

SPOTLIGHT ON DIVERSITY

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

We love differences and diversity. When I look at the pencil cup on my desk, I love to see the different types and colors of pens, pencils, and markers at my disposal. I'm the proud owner of three different types of mechanical pencils! And check out the suitcases in my garage: I have a wide variety—different sizes, colors, and materials. My hairstyle has changed over the years; I like a new and different look every now and then. I cherish the few aspen trees that are different from the pines that fill our yard.

Everywhere we look, we love differences and diversity in: pens, pencils, cars, hair styles, computers, clothes, shoes, food, furniture, flowers and trees, telephones, music, art, vacations, weather, pets, hair spray, shave cream, shower gels, and . . . the list is endless. We seem to love diversity and differences in all things except people—specifically, people with disabilities. Before wading into the disability aspect of this subject, let's look at some examples in more detail.

When summer is upon us, some of us savor an isolated cabin by a lake for a week's worth of peace and quiet—we value simplicity. Others may prefer a busy two weeks, cramming in as much fun as possible at Disney World, Epcot Center, Sea World, Universal Studios, and every tourist attraction in between. We value nonstop excitement. These two vacations are very different *and they're both valuable*. How awful if we all had to take the same kind of vacation!

Moving on to people, our society is learning to value diversity among humans. Community events and conferences celebrate cultural, gender, ethnic, religious, age, and/or sexual orientation diversity, highlighting the value, participation, and contributions of groups who have been marginalized, devalued, or ignored.

But have you noticed that people with disabilities are usually *not* part of diversity celebrations? Why? Are they not seen as a group that has been marginalized, devalued, ignored, and worse, throughout recorded history? Don't proponents of diversity recognize that people with disabilities exist *within the groups* that are usually included in diversity celebrations? Are individuals with disabilities *invisible* to promoters of diversity?

I don't know the answers to these questions. But at a recent non-disability conference, a participant approached me after my "Disability is Natural" presentation and said, "I feel just awful! For years I've done 'diversity presentations,' and never included people with disabilities. I just never thought about them!" I appreciated her honesty, and I wondered if her attitude is common to other diversity proponents.

There's much work to be done to ensure people with disabilities are recognized as valuable members of, and participants in, our society. A first step is to educate diversity promoters. But before educating others, we need to ask them *why* people with disabilities have been excluded from the diversity movement. It's difficult to effectively educate someone if we don't understand her mindset to begin with.

We can volunteer our time and efforts in diversity celebrations. We can collaborate with others and work toward common goals. As a whole, people with disabilities have much in common with other groups who have been marginalized. You may have other ideas to resolve this issue. If so, let me know and I'll pass them on to others! When we rectify this situation, we'll make the world a better place.

But there's a bigger issue—one that probably has a more profound impact on the lives of people with disabilities than being left out of diversity celebrations. It's an issue of our individual hearts and minds.

We may publicly profess that we value and respect people with disabilities. Simultaneously, we may have great difficulty seeing the value of a particular individual with a disability (a son, daughter, student, client, etc.). So let's explore this further.

If we go back and look at the vacations described earlier, we can see that both trips—one to a simple cabin, the other to busy tourist attractions—have pros and cons. The simple cabin trip may restore our peace, but it could also lead to boredom. We *choose*, however, to put a spotlight on the positive. The busy tourist attraction trip may be great fun, but it could also be tiring. Again, we tend to minimize the potential downside, and focus on the positive.

2 - Spotlight on Diversity

Moreover, when people *without* disabilities speak about themselves, they almost always focus on the positives and ignore or minimize the negatives. If I want you to like and respect me, I *don't* tell you about the dirty ring in my toilet bowl, my poor math skills, or that I sometimes try to get by wearing day-old mascara! Ditto for my husband. I'm not going to tell you about the boil on his behind or other details that might cast him in a negative light. How rude and insensitive!

Yet this is what many of us routinely do when speaking or thinking about people with disabilities. We are so focused on the diagnosis and/or what a person cannot do that *we may not see* a person's strengths and abilities.

Worse, we share "negative" information with others. Not only is this rude, but it amounts to a form a vicious gossip! We have the power to *ruin people's lives with our words*.

Since we focus on the positives in describing ourselves (and our pets, vacations, and many more things), what will it take for us to aim the spotlight on the positive characteristics of people with disabilities? And how might this affect people with disabilities, and our society, as a whole?

We can begin by making a list of a person's strengths, gifts, and talents. You might find this relatively easy, or you may not currently see many strengths. If you're in the latter category, I suggest you look harder. Every person—regardless of the type or severity of disability—has strengths, abilities, and talents.

This activity may be easier if you first list your *own* strengths. Consider this a practice session that can get your creative juices flowing. What are *your* strengths, abilities, and talents? And how are *your differences* valuable? Are you quiet, outgoing, sensitive, bold, musical, artistic, focused, flexible, neat, or what? Do you love camping, movies, sports, animals, rainy days, funny jokes, jazz, the ocean, the mountains, the Sunday paper, or what? Are you a good friend, a budding chef, a weather-watcher, a churchgoer, a stamp collector, a good listener, a dumpster-diver, a people-watcher, or . . . ?

There is something that is much more scarce, something far finer, something rarer than ability. It is the ability to recognize ability.

Elbert Hubbard

Once you've listed your own strengths, shine the spotlight on a child or adult with a disability in your life. If your list of his strengths doesn't grow quickly (1) think more broadly, (2) ask others who know the person, and/or (3) get to know the person better.

Come up with as many strengths as possible, over a period of time. Begin with those that come easily to mind, then put the list aside and go back to it later. A list of twenty is a good minimum. Think, think, think! Share the list with the person, and ask what he would add.

Next, think about how this list can change the person's life. Will the person look differently in your own eyes? Will he *see himself* differently? Might new possibilities for friendships, education,

employment, activities, and in other areas develop? And what will happen when *your relationship* with the person is based on his strengths, instead of the perceived deficits?

Think about the relationship you have with your spouse or best friend. Healthy, positive relationships are based on the sharing of strengths. My best friend and I would not be friends for long if we continually harped on each other's weaknesses! The members of my family (including myself) would not be emotionally healthy if I focused primarily on what they can't/don't do. Thinking about most families, if we didn't *purposely* "see the good" in those closest to us, we might even decide we don't like being around them some of the time!

It takes little or no effort to see the perceived "deficits" or "problems" of people with disabilities. We may think a wheelchair, the lack of speech or hearing, behavioral traits, or other characteristics tell us something important about a person. We may, in fact, believe the disability is the *defining characteristic* of the person, and that's where our spotlight is erroneously aimed.

Isn't it time to make a *purposeful effort* to spotlight the strengths, abilities, and talents of individuals with disabilities? And isn't it also time for people with disabilities (the largest minority group in the U.S., estimated at 54 million or one in five people) to be included in celebrations of diversity?