

Lesson 4



A Visit to Cambridge



This is the story of a meeting between two extraordinary people, both of them 'differently abled'. Stephen Hawking, an astrophysicist who suffers from a form of paralysis that confines him to a wheelchair, and allows him to 'speak' only by punching buttons on a computer. Firdaus Kanga a writer and journalist who lives and works in Mumbai. Kanga was born with 'brittle bones' and like Hawking, moves around in wheelchair.

Cambridge was my metaphor for England, and it was strange that when I left it had become altogether something else, because I had met Stephen Hawking there.

It was on a walking tour through Cambridge that the guide mentioned Stephen Hawking, “poor man, who is quite disabled now, though he is a worthy successor to Issac Newton, whose Chair he has at the university.”

And I started, because I had quite forgotten that this most brilliant and completely paralysed astrophysicist, the author of A Brief History of Time, one of the biggest best sellers ever, lived here.

When the walking tour was done, I rushed to a phone booth and, almost tearing the cord so it could reach me outside, phoned Stephen Hawking’s house. There was his assistant on the line and I told him I had come in a wheelchair from India (perhaps he thought I had propelled myself all the way) to write about my travels in Britain. I had to see Professor Hawking- even ten minutes would do, “Half an hour,” he said. “From three-thirty to four.”



And suddenly I felt weak all over. Growing up disabled, you get fed up with people asking you to be brave, as if you have a courage account on which you are too lazy to draw a cheque. The only thing that makes you stronger is seeing somebody like you, achieving something huge. Then you know how much is possible and you reach out further than you ever thought you could.

“I haven’t been brave,” said his disembodied computer- voice, the next afternoon. “I’ve had no choice.”

Surely, I wanted to say, living creatively with the reality of his disintegrating body was a choice? But I kept quite, because I felt guilty everytime I spoke to him, forcing him to respond. There he was, tapping at the little switch in his hand, trying to find the words on his computer with the only bit of movement left to him, his long, pale fingers. Every so often, his eyes would shut in frustrated exhaustion. And sitting opposite him I could feel his anguish, the mind buoyant with thoughts that came out in frozen phrases and sentences stiff as corpses.

“A lot of people seem to think that disabled people are chronically unhappy,” I said. “I know that’s not true myself. Are you often laughing inside?”

About three minutes later, he responded, “I find it amusing when people patronise me.”

“And do you find it annoying when someone like me comes and disturbs you in your work?”

The answer flashed. “Yes.” Then he smiled his one-way smile and I knew, without being sentimental or silly, that I was looking at one of the most beautiful men in the world.

A first glimpse of him is shocking, because he is like a still photograph- as if all those pictures of him in magazines and newspapers have turned three dimensional.

Then you see the head twisted sideways into a slump, the torso shrunk inside the pale blue shirt, the wasted legs; you look at his eyes which can speak, still, and they are saying something huge and urgent- it is hard to tell what. But you are shaken because you have seen something you never thought could be seen.

“What do you think is the best thing about being disabled?” I had asked him earlier.

“I don’t think there is anything good about being disabled.”

“I think,” I said, “you do discover how much kindness there is in the world.”

“Yes,” he said; it was a disadvantage of his voice synthesiser that it could convey no inflection, no shades or tone. And I could not tell how enthusiastically he agreed with me.

Every time I shifted in my chair or turned my wrist to watch the time- I wanted to make every one of our thirty minutes count—I felt a huge relief and exhilaration in the possibilities of my body. How little it mattered then that I would never walk, or even stand.

I told him how he had been an inspiration beyond cliché for me, and, surely, for others—did that thought help him?

“No”, he said; and I thought how foolish I was to ask. When your body is a claustrophobic room and the walls are growing narrower day by day, it doesn't do much good to know that there are people outside smiling with admiration to see you breathing still.

“Is there any advice you can give disabled people, something that might help make life better?”

“They should concentrate on what they are good at.”

The half hour was up. “I think I’ve annoyed you enough,” I said, grinning. “Thank you for

I touched his shoulder and wheeled out into the summer evening.

Firdaus Kanga

(From Heaven On wheels)

New Words

Word Meaning

metaphor -रूपक

exhaustion -थकाने वाला

exhilaration -रोमांच

inflection - उतार चढ़ाव

propelled - धकेलना

claustrophobic बंद स्थानों से डर लगना

Comprehension Questions

1. Answer the following questions:

(a) Name the book written by Stephen Hawking.

(b) What makes the “differently abled” people stronger, according to the author ?

(c) What is the scientist’s message for the disabled ?

(d) The writer expresses his great gratitude to Stephen Hawking. What is the gratitude for ?

Word Power

1. Choose the words from the box which can be substituted for the given sentences :

deaf ,illiterate, blind,dumb,lame

One who cannot see

One who cannot hear

One who cannot speak

One who cannot walk

One who cannot read or write

2. Look at the following words-

Walk

Stick

Can you create a meaningful phrase using both these words?

(It is simple. Add -ing to the verb and use it before the noun. Put an article at the beginning.)

..a walking stick

Now make six such phrases using the words given below

- read/session
- smile/face
- revolve/chair
- walk/tour
- dance/doll
- win/chance

Language Practice

1. Use neither...nor to join the pairs of sentences given below. One has been done for you

I don't eat candy. I don't eat cake. Neither do I eat candy nor cake.

- I don't like John. I don't like Peter.
- He did not come. He did not call.
- He does not drink. He does not smoke.
- She did not like Rome. She did not like Paris.

2. Use all or both in the blanks. Tell your partner why you chose one or the other.

- He has two brothers. _____ are lawyers.

- More than ten persons called. _____ of them wanted to see you.
- They _____ cheered the team.
- _____ her parents are teachers.
- How much have you got? Give me _____ of it.

3. Use of lets and let's :

Lets- without an apostrophe is the singular form of the verb lets, meaning 'to allow or permit'.

Example- She lets the dog out every morning.

Let's- with an apostrophe is a short form (contraction) of 'let us', which is used for suggestion or request. It is similar to the meaning of 'we should'.

Example- Let us learn more.

Now complete the following sentences using lets or let's :

- His mother ___ him watch T.V. till midnight.
- ___ hope for the best.
- ___ see what is on the menu.
- The teacher ___ the children play.
- He ___ his dog to go out.
- ___ go fishing.

Activity

Write some important discoveries made by Stephen Hawking in your notebook.