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# A New Way of Thinking

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Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, [www.disabilityisnatural.com](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com)

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Throughout history, a variety of strategies have been used to solve the “problem” of disability. In ancient times, Grecian and Roman laws mandated the abandonment or death of babies with disabilities, to fulfill society’s quest of achieving “human perfection.” During the early part of the Christian era, the presence of disability was often thought to be the result of the person being sinful. Religious leaders tried to cure individuals with disabilities through prayer or healing practices, as well as by “beating the devil” out of the “afflicted.”

Fast forward to the first half of the twentieth century, when the solution to cure “deviancy” was found in the “special training” available only in institutions for the “feeble-minded.” Hundreds of thousands of children and adults were abandoned in institutions, where segregation, isolation, abuse of all kinds, and death were commonplace.

Under the conventional wisdom of the time, “feeble-mindedness” and other conditions were thought to be hereditary, so the ultimate cure was preventing people with disabilities from making more of “their own kind.” Thousands of men and women with disabilities were involuntarily sterilized.

This inhumane practice was upheld by the United States Supreme Court, with Chief Justice Oliver

Wendell Holmes proclaiming, “Three generations of imbeciles is enough.” Eugenics (creating a society of the “well-born”) ruled the day.

A few years later, Adolph Hitler and the Nazis in Germany adopted American eugenics methods. Yes: Hitler and his minions learned from “eugenics experts” in the United States of America. Before

The world is a dangerous place,  
not because of those who do evil,  
but because of those who  
look on and do nothing.

*Albert Einstein*

The history of an oppressed people is hidden in the  
lies and the agreed-upon myths of its conquerors.

*Meridel LeSueur*

embarking on the extermination of “undesirables,” the Nazis experimented to ensure their methods would work. They first practiced on people with disabilities before taking on the larger population of Jewish people and others who didn’t represent Hitler’s view of a desirable master race. Isolation, segregation, incarceration, sterilization, abuse, experimentation, and murder were Hitler’s “cure for deviancy.”

So, from the beginning of recorded history, mythical perceptions and stereotypical attitudes have portrayed individuals with disabilities as different, aberrant, deficient, incompetent, and more. But like gender and ethnicity, a disability is simply one of many natural characteristics of being human. (The “white majority” once looked at people with “darker skin” as different and/or incompetent because of skin color. Ditto, people who constitute half of our population—women—were once seen as unequal on the basis of gender.) There have always been people with disabilities and differences in the world, and *there always will be.*

One of every five Americans is a person with a disability. Some people are born with conditions

we categorize as disabilities; others may acquire a disability through an accident or illness; and, if we live long enough, many of us will acquire a disability through the aging process. *Disability does not discriminate!* People with disabilities make up the largest “minority group” in the United States, and it’s the most inclusive! It includes individuals of all ages, genders, sexual orientation, ethnicities, socio-economic group, and/or religious affiliation. How can disability *not* be natural?

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### **WISDOM?**

Today, we look back on history and shake our heads in sadness and disgust, recognizing that the conventional wisdom of the past was wrong—horribly, horribly wrong.

It seems like we've come a long way. In the United States today, we have an array of laws that guarantee legal equality for people with disabilities. We also have more funding (billions of dollars) for more services and entitlements than at any other time in history—and more than any other nation in the world! The inhumane practices of the past have been replaced by community-based programs, services, and interventions. Mission statements of disability organizations and service provider agencies include references to inclusion, integration, the value of people with disabilities, and other “progressive” ideals.

Despite all the laws and services, however, too many children and adults still don't live the lives of their dreams. Instead, they experience second-class citizenship, dependency, physical segregation and/or social isolation in “special” programs, and more. In the worst-case scenarios, individuals with disabilities may be on the receiving end of abuse and harm in the very programs intended to “help” them.

Contrary to popular belief, legal equality and “special” services cannot guarantee inclusion, dignity, freedom, friendships, choice, self-direction, being seen as a valuable and competent human being, and many of the other ordinary, but precious, opportunities and experiences most of us take for granted. Don't these typical opportunities represent basic and inherent human rights that apply to each and every one of us?

Most Americans may agree with that question—we can really talk the talk! But when it comes time to walk the walk, that's a different story. Attitudes, perceptions, morals, ethics, and today's social policies are all involved in the disconnect between what we say and what we do.

### **PROGRESS?**

Perhaps we haven't come as far as we think. Today, society doesn't condone the murder or abandonment of “defective” babies at birth. Instead, we simply kill many before they're born, thanks to “advances” in prenatal and genetic medicine. (Is the “new science” of genetics just another version of eugenics?)

Today's conventional wisdom about disability is based on the Medical Model: identify the problem and provide a cure. This paradigm places the “problem” of disability within the person, so treatments and services attempt to “fix” the person: helping him achieve an “able-bodied” standard through therapies and other interventions and/or placing him in special, sheltered, segregated settings in order to “get him ready” for life in the real world.

Very young children with disabilities may spend countless hours, day in and day out, receiving “special services” and interventions, or attending “special programs”—*and in the process, their natural and joyous childhoods may be lost.* Many school-aged children with disabilities are sorted by medical diagnoses and shuttled into segregated special education classrooms. From there, they may have to “earn” their way into general ed classrooms when they've proven they're “ready.” In the meantime, they have no friends, they don't get invited to birthday parties, *and the greatest lesson they learn is that they don't belong.* Adults with disabilities, instead of working at the jobs of their choice and living in the homes of their choice, with the supports they need to succeed, may spend their days in sheltered, segregated day programs or workshops (earning sub-minimum wages), and their nights are spent in group homes or other segregated, congregate environments. As one day passes into the next, *so their lives pass by.* Their hopes are dashed, their dreams are unfulfilled, and opportunities to lead real lives evaporate.

We may have changed the locations where people with disabilities spend their time, but segregation, isolation, and invisibility are still with us.

Doubt is the beginning,  
not the end, of wisdom.  
*George Iles*

In the minds of many, all of these special programs will resolve the “problem” of disability. But the problem never has been the disability; the problem is (and has always been) society’s beliefs about disability. People with disabilities are not broken, and they don’t need to be fixed!

Old attitudes and perceptions—not the disability itself—constitute the greatest obstacle facing people with disabilities. This attitudinal barrier may not always be visible to the naked eye, but it rears its ugly head across all environments and results in children and adults with disabilities being socially isolated, physically segregated, and excluded from the mainstream of American society.

If—in hindsight—we know the conventional wisdom of the past was wrong, shouldn’t we thoughtfully ponder today’s conventional wisdom? Or will we continue to accept the status quo (even when it appears to be progressive), and leave it to future generations to wonder, “In the early part of the 21st century, people talked about the importance of inclusion, but why did they continue to embrace special programs that isolated and segregated people who had been labeled with disabilities?”

### ***A NEW DIRECTION***

Advocates in the field have traditionally agitated for more services and more funding. But we do not need more special programs that isolate and segregate people who have been labeled with disabilities. We need, instead, inclusion in schools, communities, employment, and in other typical environments. To move toward that direction requires us to recognize that disability is a “natural part of the human experience” (as stated in the U.S. Developmental Disabilities Act and other laws). In addition, we need to acknowledge that people with disabilities are fine, just the way they are!

Instead of focusing on the “problems” or the diagnosis of a person, we need to open our eyes a little wider and recognize and celebrate the abilities, strengths, talents, interests, and dreams of those who have been labeled. Isn’t that what happens in the

lives of people who have not been diagnosed with disabilities? When was the last time you broadcast all your problems to the world? Don’t you share your strengths instead?

Instead of trying to “fix” people with disabilities, we need to ensure they have the tools they need for success (such as assistive technology devices for movement, speech, and other needs) and accommodations (physical, social, or other types of support),

to enhance their successful inclusion and participation in the typical, ordinary environments most Americans take for granted. Isn’t this also what

we do for ourselves? We use tools, such as computers and other devices; seek and acquire the supports we need; and do whatever it takes to fulfill our dreams. Why should the lives of individuals with disabilities be any different?

Instead of thinking people with disabilities are incompetent—unable to learn, succeed, make decisions, and more—we need to presume competence. When we expect a person to learn, expect her to succeed, and expect her to make decisions about her life, she will! She may need assistive technology, supports, or accommodations to accomplish her goals, but so do we all.

Instead of believing people with disabilities are doomed to live pitiful, needy lives, we need to ensure they have the same opportunities as others to live Real Lives! And what’s the definition of a Real Life? It’s simple: what would the person be doing if he didn’t have a disability? With assistive technology, supports, or accommodations, there’s no reason why this can’t happen.

Instead of using special services that isolate and segregate individuals with disabilities and their families from the mainstream of their communities, we can forgo these “entitlements” and find the help and assistance we need from the natural supports and generic services in our communities. This is not rocket science, and it’s happening today. In the process, individuals with disabilities and their families are living Real Lives, included in their communities. (And those who provide special services can change the way they

Everyone thinks of changing the world  
but no one thinks of changing himself.

*Leo Tolstoy*

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do business to ensure services are provided in natural, inclusive settings!)

Today's laws and services may represent progress, and many benefits may have accrued from these legal and social policies. But the real solution to creating an inclusive society rests in the hearts and minds of each of us, and in the souls of our communities.

### **A GENTLE REVOLUTION**

Nothing short of a paradigm shift in how we think about disability is necessary for change to occur. Disability, like ethnicity, religion, age, gender, and other characteristics, is a natural part of life. Some people are born with disabilities, others acquire them later in life. (And if we live long enough, many of us will acquire a disability through an accident, illness, or the aging process.)

A disability diagnosis is not the defining characteristic of a person, any more than one's age, religion, ethnicity, or gender is the defining characteristic. We must never use a disability diagnosis to measure a person's value or predict a person's potential. And we must recognize that the presence of a disability is not an inherent barrier to a person's success.

We do not need to change people with disabilities! We need to change ourselves and how we think about disability. When we think differently, we'll talk differently. When we think and talk differently, we'll act differently. When we act differently, we'll be creating change in ourselves and our communities. In the process, the lives of people with disabilities will be changed, as well.

I am the proud parent of two wonderful young adults, one of whom has been given a disability diagnosis. I am also a wife, a daughter, a sister, a neighbor, a member of my community, a resident of Colorado, a friend of many people with and without disabilities,

a reader, a seamstress, a traveler, a public speaker and trainer on disability issues, and much more! If I live long enough, I may become a person with a disability. And I want to live in a society in which all people are valued, included, and live the lives of their dreams. I hope you do, too.

An oppressed people are authorized whenever they can to rise and break their fetters.

*Henry Clay*

Our Founding Fathers were inspired to rebel, seeking freedom from the oppressive past—the old ways of doing things. They embraced radical ideas and created a new nation. *Isn't it time for us to do the same? Isn't it time for a new way of thinking?*

What will it take to ensure that the sacred words of our nation's Declaration of Independence apply to people with disabilities: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

What will it take to ensure that people with disabilities enjoy first-class citizenship and live real lives: being included, having friends, being self-directed, enjoying both the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, and participating in and contributing to their communities?

A little rebellion now and then... is a medicine necessary for the sound health of government.

*Thomas Jefferson*

This is an exciting time, full of hope and promise! Each of us has an extraordinary opportunity to contribute to a gentle revolution that will enable adults and children with

disabilities to move from clienthood to citizenship! Are you ready for the change? Ready to embrace new ways of thinking? Ready to make a difference? Ready to promote positive images of children and adults with disabilities? Then let's get started! Explore all the pages of [www.disabilityisnatural.com](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com), be open to new ideas, sit and think awhile, talk with others, and do whatever it takes to create positive, long-lasting change. We can do this!