

PHILIP PATSTON

ADDING DIVERSITY TO COMMON SENSE



Philip Patston

Philip Patston is the founder and managing director of *Diversity New Zealand* which consults and offers training in diversity, creativity and change. He has created educational resources which challenge the misinformation about diversity and disability in our communities, and he hosts dialogue spaces which encourage people to confront their fears of diversity and explore their potential.

In his own journey so far, he has pushed the boundaries of his own potential to embrace many roles — as a social worker, a counsellor, a human rights activist, a gay rights advocate, an award-winning comedian, an actor, columnist, mentor, workshop facilitator and conference speaker.

When you meet Patston for the first time, you'll never find him talking about the exact nature of his own experience of disability. He's not trying to keep anything secret — the fact that he sometimes uses a wheelchair and has difficulty with muscle co-ordination is plain enough to see. It's just that he is fiercely focused on not allowing himself to be defined by what society defines as impairments.

Patston: "I don't see any need to be described by my medical condition or use the label "disabled" or whatever — I have worked hard to defy these kind of boxes because I am not just these things. The most difficult thing about being disabled is that people don't quite see you as an individual person, and they get very hooked into the wheelchair, the impairment and the stuff that they can see. I am not denying my disability — I just don't want my work to be filtered through this label. My preference is to be simply described as having both *unique physical function and experience* ... and let people figure it out for themselves."

When Patston was born his parents were told he would never walk, talk or be educated, and that the best thing would be to place him into an institution. His parents did not agree

with this diagnosis, and were determined to raise him as much the same as they were raising his twin brother and other siblings. It wasn't until Patston turned five and he was taken to a special school, that he realised he was disabled.

"I can remember on the first day, when I was wheeled into a room full of kids with cerebral palsy, I thought 'Oh my God they have made a terrible mistake!' I wondered why I was there, and my brother wasn't. I was terribly distressed. It was the first time that I remember being struck with what I now call *identity incongruence* — that my sense of myself and my sense of what everyone else thought of me was obviously quite different."

Patston is thankful that the expectations his parents had of him were high. When he was eight years old, they fought to get him out of the school for disabled children because the school thought that physiotherapy was more important than a decent level of education — and they had quite a battle to move him into mainstream education.

It was a battle that the family won, and Patston enrolled in a mainstream primary school. He continued to high school where he gained his School Certificate and University Entrance exams. He went on to university, but soon realised that academia wasn't his thing. Patston: "I remember a 5th-form science teacher telling me that if you want to be a scientist, you'll start off knowing nothing about everything, and you'll learn more and more about less and less until you know everything about nothing. That's a message that has stayed with me all my life because I realised then that — while I love learning — I am a breadth learner rather than a depth learner."

Patston trained as a counsellor and a social worker, which gave him a good grounding in psychological and therapeutic disciplines. He became a group facilitator and workshop leader, and did phone counselling for five years with Youthline, and another three years with Gayline.

"When I come out as a gay man myself, I remember thinking that it was an experience that was quite easy in comparison to my differences in terms of physical function. I realised the issues that I'd been grappling with in the world of disability were quite similar to some of the issues that I had in the gay community.

"I now recognise that being a gay, disabled, white man puts me in a very interesting place in society. As a white man I'm in the absolutely privileged "top end" of society, while as a gay and disabled person I'm in the "bottom end" — so I never really know whether to be a callous bastard or just simply look *interesting!*"

- Patston took a job at the Human Rights Commission, and over the next four years worked as a complaints officer, and with the education and publications unit, and the legal team. It was during this time at the Commission, that Patston did a comedy course which launched him in a whole new career as a comedian.

"I literally fell into comedy. The comedy course ended with a performance at the local venue which was in a terribly inaccessible pub. I had to be lifted up a flight of stairs and was once actually dropped, 10 minutes before going on stage — a real *show must go on* experience."

Patston quickly went from doing open-mike nights to joining the professional comedy circuit, and becoming a regular on the TV stand-up series *Pulp Comedy* (1997-2003). He earned the Billy T. James Award in 1999 for his commitment and contribution to the New Zealand comedy scene. He also enjoyed a brief acting stint on the TV soap opera *Shortland Street*.

Meanwhile, Patston was growing in reputation as an advocate and organiser within the gay community. Besides his counselling work on Gayline, he was part of establishing the *Pride Centre* which was the first gay and lesbian community centre in Auckland. He was named as New Zealand's inaugural *Queer of the Year* as voted by television show *Queer Nation*, and he was later to become a patron of Rainbow Youth.

This punishing workload and range of activities is certainly unusual for someone living with such physical challenges. Yet Patston will point out that his biggest hurdle in achieving his objectives has most often been in overcoming his own disabling thinking — rather than his physical limitations.

Patston: “I have been as bitter and twisted as a lot of other people ... and yet I have realised that the bitter and twisted bits actually came from me and not from the world outside. I remember one Saturday night feeling stressed and confused and was thinking a lot about what I didn't have. And there came a point where I realised that — even though I didn't have certain physical capacities or other resources — I had a lot of capability that other people didn't have.

“Now, while that sounds terribly clichéd, what struck me was that as soon as I changed that focus, and changed my thinking ... then the feelings I had about the situation also changed. I was no longer feeling stuck and confused. Noticing this put me on a whole new path and literally the world changed for me in that moment. It was that realisation that has driven my search for creative ways to change the world by changing thinking and behaviour.”

- In 2001, after being self-employed for three years, Patston formed his private consulting business *Diversity New Zealand* which offers training to corporate, government and community organisations. He later also set up a charitable trust *Diversityworks* which enables him to offer a hybrid of for- and not-for profit services. Over the last decade, these businesses have given Patston a platform for his range of interests in the arts and on community

ex-Gay. ex-Disabled.
ex-Vegetarian.
ex-Kiwi. ex-Comedian.

PHILIP PATSTON gives you
A BIT OF WHAT HE'S GOT!

"Fairly wicked..."
— Russell Brown, Hard News.

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and welfare issues. They have also been a way that he can demonstrate what is possible with a fundamental change in our thinking on the nature of disability and difference.

Diversity NZ and *Diversityworks Trust* are as much a philosophy as they are businesses. Patston defines *diversity* as “the synergy of similarity and difference”, and he believes this perspective is something that we often get wrong as human beings. We either focus on treating people equally, or we focus on their differences — and society has not yet been able to see a clear way around the problems that come from this oppositional thinking.

Patston encourages us to acknowledge the contradiction that similarity and difference might be opposites, but they are also usually together. The challenge is to look for the synergy that emerges when these extremes can find a way to work together creatively. This is diversity *working* ... and when we get it right, it generates much more than the sum of our similarities and our differences.

Patston’s mission is to change the social mindset that keeps people stuck in oppositional thinking, and stops us from exploring the creative benefits of diversity. He draws a connection between the generativity that was released when he changed how he thought about his own physical situation ... and the possibilities that might also follow a similar change of thinking in the way our society addresses its own disability and difference.

For Patston, a useful pathway towards shifting this mindset involves changing the language we use when describing difference. For instance, he advocates using the concept of *functional diversity* as a constructive step towards changing the labeling that currently classifies people as “impaired” or “disabled”. In fact, he calls for the complete removal of any notion of difference or deviation from a predetermined norm.

Patston: “Why do we define some people by their perceived functional deficit? Why do we describe a person as blind, rather than incredibly creative in their ability to navigate the world without sensory input? Why do we describe people with Down Syndrome as intellectually



Philip Patston presenting his social innovation workshop at the NZSEF Retreat

disabled, rather than, as is so often the case, intuitive and honest? Why don't we applaud the emotional repertoire of people whom we label as having bipolar disorder?"

Patston points out that we continue to label people using medical terminology — Cerebral Palsy, Multiple Sclerosis, Asperger's Syndrome — but we don't invent similar conditions for elite athletes, creative geniuses or beautiful people. (The comedian makes this point with his own suggestions: *Acute Physiological Superiority Syndrome*, *Ineptitude Imperfecta (Einstein's Disease)*, and *Aesthetic Arrogance Disorder ...*).

Patston sees the potential of a concept like *functional diversity* is to truly change the social mindset by creating one box only — in which all human beings sit, stand, lie or otherwise exist. This way of thinking allows all people to share in the complex array of human function and to benefit from their strengths.

When Patston holds workshops on *functional diversity*, he often asks participants to imagine waking up the next morning with a number of different changes — they might suddenly have different coloured hair, or have become rich and famous, or suddenly become another gender, or race or culture, or have a different sexual preference. The room is usually laughing and joking about the embarrassments and possibilities of such a sudden change.

Then Patston asks the participants to imagine themselves with a sudden 50% reduction in their intellectual, physical or emotional capacity. The room gets really serious and quiet. Most people in the workshop say that they would hate it and would have difficulty coping — even though they also concede that a sudden loss of function is something that is much more likely to happen compared to changing your gender, race or culture.

Patston: "The average person lives in denial that at any time they could have a car accident and become paralyzed or brain injured, they could have a stroke, develop an anxiety disorder or become depressed, lose hearing or sight. I believe it is this denial that also disables people — because the denial contributes to a society failing to provide adequate support, remove barriers and challenge discriminatory attitudes.

"The interesting thing is that we're not just scared of having a loss of function happen — we are more afraid of how we will adapt, cope and manage that change. We doubt our ability to adapt to the change. I call this fear of losing function *dysfunctionphobia*, and it's just like all the other phobias. But what we forget is that human beings are infinitely adaptable ... we adapt to situations really, really well. So it's a groundless phobia, yet we assume it so readily."

When we face these fears, and value our *functional diversity*, then the language of our differences begins to change. Instead of describing people as having a disability or impairment, Patston describes himself and others as people *with unique function*. Similarly, he describes people without disability or impairment as having *common function*. "This language is non-medicalised and constructive and reflects a shift in the way we think about impairment and disability. It removes the whole notion of a comparative state of 'normalness' while promoting a strengths-based approach to the diverse functions that are humanly possible."

It is a shift in thinking that has relevance to the many other differences that exist in our communities. Patston: "While we may well be only a moment away from being disabled

ourselves, it might be also useful to consider that that we may also be only a moment away from becoming poor, or having a gay son or a daughter-in-law who's from another culture. So changing our social mindset about diversity is an important thing to get right — given all the possibilities of the future.”

- *Diversityworks Trust* has several projects that are based on opening up the spaces where people can have a deeper conversation about the synergy of similarity and difference. In the *Diversity Inquiry* (DIVINQ) project, Patston has been taking this dialogue to senior secondary school students in Auckland schools.

Patston: “This is about simply engaging the young people in a conversation about diversity. We start with two simple questions: *How are we unique?* and, *How are we common?* Then we get into a dialogue about how we communicate and the variety of ways we express our similarities and differences. These young people are totally inspiring. Many of them are grappling with the difference between tolerance and acceptance, and the role of our fears in all this. Having some quite deep inquiry into these issues is a fascinating process ... and it feels like we are building a model from the ground up which we hope will be useful to other schools.”

UNIQUE SENSE



adding diversity to common sense

Another project, called *Unique Sense*, uses multi-media work to take this conversation into many other arenas. The project is building a collection of short films (3-5 mins long) that capture images, words and ideas about diversity and human rights and present them in an inspiring and creative audio-visual mix. A long-term goal of the project is to use this multi-media work to create a visual and ideological inventory of New Zealanders between the ages of 13-23, which can then be used to “add diversity to common sense” when engaging people and communities in dialogue about constructive change.

In 2010, the New Zealand government announced that it would create a \$3 million public awareness campaign “to change attitudes and behaviours that limit opportunities of disabled people”. This campaign is being led by the same Ministry of Social Development unit that produced the “It’s Not OK!” campaign on family violence.

Patston has consulted in the development of this campaign, and has seen it as an opportunity to start positioning disability issues in a much wider framework of diversity. “This is not about doing more disability awareness — we’ve been doing that for 20 years, and I don’t think the changes we need are necessarily about making sure that employers employ more disabled people, or educational and health services are more inclusive. I think we need something much deeper than that ... which for me is around the fears we have of losing function, and what it would mean to us to adapt and cope. That’s a very different conversation to have, compared to a campaign that simply says that everyone should be much nicer to disabled people.”

Diversityworks Trust is also home for Patston’s initiatives to encourage a more diverse participation in the arts. He began this work in 2001 when he got involved with the global disability arts movement and began performing at festivals such the *kickstART!* festival in

Vancouver, Canada, *Above and Beyond* in Cheltenham, England, *High Beam* in Adelaide and the *Art of Difference* in Melbourne, Australia.

As he began to have a deeper involvement with this global network of disabled artists, he found he was frustrated that these connections would end as soon as the festivals finished. So he set up the International Guild of Disabled Artists and Performers which provides a voice in the promotion and networking of disability arts and culture. Its members are professional and amateur artists and performers active in all genres — visual artists, screen and stage actors, dancers, comedians and humorists, musicians, singers, speakers, poets, writers, producers, directors and others working in the arts and entertainment industries.

Patston: “Art and performance are magic and creative forces. Mix them with the experience of disability and they become a miraculous expression of the illusion of limitation and proof of the existence of infinite human potential. Throughout the 20th century the development of art, performance, and culture in marginalised communities has reflected an increase in the self-determination of those groups. We have seen this exemplified, for example, by the emergence of women’s literature, indigenous music, and queer arts. For disabled people, the process is the same.”

In 2005, Patston became the Creative Director of *Giant Leap*, New Zealand’s first international disability arts festival. And a few years later he launched *Creative Momentum* — an online network and collection of resources which continue to foster this international movement.



Trustees of the Diversityworks Trust





Philip Patston speaking at the Skoll World Forum social entrepreneur Masterclass held at Oxford University

- In his projects and advocacy for social change, Patston has brought many insights into how disabled people can pursue self-determination — especially in how they manage their own support, and address the power issues that exist in the relationship between service “providers” and “consumers”.

Patston has a vision of *collaborative autonomy* — which is a different way of looking at these relationships, especially in the provision of home-based and independent living support. “I think it is ironic that we put a lot of resources into training professionals to provide services ... but do nothing to upskill the people who have to handle all these professionals who are in their lives.”

Patston believes that when people take control of their own services, the services become better: “Take women’s or indigenous people’s health initiatives, for example ... the services got better when the people being served took more control. The way that disability support services are provided is predominantly from a commonly functioning perspective and does not meet many of our basic, let alone higher, needs. We need to affirm the fact that we can and will plan, assess, deliver, fund and evaluate services which meet our own needs, in a way that suits our lifestyle and culture.”

Patston doesn’t think the overall system is going to get any better anytime soon — because so many of the support services provided by government and NGOs are overloaded and under stress and often failing people. So he has created the *Diversityworks Peer Support Network*, which has been working with disabled people and their families to explore how they can better use community-based relationships and virtual communication methods to build more support into their lives.

“Instead of just banging at the system’s doors and complaining, we are saying let’s look at a different model to complement the system. We want to connect uniquely functioning people in a way that they can take more charge over their own needs. We want to engage with each other rather than engaging just with the system. That way, when the system fails, we will have people around us to fill in the gaps, and we will have many other options.”

- Patston was the first Social Entrepreneur Fellow from New Zealand to be invited to speak at a workshop at the Skoll World Forum for Social Entrepreneurship held at Oxford.

For him, it was a sobering experience which left him with many questions about just how much this international movement was itself prepared to embrace diversity.

When he turned up to the opening plenary held at the historic Sheldonian Theatre, he found that there was no wheelchair access available because the only accessible door had been blocked off by security agents protecting the keynote speaker, who was the former US President Jimmy Carter. It was a cold and wet afternoon, and Patston and his assistant got soaked while waiting for the organisers to figure out how to open the door and let them in.

Twenty signs you may be a creative and social entrepreneur

by Philip Patston

1. You get to the end of the day and wonder what you've done all day.
2. People ask you what you do and you're not sure what to say.
3. People ask you what you do and you say something different every time.
4. Half the time you have no idea what you are doing.
5. You have great ideas that no one wants to pay for.
6. When you do get paid you're not sure why.
7. But when you don't get paid you're not sure why not.
8. People love the ideas you had last year, that you're bored with.
9. You have a great new idea and nobody knows what you're talking about.
10. You do five things at once, but still wonder what you did all day.
11. You have five conflicting opinions about one topic.
12. You have meetings with people and wonder how you're going to do what you said you would.
13. You feel like you may be an intergalactic being.
14. Sometimes people look at you like you're from Mars.
15. Actually you're from a galaxy far, far away.
16. You're only kidding but everyone believes you.
17. People look shocked when you say the world could work better if money, religion and politics didn't exist.
18. You wonder why you bother.
19. You know why you bother.
20. You write blogs about being a creative and social entrepreneur at six in the morning because you're not sure what to do today.



Philip Patston and Malcolm
Cameron at the NZSEF Retreat

Patston: “We then spent the next two hours at the Sheldonian celebrating social entrepreneurship around the world and talking about respect, dignity, empowerment, culture, context and social change. Afterwards, I found that the opening reception was being held at Trinity College in a tent — which for me would have involved negotiating five steps in the rain, a long path and then a trek over grass.

“I felt betrayed, angry and disillusioned ... and I thought some critical questioning was needed. The organisers particularly needed to examine the cultural and contextual barriers they are creating for their own participants.”

In true Patston style, he turned the whole experience into a learning opportunity and he also used his experience to introduce and illustrate his subject of *functional diversity* at his workshop session. He also connected with the organisers and opened up a conversation about how the forum could better embrace the needs of people with unique function who are also social entrepreneurs.

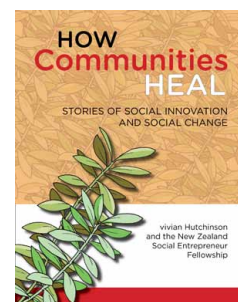
- When Patston was invited to join the Social Entrepreneur Fellowship, he was coincidentally also invited to join the ART Venture programme run by Auckland’s Arts Regional Trust. This was an 12-month “creative enterprise accelerator” where participants were supported to take their enterprises and projects to the next level.

Patston: “As different as the two fellowship groups seemed on the surface ... deep down there were some revealing similarities between the two. I was relieved to observe the deep commitment to social change I found in my fellow creatives — my biggest fear was to be stuck with a bunch of arty-farty poseurs. And likewise I have been suitably impressed by the creativity of my Social Entrepreneur Fellows. This overlap has been one of the perks of straddling both worlds.”

“In the Social Entrepreneur Fellowship, it’s been very interesting for me to have a peer group of people who are working in very different areas than the ones that I’ve been involved in. I’m a bit of a fringe dweller, and the tendency is to say I can’t be bothered with the relationships. But I am learning to stop and ask what other people think, and find out what part of my thinking they are going to understand. It’s a different, slower and more considered process. Ironically, I’ve been learning what I have been preaching for some time — invest in your relationships.”

Notes and Links

- This article by vivian Hutchinson is part of the [HOW COMMUNITIES HEAL project](#) — stories of social innovation and social change featuring members of the New Zealand Social Entrepreneur Fellowship. It is available online at tinyurl.com/hchpatston
- *Philip Patston* can be contacted at philip@diversitynz.com or at Diversity NZ, PO Box 46256, Herne Bay, Auckland 1147
- *Philip Patston blog* www.philippatston.com Patston also at twitter.com/philippatston and on Facebook www.facebook.com/philippatston
- *Diversityworks website* www.diversityworks.org.nz and Diversityworks on Youtube www.youtube.com/user/diversitynz
- *Attitude TV* feature on Philip Patston (2009) ... see www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnXh_sW39_0
- Philip Patston was a Winston Churchill Fellow in 1992 ... see “*Alternatively Speaking in a Talkist Society - conversations with Americans who use assistive technology in communication*” report to Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Board by Philip Patston (June 1993)
- “*Constructive Functional Diversity: A new paradigm beyond disability and impairment*” by Philip Patston (2007) published in the journal of Disability & Rehabilitation, available online at tinyurl.com/9509617
- *Diversity Inquiry* ... see www.youtube.com/watch?v=PoQSw_9ldTY
- “*A Giant Leap - Disability Culture, Queer and Not So*” by Philip Patston in *BENT: A Journal of CripGay Voices*/July 2005 at www.bentvoices.org/bentvoices/patston_great_leap.htm
- *Creative Momentum* ... see also interview with Sir Ken Robinson where he makes a compelling case for educational, commercial and cultural organisations to consider diversity, creativity and the nature of ability into the future. <http://vimeo.com/3553704>
- *Diversityworks Peer Support Network* <http://dpsn.net.nz> ... has been generously supported by the Todd Foundation.
- *NZ Government Disability Issues Campaign* see “*Budget 2010 - Improving Attitudes to Disabled People*” at tinyurl.com/4dmkvas
- *comments on experiences at the Skoll World Forum* by Philip Patston are from his 200GR8 blog <http://200gr8.blogspot.com/>.
- “*From Whinger to Wise Man*” Presentations by Philip Patston in Newcastle, Oxford, Manchester, and Exeter (March April 2008) www.philippatston.com/blog/from-whinger-to-wise-man/
- *ART Venture programme* ... comments taken from “*Fellow Ventures*” article by Philip Patston published in Idealog #16 (August 2008) idealogue.co.nz/magazine/16/fellow-ventures
- *The Creative Collide* ... blog by Philip Patston www.thebigidea.co.nz/news/blogs/the-creative-collide
- *Philip Patston Jive Live poetry* ... see www.youtube.com/watch?v=4G5Rg8R71rE
- *Philip Patston comments* taken from workshop presentations at the NZ Social Entrepreneur Fellowship Retreats at Long Bay 2007 – 2009, and also interviews with vivian Hutchinson 15 August 2008 and 1st July 2009, and interview for the HOW COMMUNITIES HEAL project 15 December 2010.
- More articles in this series, and further information on the HOW COMMUNITIES HEAL project can be found at www.nzsef.org.nz/howcommunitiesheal
- If you want to be notified of future releases of articles in this series, you can sign-up for our mailing list at tinyurl.com/HCHsign-up





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- This project is on Twitter at [@HowCommHeal](https://twitter.com/HowCommHeal) using the tags [#HowCH](https://twitter.com/hashtag/HowCH) and [#socent](https://twitter.com/hashtag/socent)
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