

David L. Jenson

Brett Campbell, M.S.W., C.S.W.

Study of Disabilities, Final Essay

July 31, 2011

Understanding the Disabled

Early one morning, on a day set aside and freed from regular responsibilities, I journeyed to a volunteer center to fulfill an assignment for my Study of Disabilities course. At the volunteer center I had the opportunity to associate and work with young children who had a wide variety of disabilities. This brought to mind many awkward instances in the past as I had interacted with relatives and acquaintances who had disabilities. I began to wonder what causes the gaps between the individuals with disabilities and the individuals without disabilities. I wondered what could be done to begin to bridge these gaps in my own life with my own relatives, as well as the gaps within society.

In the world today, as in times past, there are a great many individuals with disabilities. There are few people who, if they are not disabled in some way themselves, have not been personally acquainted with or known about someone who is. People with disabilities are the nation's largest minority, and the only one that any person can join at any time (Disability Diversity, 2010). These individuals with disabilities are more often than not faced with biases, stereotyping, and discrimination as they struggle to find their place in society. We, as a society, must strive to better the lives of these individuals, give them the respect that they need and deserve, and include them as a part of society. For, as Cardinal Roger Mahony stated, "Any

society, any nation, is judged on the basis of how it treats its weakest members -- the last, the least the littlest" (Mahony, 1998).

Historically individuals with disabilities have relied upon the charity of others within their environment, through clergy or family relations, for their support. With the passing of the ADA in 1990 and the introduction of governmental aid these individual are no longer dependant on this charity for their support. They are also legally protected from discrimination due to the ADA. The world, especially the United States, has made great strides in the effort to prevent injustices against individuals with disabilities and give them equal opportunities in education and employment. This process has been very slow however. Many still feel excluded and marginalized. Joshua Malinga expressed his feelings that "all governments treat disabled people badly. They all see us as a burden. All governments, whether capitalist or socialist, have separated us from the rest of society... Until we are businessmen, politicians, community leaders, people at all levels of society, we will be marginalized and segregated" (Study of Disabilities, pp. 268).

Negative attitudes and stereotypical labeling serve to limit individuals with disabilities despite the strides in governmental policies. Disabled persons are viewed in society according to their disability rather than according to their ability to perform tasks. Walter Mitchell gave a great example that describes his feelings when he said, "before I was paralyzed, there were ten thousand things I could do. Now there are nine thousand. I could dwell on the one thousand lost or focus on the nine thousand I have left" (Study of Disabilities, pp. 272). The tendency in society is to focus on these lost talents.

As a former owner of a company and an employer I personally have a somewhat unique perspective regarding individuals with disabilities, their employment, and their ability to perform in the workplace. I don't recall any instruction or requirements when I obtained my business license, in 2001, regarding my responsibilities, as an employer, to individuals with disabilities. It has been ten years since I passed the test and probably forgot many of the details due to the passage of time and the issue not coming up. It is also possible that, since my license is specifically designated for the authorized construction of homes and buildings, any seriously disabled person would not likely meet the minimum requirements for employment. I don't believe that there any details in the ADA that specify what the minimum requirements are in each field. It would be interesting to know if there are any specified differences based on the type of business. The ADA does however only apply to "employers with fifteen or more employees" (Facts, 2008).

In our disabilities class our instructor detailed an imaginary, but very likely, circumstance where a blind person and a person without any disability applied for a job that had only one opening. Each applicant was equally qualified. Remembering that, by law, the blind person could not be discriminated against and the necessary equipment and reasonable accommodations requisite for his/her performance, must be provided no matter the expense, our instructor asked his students which individual we would hire. This imaginary situation was fascinating to me and I viewed it as I would have in my past role. I had to sit back and examine myself as I seriously contemplated this question. Time and performance is money and I know this for a fact when it comes to framing homes. The additional accommodation and equipment costs are also a big consideration when it comes to a small business. It seems that the designers of the ADA were aware of these issues as can be seen from the following: "An employer does not have to provide

a reasonable accommodation if it imposes an "undue hardship." Undue hardship is defined as an action requiring significant difficulty or expense when considered in light of factors such as an employer's size, financial resources, and the nature and structure of its operation." "An employer is not required to lower quality or production standards to make an accommodation" (Facts, 2008).

As I contemplated the situation above I considered the fact that I could not ask what the disability was. My first concern was the individual's ability to safely perform tasks in a dangerous construction environment. I wondered how I could find this out without asking about and knowing what the disability was. To be honest I would have had no problem hiring the individual with the disability if he/she met the minimum requirements. In fact, I have a greater respect for an individual who has been able to overcome the social and environmental handicaps to equally qualify for a position in my company. Obviously, to me anyway, a blind person would not meet the requirements necessary for employment in a home or building framing environment. However, every employee that I ever had had specific abilities and inabilities. I had no problem delegating tasks according to an employee's ability and I see little difference between inability and disability. Either way the specific task must be delegated elsewhere. I have in fact previously employed or worked with several individuals with disabilities ranging from ankle problems, to cognitive and hearing impairments. I believe that everyone deserves a chance, especially when they pursue an open opportunity and can reasonably perform the needed tasks.

In the opening paragraph above I alluded to the awkwardness I felt in my interactions with relatives and acquaintances who had disabilities. I believe that this is a natural feeling and reaction that society in general feels in such circumstances. I've seen it with each one of my

kids. They have an aunt with a cognitive disability that has limited her mental development. She is 36 years old with an approximate mental age of about 5 or 6. My Mother's sister is completely knotted up due to a severe case of arthritis. I've watched my children's attitude and familiarity change as they learned to accept these relatives the way they are and I remember my own adjustments as well. I feel that in most cases this awkwardness is not intended to diminish or belittle the individual with disabilities. It is fear and an unfamiliarity that causes these kinds of reactions. Christopher Reeve's proposition sums up the matter. He said, "the point is, we are all one great big family, and any one of us can get hurt at any moment. ...We should never walk by somebody who's in a wheel chair and be afraid of them or think of them as a stranger." (Study of Disabilities, 2011).

I am very grateful for the opportunity that I've had to take this Study of Disabilities course. Although I've had a fair amount of experience with individuals with disabilities, this class has still opened my eyes! Having an instructor who has personal experience and perspective has been incredible! My experience volunteering was also amazing! I will always remember these experiences! It is my opinion that many of the struggles and problems individuals with disabilities face in regards to biases, discrimination, and exclusion would begin to diminish if more people were so privileged. The education of society about the disabled is, in my opinion, a beginning step in the process of bridging the gap between the two and providing equality as well as an increased quality of life for the disabled among us.

References

- Disability Diversity in Society. (2010, May 24). Retrieved July 31, 2011 from the *Disabled World* website at <http://www.disabled-world.com/disability/diversity.php#ixzz1ThbwY994>
- Facts About the Americans with Disability Act. (2008, September 9). Retrieved on July 31, 2011, from the *U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission* web site at <http://www.eeoc.gov/facts/fs-ada.html>
- Mahony, Roger. (1998, November 12). *Creating a Culture of Life*. Retrieved July 31, 2011, from *Priests for Life* the website at <http://www.priestsforlife.org/magisterium/mahonyelectionltr.htm>
- Study of Disabilities. (2011). *Ableism: Disability does not Mean Inability*. Boston, MA: Pearson Custom Publishing.