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## Seeing *Million Dollar Baby* From My Wheelchair

DIANE COLEMAN

Many people have told me that they don't think they could "stand to live" if they needed a wheelchair like me. That's why I felt a little queasy about going to see *Million Dollar Baby*. But helping plan the first disability protest of the movie, in Chicago, I had a duty to see it.



I thought I was emotionally well-prepared. I already knew many details about the last half hour — the injury, hospital, nursing home and killing scenes — from disabled colleagues.

But my preparation was more than that. When I grew up, through braces and surgeries, my elementary school teachers called me "Mary Sunshine." When I completed UCLA law school from a motorized wheelchair, I was called "inspirational." I took it as the highest compliment to be told by some non-disabled person that they "didn't think of" me as "handicapped." When I was excluded or rejected in my work or social life, I could always understand the other's perspective.

Even the few times someone would actually say they would rather be dead than be like me, I would just politely forge on.

In my early thirties, sharing experiences with disabled friends, I finally learned how to recognize and constructively resist discrimination. The connection and insights we shared gave me a new lens through which to view my life. Most importantly, I learned to look more clearly at the ways I had internalized the stigma and shame of disability, and began the lifelong struggle to undo the damage done by growing up in isolation from a true sense of community and mutual respect.

In short, a "Jerry's Kid" became a "telethon protester." Over the last two decades of involvement in the disability rights movement, I have faced arrest many times in non-violent protest to help win the right to ride the bus, and the right to not be forced into a nursing home because of the need for assistance to live. During Kevorkian's heyday in assisting the suicides of middle-aged disabled women, I founded a national disability rights group called Not Dead Yet. Using a ventilator at night since 2002, it's become even more personal.

I came into the theater, wanting to flee quickly when *Million Dollar Baby* was over. I sat through the whole movie without removing my coat, scarf, hat or gloves.

Queasy stomach, wish to flee — not typical for me anymore. Moreover, the threat of assisted suicide and euthanasia are daily fare for Not Dead Yet. We fight to be heard over the loud voices of players on both sides whose interests should be readily seen as, at best, secondary to the organized voice of those society says are "better off dead." So many of us have died too young, never getting a real chance to live.

In the midst of all that reality, what makes a fictional movie like *Million Dollar Baby* so disturbing that I want to flee?

As the movie unfolded to its star-powered conclusion, audience members sniffled in pitiful admiration of Maggie's determination to die rather than move on and leave her non-disabled life behind. They were deeply moved by Frankie's redemption through fatherly love, his wish to help her live and his profound sacrifice in giving up everything he had to free her from her "frozen" body. This is the bittersweet ending that inspires so much acclaim.

As I watched, I thought about the impact the movie would have on severely disabled people surrounded only by doctors, nurses and mixed up, grieving family and friends.

Swept along in the emotion, could any audience member imagine a happy and meaningful life for Maggie as a quad? For him or herself as a quad?

It took me another week to get in touch with my deeper personal discomfort.

Could people imagine a happy and meaningful life for me? Could they see that I am not living a fate worse than death?

I've always felt a tension between how others see me and how I see myself. By now, that tension, and my coping mechanisms, are way below the surface. Denial, the fantasy of acceptance, I have used whatever I could to endure and manage over 50 years of those looks, and looks away, to be who I am out in the world everyday.

But now I am forced to see how critics and audiences love this movie, resent our anger, and extol the virtues of open public discussion of euthanasia based on disability. My fantasy is ripped away.

If I'd been truly prepared, I'd have brought a sign to hold up, saying, "I Am Not Better Off Dead." I would have looked into every face exiting the theater, insisting that they see me, and this simple yet apparently incomprehensible message.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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### THE AUTHOR

Diane Coleman obtained her law degree and Masters in Business Administration from the University of California at Los Angeles in 1981 and worked as an attorney for the State of California for seven years. During this time, she also served as a member of the California Attorney General's Commission on Disability. Relocating to Tennessee in 1989, she became Co-Director of the Technology Access Center of Middle Tennessee and served as Policy Analyst for the Tennessee Technology Access Project, funded through the National Institute of Disability and Rehabilitation Research. She served on the Tennessee Advisory Committee to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission and the Advisory Committee to the Tennessee Human Rights Commission. Ms. Coleman is currently the Executive Director of the Progress Center for Independent Living in Forest Park, Illinois, a nonprofit nonresidential consumer-directed center advocating on behalf of people with disabilities. She currently serves as a member of the Illinois State Medicaid Advisory Committee, the Illinois Medicaid Buy-In Advisory Committee, and is a member of the Board of Directors of the Illinois Campaign for Better Health Care.

In April, 1996, she founded Not Dead Yet, a national grassroots disability rights organization opposing the legalization of assisted suicide and euthanasia. She has twice presented invited testimony before the Constitution Subcommittee of the Judiciary Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives (April 29, 1996 and July 14, 1998) as well as the Illinois Legislature on the topic of assisted suicide. Ms. Coleman is a well-known writer and speaker on assisted suicide and euthanasia. She co-authored Amicus Briefs filed in the U.S. Supreme Court on behalf of Not Dead Yet and ADAPT in the matter of *Vacco v. Quill* (1996) and in the Conservatorship of the Person of Robert Wendland in the California Supreme Court (2000). In 2003, she joined the adjunct faculty at the University of Illinois at Chicago to co-teach a series of graduate courses in disability and medical ethics.

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### Million Dollar Baby

"Clint Eastwood's *Million Dollar Baby* is a masterpiece, pure and simple, deep and true." - Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*



"This movie is a corny, melodramatic assault on people with disabilities. It plays out killing as a romantic fantasy and gives emotional life to the 'better dead than disabled' mindset lurking in the heart of the typical (read: nondisabled) audience member." - Stephen Drake, *Not Dead Yet*

(*Million Dollar Baby* won four Oscars: best picture, best actress, best supporting actor and best director.)