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How I Became a Human Being: A Disabled Man?s Quest for Independence

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Mark O'Brien
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“Society has defined a human being as someone who can bear the major responsibilities required for a self-directed life; I was not a human being. I didn’t feel I could control anything except my mouthstick and my mind.” Paralyzed from the neck down by polio at the age of six, the author—the subject of the 1997 Academy Award winning documentary *Breathing Lessons*, a published writer, and cofounder of the Lemonade Factory, a California press that publishes poetry by people with disabilities—never wasted a moment. Co-author Kendall contributed to *Outright Radio* and *Sun* magazine, finalizing this book after O’Brien’s death in 1999.

A plump mama’s boy, O’Brien ran everywhere until stricken down. The last body movement he ever made was to roll from a gurney to a hospital bed where a thirty-day coma ensued. He awoke in an iron lung. Left on a bedpan for four hours, he became used to the sadness of being neglected. After partial weaning from the iron lung, O’Brien went home to a caring mother, and a brother and father who pushed his cot to yard games. Fighting frequent respiratory infections, he tried to fit in. Puberty came with lack of teenage experiences—good and bad—trophies, girlfriends, Beatles haircuts, and drugs. Isolated, O’Brien watched television, which “helped me to escape my life. Quitting TV made my life seem more real, as if it were something that demanded my attention.” He realized he wanted to write and to be more independent.

Fearful at leaving the one person who cared for him well, he moved to a rehab center. For the first time in twenty-one years he was seated up high in a wheelchair. Finally in 1977, he took classes at Cal State, in person! Independence followed at Berkley when he had his own room. Hired attendants still tended him, but he was in control. Battles with bureaucracy led to an adapted, electric wheelchair.

In 1982, he was paid for his writing, and graduated with a BA in English. Disability and inaccessibility often temporarily confounded O’Brien, but through all he adapted and grew, socially and emotionally. His weakness, fears, and frequent battles with health never deterred him from the goal of writing for a living. “I feared being helpless in the face of death. This, I suppose, mirrors my fear of being helpless in life.” O’Brien may have feared life and death, but his book stands as an example for all people.
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