

Being different brings difficulties

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WHENEVER A CHILD points me out in a public place, parental panic sets in. The child is often hushed or removed from the scene. In some few cases, the child is punished needlessly.

On a recent summer's day, I was standing in a grocery line behind a woman and her child, perhaps 4 years old. The child spotted me instantly from her rear-facing seat in the shopping cart and repeatedly informed anyone within hearing range: "That man only has one arm!"

The mother attempted verbally to silence her several times then slapped her across the face. I have learned to be stoic in the face of comments or staring, but I was outraged at the slap. I remained calm enough to say, "I hope you needed that, because I certainly didn't." The child left the store crying. Her mother never looked back.

Terms such as "crippled," the relatively modern "disabled" and more recent and euphemistic ones such as "differently abled" are all distasteful and somehow painful to me, but they can be lifelines for some.

Many find it necessary to pay attorneys to prove them disabled for the simple purpose of enforcing rights or receiving benefits necessary to maintain even a minimal standard of living. "Disabled" often describes a body that is somehow different from the norm, even though that body might work quite well for most purposes.

I have only one arm and two fingers. So I am generally perceived to be disabled, although there is nothing important to me that I am unable to do on that account.

To see someone who looks different from you because he or she is missing some body part can be quite a shock. For a young child, it can be a matter of consuming interest. Children notice my disability and point it out as innocently but insistently as they might point out a pony or a fire truck.

Adults are usually more subtle and quiet about it. A few stare and whisper, fewer still say outrageous things, most pretend they don't notice at all and some of these look right through me as though I were a window pane.

Children are relatively easy to deal with. They have some absolutely straightforward questions such as, "Does it hurt to have one arm?" "Can you do anything?"

To these, my stock response is that I can do most things quite well, but there are some things I find difficult and then I need a special friend to help me. "Do you know anyone I could ask for help if I need it?"

I ask as if I am trying very hard to think of someone. The response is invariable and the feeling of friendship is immediate and lasting.

With adults, it is not quite so easy to break the ice. Adults most often shake hands when they meet, and they often reach out for my hand before they realize what is in store for them. Only a few are truly unhinged enough to express revulsion.

It is best when they can ignore my missing arm and assume that I can do the things most adults can do, allowing me to ask for help when I need it. We don't discuss my disability. We don't discuss my baldness. We don't discuss their girth. And why should we discuss any of those things, since they don't really come into the relationship?

If we do come to discuss my disability, that is often after I have made it less difficult by making some casual or humorous remark about it. This seems to give them permission to ask or to comment.

As difficult as it can be for disabled people to move about in a world that expects specific physical characteristics, it is also difficult for others to know precisely how to deal with us. Although I do not subscribe to the idea of a "disability culture," there are certain aspects of the meeting that seem a lot like culture clash.

We can be angry when we are pointedly noticed or even angrier when we are ignored. We can be upset at a lack of special accommodation, and we can be outraged by the wrong sort of accommodation. Even an ill-considered compliment can result in discomfort. The best of intentions cannot guarantee success in dealing with some of us, because we have prejudged you even as we demand not to be prejudged.

James N. Myers moved to Centerville after he retired as dean of Temple University's Japan campus in Toyko. The former university librarian also has a law degree. Born without a left arm and all but two fingers on his right hand, he offers perspectives about issues that affect disabled persons.

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