

THE HIERARCHY OF INSULTS

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

Listen to talk radio, watch a sitcom, or just pay attention to your own conversations at home or work, and you'll hear "retard," "idiot," "moron," "imbecile," "lame," "crazy," "schizo," "spaz," and more. The American public has decided that these—and many others—are great words to use as insults and slurs. They roll off the tongue so easily, while the brain gives little thought to what these words mean, where they came from, or what impact they have.

What these and other words have in common is they were, or are, *medical diagnoses*. And in our society, these particular diagnoses fall under the category of "disability." But we don't use *other* medical diagnoses as slurs or insults do we? I've never heard a child on a playground yell, "You're such a *diabetic*—you can't play with us!" No, "*retard*" is the insult of choice.

I've never heard a radio talk show host describe Congress as, "a bunch of *sciatics*." No, "a bunch of *idiots*," is a favorite descriptor. On a sitcom, I've never heard an actor recite, "That guy's a *cancer patient*!" No, "That guy's a *moron*," will get a bigger laugh.

Decades ago, my teenaged friends and I hurled "spaz" at others—it seemed such a juicy insult, even though we had no idea what it meant. Irony of ironies, my son has spastic diplegia cerebral palsy.

Upon his birth and my entrance into disability activism, I began caring deeply about language and its impact on people. I've worked hard to clean up my own vocabulary, and have tried to raise my children to be more aware of hurtful words. So when my then sixth-grade daughter used the word "lame" in describing what happened at school one day, a heart-to-heart was in order. When questioned, she revealed that in her circle of friends, lame meant dumb or stupid. We looked up the dictionary definition of

this antiquated word, and I explained that some people would *still* use that word about her brother, since he uses a wheelchair. I then asked what she was saying about her brother, and others with physical disabilities, when she used lame to mean dumb or stupid? She got the message loud and clear, and that word—and others—were excised from her brain.

We need to think about why so many people use this category of words in a derogatory fashion. Could it be that in the hierarchy of insults, these words are at the top of the list; higher than "jerk," "creep," "stupid," and even profanity?

When a child screams "retard" across the playground for all to hear, he has *chosen* to use a word that will inflict the *most emotional damage* to another. In his mind, a "retard" is obviously the lowest of the low. And this example (as well as many others) should trouble us—deeply. For the use of these words as insults represents the extreme devaluation of people with disabilities—men, women, boys, and girls—who happen to have certain medical diagnoses. Does anyone consider how the use of these words hurts those who actually have the medical diagnoses represented by these slurs?

Collateral damage can be just as harmful as a direct hit. And when these verbal missiles are launched again and again—on the playground, at the workplace, in our own homes, and on radio and TV—the wound never has a chance to heal.

As a society, most of us (I hope) have evolved in our thinking. We recognize the danger in using slurs related to ethnicity, religion, gender, or other characteristics, and we've taken those words out of our vocabularies. Isn't it time to do the same with disability-related insults?