Comments on *Me Before You*
By JoEllen Barnhart, Ph.D.

I love a good romantic movie. Yes, in deed. I am a sap for a feel good, chick flick, fairy tale with hope that “happily ever after “ really does exist.

As the mother of two adult children with disabilities, I work tirelessly to do my part to extend the same hope for my children. I am not alone. Across the country and around the world, a movement continues to make long overdue changes in the way individuals with disabilities, like my sons, are viewed. And so, it was exciting to hear that a new movie has been released that includes an individual with a disability…until a closer look reveals a missed opportunity to deal with an important social movement.

*Me Before You* (Warner Bros., PG-13) is a tragic love story based on the *New York Times* bestseller of the same name by JoJo Moyes filled with plots of surprise. Moyes illustrates the story’s “hero,” Will, as a high-flying executive with a well-endowed bank account, traveling the world, meeting exquisite women, and indulging in extreme sports. He is bossy, critical, and moody. His life takes an expected turn when an accident renders him paralyzed and in need of a wheelchair for his mobility. He also needs the assistance of a caregiver and becomes depressed.

Meanwhile, Louisa, an ordinary girl living an ordinary life who, through a string of events, becomes Will's caretaker makes it her mission to care for and help Will find a new reason to live.

A tantalizing romance ensues but Will remains depressed and chooses assisted suicide extinguishing the hope of “happily ever after” ultimately pointing to a lesson that sometimes love isn’t enough.

**So why are so many folks in the disability community offended with this storyline?**
The disability community has seen this stereotype over and over in literature and art. This film is no different. The plotline of triumph over tragedy even fails in this story as our hero decides to end his life because his life as a quadriplegic is simply too much to bear.

But the real tragedy here is a continuation of antiquated thinking viewing life with disability as less than whole. While carrying this perspective may still exist in some individuals in a quadriplegic condition, it is a misrepresentation of the complete picture of living life with a disability. Moreover, I submit that the story of Will is more about facing one's character impediments and has nothing to do with having or not having a disability.
It is no secret that, "people with a disability have shared a history that has often been oppressive and included abuse, neglect, sterilization, stigma, euthanasia, segregation, and institutionalization" (Albrecht, et al 2001). Despite the long road of advocacy efforts to gain a more accurate social identity and to enjoy civil rights, this Hollywood cliché does nothing to advance the disability rights movement for individuals with disabilities.

Literary and artistic endeavors that involve disabilities are afforded freedom in our country to express any sentiment the author or artist chooses. This should be protected and is not in question. But, when a multimedia art form shines a light on a single story for mass audience consumption and for profit, an ethical responsibility needs to be considered. At the very least disability historians, scholars, self-advocates, caregivers, and other stakeholders should be consulted for social accuracy.

**Yes, it’s personal.**
I have three adult sons, two with developmental disabilities. One of my sons has muscular dystrophy and autism. As a child he learned to walk later than "normal" children but he did. While he could only walk a short distance, everyone who knew my son took great delight in his accomplishment. As he entered the sixth grade, his educating team agreed he could learn to run. But by the time he entered high school, his condition changed and he required a power wheelchair for mobility. Finally, he could run. While it was on wheels – he could independently feel what *fast* felt like and he could keep-up with his brothers and friends. Yes, in a wheelchair.

As a parent of children born with developmental disabilities, I know, first-hand, the changes required of me to recalibrate what parenthood means and to surrender to the challenges in front of me. I learned I had the power to change or not to change my perspective and create a new parenting pathway, one that was full of hope. A transformative journey that still remains dynamic and ever evolving.

Like Will in *Me Before You*, my life has encountered disorienting dilemmas. And my children have experienced the shocks that life strikes upon us. We refuse to allow our life stories to end with grief and anger. We know the REAL journey toward transformation includes moving beyond the disorienting dilemma and the disappointment accepting the hard work of a critical self-examination, revising assumptions and perspectives arriving to a place in our journey where we may be able help others.

Yes, the terrain of reinventing one’s self is rough in places. But that is exactly why it is amazingly exhilarating and rewarding. In *Me before You*, Will resists the obvious: the chance to gain a new perspective filled with an even deeper and wider emotional intelligence. Such perspective shifting is not about having a disability but about denying one’s self to experience one of the greatest
paradoxes of life. Through pain, weakness and disappointment, we gain strength, power and joy.

I thank the many disability advocates who blew the whistle on the underlying dangers lurking between the lines of *Me Before You*. I am grateful for the warnings because I would have taken my son to see this seemingly hopeful love story as the trailers and ads cleverly link love and disability. My son, who uses a wheelchair, possesses a healthy respect for his life and a gratitude for the technologies of his power wheelchair that lets him run. How would he internalize such a movie? That is an assault on hope we both choose to ignore.

There is a positive note here. At least *Me Before You* has us talking about the delicate intersection of art and literature and disabilities.

I will always be a sap for a good love story. For now, I will take heart in the love and hope a mother has for her sons to live a whole and fully included life, keeping films like *Me Before You* in the archives of “that is how disabilities used to be viewed.”

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