

Yesterday, I was listening to NPR's "Day To Day", specifically, their piece on Project Healing Waters. It's a program that helps veterans recover from their war injuries through fly-fishing. The journalist was interviewing, Corporal Neal Frustaglio, a young man who lost both legs to an IED a number of months back. Incidentally, he was being interviewed sitting in his wheelchair in the middle of the river fishing. Toward the end of the interview, as he was speaking to his hopes for the future, he shared that it was his intent to go back to college, finish his Education degree and become the Science/Biology teacher he'd always wanted to be.

His dream got me thinking about a question posed to me once by an elementary school principal. She first confided that a parent was pressing the school for automatic doors. This parent had a second grade daughter who used a chair and had difficulty with the big glass and metal doors that, apparently, divided up the school's various wings. She then asked me whether I felt her school needed to have automatic doors, breaking up the question with a caveat: all children, disabled and non, are accompanied in the hallways by an adult. There will always be someone to get the doors.

I paused a moment and then replied, "So, let me get this straight ... I am coming to your school to pick up my son, or to meet with his teacher, or to attend a function or volunteer ..."

"Oh My God," she suddenly realized, looking down at my chair, "I never once considered a disabled parent!"

"Or ... what about a member of your staff? Say a teacher ... say a Biology teacher." Corporal Frustaglio shows us the very real possibility of this scenario.

She stood there flabbergasted, a hand on my shoulder, embarrassed and apologetic for not considering either scenario.

I told her not to worry about it, that it was just indicative of a widespread paradigm held by many who grew up in exclusive schools and communities. This Paradigm of Low Expectation. I told her, was, as I saw it, a long-standing, heavily entrenched mind set based upon many things: old myth and stereotypes, fear and exploitation but, primarily, upon lack of contact, connection and, therefore, awareness. I also told her it was a paradigm that needed to change.

I asked her to see the last two minutes as a sort of "whack on the side of the head", and to consider from then on everyone, disabled and non, with a higher expectation. I asked her to break from the old paradigm ... see people, especially

young people, with an unlimited potential for success; a more equitable regard and respect.

She thanked me, said she would do that and added that she was going to call the parent as soon as she got back to the office.

One more light for inclusive thinking burning brightly ...

If we are ever to move beyond this archaic way of thinking, this fear of and focus on “otherness” and inability, we must begin first, it seems to me, by recognizing that it exists. Second, that it is a very real problem for many, many people, and by that I mean it causes pain and loss and separation and a myriad other ugly things that keep people from dreaming and living big dreams. Third, and this is important, if we are ever to move beyond this old paradigm of low expectation, we need to understand that we as individuals, as school districts, as whole communities, are a big part of either perpetuating or stopping it right now.

I invite you to take a moment, if not now, sometime during this conference, to step back, consider what it is that you believe: what is your perception of people living with disabilities, Then consider what your belief is based upon: is it based upon personal experience? On a person or people you know: a family member or friend, a student, for example. On growing up in an inclusive or exclusive environment? Classroom? Is it based upon classes taken, movies seen, books read, stories heard. More than likely your belief is based upon an amalgam of all of these, which certainly makes it YOUR truth at this juncture, a part of your story and journey, but how congruent is it with that truth experienced by a majority of folks living with disability?

On your bags, it says “ A Community that excludes even one of its members is no community at all.” I was honored when my dear friend, Liz Healey, asked to use it. It is a powerful quote that calls us to consider the very meaning of “community”. I put it out into the world to do just that: to get people thinking, and talking. And that it has done. Even folks that thought they got it but not quite.

One of my favorite “close but no cigar” stories involves a couple of my pins: the “Community” pin which has the above quote about “excluding even one”, and the “Peace Dove” pin with the white dove and the rainbow colored wings, with the word “Peace” written in the body of the dove. I was in a restaurant and saw a woman wearing my “Community” pin. As she rolled by I smiled and said, “Nice pin.”

She replied, “Aren’t you Dan, the guy who made these?”

“You bet.” I said, stopping, and she quickly added, “I love this pin. I love the message ... so powerful!”

I was about to thank her for the support and for sharing the message when she continued, “I was going to buy the Peace pin. You know, the one with the dove and the rainbow wings, but I got thinking I wouldn’t dare wear it at my church. They’d think I was supporting some Gay/Lesbian organization.”

I just went quiet for a moment. I looked at her and said “Wait, wait, wait. Think back ... dove? Rainbow? Ring any bells in your Christian mythology? Guy in a big boat? Lots of animals? God sends a couple of signs to let the man know everything is going to be okay?”

“Oh my!” She responded, completely taken aback. “I didn’t even think ...”

“Yep.” I interrupted, “The Christians had the rainbow way before the Gay and Lesbian members of our Community.” As I rolled on to my table, I added, “Maybe you should read that pin you’re wearing a few more times ...”

A few weeks later, I ran into her in a coffee shop downtown. She was wearing the “Peace” pin. We had coffee together. She said she was still wrestling with faith-based issues regarding some people but was working to find resolution. She then told me she even bought one for her daughter. One step at a time ... heading in the right direction ...

All means All. There can be no exceptions.

The world is working toward something. I want to believe it is ripe for positive change, moving toward a period of greater understanding, equity and acceptance. I see it at conferences like this one, so much energy and promise. It is certainly telling when you put together your first conference and 400 people show up. It is a powerful statement regarding need. Know that you are not alone here in your thirst for knowledge; for something better.

I hope that all of you get what you came for. And, because I know the messages and information shared by the phenomenal line up of speakers and wisdom keepers in attendance is the most progressive you’ll find anywhere, I hope that you take this wisdom back to your schools, your neighborhoods and towns, and implement it. Pay it forward. The cost is so little, the benefit so great.

When we begin to create inclusive environments, where everyone is welcome and supported and encouraged to dream big dreams we begin to challenge the old paradigm and the systems founded upon and structured by it. When we create

classrooms and neighborhoods that bring kids together kids with a myriad of differences, naturally, without pomp and circumstance, we begin to grow a generation of kids accepting of each other, without fear, respectful and aware.

Regardless of who we are or how we are, we all have the same Maslowian needs for love and respect, safety and friendship, a sense of belonging and contribution. These are the intangible aspects of our humanity that bind us one to another; that help us see through each others eyes.

I want to speak for a moment about the importance of connection specifically, about bigotry and shared oppression. I'm 6'5", white, male, living in America. I never knew oppression. I was raised to love and respect all people so I supported Civil Rights. I supported Women's Rights. I supported Gay and Lesbian rights ... but none of them touched me personally until I rolled my Camaro in my twenty-third year. Suddenly, when not excluded completely, I was coming in back doors, loading docks, kitchen entrances. Suddenly, I had to use a different bathroom, different drinking fountain ... for me it wasn't front of the bus or back of the bus ... I couldn't even get ON the damn bus. Suddenly (and this is the "gift"), Dr. King was speaking to me. Marion Wright Edelman and Gloria Steinem were speaking to me. Mahatma Gandhi speaking to me. I began seeing "through bigger eyes."

When we come to understand that, at a very human level, we find common ground in our "shared oppression", we recognize that what happened to Matthew Shepard on a fence in Wyoming is not unlike what happened to James Byrd behind a pick-up truck in Texas is not unlike what has happened to people living with disabilities in Institutions for years. Same struggle, just a different difference. We begin to take ownership in each other's cause, because it is our cause: freedom from bigotry, acceptance, equity, respect ... feeling welcome and part of something bigger ... inclusion.

When we exclude anyone, even one, from our community we deny them basic human rights, basic human needs, and it is wrong.

And each of us in this room is filled with infinite potential. Likewise, every child in your class, every kid on your block, is filled with possibility. Who are we to think or tell them otherwise?

In closing, pay attention to the baggage you carry, we all have it, pay attention to the words you use. Negative words perpetuate old myths. They don't help. For example, use 'Significant' rather than 'Severe'. Speaking of negative, if you feel a negative charge to something or someone, ask yourself, "Where is that coming from? What is That all about?" And follow up on that line of thinking. Work

through it. You'll come out the other side better for it.

Think progressively, inclusively. Challenge yourself, your coworkers, your administration, your community leaders to face their fears (we all have them), ask questions, get answers, find common ground and begin to think, act and work toward building a classroom, school, school district, community that accepts and values each of its members and what they have to share.

Ram Dass reminds us “we are all just walking each other home.” Take time to celebrate every little being walking through your door with a new paradigm, one of high expectation. Consider what is possible and, when considering, think of those who have gone before, people like Beethoven, Mozart, Matisse and Monet, Milton, Keats and Shelley, FDR and Churchill, Socrates, Aesop, Einstein, Newton and Hawking ... Thomas Edison ... where would we be without Edison? Or, any of these people, all people who lived or are living with disability. And the beauty of it all is that, quite probably, it was the gift of this perspective, of living life differently, that gave them the impetus to write what they wrote, lead as they led or invent what they invented. This is the gift so often ignored or overlooked. Who are we to deny even one child the opportunity to aspire and live to their fullest potential?

I leave you today with Gandhi's powerful challenge: “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.” You have everything you need, right here (in your head) and, especially, right here (in your heart) to be that change. I encourage you to take steps to make personal the problems in your classrooms, schools and community. Get involved in building equitable and inclusive environments where you live, work and play. It all begins now, this very moment, with what you choose to do next.

Thank you.

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