

THE ROLE OF DISABILITY IN SHAPING RESPONSIVE COMMUNITY

by Judith A. Snow

The presence of people with handicaps in ordinary communities has long been at risk. For 200 years and more, people who live with a mental or physical disability have been viewed as burdens, at best needing help and charity, at worse as being a chronic threat to the economic and social well-being of the rest of society.

Such beliefs have led to a variety of responses that share a common thread. Those who view themselves as normal often reject the disability they perceive in the other, and reject that person as well. Rejection often shows itself as banishment, perhaps to a therapeutic setting, or in the extreme, to a far-away, inhuman environment, designed to allow ordinary citizens to forget the human reality of weakness and vulnerability. The ultimate exile of death is often recommended and sometimes imposed.

A key companion to our rejection of people with disability is the alteration of our relationship with them. Ordinary citizens are supported to participate in a network of friends, school or work comrades, neighbours, relatives, along with other multivariied associations. Some of these connections are intimate, many are friendly, most are sustaining. The disabled person can count on a network populated by a majority of people paid to control or modify his/her being, with family relationships that are strained, non-existent, or redefined as therapeutic, with few friends, little or no intimacy, and with constant potential for subtle or dramatic violence. This altered network signifies in the most powerful way possible that others, who see the person as being abnormal, define the person as being less than, or just simply not, a human being.

The response of one disabled individual to another, or to himself/herself is similar. shaped by cultural attitude of rejection, and steeped in daily interactions that spurn disability, the individual with unusual needs adopts the same devastating pattern of life. The cost to this individual is clear. Opportunities to give or receive love, to develop skills and talents, to participate and contribute, to celebrate humanness and humanity can be few and dispersed. Few of these individuals gain enough insight into their special milieu, or enough support from others to achieve a more nurturing attitude toward themselves and others around them.

The cost to the community is not as clear but just as genuine. The community loses the underdeveloped contribution that is therefore not given. Other citizens lose the opportunity to relate to the disabled person, and so lose opportunities to expand their giftedness and increase their contributions. Occasions to solve problems and to care are diminished in number, kind and intensity. Ordinary citizens learn to fear any flaw or vulnerability that may be "lurking" in their own minds and bodies; to avoid sharing and caring in order to appear more independent. In short, the community grows ever less responsive to its members, disabled or not.

In order to create or expand the capacity of communities to respond to their own members, it is clear that a fundamental activity of change is to welcome people with disabilities into ordinary, rich networks of relationship. To achieve such a welcome, disability and those who carry it must be seen as less threatening and burdensome, if not in fact as unusual gifts to the broader social structure. People must see that disability does not have to be fixed or cured, but accepted and challenged. The individual must be welcomed, celebrated and listened to, challenged and supported in every environment to develop every talent that he or she potentially has, just as ordinary people are. His/her contributions must be facilitated and used for the betterment of the wider group. In short, every citizen must be an ordinary citizen.