

GIFTEDNESS Vs DISABILITY

A Reflection

Text: Judith Snow

I AM SOMEWHAT reflective these days, as I've discovered it doesn't help to run after answers. It's better to ask good questions. If we can frame a few good questions, we can spend our lives trying out answers.

One such question for me is: "How is it that I am not perceived to be a member of the public - a citizen? What can my friends do to change that perception?"

When I was born, I was a member of the general public. People were willing to support me because they expected something of me. There were systems to support me: education, transportation, family, et cetera.

When I was seven months old, I was labelled 'disabled', and that label changed my life. People no longer expected my family to be there for me - or supported my family to be with me. The Educational system was no longer there for me. My family had to fight so I could go to school. The transportation system was no longer there for me - and still isn't. No one expected me to 'be there' or to make a contribution.

Luckily for me, my family was different. They expected me to make a contribution. That fact made a tremendous difference in my life.

The fact that I was not considered to be a member of the general public totally changed my life. Today, my life is built around the constant battle for me to simply be a member of the public.

There are people in every generation who can run really well and do amazing physical feats. People like Ben Johnson, and Olympic divers and skaters. We say they are gifted. It is interesting that there are as many people like Ben Johnson as there are like me. But there is one profound difference. People really enjoy and value the fact that Ben can run, or that my classmate Beverly could dive. I don't understand what intrinsic use it is to be an Olympic class diver or runner.

For Bev to become an Olympic class diver, our society created thousands of gifts. We created opportunities for pool builders, coaches, pool cleaners, advertisers, swim suit manufacturers, et cetera. People got up at four o'clock every morning, travelled thousands of miles, raised tens of thousands of dollars. Thousands of people were involved in making this possible.

A person who is labelled disabled needs exactly the same support. I need people to be friends, to tutor, to raise money, to set up special places, to do governmental negotiations - exactly the same things that Beverly needed to become an Olympic class diver.

What is the difference? What prevents society from seeing me as important and exciting as Bev?

There was a serious mistake. Someone jumped the gun and labelled me a problem. Instead of seeing me as a gift and an opportunity, I was called a problem and became a project. I was not supported by 'the community'. I was serviced by staff. People's livelihood was determined by their fixation on fixing me. But this is crazy because we are not fixable. We never stop to think about that. Our society has created a billion dollar industry to fix people who are not fixable. It is destined to failure. It doesn't work and there are tremendous costs both to society and to the people who cannot be fixed.

People's lives are wasted. The 'helpers' get trained to do something that is useless and doesn't work. Not surprisingly, there is an incredible burn out rate. When things don't work, people get angry and that breeds

violence. It is no wonder that so many special educators and human service workers spend the vast majority of their time doing paper work. It is a logical response when their job (to fix people) doesn't work and only generates frustration and anger.

There is another cost. The Community is denied the talents, gifts, contributions and opportunities of all the people who are excluded.

The answer is simple - see me as gifted not as disabled. Throw away the concept of disability. Welcome the concept of Giftedness. □

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