An Essay on Multiculturalism and Sadness

David Pfeiffer
Center on Disability Studies
University of Hawai'i at Manoa
and
The Frank Sawyer School of Management
Suffolk University

The title of this essay comes from the sadness produced by a book on multiculturalism which includes a chapter on disability. The book, *Reflections on Multiculturalism* edited by Robert Eddy (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, Inc., 1996), was reviewed in the Fall 1997 issue of *DSQ* with an overall satisfactory judgment concerning the multicultural part, but a not so satisfactory judgement about this chapter.

The chapter which purports to deal with children and adults with disability woefully fails. Written by James Helten, a paraplegic wheelchair user from a motorcycle accident ten days before his eighteenth birthday and a former wheelchair athlete, it does little more than reinforce the popular notion that people with disabilities are proper objects of pity even though society at large can learn from their courage. Thus the sadness.

Helten, a Ph.D. in English and an assistant professor at a college in North Carolina, titles his chapter "The Accidental Culture: Disability and the Enduring Need for Closure." It is about the need for people to bring closure in the way they understand their lives and not about disability culture. With such a lack of understanding it is no wonder he writes that "...twenty-seven years after suffering a permanent, disabling injury, I find it so difficult to write about either my individual experience or my cultural one." (p. 134)

He says that he can find no publications nor research projects relating to the culture of disability. He is apparently unaware of Steven Brown who is the co-founder and president of the Institute on Disability Culture. Brown was a 1993-94 Switzer Distinguished Fellow funded by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (U.S. Department of Education). In November 1994 he completed his report "Investigating a Culture of Disability" and submitted it to the National Institute.

He is apparently unaware of the work done by cartoonist John Callahan, writer Hugh Gallagher, sociologist Irving Kenneth Zola, performing artist Cheryl Wade, psychologist Carol Gill, and historian Paul Longmore, all persons with disabilities. He seems unaware of the many publications in the field including *Mainstream*, *The Ragged Edge*, and *The Mouth*. He does not know about the National Council on Disability, the already noted National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, the National Council on Independent Living, and the World Institute on Disability. Nor does he appear to be aware of the Society of Disability Studies, its *publication Disability Studies Quarterly*, as well as the disability interest groups in the Modern Language Association, the American Sociological Association, the American Anthropological Association, the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, and the American Public Health Association. In addition, he appears ignorant of the vast amount of literature some of which is listed at the end of this essay.

In addition to his misstatement about the lack of research and publications, he makes a number of inaccurate or misleading statements about the disability movement. He writes that the "...'culture of disability' is widely considered to comprise at least four dramatically disparate subcultures: visually-impaired persons, hearing-impaired persons, mentally-impaired persons, and mobility-

impaired persons...." (p. 137) It would be nice to have a footnote because this "widely considered" statement is wrong. Not only are there numerous ways of dividing the disability community, he totally leaves out people with hidden disabilities who make up from 25% to 50% of the community depending upon whom you read. In addition, a very large number of hearing-impaired persons and a lesser number of visually-impaired persons deny that they are disabled.

He then writes that the disability community is not able to work together to attain policy objectives even though (as he notes) they were able to obtain passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (his date is wrong) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Perhaps a professor of English can be forgiven for not knowing that passage of the ADA in 1990 marked the political maturity of the disability movement, but he should be aware of the Architectural Barriers Act of 1968, the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act of 1975, the 1988 Fair Housing Amendments Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the Air Carriers Access Act, and the Voting Accessibility for the Elderly and Handicapped Act among other federal and state laws.

He then focuses on the term "disability" emphasizing the "dis" part of the term. He first writes that the inability of a person with a disability "...should not exist in a normal, healthy individual." (p. 144) He is unaware, presumably, that many persons with disabilities are normal and are healthy. His linguistic slip discloses that he accepts the popular view that people with disabilities are abnormal and unhealthy. More evidence is provided when he writes that "...regardless of the great effort on the part of many individuals to convince themselves otherwise, a disability is not and will never be desirable or attractive, is inherently disadvantageous, is unnatural, and is not purposeful in itself." (p. 145) Again, his ignorance of disability culture and of such things as disability cool and disability pride is evident. A disability is a natural part of life. Every person, before he or she dies, will become disabled. A few for only a short time, but most people will spend a considerable amount of time as a person with a disability.

There then comes a curious part in which he describes his view of life before and after his accident. Before his life was good and made sense. Afterwards it was neither. His naivete is shown when he writes: "...I held a view of myself that was generally consonant with the view the world held of me." (p. 148) How he knows the way in which "the world" viewed him is not clear, but after the accident he becomes aware that the world views him in a radically worse way. To his credit he used this change to search for closure, but maybe not in the most fruitful way. He cuts himself off from his pre-accident life.

Working through his feelings and relationships after his accident, he discovers "an immutable truth" which is that "...a traumatic injury does not change the basic nature of the individual; instead, it brings it to the fore." (p. 151) Assuming that he also intends this truth to apply to persons with disabilities who are disabled through illness and from birth, the best that can be said is: maybe.

"Ironically," he writes, "through hard work and good fortune I now have much of the life that I once assumed I would." (p. 151) A statement such as this one coming from a white, middle class male (p. 147) in a volume on multiculturalism should have raised a red flag. It did not. The assumptions of the editor and others who must have read this chapter are clear. People with disabilities are proper objects of pity and society can learn from their courageous battles. As Helten writes in his final sentence: "If we are to judge ourselves, we should do it on the character of our responses to the crises we face that define our humanity." (p. 152)

So he is saying that in spite of the racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, and ablism and the structural oppression inherent in the U.S. economy all of which makes it necessary to struggle to bring multicultural diversity to the attention of the public, people with disabilities are the only ones

28

who are inherently to blame for being victims. If only persons with disabilities face reality, they too can overcome. Besides being nauseating, this statement is wrong.

The whole chapter gives a slanted and inadequate treatment of disability culture. People with disabilities, like the other minority groups discussed in the volume, have a right to be different and a right to be treated equally. If anyone wishes to read further, the following references are recommended as a point of departure.

References

Callahan, John. *Don't Worry, He Won't Get Far on Foot: The Autobiography of a Dangerous Man*. New York: Vintage, 1989.

Gallagher, Hugh. *FDR's Splendid Deception*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1985.

Hevey, Donald. *The Creatures Time Forgot: Photography and Disability Imagery*. London: Routledge, 1992.

Kailes, June. *Disability Pride: The Interrelationship of Self-Worth, Self-Empowerment, & Disability Culture*. Houston: Independent Living Research Utilization, 1993.

Morris, Jenny. *Pride Against Prejudice: Transforming Attitudes to Disability*. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1991.

Pfeiffer, David. An Annotated Bibliography of Research and Professional Publications in the Field of Disability Studies. *Disability Studies Quarterly*. 14(2), 1994, pages 65-69.

Pfeiffer, David. Eugenics and Disability Discrimination. *Disability & Society*. 9(4), 1994, pages 481-99.

Pfeiffer, David; Novak-Krajewski, Alexa. The Emergence of Disability Studies. *The AHSSPPE Bulletin*. 1(1), 1983, pages 116-22.

Pfeiffer, David; Yoshida, Karen. Teaching Disability Studies in Canada and the USA. *Disability & Society*. 10(4), 1995, pages 475-500.

Wade, Cheryl M. I Had No Idea. *Disability Rag*, September 1985, page 59.

Wade, Cheryl M. Identity. *Disability Rag & ReSource*, September/October 1994, pages 32-36.

Wade, Cheryl M. It Ain't Exactly Sexy. *Disability Rag*, November/December 1991, pages 42-43.

Wade, Cheryl M. (editor) *Range of Motion: An Anthology of Disability Prose, Poetry, and Art*. Berkeley: KIDS Project/Squeaky Wheels Press, 1993.

Zola, Irving K. *Missing Pieces: A Chronicle of Living with a Disability*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982.