

BUT NAMES WILL NEVER HURT ME

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The words we use to describe things often betray our true feelings about them, as well as determine how we think about them. Good – Bad! Success – Failure! Win – Lose! Beautiful – Ugly! Black – White! Words are powerful! Remember: “In the beginning was the WORD!”

Words, also, determine how we relate to people, especially people who are different from us. Persons who have a disability fall into this category. As a result, we may call them, not by their names, but by labels – CP – Amputee – Blind – Quad – Spastic – Deaf – Retard – the list goes on. Other words, mostly adjectives, conjure up pictures that reinforce the ‘DIS’ in ‘DISability.’

Well, names do hurt and often can remain for a lifetime, no matter how hard we try to live them down or erase them. In fact, the words we use when referring to others more often than not, reflect our real feelings about them and our attitudes toward them.

In our work with the Physically Different – others may view them as the Disabled – Handicapped – we encounter names all the time – names that limit – and set up barriers between “them” and “us.” Labels, such as “Crippled,” “Victim,” or “Wheelchair Bound,” are metaphors which set the tone for how we act or react in a given situation.

Close your eyes for a minute and concentrate on the phrase “Wheelchair Bound.” What comes to mind? Describe that picture. (A cartoonist once depicted someone who is “Wheelchair Bound” as a fully wrapped mummy stuffed in a wheelchair – Another, as a person in chains, padlocked to the wheelchair.) In what you envisioned, is the central figure a vibrant, active individual who is meeting the challenges of life, or is she or he downcast – excluded – damaged goods – a victim who is fixed in a seated position for the rest of time? Is the picture you see one of ABILITY, or DISability? Is a wheelchair confining or enabling?

Most who use wheelchairs will tell you that such pieces of “Durable Medical Equipment” permit them to get on with their lives. They are “Wheelchair Users,” not “Wheelchair Bound.”

Let’s look at another metaphor: If we set out to “fight crime,” we will either win or lose. When we “Win,” we keep fighting; if we “Lose” too often we move on to other battlefields. However, if we set out to “reduce crime and violence,” we will



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keep working no matter how small the improvement. It's the metaphor, not reality, that determines the outcome. The same thinking should apply to the disability community – avoid win/lose metaphors – it's not we/they, it's US!

There is also a name that refers to all who are not among the 55 million Americans who have been identified as “Disabled!” “TABs!” TEMPORARILY ABLE BODIED! What picture does that conjure up? Think hard – we are all but a heartbeat away from a life changing event!

Therefore, instead of labeling people, let's use proper names – Peter, Paul, Mary – that has a familiar ring – and do away with descriptors that separate and lessen the value of those around us.

What's in a name? Everything!

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