

ON BEING DIFFERENT

It was the other day, in the street. Two boys, 10-12 years old are walking beside me. They look at me with interest. They have never seen such a one before. Then says the younger one: "*Terribly small!*" The older one becomes very embarrassed. Even if you never saw such a one, there is no need to say so. "Yes of course she is small", he says, "terribly small, but that doesn't matter". "No", says the younger, "*the main thing is to be alive.*"

I am a painter, a painter of pictures. I ought to be showing you pictures instead, so this will be an attempt to paint with words some pictures from my life that is different.

I was tiny and weak when I was born: "She probably won't live very long." After some months: "She will probably never sit up, her back is so weak." Later: "She'll probably never walk." Most children do not remember learning to walk. But I remember, for I was three years old. Mother sat in the room, I was playing on the floor. Suddenly I lift both my arms, raise myself up, and walk across the floor. Mother, who had accepted the thought that I would never walk, was so taken aback that she showed her joy with tears.

I remember a poem by Maria Vine:

*Do you remember
when as a child
first you saw your Mother weep?
Do you remember
that a whole world collapsed.
Was it not
as if the day would never end.
Your mouth open in astonishment,
did not know whether to weep.*

*because, child as you were,
you believed
that only you had the right to cry.*

*Where was now your security
when you had seen your Mother weep?
You sat in silence and listened
for a rescue.*

*Then suddenly you heard happy laughter,
your Mother lifted you up
and slowly your security returned.*

Then it was said: "She will not grow and become like others." The discovery that I was different came very early. But nobody mentioned it. At home I was as the others.

There is a certain kind of doll, with lead at the bottom. You can knock them over. Yes, you can knock them over, but they rise again. Most parents probably wish for their children that they shall be able to go ahead in the world and that the world shall be kind and merciful. But the world is not kind and merciful, and we cannot protect our children

from injury. They will be hurt, they will be knocked over, that we know. I don't know whether my parents thought of one of those lead dolls, but I believe that they wished me to be, and endeavoured to make me, invulnerable. Not insensitive, not hard, those are different things; but invulnerable. A centre of gravity inside me. To be able to fail without feeling a failure, to realise that each time one lost something, one also gained something. Therefore they made no difference between me and my brothers and sisters. I trained to be as good as they at throwing a snowball ... Humour often combines tragedy and comedy. At the bottom of seriousness there is always the jest. Humour knows both life's disharmony and its joys.

Yes, and then there are adaptations to be made, which are often very difficult for all concerned. How they talk in a small village about who is different from most! The day came when I wanted a *name* for my difference, whether in Swedish or medical Latin did not matter. I began to look in dictionaries. In an old edition I at last found what I was looking for. But my find was incorrect, for it said that with that bodily defect, idiocy followed. Now I lived every day as if it were my last. Every morning I awoke with an intense feeling of happiness: "hurrah, another day! Come on, life!"

To be different and to be *loved* is one of the most wonderful forms of happiness on this earth. The greatest happiness is to be loved for one's own sake, in spite of everything. One has not lost one's light, though blind, if one has love. *Dependence*, which can be the greatest misfortune of those blind and those different can be turned by love into the greatest fortune ...

It has been said: "the tramp's greatest enemy is fear." I can say that it is ours also: the often exaggerated fear that others may be afraid of us. One does not want to expose others to the fear of surprise, nor oneself to the shame of giving rise to it ... That fear, the fear of giving surprise, can become permanent in us who are different ... Many *pity* those who are different. To be pitied is often harder to bear than the cause of the pity ...

Now here comes the last 'picture' in my exhibition. In Paris, I so wanted to experience The Halls - where fruit and vegetables and flowers arrive from the country during the night and are thence distributed all over the city. I didn't know that in order to manage this adventure alone I had to be of normal height. I was amongst chaos: everywhere cars, loaded lorries, carts, bicycles, everybody shouting: "look out!" But where was I to go? Then suddenly, as if by magic, a way was prepared amongst all this muddle for me to walk along. But how had it happened? Then I discovered that behind me was walking a negro, his hands lifted protectingly over my head. You know how a negro's palms are white? The sun that had just risen shone down between his beautiful long fingers. The traffic seemed to part, for everybody spotted his tallness. I bought bread and fruit and he turned his hands and carried them for me, and guided me to all the things I most wanted to see, under this wonderful umbrella. He bought a white lily for me. After we had listened to Mass in Notre Dame, we sat by the Seine and shared the bread and fruit. Karin Boye says: "Fate has done me much harm, as others see it. But much more good, so I see it myself."

Birgitta Sandberg (a dwarf)