

## Film Review

Freedom Machines

Richard Cox Productions, 2005

Distributor: New Day Films

**Reviewed by Dana Grisham**

*California State University, East Bay*

### What Is a Human Life Worth?

Changing the attitudes of human beings is a complex process, fraught with the emotional reactions learned over the course of a lifetime and complicated by fear of the unknown. All of us, for example, fight racism in ourselves as we struggle to comprehend, accept, and hopefully celebrate the diversity in our lives. So, too, has there been a longstanding struggle to accept physical and cognitive differences in people. Late last year, I broke my patella (kneecap) in a fall necessitating many temporary adjustments to my life. On a theatre trip to New York, for example, I found myself in a wheelchair. Prior to this, I assumed that ADA had insured that I would find access to various activities easy. Instead, I found that I became virtually invisible to others and very much restricted by my temporary disability. People did not see me, would not meet my eyes, and very few stopped to assist when I needed a hand. While quite a shock for me, this “facelessness” was a temporary state; for many others among us, it is a way of life.

How can we put a human face on disability? How can we change our attitudes toward the individuals who must cope with our fear and ignorance as well as the physical challenges they face? How can we recognize that disability is another aspect of diversity? One tool that I

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recommend is a film (DVD) produced by the Film Arts Foundation in San Francisco called “Freedom Machines,” first seen on PBS.

The film blew me away! Here is what I experienced. I recognized, up close and personal, the individual human face of disability. I cheered for a valiant African-American man, who, paralyzed by an accident, clawed his way out of a nursing home to start a business and become an advocate to help others escape the same hopeless confinement. I fell in love with a brilliant, multiply-disabled young woman on her way to college, cried with her when her mother left her there, and laughed with her as she found her way and flourished in her new environment. I sympathized with an Asian-American woman losing her hearing, watched fearfully as a young African-American girl struggled with her public education, and became reacquainted with a blind astronomer who was portrayed in the movie “Contact.” Several stories include the experiences of loved ones who have struggled to obtain equal treatment for them. Along the way, I realized that their lives are different—more fulfilling and productive—not only because they have advocates working for them, but because they also have powerful new technologies, the “freedom machines,” on their side.

Technology has changed the lives of the people in this film. Assistive technologies are leveling the playing field for people who have physical and cognitive disabilities. The human-powered wheelchair that took me around New York is a distant cousin to the new generation of wheelchairs available today that fulfill multiple functions. Computer technologies, including text-to-speech functions, Braille readers, hearing devices for the telephone, and gross-motor touch keyboards are just a few of the growing number of technological innovations that assist people to be mobile, to “hear,” to “see,” to communicate, think, interact and become part of the larger community.

I met the Executive Producer of “Freedom Machines,” Janet Cole, in late 2006, when she came to California State University, East Bay to show the film to a group of professors and members of BTSA Induction consortia. I invited Janet as a result of viewing the film earlier as part of my work with the California State University Chancellor’s Office Teacher Education Task Force (TETF), a group of special and general teacher educators working on strengthening collaboration between the two groups. Janet is a gracious and knowledgeable individual who believes in the power of this film and eagerly seeks ways of disseminating its message.

I, too, believe it should be widely disseminated. It seems the notion of “disability” lies with our society that hasn’t figured out how to incorporate the talents of 20% of the population when the tools exist that

make it possible. For example, when there is a 70% unemployment rate among people with disabilities, our social systems drastically need reconsideration. I have shown “Freedom Machines” in my preservice classes at CSU East Bay, in which my students have experienced an epiphany about disability and inclusion in their regular education classrooms. It is a major step in learning for us to widen our perceptions of the world in which we live and to envision the potential of assistive technologies in bringing us together. Freedom Machines does all that and more; it provides information, true, but more importantly the film is compelling. In an unforgettable way, it engenders a positive AFFECT that disposes us toward the acceptance of individuals with disabilities into our classrooms and our lives.

Finally, it should be mentioned that there are many useful extra features on the DVD—there are the chapters with chapter cues to address multiple subjects, the film can be seen in a Spanish version, and there are abundant resource materials for the teacher’s use. In its chapter on Universal Design, for example, “Freedom Machines” tries to get viewers to imagine an inclusive world that can work for people all across the human continuum. Universal design principles in education speak to the learning differences of people with a range of non-visible disabilities.

To order Freedom Machines:  
[www.freedommachines.com](http://www.freedommachines.com)

Distributed by New Day Films:  
[www.newday.com](http://www.newday.com)  
FAX 845.774.2945

California Council on Teacher Education members will receive a 20% discount on purchases of the “Freedom Machines” DVD by entering promo code B98MC6 on their order.