The First Step Is To Be Noticed

by Dianne Pothier

Pour que les personnes atteintes d'un handicap deviennent complètement intégrées à la société, il faut d'abord que l'on en tienne compte. Le manque de sensibilité des personnes non handicapées transmet un message d'exclusion aux personnes atteintes d'un handicap. Cet article décrit comment, lors d'une conférence universitaire sur l'accès aux personnes handicapées, certaines personnes ont fait preuve d'insensibilité. Cet incident, ainsi que la variété des réactions qu'il a provoqué, représente bien comment les personnes atteintes d'un handicap sont exclues par la société.

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"We don't think of you as disabled because of what you have accomplished." My friend thought she was paying me a compliment; both our friendship and my degree of shock got in the way of my bluntly explaining that her comment was instead very insulting. And it was particularly ironic that her comment was prompted by her knowing that I was in the final stages of writing an article[1] about disability from my perspective as a person with a visual impairment (close to legal blindness).

What was so offensive about my friend's comment? The explicit assumption was that persons with disabilities are not expected to accomplish anything of significance. If you have achieved anything of note, you cannot really be 'disabled'. A clearer statement of able-bodied insensitivity to people with disabilities would be hard to find.

In a different way, that same point had been brought home to me a few days earlier at an academic conference. Again the point was made more poignant by the fact that the incident in question arose in a context in which disability was expressly under discussion. There was significance not only in the incident itself, but also in the differences in the reactions to it.

The location of the conference was itself disturbing. It would be difficult to imagine a building more wheelchair inaccessible. The only apparent access to the building was by stairs; there were no elevators between floors; the floors themselves were not level, with mezzanines connected by stairs; and many of the conference sessions were in steeply tiered classrooms. In two days at the conference, I had heard no comment, either apologetic or critical, about the building layout.

There was a session at the conference devoted to a discussion of a committee report on equality in access to education which included disability issues. The program involved a short opening plenary, a series of workshops, and a closing plenary. At the opening plenary, one of the authors of the report gave some background on its preparation and introduced the other authors. He explained that one of the committee members was unable to be at the conference because she was away training a dog. Several people in the audience laughed at that remark. I thought to myself: what is so funny about someone training a guide dog? I resolved to myself that sometime before the end of the session, I would comment on the inappropriateness of the laughter.

Shortly thereafter we broke into workshops. The facilitator in my workshop was one of the members of the committee. She had arrived late at the plenary and had not been present at the time of the laughter. She started the workshop discussion by saying that we all knew the nature of the problem, and it was only the solutions that needed to be addressed. I decided I could not let that pass. I said that what had just happened in the plenary was an indication to me that there still was difficulty in recognizing the problem. People with disabilities are clearly not fully accepted and integrated if people thought it was funny that a blind person would need to train a dog. Moreover, no one had yet expressed concern about the inaccessibility of the building in which we were discussing equality.

My comments did not generate any particular response. However, there was good discussion on other points in the workshop, and I was satisfied that I had made my point. At the start of the closing plenary, I felt no particular need to repeat my comments. But the tone of the closing plenary was far too complacent and self-congratulatory for me to keep silent. Near the end, I decided to say my piece.

I again noted the inaccessible nature of the building we were in, and my offence at the laughter in the opening plenary. I added a

comment about my own frustrations in sitting through days of people reading their papers. I know that I, a person with a visual impairment, would have been judged very harshly for such a performance, given the way I read.[2] I was attempting to jolt people out of their complacency, and the only way I knew how to do that was to let my anger show. Showing anger carries with it the danger of simply alienating people, but I had reached a point where I was prepared to take that risk. At least, I got people's attention. The range of reactions to my point about the laughter was very interesting, from apology to denial.

An Aboriginal woman friend who had been sitting next to me in the opening plenary, and who had been one of those who had laughed, immediately came up to me with a profuse apology. I found that gratifying, because it showed she had understood my reaction. It was obvious to me why she understood so readily. She had just done to me what had been done to her many times before—displayed an insensitivity that conveyed a message of exclusion.

At the other extreme, a white male friend started our conversation by doubting that there had been any laughter at the opening plenary. I gave a very curt response to that comment. I had no patience for the attitude: "since I didn't notice it, it can't have happened." There had been clear and unmistakable laughter; that point was not open for debate. My friend backed off, and moved from denial to defensiveness. He said that while he had not himself laughed (which I had no reason to doubt), he had found the comment about training a dog odd. He had not been thinking of a guide dog, but of training dogs in the way that one trains horses. My response was that, even accepting, as I am prepared to do, that this sort of explanation accounted for the laughter, it was still offensive. That is because it means that the notion of needing a guide dog is simply not part of people's thinking. Even in a setting in which access to people with disabilities was the topic for discussion, they could not comprehend a reference to a dog as meaning a guide dog. In an able-bodied perspective on the world, guide dogs do not figure prominently. My friend did not seem convinced that I had a point. My interpretation of this is that someone who is not used to being marginalized has a harder time recognizing it when it happens to others.

Later that day, this same friend and I happened to be sitting next to each other at a session on Aboriginal rights. The person giving the presentation was Mohawk. In the course of his discussion, he asked the audience if we could name the six nations of the Iroquois confederacy. To our embarrassment, we collectively could not do so. My friend recognized the parallels to our earlier conversation, and its significance started to hit home. He recognized and commented to me that this was the kind of insensitivity that I had been talking about. I agreed, feeling humbled by the fact that this time I had been among those displaying the insensitivity.

A slight need not be intentional to be hurtful. Indeed, where there is a simple failure to notice, the very absence of intention may itself constitute the problem. People cannot feel that they really belong unless they are made to feel that other people at least recognize their existence.

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[1]Since published, D. Pothier, "Miles to Go: Some Personal Reflections on the Social Construction of Disability." 14 *Dalhousie Law Journal* 526 (1992).

[2]For elaboration, see above mentioned article.