sex, race, age, sexuality, etc). Today, it would be ludicrous to define the experience of being a woman as an “impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities.” We would be outraged if the laws guaranteeing equal education for African-American children explicitly stated that an African-American child is only protected by the laws if the child has a skin color that “adversely affects their educational performance.” We would laugh if we heard a white person say, “I understand what you are going through because, after all, we’re all Latino, aren’t we?” How often do you hear a civil rights activist boast about the fact that they have “overcome their skin color”? Do they hold out for that “cure” for their skin color, like Christopher Reeve does with his disability? Do African Americans try to “overcome their blackness,” or understand that the primary barriers for their community in our society are racism and discrimination? Why is it somehow different for disability? “When disabled people internalize the demand to ‘overcome’ rather than demand social change, they shoulder the same kind of exhausting and self-defeating ‘Super-Mom’ burden that feminists have analyzed” (Linton, 1998).

It is time that we reclaim the definition of “disability,” take control over the naming of our own experience, and acknowledge self-definition as an important part of self-determination, just as African-Americans and women did before us. In 1966, for example, during his historic speech in Berkeley, Stokely Carmichael defined the

concept of Black Power as a fundamental right to define oneself and to be free of the oppressive black/white opposition in society. "The lie that says anything black is bad." "People have been telling you anything all black is bad," he said, "I'm never going to be put in that bag. I'm all black and I'm all good" (Carmichael, October 1966). Carmichael's refusal to be subjected to a black/white dichotomy through a purposive reversal of values harkens back to a strategy of inversion articulated over a century before by Frederick Douglass: "What [my master] most dreaded, that I most desired. What he most loved, that I most hated. That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought; and the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn" (Douglass, April 28, 1845). In 1978, the well-known lesbian feminist, Mary Daly, employed a similar strategy of inversion in her book, *Gyn/Ecology*, by arguing that a woman whom the patriarch calls "evil" is in fact good, whereas a woman whom the patriarch calls "good" is in fact bad (Daly, 1978).

Uniting all three of these strategies of self-determination is an attempt to subvert the cultural imperative to structure experience through false dichotomies such as white/black, man/woman, straight/gay, able/disabled, etc. According to the lesbian theorist, Judith Butler, the Western philosophical tradition is largely driven by a binary system that defines certain terms, such as masculinity, by virtue of their negative, contrasted opposite (i.e. femininity), thereby producing a series of binary oppositions that serve to solidify meaning, beliefs, and what is perceived to be reality, or the "truth" (Butler, 1993). Elizabeth Grosz argues that this "dichotomous thinking necessarily

hierarchizes and ranks the two polarized terms so that one becomes the privileged term and the other its suppressed, subordinated, negative counterpart:

The subordinated term is merely the negation or denial, the absence or privation of the primary term, its fall from grace; the primary term defines itself by expelling its others and in this process establishes its own boundaries and borders to create an identity for itself. Body is thus what is not mind, what is distinct from and other than the privileged term (Grosz, 1994).

These oppositional terms, therefore, do not coexist on equal grounds; rather, one side of the binary opposition is privileged, while the other side is devalued (Schrift, 1995). In the system of signification, or representation, then, Awhite@ becomes the privileged term - the signifier - that defines itself by its suppressed, subordinated, negative opposite: Ablack,@ the signified. As Grosz notes, this subject/object divide serves a very specific linguistic and cultural purpose, particularly in terms of establishing the boundaries necessary for the creation of a seemingly stable cultural identity. According to Rosemarie Garland Thomson, the dominant culture=s identity, or Aideal self,@ Arequires the ideological figures of the woman to confirm its masculinity and of the black to assure its whiteness,@ just as it also requires the disabled Ato secure its able-bodiedness.@ AThe freak, the cripple, the invalid, the disabled,@ she writes, Alike the quadron and the homosexual - are representational, taxonomical products that naturalize a norm comprised of accepted bodily traits and behaviors registering social power and status@ (Thomson, 1997). Those who are situated in the position of the negative, subordinated Aother@ (i.e. the black, the woman, the disabled, etc.) are not allowed to participate in



this process of representation and to offer their definition of what it means to be black, feminine, disabled. Instead, as the Aconstitutive outside,@ they are subjected to an explicit narration of their bodies that in and of itself serves to erase any Adisruptive possibilities@ or alternative definitions (Butler, 1993). As the French feminist, Luce Irigaray, notes, when these isotopical feminine figures are taken to be *the* feminine, the Areal@ feminine (i.e. femininity as defined by the Aother,@ the woman) is fully erased by its very representation as the negative, contrasted opposite of masculinity (cited in Butler 36). This dichotomous representation then becomes a Areality@ that people act upon as if it were true - a sign that supposedly references the world without any complication or ambiguity.

As many feminist theorists have shown, however, this sign is highly unstable. That which we believe to be Anatural@ or inherently Atrue@ (i.e. that black is the negative opposite of white) is nothing more than an illusion of language, an imposed fiction that only appears stable and absolute because it has been repeated and reified from one generation to the next. Once it is recognized that *meaning is not fixed*, and that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is an arbitrary product of language, Butler argues that it is then possible to interrupt the site of signification and directly challenge the assumption that what we believe to be true is inherently true by *developing alternative definitions* that transgress the binary oppositions of white/black, masculine/feminine, form/matter, mind/body, etc. Grosz notes, however, that when dissolving these oppositional categories, Awe cannot simply ignore them, vowing never to speak in their terms again.@ AThis is neither historically possible nor even desirable,@

she writes, insofar as these categories must be engaged with in order to be superseded (Grosz, 1994).

Many disabled people today propose that we choose a new name for ourselves and our community rather than “disability” such as “physically challenged,” “disAbility,” “the able disabled,” and “special needs.” As Grosz notes, however, these terms do not necessarily challenge the oppositional category of able/disabled” nor do they really fundamentally change how people define “disability.” As Stokely Carmichael, Frederick Douglass, and Mary Daly all illustrate, one of the most effective ways to directly engage, and thereby supersede, this dichotomous category is to invert the subject/object divide and effectively mobilize it to its opposite by purposely valuing that which is devalued. We must, as Grosz argues, engage the language that has been historically used to stigmatize us, “disabled,” and reclaim and reassign its meaning by purposely valuing that which is devalued (“disability”).

What I am proposing – a fundamental redefinition of “disability” both individually and in society – is extremely radical and strikes at the deepest feelings and assumptions people have about themselves and the nature of life itself. As one of my comrades in the National Disabled Students Union, Jodi Ross, said: “The mindset of oppression is pervasive, has a momentum of its own and takes a lot of energy to get free of. So even people who have quite a few insights and positive qualities and even care about you/me/us in some genuine ways are often still very caught up in it and very unsettled when its challenged. But unfortunately, I don't think there is a chance in hell that the ablebodied population will get this until we get it ourselves. There are MANY - I would say MOST- who are disabled who share the belief that they are lesser and that

disability is by definition tragic and bad. Even disabled people who I personally consider amazing and wonderful and even people who are politicized about other oppression, still believe the lies about themselves and their disability. This is a common problem in oppressed populations: internalized oppression. I think it's worse among disabled people because our movement is so little known and because many of us grow up in families where the folks who are supposed to love us best buy into the idea. As a lesbian, I can say that this is a common problem for other minorities who live in a situation of being "the only one" in their family, in a world that affirms the 'defective' status of 'people like me,' as well. But it's not hopeless. Dykes, gay men, and other sexual minorities have worked hard over ages and made considerable progress. The suicide rate for gay teens is still many times that of straight ones, but there are many more people coming out and finding self-love, community, and the respect of others than in the past. We need to do the same in the disability movement. We need to show models of empowerment, not only for practical reasons, but also because humans are social creatures and don't like to be alone in their thoughts any more than we like to be alone in our bodies. We need to tell the world, starting with ourselves, who we are and what we are, and it will give others the insight and courage to open up their hearts and minds as well."

### ***KNOWING WHERE YOU WANT TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE***

As Jodi Ross notes in her insightful comment, a fundamental part of self-determination is knowing who we are and what we are (i.e. what we believe). Without this foundational knowledge of self and identity, knowing where you want to go and how

to get there (what is traditionally considered “self-determination”) is next to impossible. As the legendary civil rights activist, Grace Lee Boggs, wrote in her autobiography, “To make a revolution, people must not only struggle against existing institutions. They must make a philosophical/spiritual leap and become more *human* human beings. In order to change/transform the world, they must change/transform themselves” (Boggs, 1998).

All Disabled people must learn to go out into the world with our heads held high, with our dignity and pride intact, vowing to *take back* the definition of disability with *militant self-pride*. Just as “Black is beautiful,” *Disability is beautiful* and we should never let anyone tell us any differently or make us feel ashamed to be who we are. Today marks the beginning of our efforts to develop a whole community of people with Disabilities and allies who are proud to be who we are, who do not see ourselves as victims, who expect more from ourselves and those within our community, and who are committed to building an inclusive community that recognizes the dignity, humanity, and worth of *all* people. In our efforts to promote “self-determination,” we must prioritize the transformation of the hearts, minds, and souls of our people, for that is where our true power lies. As the great leader of our movement, Ed Roberts, once said, “My ability to regain the pride in myself as a person with a disability is one of the most important things that's coming out of what's happening here today.” Whether or not Ed Roberts and his comrades successfully won regulations for Section 504, they left that effort with a fundamental self-acceptance and love, a new sense of pride in who they were - and that is their legacy and our heritage; a heritage that I embrace and value with every fiber of my being; a heritage that is truly my “source” of self-determination, my personal

“Stronghold” today as a young, proud, disabled woman. “Run. Run for the Stronghold, Thunderheart, the soldiers are,” indeed, “coming.”

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