

The Prince was bored . . .

The U.S. government sent Michael Dowling and four others on a goodwill tour of India shortly after WWI. They were welcomed by most, but not by everybody. On this particular day, the ruler of one of India's more than 500 princely states had reluctantly given them an audience in a mammoth room that had a dirt floor and half a dozen wide cement steps leading up to the Prince's throne.

Dowling and his friends were seated on the floor in metal folding chairs, staring up at the Prince, who wasn't really listening to anything they were trying to say. He was conversing with his advisers and only occasionally glanced down at the Americans.

Michael Dowling knew he had to do something or the entire visit would be pointless.

So he shifted noisily in his chair. The Prince heard him and looked down to see what was happening. When he did, Michael Dowling calmly removed the bottom half of his left leg and threw it on the floor.

The Prince leaned forward.

Michael Dowling removed the bottom half of his right leg and threw it on the floor.

The Prince waved off his advisors.

Michael Dowling reached over with his right hand, removed the bottom half of his left arm and threw it on the floor.

The Prince stood.

And when Michael Dowling reached his hand slowly toward his head . . .

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Michael Dowling was 14 years old when the blizzards of 1880 swept through Minnesota. A freak accident sent him tumbling off the back of a lumber wagon into snowdrifts and he stumbled through the storm for hours, finally burrowing into a pile of straw. When morning came he scrambled out and spotted a farmhouse half a mile away. He tried to stand, and fell. His legs were frozen. When he clapped his hands together to restore circulation, "it was as if I had struck two blocks of wood together," he recalled years later. "They were as white and rigid as marble."

Somehow, Dowling crawled to the farmhouse, but 16 days later doctors amputated both legs six inches below the knee, removed his left arm below the elbow, and took



away the fingers and part of the thumb on his right hand. He was a few weeks short of his 15th birthday.

“I won’t deny it seemed pretty hard,” he remembered. “There were days when I felt as if the whole foundation of things had dropped out, when the future looked utterly black, without a ray of hope or comfort, when I rebelled with my whole soul against the raw deal life had given me. At such times I cursed my own strength of will that brought me through the storm and the strength of body that made me survive the operation.

“The thing that was hardest to bear,” he admitted, “was the pity I received from people. The night of my birthday my friends gave me a party and everybody turned out. I was sitting up by that time and used to push my chair around the house somehow or other using my arms the best I could. That night I overheard people talking among themselves. They would say: ‘Poor boy! Isn’t it dreadful! He’ll be helpless all his life. He’ll have to be dressed and even fed by other folks. Too bad he didn’t die!’ When I heard them say things like that it roused every ounce of fighting spirit in me. I didn’t want to be pitied. I hated being an object of commiseration. And I said to myself: ‘I won’t be like that! I’ll take care of myself! I won’t be an object of charity. I won’t be laid on the shelf for the rest of my life. I won’t! I won’t!’”

Dowling had been supporting himself since the age of ten as a water carrier, a cowboy, and a cookee on the Mississippi steamboats. The blizzard of December 4, 1880, dropped temperatures to 50 below zero, and Dowling was outside from seven in the evening until sunrise the next morning. By Christmas he was little more than a stump of a man, physically. Within a year his savings were gone and the Yellow Medicine County Commissioners didn’t know what to do with him. They arranged to pay a local farmer \$2 per week to care for him the rest of his life, but when they told Dowling about their plans “it was all I could do to contain myself from jumping into the air and landing on top of them!” Instead, he startled the commissioners with a bold proposition: “If you will pay for one year at Carleton College,” he said, “it will never cost this county another cent to keep me going as long as I live.”

That was the beginning. Outfitted with artificial limbs, Dowling attended Carleton, became an elementary school teacher, painted fences, ran a roller-skating rink, sold books and maps, published a weekly newspaper, became superintendent of the first high school in Renville County, married, had four children, became president of the Olivia State Bank and president of the Minnesota Bankers Association. He traveled extensively as an insurance agent, served two years as secretary to the National Republican League, visited the



Philippine Islands as a United States Commissioner shortly after the Spanish-American War, and became a state representative in 1901, later Speaker of the House. He drove his own automobile all over the country, danced, went hunting for big game, and in later years was mentioned often as a candidate for governor.



“Don’t spend your time thinking about the things that are gone and can’t be brought back,” he told soldiers who had been disabled during WWI. “Think of what you have. Keep your mind working and you can accomplish wonders. Don’t think you are a cripple because you’ve lost a limb or two.” He traveled from hospital to hospital all over the country after the war as a living example of what a wounded and crippled man could accomplish with only a body, a head, and a part of one arm. He spoke to huge throngs in New York and visited English hospitals for eight months at the invitation of

the British government, astonishing his listeners by inviting them to rap on his wooden legs or squeeze his wooden arms.

When Michael Dowling died in 1921 at the age of 55, the people of Minnesota did not forget him. A \$100,000 fundraising campaign generated contributions from all over the world and resulted in both the Minneapolis School for Crippled Children and the State Hospital for Crippled Children in St. Paul. His wife Jenny became one of the prime movers who established the Society for Crippled Children and Adults in 1928 (later known as Courage Center, it eventually became one of the largest and most respected rehab centers in the nation).

“Affliction,” said Michael Dowling, “turns some people into a sponge that soaks up pity. But a sponge never gets anywhere. There is no such thing as a cripple, if the mind is right. When anybody tells you that because a man loses a leg or an arm he’s a cripple, just refer him to me.”

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I wrote the middle part of this essay during Courage Center’s 50th anniversary in 1978 and have used the story about Michael Dowling and the Prince in numerous speeches around the world. When I first began thinking about re-telling the story in one of these journal entries, I’d intended to focus on the importance of getting people’s attention before they can begin to understand or give credence to what you’re saying. I’ll save that for a later time.

What struck me as I re-read my original manuscript and thought about Dowling’s accomplishments is something my old friend John DuRand constantly hammered home: “Don’t call them disabled people,” he’d bark. “Call them people who have disabilities. They’re not an illness, a disease or an infirmity. They’re people!”

And I thought about all the men and women working for social justice today who are doing as John asked. You’re one of them or you probably wouldn’t be reading this essay. I especially think about entrepreneurs like John who start social enterprises specifically to provide employment and career opportunities for people who are mentally, physically, economically or educationally disadvantaged. In John’s case, he began with \$100, a circular saw, a sewing machine, and 14 young adults who were developmentally disabled. By the time he retired 25 years later, he was running a \$70 million business employing nearly 1,000 people, more than 600 of them developmentally or otherwise disadvantaged.

When Michael Dowling jolted the Prince out of his boredom by deliberately removing parts of his body and tossing them on the ground, then reached for his head, the Prince begged him to stop and share the secret of his magic.

There wasn’t any secret. Michael Dowling had simply made it possible for the Prince to see the man behind the disability.

The quotations from Michael Dowling in this essay are taken from Mary B. Mullett’s 1919 article in *The American Magazine* entitled “Dowling Just Wouldn’t Give Up: A Wonder Story of Pure Grit”