

Disability: the dark and the light

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The word disability has a bad connotation for most people and as a result it is often pushed away and not faced directly. Even the term is avoided, often leading to a denial of the difficulty. A positive view of the situation is important but if it comes at the expense of acceptance, this usually includes a hidden expectation that things will not turn out well. This is unfortunate because negative expectations can only lead to negative consequences and any hidden positive possibilities will never be given the chance to surface. Although no one welcomes it, it has often turned out that a disability has been appreciated for the gifts it brought. As a friend wrote, "There is a strong gift that can come from living with a disability, that one can be forced to focus on what really matters in life and to reach deeper understandings while pondering existence."

When a disability arises, it calls forth "something" within the person to meet the challenge that he or she faces. In this meeting there occurs basically a negotiation on what the person is willing or not willing, and able or not able, to do, to let go of, etc. It is a confrontation in which the person decides whether or not to accept the disability on its own terms because it seems to me there is no negotiation on that. The person basically does an inner evaluation, usually unconsciously, of what resources they can access to deal with the situation. It may be that they do not have adequate resources to fully overcome the challenge and are forced to submit to the intrusion. This reminds me of an invasion of a country by an army more powerful than its own and the best response in this case is to surrender. But the surrender only needs to happen on an outer, not an inner, level and this is a critical issue. If it turns out that I need to surrender to the disability, it will have been because I surveyed the situation and made my own decision. I need not give in to the disability on an inner level. Even though the disability may render me incapable of something, it need not diminish me as a person.

To meet or not to meet

To meet or not to meet the disability is the basic question or decision that is central to how that disability unfolds. It seems to me the decision of whether or not to come to terms with a disability determines whether it is accepted or rejected. Rejection of a disability is pointless and resistance (to use a cliché) is like "fighting city hall". It not only blocks a possible recovery, but irrespective of an eventual recovery, it especially blocks a creative adjustment to the disability where something new can emerge. Disability is not an either/or situation, in the sense that neither resistance nor total surrender is effective in any way. We need to come to terms with ourselves and find our strength there. But disability definitely is an either/or situation in terms of deciding, willing or being able to meet the disability face to face and come to terms with it, which ultimately means coming to terms with oneself. If I can do this, I may be disabled, but I will not be defeated. I am reminded of people confined to a wheel chair who have come to do amazing things with that chair.

The situation of confronting a disability when it occurs reminds me of the Chinese term for crisis, "wei-ji". I have heard it claimed that this term has the double meaning of danger and opportunity. On further research I discovered this to be untrue, for while "wei" does mean crisis,

"ji" does not signify opportunity. "Ji" by itself indicates quick-wittedness and/or resourcefulness, and together with "wei" it indicates a perilous situation when one should be especially wary. It is not a juncture when one goes looking for advantages and benefits. Nevertheless this idea has validity if we change the word "crisis" to "challenge", for as well as failure and perhaps danger, a challenge can indeed provide us with new opportunities.

Although confronting a disability is definitely a crisis, it can also be seen as a challenge, for being overcome by it is not a foregone conclusion. Having a firm foundation within oneself enables one to keep a middle ground between resistance and surrender. As long as one is not overtaken by the notion of disability and relegates it only to an area outside of one's self or soul, it will not have the crippling power it might otherwise have.

Universal

Although many of us don't want to admit it, disability is universal. It is part of our humanity and to deny it only creates worse problems. Whether it be due to aging, health problems, relationship or communication problems, or whatever, each of us has our own version of it. Life is such that we all encounter some area in our lives where, due to a blind spot, a weakness or some other incapacity, we find ourselves unable to deal with it. An exploration of the similarities and differences between disability, failures, weaknesses and other shortcomings may prove to be quite illuminating in many ways. As a friend wrote to me recently, "If we allow ourselves to each understand our own handicaps, things that disable us in one way or another, it helps us to tap into a better understanding of the workings of life."

Help and support

With a disability, the outer world has invaded the personal world. If a person has not come to terms with their disability and fully succumbed to it, they are going to be happy only when they can be passive and fully rely on other people and let themselves be taken care of. They attract to themselves so-called "helpers" who find their self-worth in looking after others who are totally passive, and this of course only promotes more dysfunction. The disabled person is fully dependent on the "helper", who finds his or her self-worth in this arrangement, a clear situation of co-dependence.

Like simplicity, helping is one of the most complex things to put into practice. I am reminded of when a butterfly emerges out of its cocoon. This is a critical time for the butterfly as it struggles hard to get itself out of its confinement. If someone witnesses this, and their sympathy propels them to help, when the butterfly finally emerges, it will not have fully developed the strength in its wings to fly, and it will fall to the ground and die. Like a butterfly, a person needs to find their own inner resources to deal with their own personal challenges. But unlike a butterfly, a person can be helped by someone who has truly accepted his or her own weaknesses and shortcomings and who has developed the sensitivity and awareness to provide this help to another without interfering with the person's own efforts.

The issue of our response to disability is a fascinating one and can provide many new insights into how to best deal with disability, whether our own or of others. Much can be said that can make a significant difference in the effectiveness of those who aim to provide support, whether they be family, friends, support groups, hired help, and even (or sometimes especially)

professionals. A desire to fix things or make things better is a necessary and often primary concern. But having any expectations of them or doing what they themselves need to find the resources to do, will sabotage any effort to help. A primary issue here has to do with projection, which is very effective in blocking the emergence of that critical "something" within a person that makes it possible for them to come to terms with a disability and not be completely ruled by it.

Hidden gifts

The person who finds it within him or herself to meet the disability and is not willing to fully surrender to it, has the possibility to bring out strengths and resources that they did not know they had, parts of themselves that they had avoided or perhaps even rejected or suppressed. One of the most valuable things that a disability offers is the necessity and opportunity to come to oneself in a new way that can bring new awareness, insights and possibilities. While this does require that "something" within that will not be intimidated by the circumstances encountered, disability can be understood to be quite an opportunity. When this is understood and acknowledged, the way we deal with disability will be positive and effective.

Other aspects

The above offers a brief introduction into another way of looking at and dealing with some aspects of disability. But the subject of disability covers a large territory and I have only scratched the surface. For example, the idea of expectations, both of oneself and of others, plays a large role in how a disability plays itself out. And there are many types of disability. It can be obvious or invisible. It can be physical, mental, emotional or spiritual. It usually refers to a lack of ability to do, but we don't often talk about a disability in being. Examples of this are: an inability to be present, compassionate, true to oneself, hopeful about the future, to trust in the goodness of life, find balance in our lives, connect with others in a meaningful way, find meaning and purpose in life, and others. Surely these are as important as our ability to do, and yet it seems to me we do not consider them as such in terms of how we live our lives from day to day, or am I wrong? One last aspect I can think of at the moment is the rich topic of "wounded healer", where a person's wounds can become a source of strength to bring wholeness to others.

Much can be written about disability but I hope I have given another perspective and some new ideas that can make a positive difference. Having a disability involves the necessity not only of coming to terms with it, but more, with oneself. If this is understood and worked with, a disability can provide the opportunity to deal with issues that are normally not just overlooked but often rejected, issues that lead to valuable personal growth that may not have been possible otherwise. In this light I wish you the ability to accept and work positively with your own disability, whatever that might be. As Isaac Pennington wrote in 1678, "There is that near you which will guide you. O wait for it and be sure you keep to it."