

## **PERSPECTIVE: Just Who's Disabled Here?**

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**Denver**

When I read about diversity in the *World Tribune*, I'm surprised that we haven't heard more from the disabled population. Many of us take for granted our ability to walk into a meeting and to see and hear all the wonderful things that go on there. Our organization has grown significantly, and we now have a wide range of disabled people whose needs are not always met. I see and hear about these needs and wonder what we can do collectively and individually to improve the situation.

When I was in my early 20s, I moved to Boston to study Oriental cooking in a commune. Each person in the commune had certain duties in preparing and serving the food. To my surprise, one of my duties was to help a woman get to the dining room. She was severely crippled from arthritis and diabetes.

I had never been around anyone in this condition. As long as she sat in her wheelchair and ate with the rest of the people, I didn't have any problem. But when I was told I had to get her out of bed, dress her and move her to her wheelchair, I suddenly felt appalled.

For a moment, I hesitated. I didn't want to do this. I had come to Boston to study cooking, not nursing. I had no experience in this area. But what could I do? Home was too far away, and everyone else in the center had done their turn. Now it was my turn. I decided I would do the best I could.

I went into her room, walked to her bedside and introduced myself. She told me her name was Mabel. She instructed me how to help her out of bed so she would feel less pain.

Her body was like a skeleton. She wasn't very old, maybe 50, but she looked many years older — like 90 or 100. She seemed closer to death than to life. I dressed her gently. We didn't talk very much, and somehow I managed to get her to the dining room.

The next day I felt more competent. We talked more, and she shared stories about her life. Over the months I lived there, I found myself going back to her room not because I was supposed to help, but just to talk with her and tell her about my day. She was witty, intelligent and always willing to listen. Many young people came to her room to talk or read to her. In her quiet way, she reached the hearts of many people.

When she died a few years later, I was sorry I hadn't told her what a change she had made in my life. She had helped me overcome my fear, and I had learned a valuable lesson.

Many years later, I decided to go into the teaching profession. By this time, I had a number of years of chanting to help me challenge situations. A friend asked me to help her teach some emotionally impaired children. Here again, I had to challenge myself.

I spent the first day on the job with a pounding headache. I couldn't imagine how kids could behave so strangely. But with the aid of my Buddhist practice, I looked for and found the Buddha nature in each child. There were some who I had to chant a lot of daimoku for. For example, there was one boy — I'll call him Jake — whose charts described him as a feral (wild) child. That was putting it mildly. For this student I chanted intensely.

Then, one day, Jake came to class with a large, white, furry puppy. Although other students and teachers gathered around him to pet the puppy, he made a straight line across the room to me. He placed the puppy in my lap and said, "Mrs. Owada, this is my dog and her name is Snowflake." I knew at that moment my daimoku had touched him. This was Jake's way of letting me know that, in his book, I was OK.

That same year, I met a teacher who astounded me. At first I didn't notice anything unusual about her. She walked the crowded and bustling hallways much like the rest of us. It wasn't until she became my son's teacher that I noticed something missing: her hands.

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She had only two small, stubby fingers on each hand, yet she opened heavy doors and breezed into classes with an armload of heavy books and papers. It was much later when I heard her joking with a student about taking off her leg and saw, with a jolt, that she walked on plastic legs.

Later, after I got to know her better, I woke up one morning to chant an hour of daimoku with appreciation for knowing this woman! She was always so lively and enthusiastic, so full of hope. She had many physical challenges, but she seemed to sail through them. Although she was disabled and I was able-bodied, I felt that with my constant pessimism perhaps I was the one who was disabled.

I feel that our diversity issues in the SGI should include all of our special populations. I felt proud when I read that the organization was meeting these issues head on. We weren't just following some mandate; we were really trying to have a dialogue.

But sometimes for the disabled, it's hard to speak up. That's why it's my determination to be more aware of their special needs. If a community center is not equipped so that it is accessible or if there's more that could be done, I will take the initiative to speak up. And I hope by my example that others feel confident to do the same.

No one means to leave the disabled out, but those of us who are able-bodied don't always think in those terms simply because we don't have to deal with the issue ourselves. But to overlook the needs of the disabled, I believe, is to impair ourselves and our society.

I am determined to reach out, regardless of our differences, even if it's just to hold open a door for a disabled person and smile or ask about their day.

These people have a mission, too.

**WT**