It is a real pleasure to be speaking to an audience from the Blavatnik. One of the strongest lines of narrative in my life reaches back 24 years to a time when I was an impressionable doctoral student sitting in Exam Schools listening to a series of lectures by a visiting scholar, entitled the Ascents of Love, which opened my eyes to the possibilities of what a lecture could be and shaped one of the series of steps that leads to me addressing you today. That visiting academic was Professor Martha Nussbaum, and 20 years later I sat in your lecture theatre and had the privilege of asking the first question after she had delivered her acceptance lecture upon winning the Kyoto Prize. She spoke about the role disgust plays in shaping society's narrative around old age. It's a theme I have returned to many times in my work with Oxford's Futures Thinking Network as I think about the way in which environmental movements create utopias that use the mechanisms of holiness and disgust to exclude disabled people from their ideal societies. I hope some of you here today who might be working on sustainability, smart cities, or transport policy might be interested enough by that idea to come back to it, chew on it, and make the societies you will inevitably shape not just a little more accessible but a little more creative as a result.

What do you say when you have only 10 minutes to tackle such a vast subject as mental health and mental illness? Do you go broad, a rat-a-tat-tat of the myriad ways higher education throws up barriers and a whistlestop tour of the failed attempts to remove them? Do you go deep, forensically examining the extent of the income gap faced by those with the most common mental health conditions who earn just ⅔ as much as their peers, and listing the ways in which our handling of the pandemic, and the unequal CVs that have resulted from it, will widen it even more over the coming decades while doing your best Cassandra impression in predicting that no one will have the foresight to collect the data that would help stave off such a catastrophe - precisely because the system is so broken that those with the necessary lived experience are gatekept out of such research and strategy decisions?

In my case, you fall back on your most familiar territory, telling stories.

My first story is an answer to by far the most common question I'm asked whenever I give a workshop for managers, and it's this. How can I get someone in my team to tell me if they've got a problem, because I can't help if I don't know?

This is a story that starts, as so many of the most important stories tend to do: at the end. It starts with a manager, Steve, sitting at his desk shaking his head. He has just had to send a final email to Jem, After months of escalating procedures through Jem's sickness, he has finally let them go. What more could he have done? "If only you'd come to me earlier, I could have done something," he wrote. But, he thinks to himself as he closes his laptop, shrugs, and gets on with his day, "How could I have known?"

Now our story takes us back in time, to that first day in the new office as Jem excitedly arranges their things on their new desk - their purple journal and pen, the purple photoframe, and the purple letter trays they've had since student days. "Are you all set up?" asks their new boss, Steve, "Anything you need, you can order up from supplies." "Well," says Jem enthusiastically, "I just need some paperclips. I saw the catalogue has some purple ones. It'd be epic if I could have some of those." It'd really make my desk feel like home, they think.

"Sorry," says Steve. "We have a supply of plain metal clips in the cupboard. Help yourself. You know what they say, 'watch the pennies.'" Jem smiles, knowing that's the correct reaction to the first thing your new boss says to you. Inside they shrink a little, a light dims, something begins to die, a familiar wall goes up. That night they take their purple journal back to the sanctuary of home. It's nothing they haven't been through before they reflect as they stare at the ceiling, unable to sleep. They'd hoped it would be different this time, but if that's how Steve reacts when they ask for something as small as a purple paperclip, there's no way he's going to listen to what they need to make the workplace work for their depression.

In short, if you want to make it safe for your team to talk to you about their mental health, what matters most is how you behave long before they ever need to approach you. The way you talk about and act around things that are not related to mental health tells such an important story about how you would respond to someone coming to you to talk about mental health.

The second story is a personal one. I want to go back to the late Summer of 2017 though, to be honest, it could be pretty much any time because this is a story I have lived again and again. I've always loved being creative. During my doctorate I spent a long time looking at creative memory techniques in early modern England. I have taught creative thinking to everyone from school children to software programmers to intelligence analysts. I've also been competing at creative thinking for more than 2 decades, and in the late Summer of 2017 I won the second of 3 world championships.

Just two days later, our washing machine broke. For most people, ordering a new washing machine (we knew exactly which one we wanted) would take about 5 minutes, and an hour of someone's time when it was delivered.

But my spouse and I are both bipolar. They are autistic; I have ADHD and dyspraxia. As a result of the impact of these conditions on our ability to plan and communicate, it took me 10 hours just to place the order. And I had to recount intimate medical details to more than 10 different individuals before I found a company that would allow me to have the delivery arranged in an accessible manner. It was distressing, humiliating, and left me wrung out, and temporarily broken to the extent I was able to do nothing but sit at my desk and stare at a blank screen for days after. It was the kind of episode that embodies so many of the reasons for the income gap I mentioned earlier.

I posted about the experience on Facebook and got a very interesting comment back — “genuinely interested, do you have any idea what it is about the difficult stuff that means you can do it when you can’t do the easy stuff”. It took me completely aback because the answer is obvious — I can’t do the difficult stuff, like answering a telephone call, I can do the easy stuff, solving puzzles. And then of course it clicked. As a society we have objectified our definitions of easy and difficult rather than accepting that the terms are relative. If you can do “difficult things” therefore, you must be able to do all things with no help at all, and if you can’t do “easy” things then there must be nothing you can do.

The problem always seems to boil down to the fact it is so easy to see one side of a person and then draw conclusions about the rest of them from that.

This has happened to me in the workplace. When I ask for adaptations in order to help me do my job, the level of work I am given is lowered, the amount of work reduced, the opportunities I am given lessened because “we don’t want to put pressure on you” or “we know you struggle” - as though what I struggle with is delivering presentations of performing complex calculations or seeing the deep implications of policy and strategy and not, let’s see, having to work fixed hours despite fluctuating health and being forced to use the telephone. And so I end up with tasks I cannot perform well and because I cannot perform them well I am given tasks that are so-called “easier” which I can do less well, and the spiral continues

But when I stay silent about the adaptations I need, I find that work at which I would otherwise excel comes with sets of procedures, utterly irrelevant to the task at hand, such as the clothes you should wear to carry it out, a deadline not for the final work but for every stage it is assumed you will take along the way, the form of communication any collaborations are to take, and the linear medium in which everything related to the task is to be delivered. And so I fail at that too.

In both cases, people end up unable to do what they are capable of doing, and the organisations that employ them end up losing out on their potential

It has also happened to me with speaking and consultancy. I am sure many of you will, sadly, be able to relate to the fact that when you are involved in any field and you are also part of an underrepresented group in that field, your invitation is always to sit on the panel about “diversity in…” whatever field it is, rarely the panels discussing the art or craft or nuance of the field itself. As a disabled person, I am used to being invited as an “expert by experience” but rarely as an “expert by expertise.”

On the other hand, when people don’t know about my disability and invite me to speak, or to consult, I am rarely if ever asked if I have any access needs - and none are provided by default. It’s not an example that relates to a hidden disability but this failing was epitomised when I spoke as part of an event at Wolfson College about disability, fiction, and technology. When I arrived, the whole lecture theatre had wheelchair access - except for the stage. A brand new flagship building had been through planning and committees for years and literally no one, at

any stage, had thought to ask, “what if one of the lecturers is a wheelchair user?” Needless to say my wheelchair-using fellow panellist had a lot of extra material.

If we are going to empower disabled people to flourish, we need a society that sees what we can do and what we cannot.

And as a world we do need to empower disabled people - this is just part of a wider need to amplify the voices not currently heard, to bring to bear on so many existential threats and wicked problems the perspectives we currently ignore. At present these stories are heard only in tiny huddles around dimming fires. They are the whisper and the chatter that whistle through cloisters of foundation myths carved in stone. We know that wind and water and dust can carve new landscapes, and that is what gives us hope. But we also know that for them to do so takes geological periods of time. And that is what gives us urgency.