



We Came to See the Elephants

By Sunny Roller

We were at a wildlife reserve in southern India waiting to see the elephants. As I gazed at the aqua blue mountain lake ahead of me, I was suddenly surrounded. A trace of fear bullet-shot through my veins. Gone as fast as it came, most of the fear vanished to leave me gazing up at seven Tamil Nadu women draped in full native garb. Semi-circled, they drew claustrophobically close. Their huge white smiles seemed ten feet wide. Their dark brown eyes, curious, warm and excited asked who I was and why I was sitting in such an unusual-looking chair. I must have been quite a spectacle to them.

I faced a critical decision. Do I smile? Do I explain? Do I turn and roll away? Do I force them off with a harsh gesture? I could. How dare they hover! I didn't ask them to surround me and stare. Regardless of what I choose, I knew that I would be communicating something to these women.

Being a "spectacle," I had no alternative but to communicate. I remembered that this obligation can be positive if I make it such.

There we all were, staring at each other. We were all spectacles! I smiled and nodded. They smiled, nodded, and a coo rippled through their group. I pointed at one woman's earrings and gestured compliments to her. She and her friends giggled. I pointed to my wheelchair and enunciated the "W-H-E-E-L-L-L-C-H-A-I-R." Nods and giggles. I pointed to my legs and said "P-O-L-I-O." In India, people know polio. They understood.

Then, as if in a flow of wind or water, we were beyond our unique deformities and with a warm rush of compassion, I felt our universal womanhood. Women communicating. Women with babies. Women with sisters and girlfriends. Women with jewelry. Women on a holiday enjoying nature's creations. Women with self-chosen deformities and externally inflicted deformities. We knew each other well. There was a communal warmth among us during this peaceful cross-cultural moment. No more needed to be said. Our mutual message had grown from fearful and curious to affectionate, positive, and dignified.

As my American friends came and rolled me in my wheelchair off toward the lumbering elephants, I remember one more time that being a natural spectacle can be an embarrassing burden or it may serve as an opportunity and a privilege. Because of our unique shapes and mannerisms, often adorned with braces, crutches, or wheelchairs, the disabled dramatically command public attention so quickly and so often. What we communicate once we have that attention is our choice. As I glanced back at the women who were chattering among themselves, I felt a little renewed and a little relieved. After all, we came to see the elephants.