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## **Teaching with Disabilities**

*Jack Rushton*

*Jack Rushton was a retired Church Educational System employee when this was published. He had been a quadriplegic since 1989. Since the accident that paralyzed him, he taught the Gospel Doctrine class in his ward and participated in Know Your Religion and in part-time institute classes.*<sup>1</sup>

My love for teaching was born as a young missionary serving in the Central American Mission of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from 1958 through 1961. As a missionary, I was overwhelmed with how the gospel changed the lives of the humble Central American people I taught during those two and a half years. After they were baptized and continued to be faithful, the entire quality of their lives improved dramatically. It came to me then that there would never be anything more important than being a teacher of the gospel.

Upon completing my mission, I returned to Brigham Young University. It was at BYU that I learned about the seminary program in the Church. Growing up in a small mining town in eastern Nevada, I had never attended seminary and did not know that such a program existed. I took the classes necessary to prepare myself for a full-time seminary teaching position.

The first seminary class I ever attended was at Pleasant Grove High School. I sat in the back of the room observing the full-time teacher instructing a classroom full of teenagers. By the end of that class, I knew I wanted to be a seminary teacher. As I did my student teaching in that same classroom, the desire to teach teenagers the scriptures intensified each day. Fortunately, a few months before graduating from BYU, I was hired to teach seminary at Bonneville High School in Ogden, Utah.

For the next twenty-five years, I experienced the joy of teaching the youth, both in seminary and in institute classes. For those twenty-five years, I always marveled that a teacher could actually be paid for doing something so wonderful and rewarding.

In August of 1989, while I was waiting for the annual Church Educational System symposium to begin in Provo, our family accepted a friend's offer to use his beach-front apartment at Laguna Beach, California, for a week. The second day we were there, I was body surfing in the ocean with my sixteen-year-old son and his friend. It was a beautiful, warm summer day at the beach, and the waves were not the least bit threatening.

My son and I decided we would take one more wave and then call it a day. I caught the wave perfectly and thought I would ride it all the way to the shore. To this day, I am not sure what happened next, but I hit my head on a rock or sandbar or something in the surf. The moment I hit my head, I knew I was paralyzed. I couldn't move my arms or legs, and I can still remember the panic I felt before I blacked out.

My son and his friend miraculously pulled me through the waves to shore, where lifeguards and paramedics kept me alive. I woke up two hours later surrounded by doctors and nurses. When I opened my eyes, the nurse standing directly above my head said, "Mr. Rushton, you have had a serious accident. If you can understand what I am saying, blink your eyes once." I knew what she was saying and blinked my eyes.

That was the beginning of a new life for me. My family and I were told that I would never again speak, breathe on my own, move any part of my body, or eat on my own. We were further

informed that I more than likely would have to live in a care facility for the rest of my life—however long that might be. To say we were devastated does not even begin to describe our feelings of anguish.

As I lay in the trauma center alone at night, I could not fully process what the doctors had told me. How would I take care of my family? How would my wife deal with these circumstances? What impact would the accident have on my children? How could I live without being able to move any part of my body? How could I possibly live that way? If I could not speak, then I could not teach. If I could not teach and be of service, why keep on living? Within two weeks, however, I was transferred to a rehabilitation hospital and was soon speaking, eating, and learning to use a power wheelchair.

I recently entered my thirteenth year of life as a quadriplegic on a respirator. I am paralyzed from the neck down, and the only feeling I have in any part of my body is in my face and on the top of my head. The doctors were partially right in their diagnosis: I do not have any movement in any part of my body, and I cannot breathe without the aid of a respirator.

One great truth I have learned through these thirteen years, however, is that we must not let our circumstances control our behavior and keep us from achieving our true potential. This is something I struggled with as I tried to adapt to my new set of circumstances. I was depressed and felt my life was not worth much to me or to anybody else.

At that black time, a good friend, a physical therapist, came to me and said, “Jack, what you must do is accept the circumstances over which you have no control and then maximize and develop to the highest possible degree every talent and ability you have left.”

I was ready for his advice, but the thought occurred to me, “What talents and abilities do I have to develop in my situation as a quadriplegic who is on a respirator and who cannot move or breathe?” I did not realize at the time that the Lord had already taken into account my limitations and would provide opportunities for me to serve and to grow.

Shortly after this conversation, the stake president came to our home eight months after my accident and called me to be the patriarch of our stake. “A paralyzed patriarch,” I thought. “How could it be?”

A week or so later, a good friend in CES asked me to be the keynote speaker at our stake seminary graduation. I flatly refused, knowing I could not possibly prepare or deliver a talk in my condition. He said, “Fine, but I’m going to have your name printed on the program as the speaker. Whether you show up or not is up to you.”

Needless to say, I did show up—after two weeks of agony trying to prepare a simple talk. And I delivered the address. Later, the bishop called me to be the Gospel Doctrine teacher in our ward, a calling in which I have served for nine consecutive years. Opportunities to teach courses in institute followed, and I hesitatingly accepted.

Soon after these opportunities began coming to me, my wife and I were eating at a Chinese restaurant with some friends. When the fortune cookies were brought out, my wife opened mine and read, “Your talents are still intact. Use them!” It seemed that every time I was willing to go to the edge of the light, and at times even beyond, the Lord magnified my talents and abilities and helped me do things I felt exceeded my capabilities—given my unique circumstances.

Through all these events, I have discovered some interesting things about teaching. I tell my students that I am the most laid-back teacher in the Church. I don’t write on the board; I don’t use visual aids to speak of; because I can’t turn my head, it’s difficult to maintain good eye contact with my students; and I can’t move about the classroom enthusiastically as I did before my accident. However, we still seem to have great experiences in the classroom. I attribute that

outcome to be the fundamental truth regarding teaching in the Church as contained in the Doctrine and Covenants: “And again, the elders, priests and teachers of this church shall teach the principles of my gospel, which are in the Bible and the Book of Mormon, in the which is the fulness of the gospel. And they shall observe the covenants and church articles to do them, and these shall be their teachings, as they shall be directed by the Spirit. And the Spirit shall be given unto you by the prayer of faith; and if ye receive not the Spirit ye shall not teach” (D&C 42:12–14).

Teaching is about having the Spirit and relying on the principles of the gospel as found in the scriptures. I will always remember the time while I was serving as a bishop that I called a young married man to teach the priests quorum. He had a severe stuttering problem, and I worried how the young priests would respond to him. I knew he had a deep and abiding testimony of the truthfulness of the gospel as well as a profound knowledge of the scriptures. Would this knowledge and testimony, I wondered, compensate for his communication challenges? I reasoned that they would.

Sure enough, the young men never once ridiculed him or thought less of him because of his disability. They loved his lessons and were very patient as he struggled with his words from time to time. As he bore his testimony at the conclusion of each class period, anyone listening could sense the impact he was having on the hearts of those young priests.

Disabilities are as varied as the personalities of individual teachers. There are the obvious physical disabilities like mine or like the young man with the stuttering problem, but other things in life can also be perceived as disabilities. As a bishop, I also called a young widow to be our Young Women’s president. She felt her disability was that she had no husband, but she loved the girls and taught them powerfully from the scriptures and through her own example. Through her teaching and example, many girls in our ward were influenced to further their education and marry in the temple.

As a gospel teacher with a disability, I suggest everyone view disabilities in a broad, comprehensive context. All of us have challenges, weaknesses, private fears, etc. Some of these involve physical disabilities; some do not. There are seminary and institute teachers throughout the Church who may feel they have disabilities. Maybe their home life is not perfect. Perhaps they have a wayward child who is of great concern to them. Perhaps their physical appearance is a concern to them. A single sister or single mother may at times feel that her marital status is a disability for her as a CES teacher. The fact of the matter is that there are no perfect teachers. There never have been, nor will there ever be.

Thankfully, most of us can teach better than we think we can regardless of our circumstances. In spite of our weaknesses, if we truly love our students and teach the scriptures by the Spirit, the Lord will magnify us and help us be successful in the classroom. As the Lord said to Moroni, “And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them” (Ether 12:27).

The Apostle Paul was arguably the greatest teacher and missionary the world has ever known. He too had a disability that he described to the Corinthians: “And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure” (2 Corinthians 12:7). I suppose that Paul’s thorn in the flesh, rather than being a hindrance, enabled him to be the powerful teacher he was.

Through my own disability, I have come to appreciate the words of Matthew Arnold, the great English literary critic and writer. On one occasion, he said, “All art gains freedom through discipline.” I have always believed that teaching is an art.

Since my accident, I have had to discipline myself more than at any other time in my life.

Because I do not have the use of my arms or hands, I do all my preparation on my computer, using voice-recognition software. By means of the Church Web site, GospeLink 2001, and various Internet sites, I have a depth of resources available to me.

I have learned I must be very selective in what I choose to use, however. When I speak or teach, I cannot thumb through the scriptures, read long passages, or flip through copious notes. My wife sits by my side with the scriptures and a few notes on a stand where I can see them. As needed, she turns the pages of the scriptures for me to the selected reference. However, for the most part, what I teach must be in my head and in my heart, or I am ineffective. When I have prepared well and have disciplined myself sufficiently, I have freedom in my teaching, and wonderful, spontaneous things take place in the classroom.

I have learned to utilize the scriptures effectively in my teaching. As my students and I read and discuss the scriptures together, I feel the Spirit present in the room. Much of my preparation time is spent in thinking of good questions that will elicit discussion and involvement in the scriptures. I have to admit the fact that in many ways, I feel I am a better teacher as a quadriplegic on a respirator than I was when I was able-bodied. In the end, however, it is the discipline, the Spirit, and my use of the scriptures as the ultimate lesson manual that make the difference.

I am convinced that regardless of what disabilities we may have, if we are willing to pay the price of preparation and implement true principles of teaching in the classroom, we can be successful. In fact, our disabilities may prove to be our greatest assets.

## **Notes**

1. For further inspirational information about Jack Rushton, see Allison M. Hawes, “It’s Good to Be Alive,” *Ensign* 24, no. 4 (April 1994): 41–45.