

The Inspired Teaching of Christy Brown

ANTHONY JORDAN is principal of Sandymount Clinic School, Sandymount, Dublin. He is also the author of *Christy Brown's Women: A Biography*, published in 1998.

“A girl once told me, a very beautiful girl, that it was dangerous for people in my position to indulge in romantic fantasies. I do not see why a physical disability should preclude any romance in one's life. Life is the greatest romance of all...” (Christy Brown in a letter to Kattriona Delahunt, March 1962).

Christy Brown's mother was not informed that there was anything amiss with her baby when she brought him home from the Rotunda Maternity Hospital in Dublin. But within a few months it had become obvious that he had poor head control, his hands were almost permanently clenched and his jaw locked tightly. In fact it was only as he slept that his body relaxed. At one year, the round of hospital and clinic visitations began. The doctors labelled him a 'hopeless case' and a 'mental defective,' assuring Mrs. Brown that nothing could be done. She decided to put her trust in herself, her baby and God. And so the inspired teaching of Christy Brown commenced.

Mrs. Brown had already reared five healthy children and she knew from Christy's eyes that his intelligence was unimpaired. She resolved, as far as possible, to treat him as she had his siblings. The latter were to reciprocate. Homework was done around the kitchen table, with Christy present ever watchful and eager to participate. Within a few years he made attempts, with his left foot, to copy the others as they wrote with chalk on slates. When, with his mother's help, he succeeded in copying letters and then words, he was on his way. The entire family then saw that he had potential.

There was never any possibility of Christy attending his local school. Mrs Brown was advised that if she had him institutionalised he might be able to go to school. She declined. At her insistence, he made his First Confession and First Holy Communion, but only in the privacy of his own home.

His second inspired teacher was named Kattriona Delahunt. She befriended the entire Brown family but particularly Christy, then aged ten. She introduced him to very simple books and brought him paints from Brown & Nolan's educational

shop. He loved his teacher and worked diligently for her. His description of her reads, "She was slim and tall and lovely - the most beautiful girl I had ever seen... came into my life at a time when I most needed someone like her, someone quite apart from my own path of life who would make me realise the necessity of trying to rise above the ordinary standard of thought and activity around me and so help me attain a secure balance within myself" (Brown, 1954). Through the help of the local parish priest, Canon Hickey, Katriona succeeded in getting a teacher, Mr. Guthrie, to give special tuition to Christy in English and Mathematics. Mr. Guthrie became so fascinated with his pupil that one night weekly soon became three, with Latin and classical music added to the curriculum. Katriona also got a teacher from the College of Art to give Christy private tuition. She later organised a correspondence course in which Christy studied philosophy. At this stage he had begun writing to Katriona. This was to last most of his lifetime.

The founding of Cerebral Palsy Ireland (CPI) brought Christy Brown into direct contact with a range of professional people. This association founded the first day school for children with disabilities which soon settled in Sandymount, Dublin. Christy wrote of the pupils in Sandymount Clinic, "They are very proud of the fact that they too can 'go to school' and have books and desks and learn sums like their sisters and brothers at home. They never get 'biffed' like children in the 'common' school. In their school their teacher concentrates more upon their minds than upon their hands" (Brown, 1954, pp.158-159).

The original title for Christy's attempt at writing his life story was *The Reminiscences of a Mental Defective*. It was a laborious task. It only proved possible with the advice of Robert Collis and Christy's own decision to ignore medical advice and resume writing with his left foot. After the success of *My Left Foot*, Christy became famous, an experience he enjoyed immensely. Shortly afterwards he decided to abandon the Clinic at Sandymount. He explained it thus to one of the staff: "I was convinced that to remain on at the Clinic would be a selfish and unnecessary waste of both my own and the staff's time and energy. And my reasons for thinking thus? I simply felt I had reached my pinnacle of progress and could advance no further. Or perhaps I should say - intrepidly - that the Clinic had reached its peak of assistance and could benefit me no further...my treatment reached a point where it was all like a circus roundabout, going about and about and yet always at the same place at any given time. It was like a repeating decimal" (Jordan, 1998, p. 33).

For the next fifteen years Christy experienced great frustration as he struggled to achieve another literary success. His lack of a formal and methodical education, coupled with his adoption of a 'Dickensian' style, stymied his development.

Eventually another inspired 'teacher' came to his rescue. An American named Beth, or Betty Moore, had built up a close relationship with Christy over many years. He had stayed with her in Connecticut and she had visited Ireland. After one such visit he wrote to Katriona, "Oh Katriona, life is so hideously complicated! I thought, after five years, and all that happened in between...but nothing had changed, nothing at all. To either of us. I knew the love would still be there; that can never alter. Katriona, she loves me. God knows why, but she does..." (Jordan, 1998, p. 88).

In a desperate attempt to achieve a literary breakthrough, Christy decided to take up a long-standing invitation and go to Connecticut to seek Betty's assistance. He remained there for several months. It was a traumatic time as she determined to act as an editor who could not accept poor writing. Much paper was shredded before she was satisfied that he was producing acceptable material. Slowly, very slowly and very painfully, progress was made, until eventually his 'magnum opus' took shape. It was published soon afterwards as *Down All the Days*, and carried the dedication:

FOR BETH

**Who, with such gentle ferocity, finally
whipped me into finishing this book...**

It was Christy Brown's finest hour.

REFERENCES

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