

My Experience

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Having been born with what many might consider a "minor" disability, the absence of a left hand, I have sometimes struggled with the question of "where do I fit?" I am clearly not able bodied. The military agreed and didn't send me to Vietnam. Of course I really do not understand what it would be like to have two hands since I never have. The world is set up for people that have two hands. Everything from tying your shoes to opening most containers assumes that you have good use of both hands. But what am I complaining about? I can walk upstairs, I can drive a car, etc. And so the debate has always gone. Inside of me at least.

What I do know is that I share a lot of common with other people who are disabled. I certainly feel the same about most issues. For example, I know that I am different and a minority in most settings. I was the only kid in my home town with one hand. I also have learned that I am treated differently by others because I am different. Like most disabled people I have been questioned all my life as to why I am different. Although I have gotten more comfortable with this over the years I have never quite gotten used to it. As a child I used to avoid these questions and looks by hiding my difference, e.g., putting my "deformed" hand into my left pocket, etc.

I was aware that adults may be more uncomfortable than children were. Younger children just seem to be curious. But there was something in the way older children and adults questioned me that bothered me and at times I felt ashamed.

As an adult and as a psychologist I am aware that the way we deal with young children about difference has a lot to do with the attitudes and behaviors that they eventually develop around people who are different. It starts with our attempts to hush young children and keep them from asking questions so that they will be "polite" and not "rude". The message that we convey when we do this with our children is that there is something wrong about the difference that shouldn't be talked about. There is "something wrong" with the person who has the difference and if we talk about it we will "embarrass" the person. Children are also often taught to "feel sorry" for the disabled person and to thank God that they are not like them. It doesn't take long to understand why children develop the attitudes and behaviors that they do around disabled people.

This early training as a child contributes to many adults feeling uncomfortable around people with physical differences and encourages adults to avoid interactions or close relationships with these individuals. I have often felt over the years that many people did not really want to get to know me very well because of the physical difference and that many adults kept me in a category separate from the one they placed themselves in.

Unfortunately avoidance behavior only increases this discomfort with people who are different and encourages segregation and discrimination. Lack of interaction contributes to a lack of understanding and awareness which contributes to accessible bathrooms not really being accessible, to ramps being too steep and therefore dangerous and inaccessible, etc. On the other end of the continuum, this uneasiness can lead to systematic efforts to extinguish difference. As a disabled person I am aware that the Nazis came for those with physical differences and disabilities before they came for the Jews and the

Gypsies. I am still waiting for someone to erect a monument to the million plus physically different folks who perished in the Holocaust.

Dealing with other people's attitudes, and "stuff", about physical difference, my physical difference, has always seemed to me to be the most unfair thing about being "disabled". Learning how to tie your shoes with one hand is hard enough. But I think I have finally realized over the years that to deal very well with my own "stuff" my anger, shame, etc., with my physical difference requires that I deal with other people's curiosity and uneasiness about it. Easier said than done.

An acquired disability can drastically change your relationships with others, your employer, your wife and your children.