

Visible or Invisible?

If someone asks you “what are the major types of disabilities?” there may be quite a discussion, with answers like “intellectual, psychiatric, physical, and sensory,” but I contend that there are only two major types of disabilities: visible and invisible. All of the major disabilities will fall into one or other of these two.

I have had an invisible disability for over 50 years that has had major effects on my life. I don't drive, so I need to obtain transportation to go to most meetings, etc. I don't drink, but not for the reasons people may assume. Early in my career, I had problems with public speaking, but changes in my medications have helped.

Five years ago, I acquired a visible disability as well. It has been fascinating, interesting, and telling to see the change in how others have treated me since this has occurred. Of course, I also need to keep check on how I may be responding to others since this has occurred....how we react to each other is a two-way street.

The visible disability deals with my eyesight. Since my eyes don't work together any more, I use a frosted lens over one eye to avoid seeing two of everything. I don't need the often-thought-of accessibility aids, such as a wheelchair, a ramp, a large print bulletin, an interpreter, or even an assistant. I can still sing in the choir, read the lessons, serve on committees and attend worship services.

It is fascinating – and sometimes embarrassing - to see how people “flutter” to ask what I need, to assure me that they will help, to ensure that I have a good experience in the church, or sometimes even pretend that they don't see anything “different.”

I wonder what they were thinking five years ago, when I was simply “there.”

What is the key to this? Why does this happen? The answer is found in our attitudes towards each other. These are the ongoing, constant automatic sensitivities of persons towards others. A person's attitude towards other people is directly related to their knowledge about the situations of others, and their own comfort level concerning uncertainty.

What do we need to deal with this? Education – for all, right from the very beginning. Sure, some accommodations may also be needed, and they may take some planning and perhaps may cost something. But of all the types of accommodations, changing attitudes is the least expensive, yet the most difficult, to deal with.

The goal is to allow someone to be “simply there.” Everyone should be “fluttered over” – or no one should need to be. Each church should be ready to ensure that every person has a good experience at their services and other activities.

I remember being told that “this church doesn't need ramps; we don't have anyone who uses a wheelchair.” Ouch!

“Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.”