

## **A STORY of LIFE & DEATH**

Paddy Masfield

Me? I'm one of the luckiest alive. The first person ever in Uganda to survive cerebral malaria in infancy! By 13 I was my school's underweight obstacle race champion! At 33 an internationally acclaimed theatre director and award winning playwright. A career that behind its supposed glamour led to two divorces, an 80 a day smoking habit, and a losing race with an alcohol problem. So I turned to marathon running at 40, only by 44 to lose all leg movement – alongside lack of access to my brain, speech, memory and writing. Assumed by all to have a life-threatening brain tumour, when scans revealed I had not, I recall the depth of my sorrow that utter exhaustion and continuous pain were not to be ameliorated by a simple sleep-like death. (In fact I had severe chronic M.E.). But had I then asked my caring relatives to assist in my suicide, I would never have met my 3 grandchildren. Nor more extraordinarily re-met and married my first ever girlfriend from the age of 15, just 6 months after being given, at the age of 60, a year to live with terminal cancer. 8 years on I have acquired psoriasis, sciatica and aggressive arthritis as well as 2 more grandchildren ; travelled the world as a wheelchair user, who spends 18 hours of every 24 in bed, and in 23 years with M.E. become a non-executive director of more than 20 companies and a public speaker from Dublin to Delhi on the rights of disabled people.

So when I read of those aged 24 who believe that sitting in a wheelchair or having your bottom wiped by someone else (as I do), is in itself proof sufficient for suicide, I have 2 reactions. Firstly that 3 role-model colleagues of mine, Life Peer Baroness Jane Campbell; Rowen Jade, Chair of the Government's senior disability advisory body – Equality 2025; and Chris Davies OBE, television presenter and author, have all since birth assigned toilet duties to others on their behalf as they do feeding, washing and sometimes speaking from their wheelchairs. Their achievements made the greater by the fact that all 3 when hospital in-patients have had the label 'Do Not Resuscitate' hung on the foot of their beds. The medical profession apparently valuing their worth less than I, the Government and the public do. And secondly, gratitude that while disabled people form 1 in 4 of the UK population, I am incredibly lucky to be in the one third of those with M.E. who has never experienced clinical depression.

For the real truth is that the pain of both divorces was the sharpest I have ever felt, and the only time I felt justifiably suicidal. While living half my life with the conscience of having been party to an abortion has been infinitely harder than 23 years of settling into a chair on wheels. Life consists of a chain of changes. No one promised my Mother that giving me birth life would be free from excruciating pain. And some pain may well be involved in my death. Indeed I discovered

last month that my cancer is no longer in remission, and too snugly nestled into my Aorta to be operable. Am I frightened? Honestly – No! In the Middle Ages 67 would have been thought a miraculous age to achieve. And my last decade has been one long miracle.