

## **Disabled: Not A Separate World**

*by Konrad Kaletsch, 2006©*

There is an acronym for those without a disability, TAB: temporarily-able-bodied. To a young athlete, temporary is unimaginable. Yet, assuming one gets to live a long life, chances are that you will one day, or maybe presently live with a disability. It might be a minor one like blurry vision, adapted to with eyeglasses, or, it might be one that has a larger impact on the ability to live independently. It might even be the care you provide for a loved one living with a disability. We pretend to have distinct worlds but they overlap much more than we notice.

A disability is measurable in duration and in the impact it has on our life. The injury from an accident might radically compromise your mobility, or not; you might recover quickly, or never. As we begin to “measure” the intensity and duration of a disability we see categories emerge. Blurred vision is easy to correct and has a minimal impact. A larger impact is experienced with conditions like rheumatoid arthritis. Further up a “scale of intensity,” conditions exist that profoundly alter the experience of life itself. There are also disabilities brought on by disease, and some by the choices of pregnancy or the results of war.

You might be clear about living with a disability, or you might acknowledge that a disability is unnoticed because an adaptation or modified environment permits unhindered mobility. A disability is clearly not confined to the individual; it includes the surrounding and adaptations that expand or diminish mobility. To enlarge a world of disability further, add social relatedness. This yet larger world includes those with disabilities and those that connect to them through family, friendship, support, care and professional relationships. A growing application of universal design is to acknowledge that the result serves a much larger world; it serves us all.

Census data provides some information about disabilities. In 2002, about 51 million Americans reported living with a disability; 32 million Americans reported living with a severe disability. Those numbers will shift dramatically as a generation of baby boomers enter their retirement years. As a population, they will number over 70 million by 2020. Combine these populations and consider that in 14 years one third of Americans will be managing their mobility, going to stores, church, work, and socializing, with a disability.

With this new context, the language of disability is now a much expanded one. It includes those with a disability, a growing population of senior citizens, and a wide range of those who provide service, be it a bus driver or an architect that transforms functionality. It includes family, coworkers, friends and neighbors. A census using this criteria now comes closer to including every American. Your own mobility becomes directly connected to everyone else. The environment, adapted to be inclusive, serves all better than the one that does not. The idea of separate disappears and the inclusion of universal design occurs as obvious. The experience is joy, security and comfort.

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