

Tunnel vision: we all have it—to one degree or another and in one area or another. And when we recognize we have it, we can then work to eliminate it! I discovered it in myself recently, and it was an eye-opening revelation.

While spending time with my 81-year-old mother, I went shopping for some things she needed. (She was recovering from a broken hip.) On the shopping list

was a lampshade for a “near-antique” lamp. The base of the lamp was a horse (probably made of bronze with that greenish tint common to aged metal). It was in my mom’s study, which included a large Oriental carpet of red and white, with a little gold and green. The lampshade was in good shape, but it was solid black, which didn’t allow much light. Thus, in my mind, a white or beige shade would be better. Off I went to the store, where I was able to quickly find the right-sized lampshade from all the light-colored shades on display. Wow—that was easy!

My joy was short-lived, for when I returned to my mom’s with the lampshade, I found it wouldn’t work. The “harp” (the thing that holds the shade on the bulb) was made for a different type of lamp. So back to the store I went. This time, I realized I needed to be more thoughtful. As I stood back from the display to take it all in, imagine my shock when I saw *more* than the light-colored shades I had seen before. I saw the *perfect* lampshade: a red, green, gold striped fabric that matched the colors in her room! I took it down from the shelf to take a closer look and thought, “Why didn’t I see this the first time around?” Because I had tunnel vision. I was focused on finding a light-colored lampshade, and *that’s all I saw!* My mind was not open to any other possibility the first time around, so I literally did not see anything else! Only when

BEYOND

Tunnel Vision*

***The tendency to focus exclusively on a single or limited goal or point of view.**
(from my computer dictionary)

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow
www.disabilityisnatural.com

my *mind* was open to other possibilities did my *eyes* see other possibilities! This experience led to my thinking about how many times we’ve had tunnel vision about individuals who happen to have disabilities.

How many of us—parents, teachers, service providers, and others—see a person primarily through the lens of the disability? In doing so, we may literally be unable to *see*

anything beyond the diagnosis, like the person’s strengths, abilities, talents, etc., as well as options, possibilities, and/or strategies to ensure a person can live the life of his or her dreams.

How many physicians continue to spew dream-crushing prognoses to parent about their children, because they can’t see that people with disabilities can lead happy, productive, successful lives? How many parents are fearful about their child’s future, because they see only what “experts” tell them? How many are hopeless, because they can’t see a real life for their child beyond the service system?

How many parents and therapists (physical, occupational, speech, etc.) are focused on remediating a child’s “deficits” through therapy, instead of recognizing the value of power wheelchairs, communication devices, and other supports that would render many therapies unnecessary? How many parents allow their children’s (and families’) lives to be taken over by therapies and interventions, because they can’t see more natural ways of assisting their children?

How many educators believe a student with a disability cannot learn and be successful in general ed classrooms, because they can’t see the many ways a child can learn? How many service providers believe an adult with a disability can’t have a real job, live on his/her own, etc., because they just can’t see

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how any of that would ever be possible, for whatever reasons?

How many children and adults with disabilities do not believe in themselves and their potential, because they've never seen anyone else believe in them? And in the process, how much potential is ignored and how many hopes and dreams are crushed?

When doing a particular presentation and/or when talking one-on-one to a family member, I often ask others to tell me the strengths of a person with a disability (their child, the person they provide services to, etc.). I wait for a response, and when none is forthcoming, I repeat the question in different ways, such as, "What does he/she love to do? What does he/she do well? What is he/she interested in learning?" All of these things, and many more, are strengths. But in response to my questions, many people respond with blank looks and are speechless; they're unable to see any strengths in the person—and how incredibly sad this is, for all of us have strengths!

Too many times—like my lamp shade experience—we see only what we plan to see, want to see, or expect to see. Our minds are closed to other ideas, unless and until we widen our perspectives *and* eliminate the diagnosis as the defining characteristic of the person. On the one hand, it seems progress is being made as more and more people replace antiquated, pejorative descriptors with the more respectful People First Language, and put the person before the disability. On the other hand, how much progress has really been made if we choose to *speak* respectfully, but are still unable to see or think beyond the diagnosis? We may talk the talk, but don't walk the walk. And our actions always speak louder than our words.

One mother of a 14-year-old girl who has a diagnosis of autism had a life-changing epiphany right before my eyes. She admitted that from the time her daughter was diagnosed at the age of four, every time

she looked at her daughter, she saw the word "autism" tattooed on her forehead. That's all she saw! She then burst into tears, recognizing that this narrow vision of her daughter had resulted in many negative outcomes, and she resolved to change her ways on the spot—and she did. Her tunnel vision was gone, and her daughter's life changed for the better. The same can be true for anyone.

What will it take for each of us to eliminate our tunnel vision and the harm that it engenders? First, recognize that *you* may be "afflicted with tunnel vision"! Acknowledging the problem is the first step in resolving it. Second, step back to get a wider view (like

I finally did in the lamp shade aisle). Instead of allowing your perception of the person's disability to overshadow everything else, recognize that a disability is just a medical diagnosis, and it's just one of many characteristics of the person (and certainly not the most important one). And learn to see with your eyes and your heart. The person

you're looking at is a multi-dimensional human with feelings, dreams, experiences, hopes, and more—just like you. So, third, consider what you haven't yet seen that's been there all the time. What *are* the person's strengths, abilities, interests, and dreams? And how do these make the person more *similar* to you (and/or others without disabilities) than different? Fourth, what possibilities, options, choices, and/or opportunities can now be explored?

Finally, try to walk in the shoes of the person with a disability you care about. What would it feel like if those who cared about you had tunnel vision and saw you only through the lens of one characteristic, like *your* medical diagnosis, your "inappropriate behavior" (we've all been "inappropriate" at one time or another), your difficulties/problems, and so forth.

When we widen our perspectives, imagine the changes that can occur, in ourselves and in the lives of people with disabilities. And won't it be a wondrous joy to get to know the "new person"—*the real person*—your newly-opened mind has discovered?

And now here is my secret, a very simple secret; it is only with the heart that one can see rightly, what is essential is invisible to the eye.

Antoine de Saint Exupéry