

My Best Friend

by Steven E. Brown, Ph.D.

In the mid-1990s publishers of the “Chicken Soup for the Soul” series notified disability publications about plans to publish a volume of disability stories. A firestorm of controversy ensued in the disability rights community. People with disabilities from all over the country discussed whether our stories seemed appropriate for the kind of smarmy, heartwarming tales included in the “Chicken Soup” books. I wrestled with the dilemma of not wanting my writings to be turned into insipid tales, but believing as a writer I might have an obligation to instill my kind of activism into this publication. I corresponded with several other writers who understood both disability rights and publishing. One, in particular, helped me arrive at a decision. I wrote and submitted a story I felt fit the framework of these books while remaining true to my life. I received an email notice that this essay made it to the next-to-final level. Then, I never heard from anyone again. As far as I know, the “Chicken Soup” book about disability never appeared, at least in part, I would guess, to the kind of publicity the request for stories generated. A few years later, while surfing the Internet I discovered this story had been lifted from somewhere and placed on a website without my knowledge. This is the first version I've published.

Have you ever wanted a friend who would follow you everywhere? A friend who would go anywhere with you? A friend who would follow you to the moon and back if asked? I have such a friend. No matter where I go my friend follows.

Such a friend can be annoying at times, in other instances gratifying.

My friend sometimes brings frustrations. Not everyone is enamored with my friend.

Sometimes, going places with my friend is like conspiring to find color in a black and white photograph. Many times, people simply do not understand my friend, and they want us both to leave.

There are times when I wish to travel alone. My friend allows no such rebellion.

We stick together.

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We have had our difficulties. But we remain buddies.

My friend is like a shadow. No matter where I go my friend comes with me. Unlike a shadow, my friend seldom disappears. Such loyalty is mesmerizing. Is there any wonder I call my companion my best friend? I'll call my friend Shadow, until I reveal my companion's secret identity.

Shadow does not leave home without me. Shadow is charitable. Shadow would sacrifice limbs for me; losing an arm or a leg would mean absolutely nothing to Shadow.

Shadow often draws people into conversation. We are asked how we can stand to remain together so much of the time. People wish to know how we get on so well.

Curious onlookers stop us in the street to inquire about our partnership. We always attempt to be courteous, but, as you can imagine, such a consistent strain takes its toll. From time to time we forget to be pleasant and rudely offend our questioners.

Shadow is flexible. Sometimes I can no longer tolerate Shadow's companionship. I am something of a loner and Shadow gets on my nerves.

There are times when I simply must exclude Shadow. Do I hear a complaint? Absolutely not. Shadow does what I ask without question or protest. Shadow is trustworthy. I have never been let down by my companion. Shadow does not argue. Shadow does not whine. Shadow does not disagree. Shadow is not completely obeisant. If there is something I want that Shadow cannot do, Shadow will not comply. No discussion occurs. We either work it out or find an alternative to the dilemma.

Shadow is a bulwark. Shadow is supportive whenever I ask.

Shadow is friendly. Shadow is even-tempered. I provide the tempests in our relationship.

I get through each day with Shadow's kind assistance. Almost everyone I know

has met Shadow. Many people do not share the same positive world-view of Shadow I do.

Have you deciphered the identity of my mystery friend yet?

Shadow is my wheelchair.

My wheelchair? My best friend? Yes.

Where would I be without my Shadow, without my wheelchair?

Most likely I would be at home. Without this means of mobility I am unable to participate in most of my daily activities.

When I get in my car I go from one spot to a different destination. When I get in my wheelchair I do the same. The only difference is that my car is likely to travel farther. There is no difference in my perception of each of these marvelous vehicles of transportation.

My wheelchair takes me from my bedroom to my kitchen, and from my office to my car. My car takes me from my home to my office, and from my daughter's school to the gas station. My wheelchair takes me from one store to another in a mall, and my car takes me to the mall. If my car malfunctions, my wheelchair takes me from a non-working vehicle to get help.

If my wheelchair breaks down, where do I go?

Much of the world perceives a wheelchair as a prison. I see liberation. Without my wheelchair I am confined to a specific place. With my wheelchair I can get anywhere I wish, with the exception of architectural barriers constructed to prohibit my vital means of transportation.

My wheelchair is personalized.

It has no legs because I chose to remove them. It has arms because I wish them to remain. Anti-tipping devices lurk in the back since I frequently desire to lean back and observe the world around me. My wheelchair comes equipped with a lifetime guarantee because in many ways it is the gift of a lifetime.

My wheelchair, my shadow, eases my life. It offers me comfort. It enables me to live the kind of life I choose. It brings me joy far more often than it contributes to sorrow. For these reasons I consider it a friend, a good friend, a very good friend.

My best friend.

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