Contents

0. Prologue

As I was approaching completion of this little book I began to turn my attention to getting it published.

I nervously pushed the draft towards the young lady looking at me over the desk. She didn’t seem that interested; she must have seen thousands of such drafts. She held out a hand. ‘I’m Fiona, by the way. Please take a seat.’ She sat opposite me and opened a notebook on her desk.

‘So what *genre* is it?’ she asked, pulling a mobile phone out of her handbag and placing it neatly just to the side of the notebook.

‘Mmm’ I stammered, ‘I’m not sure. No one has asked me that before. I guess it’s a story about me.’

‘So it’s an autobiography?’. She pulled out a second mobile phone, placing it neatly next to the first.

‘Well not really’ I continued, ‘it’s about me but also about a friend of mine.’

‘So are you two special? Do you have some unique selling point?’

‘Well not really’ nervously repeating myself, ‘but we do a lot of hill walking.’

‘Ah’. She scribbled in her notebook. ‘So it’s a travel guide?’

‘Well not really’. I shifted uneasily in my chair. ‘I suppose it’s about disability … or rather it’s about disability awareness.’

She looked up from her notebook. ‘So it’s a semi-autobiographical travel guide about disability awareness?’

‘There are some jokes in it’ I continued.

She looked towards the ceiling. ‘So it’s a humorous, semi-autobiographical travel guide about disability awareness?’

‘I suppose so.’

She looked me in the eye. ‘Thank you, Mr. Jones. We’ll be in touch.’

1. The tale begins

The crowds were beginning to grow and people flocked to the streets in quiet anticipation. Children waved their flags excitedly. Parents pulled out their cameras. Anxious stewards checked their watches and mumbled into their walkie-talkies. The pubs and cafes emptied as more and more people gathered on the pavements.

I looked down the street. There was still no sign of the Olympic torch.

The year was 2012 – the year that the Olympic Games came to London – and I had joined the thousands of people lining the streets to watch the Olympic torch being carried around the country. It was approaching five o'clock in the afternoon, and today the torch was in the North East of Scotland. I had joined the crowds in the suburbs of Aberdeen to watch the torch as it made its way towards the city centre. And it was due any minute now …

Suddenly people began cheering and clapping. The children started waving their flags even more excitedly. Onlookers peered over shoulders and readied their cameras. In the distance a runner, resplendent in a white tracksuit, was coming towards us, torch held aloft.

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I leaned forward to catch a glimpse. To his left and right, other runners were clearing the way for him. Behind him a coach carried the back-up team. The crows cheered till they became hoarse.

An American tourist tapped me on the shoulder. 'Any idea who the guy carrying the torch is?' he asked.

'Yes' I replied. 'He's Bob Nolan. He's being recognised for his work fund-raising for disability charities.'

'He doesn't look disabled. Do you know him?'

'I do indeed; he's a good friend of mine. We met Munro bagging.'

The American looked confused.

Bob carries the Olympic torch through Banchory, Aberdeenshire.

2. The invitation

Munro bagging is a fine hobby.

There are 282 mountains in Scotland with a summit over 3,000 feet above sea level. (That's 914 metres, if you prefer …) An Edwardian civil servant by the name of Hugh Munro compiled a list of them, over 100 years ago, and since then thousands of hill walkers have devoted all their spare time to climbing them, ticking them off one by one, in an attempt to reach the summit of them all. Nowadays these hills are called the 'Munros', and the people trying to climb them all (mostly middle-aged, bearded men it has to be said) are the so-called 'Munro baggers'. Many walkers start the round. Not so many finish. So those that do complete the challenge are to be congratulated. They are the so-called *compleators*.

Climbing all the Munros is a huge challenge.

Some Munros require little more than a gentle stroll up a well-maintained path; but for others, many hill walkers will need to enlist the help of their rock climbing colleagues. Ropes will be needed, and mountaineering paraphernalia will need to be deployed. The rock climbers will nod sagely to each other while neatly coiling their ropes. The hill walkers, feeling slightly out of their depth, will consult the weather forecast.

Some Munros can be reached easily from a convenient car park, whilst others can only be approached from bothies or tents pitched in remote glens many miles from the nearest road. The true Munro bagger must be prepared to carry his food and drink (and tent and cooking equipment) many miles into the wilderness in order to achieve his goal.

A much bigger challenge, of course, comes from the notoriously fickle Scottish weather. A beautiful, clear summer day can – within the space of just a few minutes – degenerate into a maelstrom of horizontal hail with zero visibility. It can turn into a so-called 'white out' where all you can see in all directions is grey, and where it isn't clear what is up and what is down. In a white out, one is effectively blind.

And of course the opposite is possible. A white out may turn into a beautiful summer's day within minutes. The problem with Scottish hills is that one never knows whether to take sun cream or snow goggles. So, in practice, one normally takes both.

The white out is probably the Munro bagger's worst nightmare; except, of course, for the infamous Scottish midge. Most baggers would readily agree to a fortnight in a white out, rather than come down from the mountains to a car park teeming with midges.

Nothing is more disabling to a Munro bagger than a midge attack.

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I was a Munro bagger. And I'll even confess to being a middle-aged man with a beard.

I spent many weekends travelling to the remote corners of Scotland, trudging up the slopes to tick off another summit. I was determined to reach them all.

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Climbing one's final Munro is a special event. The bagger invites all their friends to the final ascent. As the compleator approaches his final cairn, the assembled party raise their walking poles into a celebratory arch, and the bagger walks through to compleat. The party then starts in earnest. People abandon their flasks of water in favour of bottles of champagne

A summit cairn prepared for a compleation. Note how some late spring snow can be used to chill the drinks.

The conversation soon reveals the different sorts of hill walkers.

Some walkers will compare notes about their worst ever experience. 'It was hell crossing the ice field on *Buchaille Etive Mor*' for example 'especially after I lost a crampon on Curving Edge.' 'That's nothing' says another, 'I was coming down from the Grey Corries overnight in a thunderstorm when my head-torch packed in'. A third walker joins in. 'Well, I had to camp on *Aonach Eagach* for three days before I could cross the ridge. I was down to my last pork pie.'

The stories never end.

Other walkers play Spot the Mountain, a favourite game of Scottish hill walkers. 'Just over there is *Shiehallion*' someone will volunteer, 'can you make it out? Just to the left of *Beinn Dubcraigh*'. His chum retaliates: 'Indeed. But over there is the east top of *Stob Poite Coire Adair*. It's not a Munro any more of course. It was demoted in 1969.'

But hill walkers are nothing if not sociable. Having gathered at the summit to celebrate the compleator's remarkable achievement they are determined to make it a day to remember. The champagne flows and the stories become increasingly far-fetched. Compleation parties are splendid events.

Eventually, though, the summit party comes to an end, not because the stories are drying up or because all the nearby peaks have been identified, but because the weather is getting too chilly to hang around any longer.

The descent starts. And as any hill walker will tell you, the descent is normally trickier than the ascent, and this is particularly true with a few glasses of champagne under one's belt. Consequently the descent tends to be a bit slower and more laborious. It does, however, typically end up in a pub where the festivities continue.

A ‘compleation’ is indeed a big event.

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So I was delighted when my friend and colleague Lynda invited me to her final Munro. This would in fact be a double compleation, because her husband Scott was also compleating. It promised to be a particularly fine event and I was really looking forward to it. As an added bonus, they were planning to compleat on *Aonach Mor*, a mountain I had yet to tick off. So not only would I go to a party, I would get one more tick on my list.

The Lochaber mountains seen from Glen Lyon on a fine day. The large summit in the centre is Ben Nevis. Just to the right is Aonach Mor.

Aonach Mor is on the west coast of Scotland, not far from Ben Nevis, Britain’s highest mountain. It is also home to one of Scotland’s five ski resorts, which is why it is one of the few Munros to have a chairlift. Real Munro baggers, of course, would never be seen dead on a chairlift, but this was a stroke of genius by Lynda and Scott. It allowed their elderly friends and other non-walkers to participate in some of the high-level celebrations.

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The plan was to start the walk early on the Saturday morning, and have a slap-up, celebratory meal that evening. I contacted a nearby hotel to book a room for two nights. I only needed a single, but they were all booked, so I took a twin. Knowing that beds would be hard to come by, I emailed Lynda asking if anybody wanted to share the room with me. Lynda suggested I ask her colleague Bob.

This is the approach path to Aonach Mor from the south east. Understandably, Lynda and Scott chose to approach from the north west.

I didn’t really know Bob. We were both in the same department at work, but our paths had never really crossed. All I really knew about him was that he was a bit deaf; but his deafness wouldn’t affect a day in the hills, and with modern hearing aids one hardly notices anyway. So I invited Bob to share my hotel room.

3. Leaving Aberdeen

The hotel I had booked was near Fort William on the west coast of Scotland. It was a four-hour drive from our homes in Aberdeen and I agreed to drive.

I drove over to Bob's house. He wasn't ready, so his wife Louise invited me in.

Louise is also deaf, and her speech is typical of many deaf people. Unable to hear her own voice, she does her best to mimic sounds. It must be like learning to play a violin, I thought to myself, when all you have is photographs of violinists playing their instruments. Her speech is perfectly fluent, but *wrong* in that way that sets her apart as a deaf person.

Bob walked in. 'Any idea where my walking boots are?'

Louise hadn't noticed him, so Bob walked over and tapped her on the shoulder, before repeating the question. Louise sighed. 'By the back door. Didn't you hear me when I told you earlier?'

Obviously Bob hadn't heard her.

Bob, unlike Louise, sounds almost normal. Very occasionally he will have problems with a particular word, but his speech problems are nowhere near as pronounced as with Louise. I have since learned that this is because deafness affects different people in different ways. In particular, it affects different frequency ranges. Bob is deaf primarily in the higher frequencies, Louise in the lower. This meant that Bob could hear the human voice reasonably clearly as a child (with his hearing aid, of course) making it much easier to learn to talk. Louise, on the other hand, was not so lucky and hence retains that characteristic speech of someone who is deaf.

As a child, Louise was recognised as being deaf, and was therefore taught to speak. Curious, I thought to myself, for someone with a hearing problem to be taught to speak, but I suppose it does make sense.

'I suppose it helps' I suggested 'that you are both deaf. It gives you each a bit more understanding of what the other is going through.'

'Yes' Louise agreed, 'but it can have its downside.'

She recalled the time when they were in an airport waiting for a flight to take to them off on holiday. The departure board advised them to wait in the lounge, so they did just that, patiently sipping their coffee. But as the departure time became closer, there was no change in the advice nor indication that the flight was delayed. Bob wandered off to the information desk to find out what was happening. It seems that there had been numerous Tannoy announcements advising passengers that the departure board was faulty and that they should start boarding.

There had even been a number of calls for Mr. and Mrs. Nolan to make their way to the gate, or they would have their luggage unloaded. Mr. and Mrs. Nolan, of course – both being deaf – were blissfully unaware of this development.

But the ground staff were very understanding. Realising what had happened they arranged for a fast car to rush them to the waiting plane.

As Louise finished relating the story she turned to Bob, making certain her lips were clearly visibly. ‘I was so embarrassed’ she said, ‘Everyone thought we had delayed the plane unnecessarily’.

Bob shrugged his shoulders. ‘These things happen’ he said with a wry smile.

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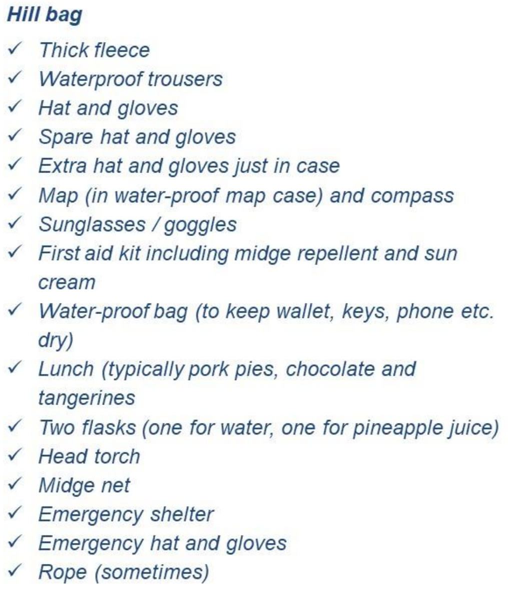
I helped Bob load his bags into my car. He had three: a rucksack for the hill, another for the hotel and a boot bag to stay in the car. This is standard practice. Packing for weekends such as this can be a tricky business; one needs a huge amount of kit – much of which may never be used.

‘New boots? ‘I asked.

‘Indeed they are’ Bob replied. ‘The old ones came apart recently. Just as well someone had some duct tape to repair them.’

‘Hope they are worn in.’

‘Oh yes,’ he replied. ‘they have already taken me up three Munros.’



Hill bag

- ✓ *Thick fleece*
- ✓ *Waterproof trousers*
- ✓ *Hat and gloves*
- ✓ *Spare hat and gloves*
- ✓ *Extra hat and gloves just in case*
- ✓ *Map (in water-proof map case) and compass*
- ✓ *Sunglasses / goggles*
- ✓ *First aid kit including midge repellent and sun cream*
- ✓ *Water-proof bag (to keep wallet, keys, phone etc. dry)*
- ✓ *Lunch (typically pork pies, chocolate and tangerines*
- ✓ *Two flasks (one for water, one for pineapple juice)*
- ✓ *Head torch*
- ✓ *Midge net*
- ✓ *Emergency shelter*
- ✓ *Emergency hat and gloves*
- ✓ *Rope (sometimes)*

Evening bag

- ✓ *Change of clothes*
- ✓ *Toilet bag*
- ✓ *Book*

Boot bag (to stay in car)

- ✓ *Boots and gaiters*
- ✓ *Walking poles*
- ✓ *Towel, dry shirt and socks*
- ✓ *Dry hat and gloves*

Check-list for a weekend in the hills …

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I rely heavily on checklists. This was a lesson I learned on a winter walk in the *Fannaichs*, a range of hills between Inverness and Ullapool. It was a bright, sunny day under a picture-perfect, cloudless sky. The snow underfoot was crisp. There was not a breath of wind. All in all, this was an ideal day to be in the hills. Except that I had left my sunglasses in my car, and an ideal day turned into a significant challenge for me. The glare from the pristine snow was unbearable. I shaded my eyes as best I could with my hands and the peak of my hat, but it was still painful

Eventually I found myself walking with my eyes virtually closed. Better, I thought, to be almost blind (and to run the risk of stumbling or falling) than to damage my eyes.

I carried on this way, and eventually reached the summit, cursing my stupidity.

From that day onwards I have never been into the hills without a detailed checklist.

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I also always take a penknife and a spare bootlace. I'm not sure why, but probably because it was recommended in the 1965 Boys' Own Annual. Off the hills, the blades, the screwdrivers and even the scissors can be useful from time to time, and indeed have been on many occasions. And of course, the bottle-opener can be invaluable.

I have never actually needed a penknife in all my many trips to the hills. It is always packed near the top of my rucksack, though, to allow me to access it in a hurry when I need it. Perhaps one day I will …

And as for the bootlace, I have never needed that either, but it may be useful one day, and it isn't very heavy.

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The car was packed. Bob had found his boots. We were ready to go.

We talked a lot as we drove across Scotland. We talked about hill walking, about sport, about holidays and about music. Strange for a deaf person to be interested in music, I thought, so I decided to dig a bit deeper.

'So what sort of music do you like?' I asked.

'Pop music, mostly,' Bob replied 'but I like most music.' He paused for a second. 'Not sure about bagpipes, though …'

I nodded in approval. 'It reminds me of the old joke' I replied. 'A gentleman is someone who knows how to play the bagpipes … but chooses not to.'

It turned out that Bob had been in a pop group while at school. I suppose this is true of many youngsters in the 70s and 80s, but the thought of a deaf boy in a group intrigued me.

'In fact,' Bob continued, 'there were three of us – all deaf. The media couldn't really believe it; they even interviewed us on television. We were called *Lumpy Custard*'.

Bob's school was a special school for the deaf. And of course, in those days there was no music taught at such schools. And this meant there were no school bands. Which in turn meant that when teenage hormones began to kick in, there were no opportunities for fumbling teenagers to leap around the dance floor with other fumbling teenagers.

And so *Lumpy Custard* was born. By playing loud music, particularly in halls with wooden floors that resonated to their pounding bass, Bob and his band were able to introduce whole deaf communities to the delights of music. And, of course, to other fumbling teenagers.

‘We weren’t particularly good’ confessed Bob, ‘in fact we were terrible. But we were very popular. We played gigs most weekends’. He paused and looked wistfully into the distance. ‘We were cautioned once by the Police, you know, for disturbing the peace’ he confessed with a cheeky smile. ‘The person complaining was three miles away. Not bad eh?’

‘Lumpy Custard’ playing a gig. Bob is on the left wearing sun-glasses, under the mistaken impression that it made him look cool.

We talked more about music in schools for the deaf. This was obviously a subject dear to his heart, and he spoke enthusiastically about it.

Nowadays music can be a powerful tool used to teach the deaf. It isn’t the music itself, so much as the lyrics and the ebbing and flowing of those lyrics in the song. If a deaf person reads the lyrics while hearing them (particularly if repeated over and over again during a chorus) he or she rapidly learns to associate sounds with words.

I was hooked. ‘So exactly how does that work?’ I asked.

Bob recalled the time he bought a Simon and Garfunkel CD for Louise.

‘She thought I was daft.’ he recalled with a wry smile. ‘Why buy a CD for someone who is deaf?’ she complained. But they sat down and listened to it, over and over and over again, reading the lyrics. Slowly but surely Louise came to associate the sounds she was hearing with the words she was reading. Nowadays, this is a well-known technique for helping the deaf to recognise sounds.

4. Driving across Scotland

‘Have you always been deaf?’ I asked.

I learned that Bob could only hear about one third of normal levels, and that he had been that way from birth. That was enough to classify him as ‘deaf’ … and therefore ‘disabled’. British society was not so tolerant of disability back in the 60s. It was generally recognised that disabled people were ‘different’ and that they would be unable to achieve as much as their able-bodied peers. Deafness then carried a considerable stigma. His parents found it hard to accept their son’s condition, and harder still to find advice or support.

Also, the technology was not as advanced. Nowadays hearing aids can be so small that nobody notices them. But back in the 60s Bob was obliged to wear large microphones on both ears and an amplifier in a box that he carried on a lanyard around his neck.

Bob as a child, showing his hearing aid. (This is his mum’s favourite photo.)

He attended a normal primary school, but a specialist secondary school for the deaf.

‘It wasn’t all bad, though’ said Bob with a big smile, ‘I remember playing Thunderbirds in the school playground.’ I vaguely recalled the puppet series on black-and-white television. ‘Well, I always got to be Thunderbird 2, because I had a radio.’

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We drove on. We left the industrial suburbs of Aberdeen behind us and entered the lush farmland of North East Scotland. The roads were quiet, and we made good progress. We followed the Dee valley inland as far as Ballater, and then struck north across the Ladder Hills to skirt the Cairngorm plateau. The landscape became increasingly bleak. A road sign, in English and Gaelic, welcomed us to The Highlands.

After an hour or so the Cairngorm plateau came into sight. This huge area of Scotland is home to some of the most extreme and hostile weather conditions in the UK, and even though it was late summer there was still snow on the mountain tops. The wind had fashioned this snow into long cornices along the ridges. From the mountain top it is hard to know if these cornices are sitting on solid rock or hanging in the air. But often it is the latter. Every year the Cairngorm plateau claims the lives of unwary hikers falling through this snow. This is no place for the inexperienced.

Bob looked up at the snow-clad plateau. ‘It looks magnificent’. He was clearly a man with a photographer’s eye for a good view. ‘Can we stop for me to take a few photos?’

I pulled over to a lay-by and Bob took out his camera. He seemed to know instinctively where to focus. He saw the final photo in his mind’s eye and was able to ignore the less photogenic clutter around it. A rare skill, I thought to myself.

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Bob, like many deaf people, relies heavily on lip reading. From an early age, he would look at the way people shape their mouth and deduce what it was they were saying. This is a skill born of necessity.

Bob and his father were avid football fans, and Bob recalled a match he’d watched with his father on the television. With only minutes to go, the match was still in the balance, each team having scored just one goal. A player broke free and rushed towards the opposition goal, neatly side-stepping the defenders. It should have been an open goal, but he missed it and the ball rolled limply into the goal keeper’s hands. The camera followed the player as he returned to his team-mates, muttering to himself.

‘What’s he saying?’ asked his agitated father, ‘what’s he saying?’

Bob told him.

His mother, unimpressed by the language, sent him to bed immediately.

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Lip reading is not an exact science, though. A competent lip reader will understand perhaps half of the words he or she sees; they will only understand the full story when the context is clear. Misunderstandings happen, particularly if the speaker has a strong accent or is not a native English speaker. Aberdonian taxi-drivers can be particularly challenging in this respect.

The one exception to this rule is swear words. They are remarkably easy to lip read. In fact, many people with no hearing problems whatsoever have no problem at all in this respect …

‘It’s not just the accent, through’ Bob explained. ‘Some English speakers pronounce words differently, even though English is their first language, and this makes it very difficult to understand them. You and I say ‘**<u>a</u>**dult’ for example with the accent on the first syllable, but some Americans, for example, would say ‘ad**<u>ult</u>**’ with the accent at the end. It’s only a small difference, but it can be most confusing.’

But the real challenge with lip reading is that certain sounds are very similar. ‘B’ and ‘M’ are virtually identical, for example, so it is hard for a lip reader to distinguish ‘bat’ from ‘mat’, or ‘bill’ from ‘mill’.

I made a mental note. I need to be very careful – very careful indeed – if I ever ask to see Bob’s mum.

Bob wears hearing aids on both ears, but they are very different from the hearing aids of his youth. Although not invisible, they are certainly less obvious than the devices he learnt to live with as a child. Nowadays, they sit unobtrusively behind the ear lobes. In fact, I hadn't noticed them until he pointed them out.

Bob explained how they helped him. 'Remember, they aren't like glasses.'

'How do you mean? I asked.

'Well glasses correct vision' Bob explained, 'but hearing aids don't correct hearing; they just make sounds louder.'

'So if I'm in a noisy room and finding it hard to hear somebody, all the hearing aid does is make the noisy room seem even noisier.'

'Not much use, then' I agreed. 'So, do you use sign language?'

'Not really', he replied. 'I know quite a bit, but I wouldn't say I was fluent.'

British Sign Language is, as the name suggests, the standard for sign language in Britain. However, it isn't as standard as you might imagine. Just like any other language there are regional differences. A signer in Aberdeen may struggle to understand everything signed by someone from Cornwall at the other end of the country. And *vice versa*.

It's also worth remembering that BSL is a fully-fledged language in its own right. Someone who has been using BSL from birth will therefore view English as a second language. This might mean, for example, that they struggle to understand a form they need to complete. I have a reasonable understanding of Dutch, for example, but I would be very wary of completing a Dutch tax form without help. It is precisely the same with BSL.

5. Arriving at the hotel

We drove on. The scenery was magnificent. The Cairngorm plateau was now behind us, and we were approaching Lochaber, the most mountainous region of Scotland. We drove along the banks of Loch Laggan, occasionally getting glimpses through the thick Scots Pine forests of tumbling waterfalls and grand Scottish Baronial castles.

Bob was telling me his experiences as a young man growing up deaf.

After school he went to university; but whereas his school had been specifically designed to cater for deaf pupils, his university made no such concession. A major problem was attending lectures. Because he relied heavily on lip reading, he made a point of always arriving early and sitting in the front row where he was guaranteed a good view of the lecturer's lips. This allowed him to follow the lecture, but he still found it impossible to take notes; if he dropped his gaze to his notebook he was unable to read the lecturer's lips. He couldn't take notes, so he sat there carefully listening.

Other students looked on in amazement. How on earth could this guy attend a lecture without taking notes? They decided that he must have a photographic memory.

But then one night in the college bar the truth was revealed. The other students were relieved. Not a super-human after all; just someone who was deaf.

Some of the lecturers were more sympathetic than others. One, acutely aware that he sported a large, bushy beard, approached Bob one day.

'I see you've signed up for my course on climate change' he said.

'Yes' Bob replied, 'the one you are giving next term. It sounds very interesting.'

'Well' the lecturer continued. 'I can see that you may struggle to lip read me, so I've decided to shave my beard.'

'What can I say?' Bob was taken aback by this act of generosity. 'That really is too kind.'

The lecturer was as good as his word, but rather than remove his entire luxurious beard, he decided to remove only those parts that made lip reading difficult. He shaved the area around his mouth but nowhere else. This may look bizarre, he thought to himself, but it's bizarre in a good cause so it's worth it.

After the summer break Bob returned to university but had changed his mind. He had decided not to follow the climate change course. The lecturer took it manfully on his splendid chin, although a little disappointed. He still sported his bizarrely manicured foliage, but under the circumstances he lost no time in re-growing it to its former splendour.

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Eventually we arrived at our hotel.

There were a number of parking bays at the front of the hotel, but the two nearest the main door at the front of the hotel were reserved for disabled visitors. A car had pulled into one of them, and an elderly bespectacled man was helping a young girl to manoeuvre herself from the car into a wheelchair. She was feisty. She clearly still had some control over her legs, and was determined to do as much as possible by herself. The driver stood back and cleaned his glasses on a corner of his shirt. He had presumably been through this exercise many times, and struck a careful balance between offering too much help and too little.

Eventually, she slumped into her chair and allowed herself to be pushed towards the hotel entrance.

A sign on the front door proudly announced ‘WHEELCHAIR ACCESS AT REAR OF HOTEL’. The young girl’s eyes looked to the skies. I could see her thinking ‘Surely it makes sense to put the disabled parking bay near the disabled entrance.

The bespectacled man turned the wheelchair around and pushed it across the car park, visibly sighing.

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The hotel foyer was buzzing. From a loudspeaker above the reception desk we heard a massed band of fiddlers blasting out traditional Scottish jigs and reels. Scott and Lynda were already there and were excitedly greeting old friends and relatives. ‘My name is Jones’ I said to the receptionist, ‘I’ve booked a room.’

‘I’m sorry sir, we are fully booked.’

‘It’s OK, I’ve booked a room. The name is Jones.’

‘There’s no room. Sorry’, he continued.

‘No’ I persisted, ‘I’ve booked a room. The name is Jones.’

The receptionist reached for a post-it pad and wrote in large letters ‘WE ARE FULLY BOOKED’ and handed it over to me.

I took a deep breath. ‘I have booked a room. The name is Jones.’

The penny dropped. He reached for his book.

‘Gowans?’ he asked, fiddling nervously with the book.

‘No, Jones’

‘James?’

‘No, Jones – J O N E S.’ I spelled it out.

I was struggling because of the hubbub of noise behind me. Bob stepped forward. ‘Let me talk to him; I see they have a hearing loop.’

Hearing loops are marvellous devices. They allow a deaf person to flick a switch on their hearing aid, so that all they hear is the sound from within a loop. All the other background noise is effectively cut out. They are installed at many shops, offices and similar places where excessive background noise is likely to be a problem.

Bob's discussion with the receptionist seemed to be taking an age, so I wandered over to chat to Lynda.

'So what's the plan tomorrow?'

'We meet at the car park tomorrow morning at 09:30 for a 10:00 departure.' I was told. 'And here' she continued, handing me a small piece of laminated paper 'are some instructions, including the grid reference of the start point.' A wise move I thought; sometimes the hardest part of a walk is finding the right starting point. It would be a shame if the celebrations were hampered by some of the party being delayed or turning up at the wrong place.

Bob finished his lengthy chat with the receptionist. He picked up the key and we headed to our room.

6. The hotel bar

We dumped our bags in the room and headed for the bar. It was a hot, sweaty day and I had been driving for the best part of four hours. I was looking forward to a long, cold drink. Indeed, maybe three or four.

‘I’ll have a pint of cider please.’

The bar maid looked at me and shook her head. ‘I’m sorry, sir. I think you’ve had too much already.’

‘What?’ I was stone cold sober.

‘I’m very sorry sir’ she continued, ‘but I don’t think I should let you have any more to drink.’

‘Are you telling me’ I was struggling to stay calm ‘that you won’t serve me a drink because I have a speech defect?’

‘I’m very sorry sir’ she repeated calmly, ‘but I don’t think I should let you have any more to drink.’

I breathed deeply. I have what speech therapists call *dysarthria*. I slur my speech. I have difficulty saying certain sounds, and I often sound as if I’m drunk.

Indeed, I remember once calling my company IT helpdesk, and the lady in Bangalore accused me of being drunk at work. Over the years I am getting used to it, but it does annoy me when I can’t get a pint.

Fortunately Bob walked in.

‘A pint of cider for my friend please, and a coke for me.’

‘Are you sure, sir?’ the bar maid asked. ‘Is he OK?’

‘Of course he is’ said Bob, ‘he just sounds a bit funny. But, then again, so do Glaswegians.’ The bar maid winced.

‘Does he want ice in his cider?’ she asked.

‘Don’t know. Why don’t you ask him?’ Bob suggested.

‘DO YOU WANT ICE IN YOUR CIDER?’ she asked me, very slowly and laboriously, mouthing each word carefully for my benefit and gesticulating towards the empty glass.

‘No thanks’ I replied, bemused that she clearly thought that I was deaf. Why on earth, I wondered, did she assume that I was deaf? Bob ***is*** deaf, yet she spoke to him normally.

And what’s more, not only did she assume I was deaf, she also assumed I was stupid.

People frequently see the disability, not the person.

I sighed. The bar maid handed over my pint, and I gladly took a huge swig from it. It had been a long day.

The bar was quiet, so the bar maid came over and sat with us.

‘So what exactly is *dysarthria*?’ she asked.

‘It’s all about the muscles in the mouth’ I explained. ‘My brain sends a message down to my mouth to say something, but the mouth can’t manage. The lips, the tongue, the palate all do their best … but it comes out wrong.’

The more I spoke, the more she became accustomed to my voice and better able to understand me. In effect, she was tuning in to my speech.

She nodded. ‘It must be very frustrating.’

‘It certainly is’ I agreed, ‘particularly when I can’t get a pint.’

‘It’s not just speaking though. I also have problems kissing, eating spaghetti, blowing up balloons. I’d probably struggle with a breathalyser …‘.

The bar maid looked a little shocked.

‘… licking stamps, playing the trumpet…’

‘Didn’t know you played the trumpet’ said Bob.

‘I used to, but not any more.’

I looked at Bob’s empty glass. ‘Same again?’

‘Please’ he replied, ‘it would be rude to say no’.

I wandered over to the bar and ordered another pint of cider and a coke.

‘It’s a funny thing, you know’ I confided to Bob as I sat down again, ‘but alcohol has an interesting effect on my speech. It makes it worse, but it also makes it better’.

‘Not sure I understand.’

‘Well’ I continued, ‘there are five things that make my speech worse. They make your speech worse as well of course, but you are better able to manage it.’

‘And what are these five things?’ he asked.

I listed them:

- if I’m cold
- if I’m tired
- if I’m out-of-breath
- if I’m nervous
- if I’m drunk

‘Can’t be much fun on a skiing holiday’ Bob joked, ‘all five of them will be true most of the time’.

‘Ah that’s where you’re wrong’ I countered, ‘and that’s why the alcohol is interesting. On the one hand it makes me less nervous, so I relax a bit and can speak better; but on the other hand, the muscles in my mouth get weaker and it makes it harder for me to make recognisable sounds.’’

‘Mmm’ Bob nodded sagely, ‘I can see that.’

This is me skiing in France. All five factors affecting my speech were true that day.

‘It’s also true for people with a lisp or stammer I continued. ‘Some people probably don’t think they are significant defects, but – believe me – if you have one, they are very significant indeed.’

–

Many people feel ill-at-ease in the presence of disabled people, and don’t know how to react. The answer, of course, is that one should react to disabled people in exactly the same way that one reacts to their able-bodied peers. But the reality is that people often feel uncomfortable and behave differently, and sometimes in an inappropriate manner.

Here’s a typical example:

I walk into a chemist. I start with a few pleasantries to allow the shop attendant to get used to my speech. ‘Lovely day isn’t it?’.

I then get to the point. ‘Can I have some 75 milligram aspirin, please?’ I ask.

It is clear to me that the poor chap behind the counter hasn’t understood what I have just said, but he is too embarrassed to ask me to repeat it. ‘Certainly’ he mumbles, and busily turns around to look in the shelves behind him. He has no idea what he is looking for, but is buying time trying to decide what to do.

I take pity. ‘75 milligram aspirin’ I repeat, as clearly as I can. ‘It’s on the bottom shelf just below the midge repellent.’

His relief is palpable, as he reaches for the aspirin.

‘Actually, come to think of it, I’ll have some midge repellent as well.’

–

Bob looked at me. ‘My neighbour has a speech defect, but his is different somehow to yours. Are there different types?’

‘There certainly are’ I replied, ‘but nowadays it’s not politically correct to refer to speech defects or speech impediments; the preferred term is speech and language difficulties.’

But I still prefer *speech defect*. After all, my speech is indeed defective; so why not call a spade a spade? The technical term *aphasia* is now becoming more widely used, but how many members of the general public would recognise that word?

–

The choice of words for disabilities and the disabled is fraught with danger.

When I was growing up in the sixties it was perfectly acceptable to describe somebody as *handicapped*. After all, someone who is blind or has only one leg will see this as a handicap when trying to perform certain tasks. Indeed there used to be manikins outside many shops in our high streets depicting a small boy with his legs in irons where we could deposit our loose change to ‘Help the Handicapped’.

But nowadays, the term *handicapped* is seen as far too derogatory, and the preferred word is *disabled* or *impaired*. To me, this reflects society’s reluctance to see the person rather than the disability. People are afraid to be seen as demeaning someone because of his or her impairment. But it’s an unfounded fear. The reality is that the person probably doesn’t give a hoot about what you call him. He’d prefer you to treat him just the same as his able-bodied peers.

Blind is another term that is becoming increasingly unacceptable. One is meant to use the less offensive *sight-impaired* or *suffering from sight loss*. But to describe someone who has never had sight as suffering from sight loss is clearly ridiculous. How can you lose something you never had?

The term *cripple* is seen as particularly offensive, but it is frequently used by the disabled themselves. ‘Why would you want to go to the pub with a cripple like me?’ my good friend Dave will ask me. The answer is that we can talk about cricket, he buys his fair share of rounds and he laughs at my jokes. He’s just like all the other people I go to the pub with (except he dribbles a bit more.)

Dave was a diver and survived a massive stroke in his early thirties. He is now wheelchair-bound. But even that term is seen as unacceptable in certain, politically correct circles. The well-meaning but totally inappropriate advice from them is to describe Dave as a *wheelchair user*.

The fact is that Dave doesn't mind what you call him.

Dave lives in a home for the severely disabled. The home is good, and provides everything he needs, but the highlights of his otherwise humdrum life are those few occasions when he gets to leave the home and re-join 'normal' life. Often this entails an evening in a pub, and I am more than happy to join him. He relies heavily on his good friend Sandy, a taxi driver, who drives him around town in a car modified to take a wheelchair.

But Dave hates his wheelchair with a vengeance. 'Why's that?' I ask. 'Because you can't get into some places easily, or because of all that faffing around with portable ramps?'

'No. It's because people don't see me' he replies, 'They see the wheelchair and immediately jump to the conclusion that I am stupid. They don't talk to me; they talk to the person pushing my wheelchair. *Does he take milk and sugar in his coffee*? they'll ask the person behind me, or *Is it OK if I move his chair out of the way a bit*?'

'I can answer for myself, you know. I'm not stupid.'

–

Bob was mulling this over. 'Curious isn't it? When people discover I'm deaf, they tend to assume I'm stupid too.' I agreed. 'It's also true of speech defects' I add. Why can't people see the person, not the disability, I wondered.

Bob recalled the time that his wife Louise bumped into a colleague one day. 'I saw you the other day' he said, 'You were walking your dog in the park.' And just in case Louise hadn't understood the concept of 'dog' he got down on his hands and knees and starting barking.

Why on earth did they feel the need to do this?

–

I took a large swig from my glass. Now it was time for Bob to quiz me. 'So what are the different types of …' He paused to choose his words carefully. '… of speech defect?'

There are many types. At one extreme is my friend Bev who is virtually speechless. She can manage just a very few sounds, so relies heavily on her facial expressions and hand signals to get by. She is never far from her tablet device where a cunning app 'speaks' on her behalf; she points at an image on the screen, and the app 'reads' it for her. (Bev, ironically, was a speech and language therapist before her stroke. She can, however, still dance a particularly fine *Strip the Willow*.)

Anomia is a particularly curious defect. This is when the brain sees something, recognises it, but sends a totally wrong signal down to the mouth. So someone might see a car for example, recognise it as a car, understand the concept of a car, but say ‘piano’. Eyebrows will be raised when he claims that he drove here in a piano …

Another type is called *apraxia*. This is when the brain sees something, but sends a slightly wrong signal down to the mouth. So for example, someone might say *heffalump* rather than *elephant*.

Bob listened intently. ‘Yes. Louise suffers a bit from that. She says *bixit* for *biscuit*.’

‘Many people do’ I pointed out, ‘particularly young children. The good news is that speech therapists can normally sort this out, especially if they catch it early enough.’

–

Both tired, we decided we’d had enough, and wandered back to our room. Tomorrow would be a long day and we needed a good night’s sleep.

Before bed, though, there was one final task for the night; we were keen to know the result of a crunch cricket match earlier that day. I switched the television on to catch the highlights, and fiddled with the remote control. I could get a picture but no sound.

‘Not a problem’ said Bob, ‘I can lip read the result’.

I watched the silent TV screen. Jubilant West Indians were high fiving each other. Geoffrey Boycott was delivering his verdict.

Bob interpreted his words for me. ‘Not good, I’m afraid. Middle order batting collapse. Nobody made double figures.’

I went to bed, excited about the next day’s walk but a bit dejected about our dismal cricket performance. But I slept well.

7. Breakfast

The following morning I went down to breakfast first. I smiled at the waitress. ‘Can I have coffee please, and a full Scottish? My friend will be down shortly’.

I peered at my watch, wondering why Bob was taking so long.

Eventually he walked in, but quite a while later.

‘What kept you?’ I asked. ‘I’ve been down for ages.’

‘I took the lift’ he explained, ‘but it took me a long time to find the right button to press.’

‘How on earth can you not find a button?’

Bob didn’t answer, and wondered over to the side table to serve himself.

‘I’ll just have cereal,’ he said, pouring himself a generous bowl of corn flakes.

He sat down opposite me. ‘Where’s the milk?’ he asked.

‘Next to the cereal.’ I replied, ‘Didn’t you see it?’

‘No.’

It began to realise why Bob hadn’t seen it.

Watching him struggle to find the milk it became clear that Bob was partially sighted. I now understood what he meant when he said that couldn’t find the right button in the lift.

Technically, I’m blind’ confessed Bob, ‘in the sense that I am registered as blind, and get free bus and train tickets, but the reality is that I can see a little. Very few blind people are completely blind; most have some residual vision.’

‘That’s the problem with this word *blind*’ he continued. ‘Most people assume it means *totally blind*, and typically this is not the case.’

‘Anyway’ he continued, ‘to answer your question, I get by most of the time, but small rooms like lifts and toilets can be tricky.’

‘Toilets?’

‘Last night in the gents, I was trying to dry my hands under the machine. It wasn’t working. Then someone pointed out that I needed to put money in if I wanted a condom.’

–

I took a sip from my coffee. So, as someone with a debilitating speech defect, I was about to tackle a potentially dangerous mountain with a colleague who is both deaf and blind. ‘Is this sensible?’ I wondered.

If we find ourselves in a dangerous position, I'll be able to see it, but may not be able to talk to the mountain rescue team. Bob won't necessarily see it, but at least he can communicate with the rescue team. But only if he can understand me.

'Is this sensible?' I wondered again.

–

'Have you always been blind?' I asked. (It was only the day before that I had asked if he had always been deaf.)

Bob's blindness, unlike his deafness, had crept up on him over the years. His parents remember him being a bit clumsy as a child, but that isn't necessarily a sign of blindness. The first signs probably came as a youngster playing football in the leafy Cheshire streets where he grew up. He was always the first to complain that it was too dark to carry on. But he never associated that with blindness; he merely assumed that he was the first to complain. He was, in fact, developing tunnel vision, but the onset was so slow that he hadn't noticed it.

'It wasn't until I went away for a year back-packing' he confided, 'that I realised something was wrong. It was Louise who spotted the deterioration when I returned.'

'Where were you back-packing?' I asked.

'It was a grand world tour in my gap year' he replied, 'New York, California, Australia, you name it …'

'But it was in Australia where I realised my sight was going. I was sight-seeing in the outback, and had fallen in with a couple of Americans. I wanted to take a photo of the sunset from the top of a mountain, so we trudged up there together. I took some splendid photos. But what happens after a sunset? It gets dark of course, and I struggled to see where I was going after that. In fact, walking down, the path twisted and I nearly walked off the side of a cliff. If it weren't for one of those guys grabbing me I wouldn't be here now.'

Bob explained that his vision was even more limited in poor light. What he can manage in good daylight can become very tricky in the dusk.

'This mountain tomorrow' he asked. 'Any idea when we get down?'

'Not a problem' I replied. 'We'll be down well before sunset'.

–

'And have you been getting more blind over the years?' I asked.

'Yes,' Bob replied 'but normally we would phrase it differently. We'd say losing one's sight over the years. It may be a small difference, but it's a bit more positive.'

'A bit more glass half full' I ventured.

'Indeed.'

‘But to answer your question’ Bob continued, ‘Yes, my sight continued to deteriorate. I suppose one of the low-lights was about fifteen years ago when I was forced to give up driving.’

I nodded. ‘I can see how that would affect your independence.’

‘I missed picking up my children from school or cubs. I missed that five-minute chat about what they had been doing that day.’

‘But, most of all’ he continued, ‘now that Louise does all the driving, I have to listen to her music. There’s a limit to how much John Denver a man should be forced to listen to.’

‘Can’t you just turn your hearing aid off?’ I asked. ‘I do’ he replied, ‘but don’t tell Louise.’

–

Bob’s blindness is caused by a genetic failure; and there is currently no known cure. However, it is a sobering thought that the vast majority of the world’s blind can easily be cured. There are nearly 300 million people in the world who are partially sighted to varying degrees, and well over 200 million of them could be cured.

And quite often the cure is a very straight forward procedure. Cataracts, for example, cause about half of the world’s blindness. They are brought about, typically, by too much exposure to bright sunshine. This is why the majority of sufferers are in areas such as the Middle East with long hours of penetrating sunshine. These people, either through ignorance or poverty, don’t use sunglasses as protection for their eyes, and are therefore extremely prone to the condition. Sadly, it is rarely treated, even though the procedure is very simple, widely available and normally very reliable.

–

‘So how much can you see now?’ I asked.

‘I have pretty extreme tunnel vision’ Bob explained.

‘Most people have a field of vision of 160 degrees or so’ he went on, ‘so that’s nearly half of your surroundings.’

‘But some have more’ he continued, ‘Do you remember Pele?’

My sport was cricket rather than football, but even I had heard of this famous Brazilian – maybe the greatest footballer of all time.

‘Well Pele’s eyes protruded a bit, so he had a field of vision slightly greater than 180 degrees. He could literally see behind him, and that was one of the reasons he was such a great player.’

‘So what’s your field of vision now?’

‘Probably three degrees or so’ Bob replied matter-of-factly.

‘What does that mean in practice?’ I asked.

‘Well, looking at you now, I can see your mouth, your nose and a lot of grey, fluffy stuff.’

I think he was describing my beard.

–

Time to change the subject, I thought.

‘Do you do much hill walking?’ I asked.

‘Not as much as I’d like to’ he replied. ‘I try to keep fit though - cycling, tennis, running and swimming. I can’t play football or cricket any more, though, which is a shame.’

‘Cycling? How on earth do you see where you are going?’

‘I don’t need to. I only ride a tandem these days; the person up front does the navigating. I just provide the glamour.

‘It’s a win-win’ he points out. ‘It’s healthier, it’s cheaper and it’s not that much slower.’

–

‘And you still play tennis?’ I asked.

‘Ah, that’s getting trickier’ Bob confessed. ‘I’m OK as long as I can see the ball, but as soon as I lose sight of it, I’ve got no idea what is going on. Also, I don’t know where my doubles partner is. I’d think twice before agreeing to play with me.’

I nodded. ‘Swimming is easier, I guess.’

‘Normally, yes, but that lady from Peterhead still hasn’t forgiven me.’ He paused, and looked wistfully into the distance. ‘I honestly never saw her, and I was as surprised as she was when …’

He paused again.

‘When what?’ I asked.

‘Well, let’s just say she wasn’t very happy.’

–

Time to change the subject again, I thought. I asked Bob about his marathon running. He had run quite a few, but always with a friend who could guide him. The guide would run just behind him and tap him on the left or right shoulder to indicate a turn to the left or right. This was particularly important immediately after a change of lighting; moving from bright sunshine into the shade, or *vice versa*, leaves Bob totally blind for a minute or so.

Bob had always been a keen cyclist, but as his sight became poorer, he was forced to abandon this. In recent years, though, he has started again. He cycles his tandem to work most days, and rarely struggles to find a colleague to share the journey. This photo shows him on a charity ride for DeafBlind Scotland, visiting Skye as part of a trip to all the Scottish islands. Note the wing mirror that allows him and Louise to lip-read each other.

A good strategy is to find a runner who is running at the same tempo, and to follow him or her. It helps, of course, if there is something distinctive. Bob recalled the time at an Edinburgh marathon when he did just that. The runner in front of him, with long flowing blonde hair, and looking rather resplendent in bright blue shorts, was ideal. He tucked in behind ‘Little Miss Blue Shorts’.

But after a few miles ‘Little Miss Blue Shorts’ began to tire and was slowing down, so Bob decided to over-take. And as he did so he looked up and caught a glimpse of a long straggly beard. It took him another mile or so to get over that.

–

‘So is it the same when you are hill walking?’ I asked.

‘Indeed it is’ he replied, ‘but rather than shorts, I look for colourful socks. I find a suitable pair and just follow them. With a bit of luck the person wearing them won’t have any suicidal tendencies.’

We finished breakfast and returned to our room to get ready for the walk. Fortunately I had a pair of bright red socks. ‘Will these be OK?’ I asked.

‘Excellent.’

I pulled them on and continued preparing my rucksack.

The forecast was for a dry day, but it is never safe to assume this in the Scottish hills. Some people have large water-proof covers that wrap around the rucksack as overall protection. I don’t like these. They are a nuisance, especially if you are carrying walking poles or ice axes, and if they catch the wind they can blow you off the track. I prefer to have water-proof ‘sacs’ within my rucksack: one or two for dry clothes, one for wallet and keys and so forth.

–

My packing was complete. I looked down at my ankles. My red socks were clearly visible. Ready for the challenges ahead we left our room and headed for the hotel car park.

8. The drive to the hills

It was only a ten-minute drive from our hotel to the mountain where Lynda and Scott were going to finish their Munro project. But we didn't want to risk any delay, so we gave ourselves plenty of time to get there.

Bob had clearly been impressed by the hotel bar. 'Excellent bar.' he commented, as we drove away from the hotel.

'Indeed.' I agreed. Some of these Highland bars can be a bit over the top. There can be just too much tartan; or there can be too many paintings of Robbie Burns or of Scottish lairds hunting deer in the majestic mountains. I rambled on: 'and there were no antlers mounted above a roaring fire.'

But Bob had different criteria. 'No, that's not what I meant'.

'The lighting was good in the bar, and there wasn't any background music, so I could lip read easily. And the menu was easy to read: solid black characters on a plain white background.'

I saw where Bob was coming from. 'Shame about the bar-maid, though. She would have benefited from some disability awareness training …'

'True, but overall it was well designed from a disability perspective. No need to take any special actions to get by.' No need for coping strategies.

–

People with impairments need to adopt coping strategies, particularly in unfamiliar circumstances.

I go to the same pub most Tuesday evenings after my orchestra rehearsal. The staff know me and know what I like to drink. A foaming pint of my favourite draft bitter will be poured without me having to say a word.

But in an unfamiliar pub – particularly if it is noisy – I will have to adopt a strategy to minimise errors. I'll walk into the pub and look at the various beer pumps, mulling them over in my mind (even though I know precisely which one I want). The barman now knows that I want a beer, but believes I haven't yet decided which one. All I have said so far is a thoughtful 'Mmmmm'.

I'll then point at the selected pump and request a pint of *McTavish's Special Thrappledouser Ale*. The chance of being misunderstood is minimal, even though it is extremely difficult for me to say *McTavish's Special Thrappledouser Ale*.

Further complications might arise if I am asked if I want a pint or a half, but I can gesticulate with my hands.

I remember once adopting this strategy only to be told that the *McTavish's Special Thrappledouser Ale* was off. 'That's a shame' I commented. Somehow, the bar maid misconstrued this as ‘In which case, I’ll have a pint of lager and lime, please.’ It would have been just too difficult to correct matters, so I manfully drank the curious concoction.

I also have problems with my address. The name of the road I live in is not difficult to say, but it sounds rather similar to a another and better-known road on the other side of town. Rather than ask taxi drivers to take me to my home address, I ask to be taken to the pub at the end of my road. It’s a well-known pub and I can’t be misunderstood. And the extra few hundred metres to walk home probably does me good …

–

Talking is always difficult for me, but more so if I am walking or eating. This can be a bit of a blow while plodding up Munros; most of the time one is walking, and when one isn’t walking it is generally time for some food.

I’m not entirely sure why walking makes talking difficult (but my speech therapist assured me that it was not uncommon, and nothing to worry about. It’s something to do with breath control.) Why eating makes talking difficult is much simpler to explain: the muscles in my mouth just can’t manage to do two things at once. And this is particularly true with certain foods. Salad leaves are tricky, especially when they get stuck on the roof of my mouth.

My friends who have lunch with me know that I sometimes have spasms of choking fits, but they also know that these are harmless. ‘Don’t worry’ Bernie will say, ‘I can finish your cheesecake for you’ as my face turns to a delicate shade of beetroot.

People who don’t know me get concerned and start running through the *Heimlich manoeuvre* in their minds.

Some foods are more likely to set me off. Small particles, such as rice or couscous, are particularly troublesome especially if dry, but also larger ones such as corn or peas. They often set off the choking mechanism and are more likely to do so if I am trying to talk as well. I tend to eat in silence.

Ironically, dispersible aspirin tablets can also be troublesome, but the good doctors have advised me to take one every day.

When I’m offered a boiled sweet, I normally decline. ‘Thank you,’ I’ll say, ‘but it may kill me.’ I’ve no idea if it would, but it would be a shame to put it to the test, especially if we happened to be half way up a Munro, many miles from the nearest *Heimlich manoeuvre* practitioner.

–

There is a huge variety in the hills one visits as a Munro bagger. To the west, they tend to be isolated and ‘pointy’ (just like a child’s drawing of a mountain); to the east they tend to be grouped together into massifs, not as spectacular perhaps as their western cousins but just as challenging to the walker. Many have trees at the lower level that give way to grass and heather as height is reached. Higher still, the vegetation thins, and the ground becomes increasingly rocky with cliff faces and gnarly outcrops. Only lichen and minute alpine flowers survive at these heights and in these extreme weather conditions.

The amount of water held in these mountains will never cease to amaze me. Even after a prolonged dry period, the springs continue to dribble water into small burns that grow larger as they tumble down into ice-cold mountain lakes. Crossing these burns may not be easy; innocuous one minute but a raging torrent only a few hours later when they come into spate. Or conversely, a huge cascading river standing between you and the comforts of tonight's destination pub might disappear within minutes. One never knows …

Some days there is wildlife to be seen in the hills; on others nothing. Lower down the land is often managed. Farmers may have herds of sheep or Highland Cows. Ghillies will burn the heather to pamper the grouse before they are shot for the dinner table. But higher there are fewer animals. Hares and ptarmigan may be seen. Deer may wander in the distant corries. Golden eagles may be seen circling over remote outcrops, hoping to spot an unsuspecting rabbit for lunch.

I remember descending a path from *Benn Fhada* with Graham, a friend who is a keen naturalist and expert on mountain flora and fauna. Suddenly he stopped and pointed to the ground in front of us. 'Look' he said, clearly beside himself with excitement. 'Fresh pine marten droppings.'

(Actually – if I'm being honest, he didn't actually say 'droppings'. He used another word, but I'll leave that to your imagination.)

I'm not sure why, but I draw comfort from this. Not only are there people in this world who recognise fresh pine marten droppings, but there are people who positively revel in this knowledge.

–

'I don't think we'll see much wildlife today' I suggested. 'There are too many people on this walk.' Never mind. Should be a splendid day.'

9. The foothills

We met at the car park below *Aonach Mor* for the final ascent. It was dry, and there was just enough wind to keep the midges at bay. ‘If the rain holds off it will be a perfect hill walking day’ I thought to myself.

The tradition is that the compleators invite everybody with whom they have walked. Some sixty or so friends of Lynda and Scott were there ready for this final ascent. I tugged up my trousers to make certain my red socks were visible. ‘Ready to go?’ I asked. ‘Yep’ Bob replied and off we set.

–

‘Who is leading? I wondered.

Typically, the most experienced walker tends to be the *de facto* leader. In this case, Scott was the first to move up the path, setting a good but comfortable rate for us to follow. Clearly Scott was leading. I pulled out my map and compass though, and checked the time. Even leaders can become disorientated or be forced to abandon the walk; so everybody on the walk should carry a map and know where they are at all times.

There are many courses for leaders to learn their skills. In my teenage days, these courses were all about the best choice of knot for a tricky river crossing, or how to trap and prepare a rabbit for the evening meal before retiring to an improvised over-night bivouac in the woods. Nowadays, the courses concentrate on man management skills, on micro-navigation and on ensuring that all members of the party eat a sufficient amount of carbohydrate each day. Then, first aid was a half hour session, but now it requires a two-day intensive course in its own right. I suppose this all makes sense in today’s risk-averse world, but I do rather miss the Boys’ Own, gung-ho attitude of years gone by. How many of today’s leaders, I wonder, would know how to set fire to a bees’ nest to retrieve a little honey for breakfast?

And how many would be comfortable if they had disabled people in the party that they were leading?

–

We plodded up the foothills of *Aonach Mor*. ‘So what causes dysarthria? Bob asked.

‘Some sort of damage to the brain’ I replied. ‘In my case it was a stroke.’

‘But strokes only affect the elderly, surely?’

‘Not true’ I replied. ‘Anybody can have a stroke at any age. I know someone who was thirty something and eight months pregnant when she had a stroke. I even heard recently about a baby that had a stroke while being born.’

Bob looked a bit shocked. ‘How old were you?’

‘I was 38.’

–

I was living in The Hague in the Netherlands at that time, with my wife Jane and four small children. My job had taken me out there, but now I was due to return to Scotland. Jane had gone on ahead with the children to sort out houses and schools, and I stayed behind to wrap up my old job and hand over to my successor.

So for nearly three weeks I was by myself.

One night some friends invited me round for a farewell dinner, and I gladly accepted. Some other colleagues were there, and we had a fine evening reminiscing about happy times in the Netherlands. But eventually it was time to go home. I took a taxi. My Dutch wasn't fluent, but it was good enough to chat to the taxi driver. He was planning a holiday in England and wanted my recommendations.

Have you been there before?' I asked.

'Yes' he replied, 'I've been there three times. I've been to Wembley (twice) and to Old Trafford.'

'Ahh' I replied, 'why don't you go to Scotland. There's much better scenery'. I suspect my advice was not heeded.

This is me in Glen Affric. The net may not be very glamorous, but it is the second best way to avoid midges. (The best way is to take up smoking, but I would advise against that.)

He drove me home, and I went straight to bed.

The following morning I awoke early. My head hurt a bit, but it wasn't a 'normal' hangover. 'Probably cheap wine' I thought and turned over to go back to sleep. Looking back, I suspect I was drifting in and out of consciousness at that time.

I was woken a little later by the phone ringing. I picked up the receiver, and it was at that moment I realised that I couldn't speak.

Not one word.

I dressed hurriedly and rushed round to my good friends the Pippings, a Swedish family that lived fairly close to me. Linnéa, their young daughter, opened the door. She knew me well, but slammed the door in my face. I was dribbling, making non-sensible sounds and desperately gesticulating to my mouth. No wonder the poor girl was terrified.

Fortunately Karin, her mum, then came to door and ushered me in. I was clearly in a mess. Lasse, her husband, later commented that my face was distorted almost beyond recognition.

Karin lost no time in driving me to the local hospital.

I communicated with the doctor by scribbling frantically in a notebook, but it was clear that he had no idea what was wrong with me. He discussed the case with his colleagues and at one stage even suggested that I had contracted rabies.

‘The best thing to do’ he decided ‘is to go home for a couple of days and see if your speech returns.’

‘But I’m booked on a ferry to Scotland next weekend’ I scribbled furiously. ‘Will that be OK?’

He looked vaguely into the distance. ‘Probably’ he said, ‘but take some aspirin before you go.’

They discharged me.

Karin took me to her home, and my true predicament began to sink in. In addition to being unable to speak, I had problems eating and drinking, and my fingers couldn’t manage fiddly tasks such as doing up my shoelaces or buttoning up my shirt.

I was also extremely tired; I was sleeping for well over half the day.

Karin was seriously concerned about my condition and called another doctor who came to visit the next day. He examined me briefly then made an emergency appointment for me at a second hospital on the other side of town. Karin drove me there and I was ushered in to see the consultant.

He was honest. He had no idea what the problem was, but one thing he did know was that it was serious. Within an hour I was in an Intensive Care Ward, plugged into a number of life-support machines and with a feeding tube rammed down my throat.

The only things I had with me – and to this day I have no idea why – were a maths book and a squash racket.

–

The Intensive Care Ward was small; there were four beds, all occupied. All our life-support machines were pinging enthusiastically to confirm that we were still alive.

At this stage, ever the optimist, I was convinced that it was only a matter of time before the good doctors and nurses would sort out my problem and send me home. But as the minutes dragged into hours and the hours dragged on into days I became increasingly concerned. I was subjected to every test in the book, but still they had no idea what was wrong with me.

I was still extremely tired, and spent considerably more time asleep than awake. What I had originally thought to be a weird hangover had worn off and I was suffering no pain or other side effects – other than a complete inability to speak.

A low point came one night when I was disturbed by a kerfuffle at the next bed. Anxious friends and relatives had gathered around, and nurses were hovering in the background. As I came to from my sleep, I realised that the poor chap in the next bed was receiving the last rites. It began to dawn on me that the good doctors and nurses might never sort me out and I might never get home.

–

But the good doctors and nurses didn't give up. Every few hours they came by to measure my temperature, pulse and blood pressure. Specialists were called to take blood samples; others wheeled me off for X-rays, for ECG scans or for numerous other tests. Most of the time, these were painless; indeed, they provided a welcome relief from the tedium of lying in a hospital bed (with the notable exception of the lumbar puncture, an experience I hope never to experience again …)

–

A speech therapist was summoned to examine my vocal cords.

'They seem fine' she concluded. 'Tell me, just how badly is your speech affected?' This was easy to answer. When I first arrived, I had gone through the alphabet checking how many sounds I could make.

I reached for my notebook and scribbled 'I can only manage M'.

–

I had visitors.

My wife Jane visited me. She had been in touch with my company's HR department to sort out my medical insurance. She needed to know my policy number, and didn't know where to find it. 'No problem' I thought, and wrote it down for her. Jane turned to one of the nurses. 'It may be that his speech has gone, but his brain is still there … and it's working.'

My mother visited me, something I wasn't expecting. In fact, it was so unexpected that I burst into tears. At that time my emotions were seriously heightened.

I guess this is because it is the brain that controls how we react and behave. And if part of the brain is damaged then it should be no surprise that we react and behave differently.

My colleagues visited me. They had been made aware of my heightened emotions, so carefully scheduled small groups of visitors to avoid overwhelming me.

The hospital chaplain visited me just in case I hadn't had any visitors. I thanked him, then told him about the endless stream of well-wishers from my office. He scribbled something in his notebook, and wandered off to the next bed.

But most of all Karin visited me, virtually every day for what turned out to be nearly two months. In fact, she visited so often that the nurses assumed that she was my wife.

Karin was a busy mum with five children to look after, so she visited when it suited her, paying scant attention to visiting hours. One morning she came in while the doctors were gathered around me. 'So, ladies and gentlemen' the senior consultant declared, 'we now believe that this gentleman has *Guillain-Barré* syndrome.' I had no idea what *Guillain-Barré* syndrome was, but I was pleased that the good doctors and nurses were now more likely to cure me and send me home.

'Sorry I'm late' apologised Karin 'I couldn't find parking slot, so I used one reserved for the doctors.'

I laughed, in my speech-defective, unable-to-laugh-properly way.

Karin Pipping

One of the junior doctors piped up. 'People with *Guillain-Barré* syndrome can't laugh' he said. 'I think we need to do more tests.' The senior consultant agreed and nodded in embarrassment. The junior doctor turned to Karin. 'Thank you, Mrs. Jones,' he said.

After two weeks in Intensive Care I was moved to a recovery ward. I had only died once, I was told, and because I had recovered all by myself, they thought I'd be OK. They had also, at long last, found out the problem.

I had suffered a stroke

10. The climb begins

To be told that one has survived a stroke is not a pleasant experience.

A thousand and one questions charged through my mind. ‘Will I survive?’, ‘Will it happen again?’, ‘How will it affect me?’, ‘Can I still work?’, ‘Will my children be at risk?’

But over and over again I asked ‘Why me?’

Certain factors pre-dispose people to stroke. These risk factors include age, family history of stroke, being over-weight, not exercising enough, smoking, drinking too much or having a high blood pressure.

Looking out of the window behind my bed, I could see the hospital’s designated smoking area. One young woman, puffing away on her cigar most days, caught my eye. She was barely 30, yet already had the physique of a Sumo wrestler. ‘Why did I suffer a stroke’ I implored, ‘but not her’. Life just isn’t fair.

Over the following days I had more tests, and the details of my stroke began to surface.

I had in fact suffered two strokes, each quite small, symmetrically positioned on either side of my brain. This was one of the reasons that they found it so hard to diagnose.

I spent over a month in that recovery ward. I was still extremely tired, but slowly but surely regaining a feeling of normality. Karin brought me books to read; Lasse smuggled cans of lager past unsuspecting nurses. The feeding tubes had been removed, and I began – tentatively – to eat normal food. It was a messy business, but it was an important step in my recovery. Not only did it taste better than the mush I had been swallowing before, but it forced me to re-learn how to use the muscles in my mouth.

But most of all I slept … and slept.

–

Because strokes typically affect mobility as well as speech, they decided to send me to the physiotherapy department. An elderly porter turned up with a wheelchair. He looked at me. I looked at him. It would make more sense for him to take the chair and for me to push, but I did as I was told, and he wheeled me off to the physiotherapy department. The physiotherapists found nothing unusual.

They did, however, decide to visit me the next day to do some more tests. I made a mental note to leave my squash racket in a prominent position.

–

Eventually they decided it was time to discharge me and allow me to return to Scotland.

Karin picked me up from the hospital a few days before my repatriation.

‘You need a night out.’ she said, bubbling as always with enthusiasm. ‘Let’s go to the ballet.’ So off we went to Antwerp, a two-hour drive from The Hague, to watch the Swedish National Ballet Company. I remember it well, and I enjoyed it, but what I remember most is stopping off at a motorway restaurant on the way home for dinner. Karin ordered Spaghetti Bolognese for me. Even today, this is one of the hardest meals for me to eat because I can’t suck. Karin realised this and set me a challenge from the very beginning.

–

A few days later I was ready to return to Scotland. I was still unable to speak, so someone had to come with me.

Karin was the obvious choice, but the lady from HR needed some details from her before booking the flight.

‘Are you family’, she asked, ‘or are you a colleague?’

‘Neither’ Karin replied with a radiant smile, ‘I’m his escort.’

‘Oh’ she replied, somewhat taken aback and ticked the box marked ‘Other’.

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Thursday, October 10, 1996

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groups throughout the country with nearly 800 volunteers working as helpers, drivers or home visitors."

The organisation also funds research, health education and advice for victims.

There are five stroke support groups in Grampian.

This week CHS is encouraging the north east public to guard against stroke illness by having a healthier lifestyle and responding to any danger signals they experience.

For more information you can contact the Chest Heart and Stroke Scotland Advice Line on 0345 720720.

A special presentation will be held in The Heugh Hotel in Stonehaven tonight (Thursday) from 7-9pm

STROKE VICTIM... 'but even when doctors say you won't recover any more you do make progress,' says David Jones, pictured with his wife Jane, sons Harry and Edward and daughter Sarah

David's story

DAVID JONES seemed an unlikely candidate for a stroke.

At 39 the computer expert played squash energetically, loved music and had the kind of sense of humour which meant he didn't take life too seriously.

But on reflection he realises he was under stress.

He was in the process of moving house and job from Holland to Aberdeen. He said:

"I had been out celebrating with friends and I woke up in the morning feeling miserable and I went back to sleep.

"I woke up in the afternoon and thought something was not quite right.

"When I tried to talk on the phone nothing happened."

David did not realise at the time that a blood clot had passed through his heart and up to his brain causing two identical strokes, one on either side of his brain.

His mouth, palate, tongue , lips and fingertips were paralysed.

"It was absolutely terrifying,"

or kiss people and I hate telephones," he explained.

Doing presentations is a necessary part of his job but one he does not relish, as with talking to total strangers.

"Some people think I am stupid or deaf," he adds.

"That is frustrating, but it is their problem because I know I am not stupid."

But David is proof that stroke and heart attack victims can pick up the threads of their lives again.

His sense of humour is constantly bubbling under the surface.

His is a success story but he urges victims to believe that things will improve.

"The first few months are extremely hard work but it is worth it.

"Even when doctors say you won't recover any more you do make progress.

"You have to find something to do if you are not working."

David made a fitted kitchen which he had never done before.

He said: "It gave me a purpose. You wake up in the morning and

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COUNSELLING SERVICE
FOR MORE VOLUNTEERS

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the core providers, with bequests in kind coming from other areas.

● Amerada Hess has provided a three-year training grant.

A cutting from the Aberdeen Press & Journal of October 10, 1996. Harry, on the left, is clearly very pleased that he has just said 'Hippopotamus'. (Curiously, my other son, William, is missing from this photo - I have no idea why.)

The Munro party paused halfway up the slopes of *Aonach Mor*. It was lunch time. Scott pointed to a sheltered area just below a boulder field, and suggested that we pause a while. ‘The next passage is tricky’ he suggested, ‘we need a break to recharge ourselves.’ I had removed my jacket some time ago, but I now put it back in again. The cold can creep up on you when you are sitting down.

I sat down and pulled out my lunch: a pork pie, a chocolate bar and a tangerine. Bob sat opposite me and pulled out his lunch: oatcakes, a cheese sandwich and an apple.

I unwrapped my pie, and tucked in. But the wind caught the wrapping paper and blew it away. I rushed off to catch it as it cascaded down the contours.

‘Well done.’ Bob enthused, as I reached it and pushed the troublesome paper into my rucksack.

‘You know what they say: Take nothing but photographs; leave nothing but footprints.’

Bob nodded in agreement ‘and kill nothing but time’.

–

It was time to move on. The lunch break was over, and Scott urged us to get ready to continue. ‘We need to keep moving.’

I picked up my rucksack and slung it over my shoulders. Bob looked a bit confused. ‘Can anybody see my rucksack?’ he implored. It was just behind him, but he had forgotten where he had put it. He looked all around him, but had failed to find it. ‘It’s behind you’ came the cry, pantomime-like, as the other walkers prepared to leave.

I reached for his rucksack and handed it to Bob.

11. Onwards and upwards

After lunch, we continued the walk up the slopes of *Aonach Mor*. The weather had stayed dry, and the views across Lochaber were truly magnificent. I carried on reminiscing about my experiences.

–

I returned to Scotland, still unable to speak, with Karin at my side. A limousine had been ordered to take us to the airport. The chauffeur looked at me, listened to my incomprehensible mumblings and came to the immediate conclusion that I was stupid or drunk or probably both. Karin looked at the chauffeur. I won't repeat what she said, but – suffice it to say – the chauffeur was very quiet for the rest of the journey.

I arrived in Aberdeen.

My speech had improved slightly; I could now manage M and N. That, I proudly told myself, is a 100% improvement.

I was signed up for speech therapy, and the long hard struggle to talk again began in earnest. My youngest son, Harry, then just eighteen months old, was also learning to talk. We used to have competitions. 'Who' my wife would demand, 'can say *Hippopotamus*?' Harry managed. I struggled.

–

The human brain is a complex organ; it controls one's every action, thought and emotion. It defines one's behaviour, personality, drive and one's very being. It's not surprising, therefore, that after a stroke there will be changes in all these respects. The physical ones such as speech and mobility are easy to recognise and empathise with, the hidden ones, less so.

–

'So, how was it in the days after you got back to Scotland?' Bob asked.

'It was frightening' I replied, 'very frightening.'

Slowly my speech returned, but not my confidence to return to the office and continue my work.

Some of my colleagues were sympathetic to this and helped ease my return, others less so.

Ian visited me at home. He knew me well from before my stroke, and carried on as if nothing had happened. He was now the proud owner of one sixth of a racehorse, and was considering retiring early to live off the proceeds. 'Sounds a bit risky' I suggested.

Harry, my new boss, visited me and told me to take as long as I needed to get back to work. 'Start gently' he advised 'maybe just a half day or two per week at first. Then gradually build up to full time.'

Amy, the lady from HR also visited, with the same advice, but wisely counselled that the longer I took, the harder it would become. These were wise words indeed.

And Paul visited me, with a laptop. Home working was virtually unknown in those days, but he had installed some new-fangled software to allow me to contact my colleagues with email. ‘You don’t really need to talk that much nowadays’ he told me. ‘It’s amazing how much one can achieve with email.’

I took their advice and returned to work gingerly. A few half days was all I could manage at first, but over the following months I was able to gradually build up to full time.

–

Looking back, my return to work was by far the hardest episode of my journey. The weeks after my stroke had been difficult and worrying, but the transfer back to work was far worse. I was leaving a world where the good doctors and nurses looked after me, to a world where I was largely on my own. I had no idea how I would react to my ex-colleagues, or how my ex-colleagues would react to me.

Shortly after arriving back home I was invited to a party by a good friend who lived near me. I accepted. Half of me was keen to meet old colleagues again and to introduce myself to my new neighbours; but half of me was terrified at the thought of struggling to make myself understood. People go to parties to enjoy themselves, I argued, not to have difficult conversations with mumbling idiots.

I went to the party, but sat in a corner, nursing my glass of beer, and said not a single word to anybody that entire evening.

–

I needed something to do, to keep me active and alert. It would have been far too easy to sit at home, moping and feeling miserable about my condition. So I decided to build a fitted kitchen. This is not something I had ever done before, and I had no idea whether or not I had sufficient expertise. But it was important to have a goal and I set about my new project with gusto. Experts, I am told, would have completed that kitchen in three days; I took three months.

However, looking back it was an important part of my journey, and my return to normal life. It kept me busy … and it didn’t require much talking.

–

In the early days I went out of my way to avoid having to talk to people. I was uncertain, embarrassed, even ashamed of my speech and I went to extraordinary lengths to side-step people so I would not be forced to talk to them.

I remember seeing colleagues in supermarkets and deliberately pushing my trolley down different aisles to avoid meeting them.

Using a telephone in those early days was clearly impossible, but even talking face-to-face with strangers I found difficult. If I couldn’t persuade my wife to do the talking for me, I would choose to deliver a letter rather than suffer the ignominy of talking to someone with my inadequate speech.

I would even – on occasions – pretend to be mute in order to avoid awkward conversations. In a funny sort of way, I preferred to be seen as totally speechless than to be seen as having a significant speech defect. I guess this is because there is no chance of being misunderstood while scribbling on bits of paper.

–

A friend of mine, Tom, was keen to climb *Beinn Dubcraigh*, a Munro near Crianlarich that had already defeated him twice, and I agreed to help him. Any climb is easier – and indeed safer – in company. But this was late December and there was already a lot of snow and ice in the hills. In addition to the normal hill walking gear, we would need crampons and ice axes.

We needed a ‘planning meeting’.

So a few days later we agreed to meet at a pub in town after work. I arrived a little before Tom, ordered my pint and sat quietly in a corner waiting for him. The pub was quiet; just me and a small group who had obviously been there for many hours celebrating Christmas. A lady in the group spotted me, peeled off from them and bounced across the room to introduce herself. She had clearly been drinking all afternoon. Had there been chandeliers in the pub, I’m sure she would have swung from them as she catapulted herself over the pub floor.

‘Hi, I’m Carole’ she said, ‘with an e’ taking a slurp from her large glass of wine. ‘You looked a bit lonely. Do you want a chat?’

I was a bit taken aback. I wasn’t used to being accosted like this.

‘You remind me’ she said ‘of Edward VI’.

I was at a loss for words. I was keen to talk to her, but at the same time frightened that I couldn’t. I mumbled something incomprehensible, and gestured to my mouth indicating that I couldn’t talk properly.

‘Carole with an e’ was unperturbed. With a bottle or two of Chardonnay under her belt, she did all the talking for me.

In ten minutes I had heard her entire life story; I knew about her children, about her hobbies, about her holiday plans and I knew that she fancied a guy in her office who normally wore a pin-striped shirt. I had said maybe five words.

She took another mouthful from her wine glass.

For the first time in ages I was having a conversation (well, witnessing one, if I’m being honest) and I was enjoying it.

‘Carole with an e’ carried on. I now knew about her mother’s health problems, about her argument with the people next door over a tree in the garden and about her plans to buy a bigger car. I had maybe said ten words by this time.

‘Are you a doctor, by any chance?’ she asked.

‘No’ I mumbled.

‘Oh’ she said. ‘That’s a shame. I’m thinking about giving blood, but I don’t know if it’s a good idea. I take Prozac, you know’. She finished off her glass of wine with a flourish and bounced out of the pub to have a cigarette.

I never saw her again.

–

A few minutes later Tom walked in. We sat down in a quiet corner studying the map of *Beinn Dubcraigh*. Tom looked up from his pint. ‘I think we’ll approach it from the south’ he said, ‘There’s a boggy bit at the start, but it should be hard enough if it’s frozen.’

This is Tom and me at the summit of Ben Dubcraigh, a week or so after meeting ‘Carole with an e’ at out planning meeting.

‘Yes’, I mumbled in agreement, wondering if ‘Carole with an e’ was a hill walker.

–

The Munro party continued to snake its way up the hill. There was a little mist lingering above us, but it began to clear and I thought I could make out the summit cairn.

My map, as always, was in a plastic case even though the forecast had been for a dry day. I studied it for a while. ‘Only another 300 metres or so to go. We should be there fairly soon.’

I tugged up my trousers to make certain my red socks were still visible. ‘OK?’ I asked.

‘Certainly’ Bob replied, ‘those red socks are really helpful.’

‘Just as well you aren’t colour-blind as well.’ I replied.

12. Towards the summit

We trundled on.

The lower slopes had been mostly grass and heather, but it became increasingly rocky as we approached the summit. Suddenly the person in front of us froze. She turned to us, and silently pointed to the other side of the scree. ‘Ptarmigan’ she said in a hushed voice, ‘three or four of them, maybe.’

We looked over. Ptarmigan thrive on the highest slopes of Scottish mountains, even in winter when deep snow covers the ground.

They were hard to spot, though, perfectly camouflaged against the dull grey of the rocks. But one stood out, flapping pathetically across the rocks, lurching uncontrollably from side to side with a broken wing.

Ptarmigans demonstrating their mastery of camouflage. There are at least three birds in this photograph.

‘Don’t worry’ she continued, still in a hushed voice. ‘Her chicks are probably nearby, and she’s just pretending to be injured so that we attack her and leave the chicks alone.’

I peered at my map. Still on schedule. I thought, and I continued reminiscing about my recovery.

–

Back in Aberdeen, I had been referred to the local hospital.

The stroke doctor in the Netherlands had written to his opposite number in Aberdeen, and arrangements were made for me to continue treatment back in the UK.

The neurologist leant back in his chair, struggling to decipher the messy handwriting. He said nothing, except for the occasional ‘mmm’. Some of these ‘mmm’s were quiet and thoughtful; others a little more urgent accompanied by a knowing nod of the head.

‘It looks’ he finally said ‘as if your test results have got lost somewhere. We will need to repeat some of them.’

‘Not the lumbar puncture, I hope.’

‘No’ he reassured me, ‘I think we can skip that one.’

The good doctors and nurses still had no idea what had caused the stroke.

I was sent to see a stroke expert in Edinburgh. He found nothing unusual. ‘Do you have a family history of stroke?’ he asked. ‘Often these things run in families. We need to check your genes.’

So back in Aberdeen I was interviewed by a geneticist, anxious to see if he could find a genetic clue. He quizzed me about my parents and grandparents but found nothing of interest. ‘Mmmm. Not sure about this’ he confessed, ‘I think we should check your blood.’

So I was examined by a haematologist in case a blood abnormality had brought about the stroke. But again, they drew a blank. ‘Everything looks normal’ she said, when the results of the tests came back from the lab. ‘Perhaps we need to check your heart.’

So I was carted off to see a cardiologist. ‘Mmmm. Not sure about this’ he too confessed, ‘the results all look OK, but it may be that you have a PFO. Let’s do some tests.’

I had no idea what a PFO was, but I agreed to come back later for further tests.

‘PFO’ the cardiologist explained when I returned ‘is a hole in the heart. It stands for *Patent Foramen Ovale*.’

The tests had confirmed that I indeed had a hole in my heart, but it wasn’t clear to me how this had caused a stroke.

The cardiologist drew a picture on his notepad.

Clots do form in the blood from time to time, often in the heart itself, and these can cause a stroke if they get to the brain where they can cause damage by preventing oxygen flow to the cells. This, he explained, is how many strokes are caused. But clots are very rare, though, and on those few occasions when they do arise, they will be pumped into the lungs before the brain. In this way the lungs act as a sort of filter protecting the brain.

He pushed his notepad over the desk so I could see the diagram of the blood flow through my body.

The hole in my heart was between the two sides of the heart, so the clot had slipped through and bypassed the lungs.

‘Basically’ he said, ‘You were just very unlucky.’

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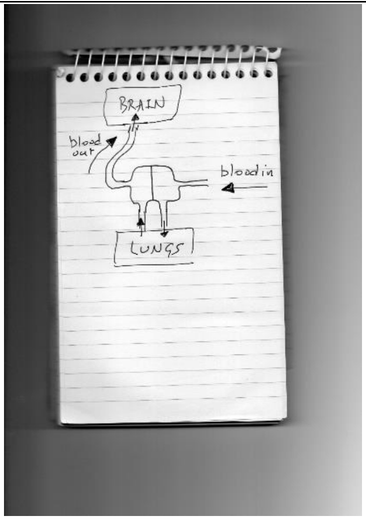

A plumber’s view of my heart.

‘So the question is’ he continued, ‘Do we close the hole or not?’

‘It’s a relatively straightforward procedure’, he explained. ‘We open you up, fix the hole then stick you back together again.’ He reminded me of a plumber deciding how best to tackle a leak in a bathroom.

But I wasn’t too happy about the thought of being opened up by a plumber. I had done some research and discovered that a new technique had been devised to allow PFOs to be repaired by key-hole surgery.

I discussed this with the cardiologist, and it was agreed that this would be a sensible option in my case. The problem was that it couldn’t be done in Aberdeen. The only surgeon was in Liverpool.

An appointment was made for the procedure and I prepared to travel south.

–

And this is how I found myself in a bed in a Liverpool hospital, with a hole in my groin through which a key-hole surgeon was fixing a defect in my heart. I had a local anaesthetic to kill the pain in my groin, but remained wide awake throughout the hour or so to complete the procedure. Above me was a TV screen showing the delicate movements of delicate devices. It was fascinating to watch my heart being repaired in front of my eyes.

The device was fitted successfully, and the surgeon carefully withdrew his instruments. A nurse swabbed the wound and checked that everything was healing properly.

‘Everything looks fine’ she said. ‘Normally we would send you home after an hour or so, but you’ve got a long journey, I believe.’

‘Yes’ I nodded. ‘Aberdeen. It’s over seven hours on the train.’

‘We’ll keep you in overnight, then ‘she continued ‘just in case. But it should be OK.’

It was indeed fine. The following morning, I awoke early, slightly sore, but keen to get home. I took a taxi to the station and boarded the next train north.

–

I peered at my map again. One can never do too much peering at maps, especially in unfamiliar territory. The route ahead was clear, with a good path guiding us ever upwards through a boulder field, but seeing the path on the map was a reassurance.

The ptarmigan had scattered as we delicately picked our way through the chaotic tumble of rocks.

I turned to Bob. ‘Take it easy here’ I implored. ‘Some of these rocks are loose. It would be very easy to turn an ankle.’

13. The last push

The summit cairn was coming into view.

‘So how does one recognise a stroke?’ Bob asked.

‘Easy’ I said, ‘think ***FAST***.’

‘***F***’ I continued ‘is for Face. If someone’s face is distorted and asymmetric they may be having a stroke.’

Bob looked at me. ‘You’ve got a beard’ he said. ‘I’ve got no idea what your face is like.’

‘***A***’ I went on ‘is for Arms. If someone can’t raise their arms slowly they may be having a stroke.’ I lifted my arms gently, just like a cricket umpire signalling a wide ball.

Bob looked at me again. ‘Like raising a pint glass to your mouth? That needs a steady arm.’

‘***S*** stands for Speech’ I carried on, unperturbed. ‘If someone is slurring their speech as if they are drunk, they may be having a stroke.’

‘Or maybe they’re actually just drunk?’ Bob countered.

‘Or maybe both?’ I replied. ‘You never know.’

‘So what’s ***T***?’ Bob asked.

‘***T*** is the most important’ I replied. ‘***T*** stands for Time To Telephone. If you can get the person to hospital immediately, they stand a better chance of surviving. The longer you leave it, the higher the chance that they don’t survive, or that they do survive but with a dreadful handicap.’

–

Music has always been important to me. As a child I learned to play piano and trumpet.

My piano teacher – an elderly spinster who lived a short walk from our house – took the traditional approach of entering me for exams, in both practice and theory, and as I grew older my proficiency developed following the same path a million other children must have followed. My trumpet teacher on the other hand, despite being a highly respected trumpeter in his own right, had no interest in exams. He played for a major London orchestra, but his background was with the Salvation Army. He took me down a very different path. I sat no exams, but grew nevertheless to be a reasonably competent trumpeter. ‘Traditional exams don’t test transposition’ he would say ‘but transposition is a necessary skill.’ So I would spend hours practising transposing.

As a teenager my love of music developed, and in particular of J. S. Bach. I would spend hours working (inadequately, it has to be said) at the piano, struggling my way through his intricate, contrapuntal works.

Music was my hobby. But it was more than that; it was my passion. Playing the trumpet and piano was more than a mere pastime; it was an integral part of my life.

But my stroke took this away.

The failure of my lips to make a tight seal with a trumpet mouthpiece and my inability to control the air flow from my lungs meant that I would never play the trumpet again.

My left hand was no longer able master the intricate finger work necessary for my beloved J. S. Bach. I could still manage to vamp basic chords, but any subtlety was beyond me.

So my stroke had affected my life in more ways than one. It had hugely limited my ability to carry on with my job, it had severely curtailed my family and social life … and it had taken away my major hobby.

And this is why I was keen to get back into an orchestra. I reasoned that my best chance was to become a percussionist. I can read music, and it can't be that hard (I argued to myself) to hit drums at the right time. I applied to a local music school, only to find that there was no shortage of percussionists.

'How about double bass?' the elderly lady at the school asked. 'There's a huge shortage, and you could probably get into an amateur orchestra within a year of so.'

And so I started taking double bass lessons at the ripe old age of 40. I improved slowly – very slowly – and am now able to play in an amateur orchestra (not particularly well, if I'm being honest). But at least my love of performing music carries on.

It's curious, though, how the hand / eye / brain coordination necessary to play an instrument is affected by a stroke.

When playing the double bass, I know what to do (well, sort of …), but I find it very difficult to actually do so. On the other hand, I haven't played a trumpet for well over two decades now, but I can still finger even the trickiest of passages flawlessly. All those hours of transposing as a child are hard-wired into my brain; but I will never have anywhere near the same fluency on the double bass.

–

The path was getting steeper. I reached for my walking poles and extended them.

When I started hill walking, poles such as these were virtually unknown. Indeed, I have heard them described as fashion accessories for walkers. But nowadays the vast majority of walkers will take a pair, even if they don't expect to use them. They are an invaluable aid for people such as myself with dodgy knees. And, what's more, they are a great help in river-crossing where they provide that bit of extra balance.

For down-hill walking and river-crossing, you should extend them as far as they will go; but for up-hill, you should leave them 40 cm or so short of the maximum. Most poles have wrist straps. These are useful when one pauses to look at the map, or to take a bite out of a pork pie, but they should be removed when on tricky terrain. A slip or fall with an arm strapped into a long thin metal pole could be most unpleasant.

–

We carried on plodding up the slopes of *Aonach Mor*, Bob’s attention firmly on my red socks.

‘How’s it going? Are you tired?’ I asked.

‘Knackered’ Bob replied. ‘I’ve spent the last four hours lip reading someone with a beard and a speech defect.’

14. At the summit

We arrived at the summit, and the assembled walkers formed an arch with their walking poles. Scott and Lynda walked through the arch and ceremoniously touched the cairn, Munroists at last.

The weather had been kind to us. There was very little wind (but enough to keep the dreaded midges at bay) and the forecast of dry conditions had proved to be true.

–

Bob and I got to chatting about deafblindness.

This is Bob and me at the summit of Aonach Mor. I thought Bob was a little foolish to wear shorts.

‘The problem is’ Bob explained ‘that deaf people tend to rely on their sight much more, and blind people on their hearing. So deafblindness is a bit of a double whammy.’

‘When did you discover you had it?’ I asked.

Bob told me that he was in his early twenties. Recently married, and just weeks into his first job, he was referred to an ophthalmologist. It seems that Bob had *Usher’s Syndrome*. ‘It was discovered in Aberdeen by Charles Usher, from the brewing family’ Bob explained.

I nodded approvingly. They produce particularly fine ale.

Bob recalled his appointment with the young ophthalmologist. He was particularly excited. He knew all about the condition of course, but had never actually seen it in the flesh.

The ophthalmologist explained enthusiastically how there was a genetic link between deafness and *retinosa pigmentosa*. Gradually the cells at the back of the eye die off, starting at the edge, with fewer and fewer of them able to function. This results in tunnel vision that gets increasingly narrow. ‘This is very exciting’ exclaimed the young ophthalmologist, barely able to contain himself.

‘Well I’m very pleased for you’ Bob replied, ‘but what does it mean for me?’

‘It’s probably five years or so before your sight goes entirely.’

–

Bob’s sight didn’t disappear entirely, but it did deteriorate. Those five years passed, and another five. By now the tunnel effect was far more pronounced, and it was having a larger impact on his life.

–

My mental picture of a blind person was of someone with a guide dog and a white stick. Bob had neither. I asked why.

‘That’s easy’ Bob replied.

He didn’t have a guide dog, because he already had a dog as a pet, and it wouldn’t be fair on the working dog to see the non-working dog lazing around being a pampered pet. So Bob saw no need for a guide dog.

As for the white stick, it turned out that Bob did have one, but he hadn’t brought it with him. ‘It’s white to indicate blindness’ he explained ‘but mine also has red stripes to indicate deafness’. I wasn’t aware of this distinction.

‘No – not many people are.’

Bob recalled a friend of his – also deaf and blind – who lived in London and travelled to work every day on the Underground with her red and white stick. Routine is important. She gets on the tube every morning at precisely the same place, gets off at the fourth stop, walks forward ten steps to find the wall and then ten steps to the left to find the exit. And then she knew her way to carry on to her work. Routine is very important.

One morning though, the train made an unscheduled stop between stations. She was tired and thought it was a station. So she got off a stop early, completely unaware that she was in the wrong station. She walked forward ten steps, then ten steps to the left, but there was no exit. Realising what she had done, she stood still and waited for help.

She was there for nearly half an hour in the busy rush hour.

In all probability a number of people will have offered to help, but being both blind and deaf she would have been totally unaware of them. In fact, some people may have thought she was more than a little rude.

‘So how do I communicate with a deafblind person?’ I asked.

‘Tap him gently on a shoulder, so he knows you are there, and then write in capital letters on the palm of his hand.’

–

It was starting to get cold. Some people had already started the descent from *Aonach Mor*.

‘Chilly?’ I enquired.

‘Yes’ Bob replied. I think he was having second thoughts about wearing shorts.

‘You know what they say: if your legs are cold, put a hat on.’

I yanked up my trousers to make certain that my red socks were still clearly visible, and off we went following the Munro party as it snaked down the hillside.

15. The descent

Bob was struggling a bit with the uneven terrain. ‘Do you consider yourself disabled? ‘I asked.

‘Not really’ he replied. ‘Some things are tricky for me, but I generally get by with a bit of ingenuity.’

I agreed. True, we have impairments, but we come up with coping strategies to get around all the little problems thrown at us. So although we clearly are disabled in the technical sense of the word, in many ways we are enabled because we have a different attitude. ‘Disabled people tend to be more innovative’ I added. ‘They often have to be.’

–

The walk was getting a bit more ‘technical’ by this stage.

Broadly speaking, there are three categories of climbs in the Scottish hills: walking (where two legs suffice), scrambling (where hands will be needed as well, to tackle some rocky cliffs and outcrops) and climbing (where ropes and other mountaineering paraphernalia will be required).

Our route up *Aonach Mor* fell firmly into that first category.

Some routes, though, can straddle the border between walking and scrambling.

Normally one doesn’t need a rope, but if the intended route leans more towards scrambling than walking it can be useful. It is a vital part of the leader’s first-aid kit. Just like a first-aid kit, he needs to know how to use it, but he also hopes that he never has to put that knowledge into practice. I have, on many occasions, taken a rope on a walk in the hills but – so far – I have only once needed to uncoil it.

As for my emergency shelter, that’s also only seen the light of day once, and that was to get some protection from the wind while we tucked into our pork pies.

–

We chatted as we trundled on. There are some remarkable people who, despite serious impairments, indeed perhaps because of serious impairments, have achieved great things.

‘How about Beethoven?’ Bob volunteered. ‘Deaf as a post, but wrote some of the greatest music of all time.’

I nodded in approval; I quite like a bit of Beethoven. ‘Or Ray Charles?’ I added. ‘Blind as a bat, but I hear his hobby was flying planes.’

‘Blimey. How does he know which airport he landed at?’ Bob wondered. ‘Or Stevie Wonder? His was a keen golfer; he’d tee off with you any time (but preferably well after sun-set.)’

‘Or Albert Einstein? He had dyslexia, so failed his O level maths, I believe …’

We carried on down the hill, swapping stories of these remarkable people.

Bob paused to take a photo of the snow patches lingering on the distant mountain tops. ‘A particular favourite of mine’ he said ‘is Esref Armagan’.

I’d never heard of him.

‘He’s a Turkish artist who paints, despite being blind. But what is truly remarkable is that he has been totally blind since birth. He has never, ever seen anything, but still manages to paint pictures. How on earth does he do that?’

‘Indeed, truly remarkable’ I thought to myself, and we carried on plodding down the hill.

–

I looked at Bob as he picked his way carefully down the path. To those who didn’t know him, there was no obvious indication that he was disabled. In fact, you might know him for ages, and unless you see him walk into a lamppost you might never know that he is almost totally blind.

Similarly, I might not be a spring chicken any more, but I was keeping up with the rest of the party. Indeed, some people, younger and less fit than me, were struggling to keep up with the group. To an outsider, I too would appear perfectly able-bodied (that is, until I open my mouth.)

Many disabilities are invisible. In fact, the majority are.

I looked at the Munro party. There were probably 60 or so people walking down the slopes of *Aonach Mor*. How many, I wondered were also disabled in some way. I couldn’t see any evidence. No one was sporting dark glasses and a white stick. No one – as Peter Cook said to Dudley Moore – had ‘one leg too few’.

Nobody appeared disabled.

But there may have been people in the party who suffered from mental illness: bi-polar disease, epilepsy, clinical depression or schizophrenia perhaps; or dyslexia; or the mental impact of a facial disfiguration. The list is endless.

Statistically, over 25% of the population will experience a disability at some stage in their life. That’s 15 people in this group. ‘Who are they?’ I wondered.

And of course, some of them will be carers for friends or family members with a disability. Maybe not disabled themselves, but they still have to experience and live with many of the problems.

–

Looking down the hill, I could see the car park coming into view. We would be down in half an hour or so, and then take the short drive back to the hotel and the Compleation Party.

–

As I approached my car I glanced at my watch; we were bang on schedule.

In my boot bag were the things I needed most at the end of a long walk: soft shoes, a towel, a dry shirt and a pair of dry socks. We may have been walking in comparatively cool conditions, but it is amazing how much sweat one can generate on a long walk. I took a long swig of cool pineapple juice from my flask and began to change out of my heavy walking boots.

My dry socks were a rather boring blueish grey colour. 'Sorry, it's the best I have' I apologised. 'Not a problem' Bob replied, 'we are down now.' The red socks – now sweaty and mud-stained – had served their purpose admirably.

–

I always take a mobile phone into the mountains with me. Some of the older purists will growl that 'we didn't need them in my day' but that doesn't change the fact that they might be very handy if you need to call out the Mountain Rescue Team. Nowadays they come with a camera which is always useful on a hill walk; and many have GPS and detailed maps as well. This is great but don't forget that you need to use a good old-fashioned map and compass as well.

I remember once climbing up the so-called Tourist Route to Ben Lomond when I was accosted by a young Japanese couple who had got disorientated in the mist. I pulled out my map and showed them precisely where we were. They were clearly very grateful. The girl said something in Japanese to the boy. He pulled out his phone and took a snapshot of my map. They then thanked me effusively and headed off into the mist.

A curious use of a mobile phone, I thought, and maybe not the best.

But mobile phones are indeed useful. Two bits of advice though. Firstly, make certain your phone is fully charged then turn it off to preserve the battery. If you are expecting that all-important message, then turn it on for just a few minutes every hour. You would be amazed how many mountain rescue attempts are foiled by flat batteries.

Secondly, if you can't get a signal go up the mountain not down.

–

I took my phone out of the water-proof sac in my rucksack and texted my wife that we had got down safely. I always leave my route plan with her and it would be a shame if she believed we were still in the hills and called out the Mountain Rescue Team. I looked at my phone: two missed calls and a text from an unknown number. Bob looked at his phone: two missed calls and a text from the same unknown number. Very curious. As I drove back to the hotel, Bob listened to his answerphone. The hotel, it seemed, had packed our bags for us and left them in reception. They wanted to know how we intended to settle the bill.

'But aren't we booked in tonight?' I protested.

'Apparently not.' Bob replied. 'We'll be there in ten minutes, though. We can sort it out then.'

When we got to the hotel our bags had been neatly packed for us, and were sitting behind the reception desk.

‘Sorry we had to pack your bags’ said the receptionist, ‘but we needed to clean the room for the next guests. Really, you should have checked out by ten o’clock.’

I was at a loss for words.

Bob rescued me. ‘We need the room tonight as well. Didn’t we book two nights?’

‘Just the one night’ she replied. ‘I remember, because I took the telephone call myself.’

It dawned on me what had happened. I had obviously been misunderstood. Normally I confirm telephone calls by email, but on this occasion I had been unable to do so. ‘Do you have another room?’ I asked, hopefully.

‘No’ she replied, ‘but I can phone around for you. There are a few other hotels and B&Bs nearby.’

She did so, and we ended up transferring to another hotel. This one was a little less salubrious than the original, but we were happy enough. It had a bedroom and that was all we wanted.

It was not far away, so we walked. We came to a road-crossing. The road was busy, so I reached for the button on the box to stop the traffic. Bob felt under the box. ‘See that?’ he asked. Under the control box was a small cone. ‘When it’s safe to cross this cone vibrates. It lets blind people know when it’s safe to cross.

‘Well I never. You learn something new every day.’

–

The receptionist greeted us. ‘We don’t have a twin room’ she explained, ‘so I’ve booked you into two singles.’

‘That’s two rooms’ (she held up two fingers just in case I hadn’t understood) ‘and one night’ (now she held up just the one finger).

‘Not a problem’ I answered, happy to have a bed for the night and just as happy to ignore her unnecessary use of inappropriate sign language.

Bob was less happy. ‘That’s OK’ he said, ‘but you’ll have to be aware that I’m deaf and blind. If there’s a fire alarm at night I won’t hear it. Someone will have to wake me up and help me out of the building.’

‘And preferably someone good-looking’.

‘I’ll do it myself’ volunteered the receptionist.

‘Splendid’ said Bob, happy now.

16. The party

The party was being held in a converted railway station. It was a short walk from our hotel.

It was quiet as we wandered down the road towards the party venue. The sun was setting, and there was a definite chill in the air.

‘Do you think you were in denial about your sight loss?’ I enquired.

‘Looking back’ Bob replied, ‘I think it was obvious that I was.’

Denial is a very common – and indeed understandable – reaction experienced by the disabled, and in particular those whose disability creeps up on them slowly over a number of years. It is very easy to put off discussing these matters with friends and family, let alone the medical professionals. The sense that ‘it might go away over time’, or ‘it’s not really a problem because I can get by’ are well recognised.

Bob was no different.

He was in denial about his deteriorating sight, and it wasn’t until he returned from his epic round-the-world trip and was confronted by Louise, that he took action and sought professional help. This was an important step in his journey.

Recognising that one is in denial is critical to coming out of denial.

‘How about you?’ Bob asked.

‘Not much point’ I replied. ‘If you open your mouth to talk and nothing comes out it’s a bit hard to deny that you have a problem.’

‘Mmmm. I take your point.’

Denial is a negative state. Other states that a disabled person might find himself in include anger and depression. These are also negative, glass-half-empty states. The disabled person might find himself bouncing between states, or even in two or more states at the same time.

This can at times seem uncontrollable as one suffers a whirlwind of conflicting emotions. The impact can be devastating. In extreme cases it can even drive people to suicide – a very permanent solution to what should be a temporary problem.

Of course, not everybody reaches the final state of acceptance; and even those that do might regress on occasions into one of the earlier states. This is understandable but unfortunate.

‘This discussion is getting rather serious’ I thought. ‘Time for a beer.’

–

It was busy at the venue. A coach party of tourists had just arrived, and the bar was heaving. ‘Make your way through to the function room at the back’ someone shouted helpfully. ‘The Munro party is being held in there.’

There were people milling about everywhere, rucksacks had been abandoned between the tables and the lighting wasn't good. 'Can you take my arm, please?' Bob asked. 'I'll need help to get through here.'

'No problem' I replied, taking his arm and helping him through the bustling room. 'Ladies normally don't have a problem taking my arm to guide me', Bob observed, 'but some chaps can be a bit more reluctant. They won't hold my arm, but instead just grab a small piece of my shirt sleeve.'

'My children, of course' he continued 'have been guiding me for as long as they can remember. To them, it's just normal. They don't know any different'.

At the entrance to the function room Scott and Lynda had erected an easel with a map showing all the Munros. 'What a splendid idea' I thought to myself, as I guided Bob towards the door. Bob didn't see the easel and bumped heavily into it as he walked through. 'I'm so sorry' he said to it without batting an eyelid, and carried on.

–

We arrived in the function room just as the party was getting into full swing.

We didn't chat that much. I was struggling to make myself understood against the relentless background noise, and Bob was struggling to understand others in the dim light. 'It might be atmospheric' he pointed out, 'but it makes lip reading virtually impossible.'

But we partied hard. Bob bravely attempted a *Strip the Willow*, despite having no clue where the other dancers were. All the ladies rose to the occasion and gamely swung Bob, elbow to elbow, turn after turn, passing him on to the next dancer. But Bob couldn't see the end of the line. And this is why, on his last turn he found himself dancing with a bar stool.

'Best looking partner of the evening' he quipped.

I smiled at his joke.

–

Smiling is an instinctive reaction. It's one that we all have.

However, it's also a reaction that one can lose after a stroke. I had to re-learn to smile. I also – and this was far more difficult – had to re-learn to 'un-smile'.

Thoughts, events or sights that please us make us smile. We all do it. However, the problem with smiling is that it makes it virtually impossible to talk. Most people get around this by 'un-smiling', by returning their face to its normal position. I still can't do this. I need a few seconds to manually re-adjust my face to its default position so that I can continue talking.

Sometimes this takes quite a few seconds.

And if the joke is particularly funny my face will seize up entirely and it can take what seems like several minutes for me to regain composure.

–

Later that night, exhausted but happy, we retired to our rooms. I slept well that night.

17. The drive home

The following morning was *dreich*. Not quite raining, but not quite dry either. A typical Scottish morning. The mist hung over the mountain tops, and in the distance, a lone cuckoo was calling.

We had a leisurely breakfast before packing the car for the long drive home.

‘A splendid weekend’ Bob ventured.

‘Indeed’ I echoed him. ‘But back to work tomorrow.’

–

I felt a bit despondent. Bob and I both worked for a large global company, and we spend much of our time on the telephone.

‘I really hate telephones.’ I felt a bit of a rant was coming on. ‘Tomorrow’ I continued ‘I have three telephone conferences. And they will ALL be a pain.’

‘Really?’ Bob was of a different opinion. ‘I quite like telephones. They cut out all the background noise, so I can concentrate on what I am hearing. They make life much easier for me.’

‘And of course, texting is marvellous’ he continued. ‘Texting was originally only meant for the engineers setting up the system, but now it is used by everyone. And for the first time ever, deaf people can use their phones to communicate with their friends and family.’

‘OK’ I conceded ‘texting is useful. But I have problems with actual talking. Only a couple of days ago a chap phoned me.’

‘David Jones’ I said, answering the phone, as I always do.

‘Could I speak to David Jones, please?’ he asked.

‘That’s me.’

‘When would be a good time to call back?’

‘No – I am David Jones.’

‘After lunch, perhaps?’

‘This is David Jones speaking.’ I sighed to myself.

‘Two o’clock?’

I spoke very slowly. ‘You are speaking to David Jones.’

There was a short silence followed by a click as he ended the call.

–

Bob looked at me. ‘I can see why you don’t like telephones.’

This is an understatement. I hate telephones with a vengeance.

When I am talking to someone face-to-face, I get clues from their body language about whether or not they have understood me. The little nods of the head, or the responses of ‘yes’ or ‘no’ at appropriate moments are a good indication that I am being understood.

Occasionally though, the body language tells a different story. The little nods come at the wrong time, or a ‘yes’ appears where a ‘no’ would be more appropriate. It is becoming clearer to me that the person I am talking to has no idea what I am saying but is too embarrassed to say so. It happens quite often.

Frequently people will answer the question they think I asked, or that they expected me to ask. I remember chatting to a friend at my local cricket club.

‘Not good weather for cricket’ I observed, looking at the drizzle through the pavilion window.

‘No’ he agreed ‘If it doesn’t stop soon, they’ll have to cancel the match.’

‘A shame’ I reply, ‘but it was forecast’.

My friend picks up on the word forecast. ‘Yes’ he continues, ‘they did predict drizzle around lunchtime, but it should clear up after that.’

‘And how about tomorrow?’ I ask, ‘The second team have a big match, I believe.’

My friend didn’t understand what I had said, so decided to play safe by continuing with today’s forecast. ‘It’s moving in from the west’ he added, ‘and there may even be some snow in the hills tonight.’

‘Mmm’ I nod appreciatively, ‘but have you seen tomorrow’s forecast?’

‘Yes’ he nods. ‘It’s been a funny sort of year. Keeps the gardeners happy, though.’

I’ve clearly been misunderstood. But there’s no point in asking again, so I smile in agreement and take another mouthful from my pint.

–

We drove on, in no particular hurry.

‘Fancy a coffee?’ Bob asked.

Normally I’m a bit wary of hot liquids. Because much of mouth is paralysed, I sometimes run the risk of scalding myself without realising it. But I can always opt for a cold drink, so I agreed to stop at the next opportunity.

Ballater is a quiet town nestling in the foothills of the Cairngorms. It’s just up the road from Balmoral, where the royal family spend their summer retreats, and it has a number of coffee shops.

The high street was busy, so I parked in a side street.

Bob ordered a pot of Earl Gray and carrot cake, while I went for an espresso and a meringue. (I'll regret this, I thought to myself; it's bound to set off a choking reaction. But who cares? I do like meringue.)

–

Bob looked at me over his cup of tea. 'So you don't like telephones?'

If I have no choice but to make a telephone call, I need to steal myself in preparation. Ideally the call should be made somewhere quiet and private because I feel uncomfortable if other people are listening to my pathetic attempts to communicate. Telephone calls are very difficult.

Some time ago I needed some advice about my savings. Rather than telephone my bank to make an appointment, I hugely preferred to do so face-to-face, so I dropped by one day on my home from work.

'Can I make an appointment please, to discuss my savings?' I asked.

'No problem' the young man replied, as he turned to his computer screen. 'We don't have any advisors here though. I'll have to make an appointment at another branch. By the way, my name's Iain'.

Iain picked up the telephone and called the other branch. 'There's a Mr. Jones here' he said, 'looking for some advice about his savings.' There was a pause.

Iain looked at me. 'They need to talk to you' he said, and passed the phone over. I answered various questions about my account and about my mother's maiden name, and they seemed happy. I wasn't happy though. I had gone out of my way to avoid a telephone conversation and here I was in a crowded bank having a very public telephone conversation.

However, I had at least made the appointment I needed.

–

Bob pulled out his wallet. 'The coffee's on me'.

'That's very kind.' The rain had picked up a bit while we were chatting. 'Tell you what' I offered, 'It's just beginning to rain. I'll get the car while you're paying.'

I rushed back to the car park. The rain was now coming down more heavily and there were dark clouds bearing down on us. The Cairngorms were about to remind us that all four seasons are possible in the space of half an hour. In the distance, a thunder cloud rumbled and lightning lit up ominous peaks.

I drove back to the coffee shop and waited outside. My car is a silver Volvo, but parked directly outside the shop was a silver Ford. Bob walked out a few minutes later, cowering under the torrential rain. I looked on in amazement as he climbed into the Ford.

A few words were spoken, before Bob apologised profusely and excused himself. I lowered the window and shouted 'over here.'

Bob walked over and climbed in. ‘These things happen’ he mused, philosophically.

–

I eased down on the accelerator and we drove off through the majestic mountains.

–

Accepting that one is disabled can be difficult.

As his sight deteriorated Bob was probably in denial. He was reluctant to use his stick or to ask strangers for help. This would signal him out as someone who was ‘different’, and he would vastly prefer to be seen as ‘normal’ (whatever that means).

This mirrors my own experience; I would go out of my way to avoid speaking to people. Talking was not easy; and for certain ‘difficult conversations’ it was even less so. If at all possible, I would write a letter, or use email, or take any option to avoid revealing my inadequate speech.

However, over time, Bob realised that this desire to be seen as ‘normal’ was wrong. He recalled the time he decided to leave his white stick at home. He was on a business trip to The Netherlands, one he had done many times, and he felt that he could manage without drawing attention to himself. On the way home, at Schiphol airport, he bought his wife some tulips and was making his way through the concourse to the departure gate.

The seats outside the airport bar are low, hard and painted a similar grey colour to the surrounding walls and floor. He didn’t see them. The collision was spectacular. The flowers were catapulted across the concourse and Bob ended sprawled on the floor with a painful knee. No one stopped to help. They walked by muttering to themselves about lager louts on stag weekends…

This was an epiphany; he wasn’t normal. So Bob started using his stick more frequently, and became more comfortable asking total strangers for help. It wasn’t easy but it was an important part of his journey.

This paralleled my own experience. Over time, I began to realise that my reluctance to speak to people was affecting my life. Not only was I becoming increasingly reclusive, I was failing to achieve anything in my life. I sensed I was beginning to stagnate. So I made a conscious effort to confront people more often and speak to them. My mind-set shifted. Rather than assume that I had a problem (*i.e.* a speech defect) I began to realise that the person I was dealing with had a problem (*i.e.* a fear of how to interact with someone with a speech defect). It wasn’t easy but it was an important part of my journey.

–

I drove on. It would be well over an hour before we got back to Aberdeen.

18. Home at last

Late that afternoon we arrived back in Aberdeen. I pulled up outside Bob's house and helped him collect his bags from the back of the car.

Louise came to the door and invited me in for a coffee.

'Good weekend?' she asked.

'Splendid' I replied. 'A great mountain, great weather and great company.'

Louise turned to Bob, facing him to make certain her lips were clearly visible. 'Is that a new T-shirt?' she asked. Bob looked confused. 'No' he replied slowly, looking down at his shirt.

'Ahh' he said as the penny dropped. 'I seem to have put my T-shirt on inside out. These things happen, you know …'.

Louise looked most embarrassed. Bob shrugged his shoulders and poured himself a coffee.

–

I sat down and reflected. I had learned a lot about disability that weekend. Bob had impairments as had I. His were congenital, one from birth and one which had crept up on him over the years; mine was acquired and had hit me overnight. These three different scenarios can mould how an impairment affects someone.

A person born with a missing arm learns from the day he is born to adapt to his impairment. He will, in effect, see it as normal. But a person whose arm wastes away over a number of many years (due to an incurable muscle disease, perhaps) will have a very different view. He may experience periods of denial, or depression as the truth begins to sink home. And the person who loses his arm unexpectedly (maybe due to an industrial accident) will have yet another view. Denial is pointless under the circumstances, but he may well have bouts of anger.

Disability can affect different people in different ways, and it is always important to bear this in mind when dealing with the disabled.

–

Bob looked up from his coffee. 'There are of course advantages from being disabled.'

'Yes' I agreed. 'A speech defect is excellent for getting rid of unwanted people on your doorstep. I get the occasional political canvasser or double-glazing salesman knocking on my door. As soon as I open my mouth, they mumble their apologies and head next door. And if they don't, my speech will become even more incomprehensible. It works every time.'

Bob nodded. 'Yes. I use the same strategy, except I pretend to be totally deaf' he confided. 'I remember once a guy from some obscure religious sect came around trying to convert me, so I pointed to my ears and made it clear that I was deaf. He mumbled something and disappeared. The problem was that he returned half an hour later with a sign language interpreter.’

–

I finished my coffee. ‘Thanks. See you in the office tomorrow.’

19. Bieldside

After our walk at Scott and Lynda's compleation, Bob and I became good friends.

A little later he invited me around to discuss plans for our next outing, an assault on *Dreish* and *Mayar*, a pair of Munros in the southern Cairngorms. Bob lived on the other side of Aberdeen, and was likely to offer me a beer or two, so I decided to take the bus.

'Bieldside, please' I said as I climbed aboard.

'Mannofield?' replied the driver.

'No, Bieldside' I repeated slightly slower, bemused that the driver had misheard. Clearly most people go to Mannofield.

'Cults?'

'No, Bieldside' I repeated, as clearly as I could.

'Ahah' the driver nodded and issued me with a ticket.

I chose a seat next to a stop button. If I press the button, the person next to me knows I am getting off at the next stop and will move out of my way. I don't have to say a word. It's so much less embarrassing than having to speak and incoherently mumble 'Excuse me'.

I sat down and looked at my ticket. He had given me a ticket to Peterculter, the end of the route. That was his coping strategy. Rather than asking a third time, he just gave me a ticket that went all the way. Fortunately, the ticket price was the same.

–

Bob's house was a short walk from the bus stop. He ushered me in and handed me a bottle of beer.

Fortunately, Louise was right behind him and handed me a glass as well. I can be a bit messy drinking straight from the bottle, and it would be a shame to waste any of it down my shirt.

–

Unlike our earlier walk at Scott and Lynda's compleation, this would be a smaller group, maybe just five or six people. Benn, who had organised the walk and was to lead it, was planning a route that was new to me – one that didn't follow a path all the way.

I was concerned that Bob would struggle crossing the rough ground.

'Not a problem' was Bob's confident reply, 'just make certain you are wearing your red socks.'

The reality was that red socks, useful though they are, would not be enough.

So what considerations are there when accompanying people such as Bob on a hill walk.

I’ve led many so-called ‘normal’ people over the years, and I’ve noticed that many of them have three levels of comfort.

At ***level one***, they have a good, well-defined path, clearly laid out in front of them and they have no difficulty walking along it. Everybody is happy at level one. At ***level two***, the path becomes less well-defined. There are muddy stretches or burns to cross, and the route becomes indistinct as vegetation and rocks encroach. Inexperienced walkers start getting a little nervous at this stage, because they can’t really see where they are going, and they miss the comfort of the well-trodden path. But it is at ***level three*** where they become particularly nervous. At this level, there may be boulders to scramble over, hands may be needed, and there may even be some mild exposure.

For walkers with limited visibility, such as Bob, the same three levels exist, but levels two and three are the other way around. At level one, all they need is a few words of advice (‘Turn to your left a bit’, ‘Watch out for the overhanging branches’, ‘Careful, there’s a large rock on the path ahead’ *etc*.) and they can manage perfectly well. The same is true at level three (‘Move your left leg up a bit’, ‘Keep to the left of this boulder – there’s a good hand hold’, *etc*.) Partially sighted walkers rarely suffer from exposure; they can’t fear what they can’t see.

All they need is a few words of advice and loads of encouragement.

But level two is tricky. Each and every step is a step into the unknown. They won’t know if a particular step will hit solid rock or soft mud; they won’t know if it will land at the same level as the previous step; they won’t know if the ground is level, or sloping up, down, left or right. In short, walking at level two can be treacherous for the partially sighted. And more so for those who are completely blind.

As Bob’s guide I may not need to offer advice at every step, but I will certainly need to be monitoring every step. And on occasions it may be prudent for me to offer a helpful arm for Bob to hold on to.

Guiding partially sighted people at level two can be a challenge. It is not difficult. It just requires patience and loads of time. As such, it can be very tiring, and progress will inevitably be much slower than normal.

It’s worth bearing in mind, also, that it gets darker towards the end of the day; and as it gets darker, everybody’s eyesight deteriorates, but more so in Bob’s case.

–

Here Bob, unable to find any colourful socks, concentrates on a pair of blue gaiters worn by my good friend Hilary.

‘Do you think I’ll manage?’ asked Bob.

I took another sip from my beer and looked at my glass. It was half full. ‘I think we’ll be OK’.

‘To be honest’ I mused to myself, ‘I think we’ll have more problems with the map reading. The forecast is not good, and if we are off the path our navigation needs to be spot on.’

‘Do I need any special equipment? Bob asked.

‘No, just your normal walking stuff’, I replied ‘and a big smile.’

20. Driesh and Mayar

On the day of the walk, I picked up Bob for the short drive to Glen Clova.

We arrived at the car park got ourselves ready. It was a clear, dry day, but the forecast was for drizzle in the afternoon. Most people take the Kilbo path. This is well-trodden and makes for a steady approach to the bealach between the two Munros. However, Benn was keen to try a more direct line that worked its way up the main buttress. I was happy to take this route, but slightly concerned that I didn't know the terrain, so it was impossible to know if Bob would manage.

As a precaution we stopped off at the Visitor Centre and filled out a route card. In the event of any misfortune on the hills, the authorities would know who was in our party, what we were wearing, where we intended to walk and how long we intended to take.

I filled in all the details and handed over the form. 'Have a splendid day' said the ranger as he glanced at the form. 'Glad you're wearing a bright red jacket – it makes it much easier for the mountain rescue folk' he laughed.

'Yep – and it matches my socks as well'. We left for the hills.

–

Katya, a Polish friend of Benn, had recently done a navigation course and was keen to practice her newly acquired skills. She constantly peered at her compass and carefully counted her steps to know how far along the path we had walked.

'Right' said Benn, 'we leave the path here' and pointed upwards. 'We need to aim for just below that buttress.'

Katya studied her map more intently, and took a bearing to the buttress.

The area below the buttress was marked on my map as forest, but it had recently been cleared. There had been a path once, but now it was totally lost under the detritus of the logging. It wasn't steep but picking a suitable path for Bob was pain-staking. Benn and I took it in turns to guide him; Katya kept a close eye on her map, peering occasionally at her compass.

–

After an hour or so we reached the summit plateau. Benn suggested we pause for a bite to eat and drink. It had been a hard slog. I tapped Bob on the shoulder; he hadn't heard Benn. 'Time for a rest and some food'.

We sat down and reached for our flasks and sandwiches.

'That was a tough walk' said Benn looking at Bob, 'especially for someone who is deaf and blind.'

'Tell me,' Benn asked, 'which is worse? Being deaf, or being blind?'

Bob paused. 'No one has ever asked me that before.'

‘I guess. It depends on the context. If I were a lorry driver, it would be awkward to be blind; if I worked as a piano tuner it would be awkward to be deaf.’

He looked at Benn. ‘Have you heard of Helen Keller?’

Benn nodded. Helen Keller was an American who contracted deafblindness as a result of meningitis whilst a toddler. She went on to become a successful author, lecturer and campaigner for other deafblind people.

‘Well Helen Keller famously said’ Bob continued, ‘that blindness kept her from things, but deafness kept her from life.’

‘Interesting’. Benn nodded sagely, then turned to me.

‘So strokes typically affect your mobility or your speech’.

‘Correct,’ I replied, ‘or maybe both.’

‘Same question, then. Which is worse?’

‘Same answer’ I replied. ‘It depends on the context. At my work, an inability to speak clearly is a real disadvantage, but mobility isn’t really a problem. But here we are, outside work, walking up a Scottish mountain where speech defects don’t matter, but an inability to walk easily would be a real handicap.’

We could see Benn mulling this over in his mind. ‘So there’s no such thing as a disabled person, as such; just people who are at a disadvantage under certain circumstances.’

‘Correct.’ I nodded in agreement. ‘There’s no such thing as a disabled person.’

Bob looked up from his sandwich. ‘A few months ago,’ he said ‘I was on a business trip to India. At the airport there was a queue for *Differently-Abled People*. Isn’t that so much better than *Disabled People*?’

–

Suitably refuelled we carried on to the summit of Driesh. We were on the plateau now and a good path led to the summit. Thirty minutes later we reached the cairn and sat down for another bite to eat. But by now the weather had deteriorated significantly, just as had been forecast, and the mist had reduced visibility to just a few metres.

Katya looked up from her map and announced that a bearing of 285° would take us to the bealach below the next Munro. She rushed off enthusiastically. We hastily put our rucksacks back on and followed her. Her calculation had been correct, but she was inexperienced at following a bearing on sloping terrain in poor visibility. Within just a few hundred metres she was considerably away from the line she wanted, but carried on regardless.

She was so keen to practice her new-found skills that she hadn’t noticed that the rest of the party were struggling to keep up with her. Benn decided to trot ahead and brought her to a stop. Benn and I looked at the map. We reckoned we were a good three hundred metres from where we wanted to be. John pulled out his GPS and confirmed our suspicions. Unfortunately, that three hundred metre slog to regain the path was all uphill over rough ground and added over an hour to our journey. Katya, somewhat humbled, learned a valuable lesson that day.

We walked on to reach the summit of Mayar. The original plan had been to carry on and descend by the waterfall in Corrie Fee. However, the weather had continued to deteriorate and were already well behind schedule, so we opted for the easier route down the Kilbo path.

–

We eventually arrived at the Visitor Centre just before seven o’clock, nearly two hours after the estimate on our route card. The ranger smiled at us wryly. ‘I wasn’t panicking yet’ he said, ‘but certainly starting to get a bit twitchy’.

21. Bridge of Orchy to Killin

Later that year, Bob introduced me to a good friend of his who was raising money for Deafblind Scotland. Michael Anderson was planning to follow in the footsteps of St. Columba, the Irish missionary who brought Christianity to Scotland. In the sixth century St. Columba walked from Iona on the west coast of Scotland to St. Andrews on the east. During that trip he founded a number of churches and spread the word to the heathen Scots. Michael planned to walk the same route. However, unlike St. Columba, Michael was totally blind and profoundly deaf. He has Ushers Syndrome, the same condition as Bob, but much more advanced.

Michael's journey from Iona to St. Andrews covered 170 miles.

Bob suggested that I volunteer to help out, and I readily agreed. However, Michael had to try me out first. Would I be a suitable and safe guide?

I visited him at his home near Falkirk. We chatted for a while, and eventually he asked me to take him for a short walk around the estate where he lived. I clearly passed, because he asked me to guide him on the leg between Bridge of Orchy and Killin. It would be a two day walk, wild-camping on the shore of Loch Lyon in Glen Dochart.

Despite being well into his 70s, Michael has kept fit by running. In his earlier years he had been a keen hill walker and saw no reason why he shouldn't continue.

My friend Steve was available to join us, which hugely helped the logistics. We booked rooms at a hotel in Killin and arranged to leave our cars there. We would take the bus to Bridge of Orchy where we would meet Michael along with his daughter Fiona and daughter-in-law Nina.

The walk went well. We were blessed with good weather.

Fiona had been guiding her father for years, so was well practiced in the skills needed. She offered a steady arm and carefully positioned herself just to the side of the easiest track. She walked steadily avoiding any sudden lurches.

‘Tell me about the scenery’ Michael asked.

‘It’s a good path’ Fiona replied. ‘There are hills to our left, and fields to our right with cattle. There’s still a touch of snow on the summits.’

‘Yes, I can smell the cattle. And can I hear a river nearby?’

‘You can indeed’ Fiona replied, ‘we are walking parallel to it, just to our right.’

Fiona walks just to the left of the best path for Michael, offering him an arm for support. In the background is Beinn Mhanach.

The weather was good for the entire day. In fact, it was one of those days that are just a bit too warm for comfortable walking.

Fiona reached for the sun cream in her pocket and handed it to her father. She knew better than offering to apply it for him, but she needed to remind him to do it for himself. Michael was steadfastly independent; despite his condition he was determined to do as much as possible without help.

We followed a good track, initially along the West Highland Way, but soon branching off north to skirt the shores of Loch Lyon.

The path crossed numerous burns. Some were shallow and Michael crossed them with little if any difficulty. But some proved to be more difficult, not only to Michael but also to us as we guided him over them.

‘This one looks quite deep’ Fiona announced as we approached the first major one. ‘Boots off, I think.’

At one of the many burns near Loch Lyon,Nina and Fiona give Michael extra confidence by linking arms and using a walking pole as a support.

We agreed and swapped our boots for plastic sandals as we picked the best route to cross the river. Fiona and Nina held a walking pole between them. As Michael waded across he kept hold of Fiona's arm, but also had the security of the walking pole.

'Give me your rucksack.' I shouted at Michael, 'The last thing you want to do is fall over with it.' Reluctantly he agreed and handed it over.

The crossing was successful, and we congratulated ourselves on the technique. There were many more similar crossings later that day, and before long we had the whole process running like clockwork.

Just after lunch, though, we came to a slightly trickier river where we had to cross on stepping stones.

'I don't think we can wade this one' said Nina.

We agreed. It would be necessary for Michael to cross the stepping stones, Nina in front of him, Fiona behind and Steve to the side. Words of encouragement weren't enough. The secret was to use a walking pole. Michael held it in his hand, but Nina positioned it for him.

'Just bring your left leg to where the pole is' she would say, and Michael would instinctively know where to put his feet.

And this time, he had no second thoughts about giving me his rucksack. 'I don't want to fall here' he would say, 'an unplanned dip would cause far too much bother.'

It took ages, but we managed.

–

Negotiating stepping stones requires three guides. (Four, if you include me; I was carrying Michael's rucksack.)

That evening we wild camped on the banks at the far end of Loch Lyon. Michael was clearly tired after a long day.

'Where's your tent' Steve asked, 'I'll put it up for you.'

‘There’s no need’ Michael replied, ‘just find me a flat bit of ground, and I can do the rest myself.’

‘Are you sure?’ Steve doubted he would manage, ‘I’m more than happy to help.’

‘No.’. Michael was adamant. ‘I’ll do it myself, thank you.’ We looked on in astonishment as he pulled his tent out of his rucksack and pitched it perfectly. He knew where every component was stashed in his rucksack and efficiently put them together.

‘You know’ I said to Steve, ‘I’ve seen fully sighted people who would make a mess of that.’

Steve nodded in agreement.

We prepared our meals. Here, at least, Michael was happy to take a back seat. Portable stoves are tricky at the best of times, and he sat patiently as I prepared some supper. Chilli con carne that has been freeze-dried then reconstituted tastes absolutely horrible at home, but under a cloudless night sky in the Highlands there is nothing to touch it. Especially when washed down with a wee dram.

We slept well that night.

22. Mount Battock

It was about this time that I started thinking more seriously about guiding differently-abled people, perhaps in a walking club. It was something I enjoyed, and something that friends such as Bob found useful. Moreover, it seemed that I was quite good at it.

I had recently retired, so had time on my hands. It was then that ***Walk-ability*** was born. I decided I would try to take more differently-abled people into the hills.

–

Benn was planning a walk to Mount Battock, the most easterly Corbett. We met at a pub a few days before the walk to plan the route and agree logistics.

‘So what’s a Corbett?’ asked Paul.

‘Like a Munro’ I replied, ‘but not as high. They are between 2,500 and 3,000 feet high.’

‘So easier than a Munro?’

‘Oh no, anything but’ I replied. ‘Some of the Corbetts are far more difficult. Size isn’t everything, you know.’

Paul nodded sagely and took a sip from his pint.

I took the opportunity to discuss my thoughts about Walk-ability with some friends. Rather than being a walking club, we agreed that it would be better to set up a charity. We wouldn’t charge for our services – but we wouldn’t refuse any donations. In the following days I set about the necessary administration: I drafted a constitution, I set up a bank account, I arranged for some publicity flyers and enquired about insurance.

My friends Steve and John agreed to join the fledgling committee, and we met frequently over a pint or four to discuss plans. Not one of us had any experience of running a charity, but we felt it very worthwhile.

–

The day of the walk up Mount Battock arrived. I picked up Bob and we drove towards the hill. He was the chairman of Deafblind Scotland, so very knowledgeable about charities. I picked his brain avidly.

‘Have you applied to OSCR yet?’ he asked, ‘the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator. There are a number of different ways to get set up. Make certain you chose the right one, or you will be swamped with admin.’

We arrived at the car park. Benn was already there, discussing the route with a small group of colleagues. They clearly weren’t all experienced walkers. One of them, a girl I recognised from the finance department, was wearing jeans. The forecast was good, so I didn’t mention it, but jeans are not sensible mountain wear. They don’t provide much warmth, and when wet they can be most uncomfortable.

We set off. There was a good path, and the view towards the Cairngorm plateau was magnificent.

‘I’ve set up the insurance for Walk-ability’ I said to John, ‘but it wasn’t easy.’

‘Why not?’

‘I think she thought we were setting up a mountaineering charity. She kept asking about ropes.’

I repeated the mantra we learned when training for my Mountain Leader qualification. ‘Take a rope, but don’t plan to use it.’

John nodded, happy that we now had adequate cover for our plans.

–

We came to a fork in the path. I looked at my map. There was no fork marked, so I wandered over to Benn for a quick chat. We looked at the terrain. To our left a small burn tumbled down the hill. Above it the plateau sloped gradually toward us. It was clear where we were. The shapes of rivers and hills don’t change over the years, but new paths can easily be built. The new track had probably been built recently to allow hunting and fishing folk to access new parts of the hills.

We trundled on.

–

At the summit, Steve and John joined me as we tucked into our lunch. The charity was beginning to take shape, and we felt it was time to arrange a launch event. All we needed was a willing guinea pig for our first walk and some publicity …

23. Bennachie

Walk-ability's launch. From left to right: David, Steve, Judy, Sam, Mary, Mike and Tom (and Vince, of course, at Mary's feet …)

I knew Mary from a committee we both sit in, and I felt she would be ideal for a launch event. Although totally blind, she was fit and had spent many years hill walking before her sight deteriorated. I tentatively broached the subject, and she was immediately enthusiastic. So Tom, Mike and I arranged to meet Mary over a coffee a few days later to arrange details.

We decided that Bennachie would be a suitable venue and agreed a date for a few weeks later. Tom's daughter worked as a journalist for the local paper and readily agreed to provide some necessary publicity.

The BBC heard about the event and asked if they could send a reporter along. I had no hesitation in agreeing. The reporter they sent, Sam, was suffering the early effects of Usher's Syndrome herself, the very condition that had affected my friend Bob.

The final approach to the summit of Bennachie. Steve leads with a short sling; Mike follows telling Mary where to put here feet; Tom looking on, in case of a slip.

Mary is used to being led by Vince, her trusty guide dog. The dog has been trained to walk slowly in front of her and to pause whenever a tricky step is required. Vince was, however, more used to negotiating busy high streets than Scottish hills.

To help her on her ascent of Bennachie, we decided to use a human equivalent. A short sling attached to Steve's rucksack was the perfect solution, with two more guides behind helping out and offering words of encouragement. Mary felt comfortable and safe (but note how she still needed her white stick for added security).

Again, this wasn't difficult, but time-consuming and at times needed three guides.

Leaving the summit. I used a large sling around Mary as 'confidence roping'. Steve is guiding her step-by-step.

Like Michael, Mary was keen to know about the views she was missing. However, unlike Michael, she had developed very sensitive hearing over the years to compensate for her poor sight. At one point when we paused to gather our breath.

'I can hear birds singing' said Mary, 'and trees creaking in the wind'.

We – her guides – had heard nothing, but she was quite right. We had stopped at a small copse, and the birds in the trees around us were indeed singing. She was also able to 'feel' the slope of the ground, and had a good mental picture of where we had come from and where we were going.

The final few metres to the summit of Bennachie require a little scrambling (this is definitely at comfort level three….), and indeed many sighted hill walkers decide to miss out on this last challenge. Mary, however, was determined to make it to the very top. The ascent was straightforward enough, but slow and laborious. But, as all leaders will know, it is the descent that is trickier.

To do this, Steve walked backwards in front of Mary guiding her every step, and I followed behind with a sling to provide extra re-assurance. Tom had taken her white stick and rucksack.

At the summit of Bennachie. Seven of us started, and five made it to the end. A reasonable attrition rate, I would say …

Meanwhile Vince, Mary's guide dog, was having a marvellous time. Let off his guiding responsibilities, he was bounding all over the hill taking advantage of the unexpected freedom. He was like a puppy without a care in the world. But as we approached the car park Mary blew a whistle to summon him. He returned sedately to his tasks and carefully guided her safely back to the car park.

–

I sat down and changed my boots for shoes for driving. Vince spotted a muddy ditch and made a beeline for it. Fortunately he wasn't going home in my car ….

24. Ben Nevis

A few months later, Bob approached me about his plans to attempt the Three Peaks Challenge. He wanted to raise funds for his charity and this seemed like a good plan. The goal was to climb the highest summits in Scotland, England and Wales. Bob asked me if I was available for the Scottish leg, an ascent of Ben Nevis, the highest mountain in the UK.

I had no hesitation in agreeing. I had last climbed Ben Nevis some 15 years earlier, so I was more than happy to return there.

Bob and Louise now lived down in England, so the plan was that we would meet up in Fort William the day before the ascent. They booked a B&B for me.

As the day approached, I started packing.

I reached immediately for my red socks of course. Safety might be an issue, so I packed an emergency shelter, a head torch and a first aid kit, as I do for most expeditions. I wondered about a rope, but decided that it would be unnecessary; I did, however, throw in a large sling and a karabiner … just in case.

–

The drive took a little over four hours. I arrived at the B&B. ‘Good afternoon’, I said to the friendly guy who opened the door for me. ‘My name’s Jones. I have a reservation.’

He looked a little puzzled. ‘Sorry, there’s nobody of that name booked in’.

‘Ah’ I realised, ‘It’s probably in the name Nolan’.

‘Nope. Sorry’ he continued. ‘How many of you have booked?’

‘Mmm, not sure.’ There would be me, plus Bob and Louise. ‘Probably three of us’ I ventured, ‘a single and a double?’

‘Nope. Sorry’ he checked his booking sheets again. ‘I’ve got a booking for one single and two doubles. Could that be you?’

‘Maybe’ I replied a little hesitantly. ‘I’ll probably be the single’.

He handed over a key. I accepted it, not entirely sure that I was at the right place. Nevertheless, I dumped my bag in my room and headed off to a nearby pub for a drink and a bite to eat.

–

But it was indeed the right place. Later that night, as I washed my curry down with a pint of the local ale Bob and Louise found me in the bar. They were accompanied by their friends Jerry and Judith, who had also agreed to help with guiding Bob. I recalled meeting them some years earlier when I was camping in Knoydart. Bob and some of his friends had hired a holiday cottage. There were three couples. Six people, four of whom were deaf and one who was deaf and blind. The evening I joined them as they all sat around the piano singing songs to each other, Bob and Jerry providing the accompaniment on guitar.

–

On the morning of the Ben Nevis ascent I awoke early. I pulled on my red socks and headed for the breakfast room. The day would be long, arduous one, and it would be important to have sufficient energy reserves. I tucked into a ‘full Scottish’. Louise opted for a slice of toast and a yoghurt. ‘Let’s hope that’s enough’ I thought to myself. In my rucksack I had a couple of pork pies, a couple of tangerines and a couple of chocolate bars, along with two litres of water. If necessary, I could share some of it.

–

We drove to the Visitor Centre. The weather was dry, but a little overcast. There was a slight breeze to keep the dreaded midges at bay. Despite this I sprayed some midge repellent on my face and hands, and checked that my midge net was readily accessible at the top of a pocket of my rucksack.

At 09:15 we walked out of the car park.

–

After just a few hundred metres, it was clear that Bob was struggling with his rucksack. It wouldn’t sit comfortably on his shoulders. The chest strap was broken. ‘Not a problem’ I said, pulling the sling and karabiner from my own rucksack. ‘We can sort this out’. It was an easy matter to clip the sling onto on shoulder strap and tie it into the other one.

‘Job done.’

With his rucksack now secure, Bob carried on.

–

I must confess that I am a bit of a rucksack nerd. I have seven different packs for seven different purposes. Today I had my 38-litre pack, perhaps a little large for a day walk, but it offered me a bit of flexibility. I looked at the other people trudging up the mountain path from the Visitor Centre. Some, like me, had ‘proper’ rucksacks, well suited to a day in the hills. Some had smaller rucksacks, a bit like those that children use for their lunch and school books. They have no chest or waist straps, and no pockets for essentials such as compass, chocolate bars and midge repellent. But they were adequate, I suppose, particularly for people who were not intending the full trek to the summit.

Some people had bags which would be more appropriate for hipsters on a trip to Harrods or a stroll around Sloane Square. And, of course, they perfectly matched their designer trainers.

Alarmingly, some people had no bag at all. I wondered if they realised just how serious a walk the ascent of ‘The Ben’ is.

–

On the so-called 'tourist route' up Ben Nevis.

We made slow but steady progress. By 10:30 we were approaching *Lochain Meall an t'-Suidhe*, the so-called half-way Lochain. This is where the path splits: climbers to the left, walkers to the right. We chose the right.

Bob had managed admirably. Louise had recently given him a pair of walking sticks with horizontal handles; these gave him more security on rough ground and the confidence to walk by himself. Although we took turns to keep an eye on how he was doing, we left him largely on his own as we plodded up the mountain path.

There were only three or four tricky passages where we felt that we needed to guide him over rocky areas or offer a friendly arm.

–

As we continued upwards, the mist descended …

It began to dawn on me, though, that Bob's sight had deteriorated over the last few years. It was nearly a year since I had last walked with him, and it seemed that the tunnel through which he sees the world had narrowed. But his spirits were as high as ever. Despite his problems he carried on up the path, picking his way through the rough ground.

The path zig-zagged up a shoulder of The Ben. We walked on, into the mist, and the visibility began to drop. Below us we got occasional glimpses of the valley but only for fleeting seconds. As always, we watched Bob's every step, but the occasions when one of us needed to help him were becoming more frequent.

The slog continued, ever upwards, into the thickening clouds. It suddenly dawned on me that we had lost the path. I looked around for any clues, but all I saw was swirling mist. I looked at the altimeter on my watch, and noted that we were just shy of 1,050 metres above sea level. This could be invaluable information. I pulled out my compass to discover we were walking on a bearing of about 160°. Again, more information that would help me determine where we were. We scrambled over the rocks, desperately looking for the path. Bob now needed help for every step. We took it in turns to guide him as I searched desperately to re-gain the path.

In the distance I spotted a cairn, clearly built to help walkers. We approached it and another cairn loomed in the near distance. We followed this chain of cairns, and they brought us safely back to the main path.

I pulled out my map. It had been a small detour, probably no more than ten or fifteen minutes delay, but we were now firmly back on the main path.

–

Just after one o'clock we reached the summit. The mist was now solid, and visibility was down to just a few metres. To make matters worse, it was beginning to drizzle. The summit was busy. There were many people there, like us, fund-raising for their favourite charity. Some in shorts and T-shirts were struggling with the cold and relentless wind.

Our intention was to have lunch on the summit, but there seemed little point. There was no view and the drizzle was turning to sleet. We decided to carry on down the path and find somewhere to escape the weather and shelter for a bite to eat. I set my compass to 231°. 'We need to follow this bearing for 150 metres to avoid the cliffs' I explained. Louse took Bob's arm and guided him. It was clear that he was becoming tired from the constant struggle.

–

The weather continued to deteriorate. The sleet was more intense. The visibility now extremely poor. We picked up the path and headed down. At one point we found ourselves crossing some thirty metres of snow field. Despite the fact that it was June, and the temperature in the valley was probably in the high teens, this snow field was well established. It would probably stay there throughout the year. Walking sticks gave added security. I dug my heels into the snow and offered Bob my arm.

We walked on. There was a stone shelter built to the side of the path that I thought may offer some respite from the wind, but we decided against it. Getting lower was now a priority, particularly because it was clear that Bob was becoming increasingly tired.

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Much of the path has been renewed over the years and now consists of slabs that act as steps. This is great for sighted people, but Bob was struggling because he was unable to see the depth of the steps. He didn't know where to put his feet. This was 'level two' on steroids. We decided to link arms at this point to guide him down. This is not easy. While guiding Bob, I offered my right arm for him to hold on to. I then walked just to the left of the best path, always avoiding any sudden movements, which meant I frequently had tricky steps to negotiate. It was tiring. It was very tiring, so we took it in turns.

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Even in June there can be snow on 'The Ben' …

Eventually, we found a sheltered spot much lower down and paused for a bite to eat. By now it was 16:00 and we were well behind the schedule we had set ourselves. There's a rule of thumb, well-known to most hill walking folk, devised by William Naismith. His formula, known in his memory as Naismith's Rule, is used to estimate the time needed for hill walks. When walking uphill, one assumes a constant speed (typically three or four kilometres per hour) for the horizontal distance, then add a correction for the climbing (typically an extra ten minutes for every hundred metres). Naismith had no formula for the descent, but one generally assumes it will be a little quicker than the ascent.

We found that the ascent with Bob tied in pretty well with Naismith's prediction, but that the descent was way off. A better prediction would be to assume that the descent will be between one and one and a half times as long as the ascent.

I calculated. 'At this rate', I announced, 'we'll be back about five-ish.'

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My estimate was optimistic. We got back to the visitor centre at about five thirty. I was tired. Bob was tired. 'That' he said, 'was probably the hardest walk I have ***ever*** done.'

'Me too', I thought to myself. It's not just the walking; it's the added pressure of checking not just my steps, but someone else's.

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Back in the B&B that night I struggled to get to sleep. It had been a long, hard day, both physically and mentally. My mind was racing. I was thinking about hill walking and about disability. I had learned so much over the years about both. Maybe I should write a book about it, I thought.

No. A silly idea, I thought, and turned over to go to sleep.

25. Epilogue

If this little book reads like a bit of a hotchpotch, it's probably because it was written as a bit of a hotchpotch.

The first few chapters about Scott and Lynda's completion are based on a number of presentations that Bob and I gave about living and working with a disability. They were not so much about disability as about disability awareness. All the episodes I describe are essentially true, but some of the details may have been 'tweaked' to support the plot. The incident where Bob and I were ejected from a hotel, for example, really happened, but not on the weekend of Scott and Lynda's compleation. I have changed some of the names, for obvious reasons, but not many.

Bob and me at the summit of Beinn an Dothaidh. It was a splendid day our for someone who can't speak properly with someone who can't hear properly.

The remaining chapters continue this theme and is based on a number of articles I wrote, primarily about guiding sight-impaired clients. It tells the story of the birth of *Walk-ability* a charity that brings together my interest in disability with my love of the Scottish hills. The final chapter describes our day on Ben Nevis. I have spent many days in the hills, but I can honestly say that this was one of the hardest. If not ***the*** hardest.

About the Author

David Jones describes himself as a generalist: he knows almost nothing about almost everything. He does, however, know a bit more than most about disability and about hill walking. And, as such, he is well qualified to write this little book.

When not trudging around the Scottish hills, he enjoys beer, Bach and curry.