

CROSSING THE RUBICON

By Dr Jon Stamford

In amongst the usual collection of bills and flyers for pizza restaurants, yesterday's post also brought me a largish brown paper envelope from my local council. I knew what the envelope was before I opened it and for some reason I paused a moment. Normally I dispatch the post swiftly with a rather fine miniature sabre letter opener I was given by my grandmother. But this envelope was different.



I put the envelope down on my desk and took a sip of coffee. It wasn't that I didn't want to open the envelope, more that I wanted to respect the moment. I wanted to acknowledge the significance of it. Because this envelope contained my blue badge, allowing me to park wherever I needed without hindrance. No more days traipsing across a supermarket car park the size of an airfield in the pouring rain. No more days circling the town centre like an automotive vulture waiting for a vacant parking space. A cause for joy and celebration surely. Crack open the prosecco.

But for me the blue badge was more than a permission to park more freely. And perhaps that's why I paused, sabre in hand, over the envelope. The blue badge was a tacit admission that I was disabled. An admission that my Parkinson's had reached the stage where I needed to park more closely to the shops. And in that respect, accepting or at least acknowledging my disability felt like a defeat.

But why would something that should be a victory feel like a defeat? And here I have to blame my parents. Honest, hard-working, God-fearing stock. Neither believed in handouts in any form at all. When my mother was housebound with osteoporosis, she refused to accept any kind of disability payment, appropriate though it obviously was. And my father was no different when his time came. These values were so strong in them, and so strongly imprinted upon me, that I could almost hear my father tut-tutting as I filled out the application form.

Applying for the blue badge was, for me, crossing the Rubicon. And it will feel the same when I first park in a disabled parking space. I will still feel that sense of... well, not shame exactly. That's putting it too strongly, but certainly a feeling of discomfort.

The feeling that I don't really deserve such privilege. The feeling that I have somehow jumped to the front of the queue.

It's hard not to see this in context too. We live in times where attitudes to the disabled are hardening. I sometimes feel that our government is trying to alter people's perception of disability, somehow to demonise and stigmatise the disabled. Benefits are now handed out so grudgingly that a sense of guilt among the disabled is almost expected. Stories of illegal immigrant families living on questionable benefits are the stock in trade of the tabloid newspapers. The receipt of benefits is now considered less as the morally mandated symbol of our care for the vulnerable and more as simple scrounging. It's a sad world when the acts that civilise us as people are called into question.

It's ridiculous I know. I'm in my 10th year of Parkinson's now. Supermarket checkout girls offer to pack my bags for me. Sales assistants offer to carry heavy or unwieldy purchases to the car for me, even several blocks away. I can no longer hide my Parkinson's nor, for that matter, delude myself that it goes unnoticed unless I draw attention to it. Why should I feel such guilt over something so trivial as a blue badge? I don't know but in my mind's eye I can see my father and mother shaking their heads.

"You're wrong" I say to them as I open the envelope.