

Chipping Away at Misconceptions

By: Ioana Zanchi

I am in the cookie aisle trying to decide how to conquer my sweet tooth: the ultimate contenders are narrowed down to the Chunky Chocolate Chips Ahoy and the Mint Oreo. Behind me I hear a small voice. “Mommy! Why is that girl so little and why does she use that thing on wheels?” Her mother swiftly grabs her hand and tugs her down along the aisle as she shushes her daughter. She leans down towards her daughter, in a whisper hoping that I would not hear her, and says, “Honey, we do not say things like that, it is not nice to hurt that nice lady’s feelings.” The curious little girl is already at the end of the aisle before I could turn back and offer a smile or an answer to her question.

As an individual with a physical disability, I have experienced the world from a unique viewpoint. However, the scenario drawn above is not novel. It is one that I and many other people with disabilities have relived time and time again. The parent, the kid, and the comment can all be substituted, but the subtext behind these brief moments of awkward remarks and hurried shuffles is an incredibly narrow and sheltered view of how society interacts with individuals with disabilities. The implications behind the simple beliefs that individuals with a disability are incapable, unintelligent or unwanted further ideas and actions of alienation. While individuals with disabilities fit in a wide spectrum of how they choose to conduct their lives, including their preferences in how they interact with others, their challenges of independent living, and their awareness of their environments, it is far from the truth that people with disabilities do not want to engage and be part of society. The reason awareness of the scenario drawn above and the many that occur just like it is paramount is because it serves as a way to reevaluate and reconsider our interactions as people and with our surroundings. Perceptions built off of misrepresentations or misinformation is dangerous as it breeds fear, confusion, and the perpetuation of the idea that different is bad, wrong or inferior.

Different encapsulates us every day with new hair, fashion, tech, and thousands of other trends, thus we as society are not necessarily new to the concept of constant change. Different can be hard, especially when a particular different is something we have not experienced yet. A child or an adult may have actually not interacted with an individual with a disability; therefore the first exposure may in fact be shocking. It is natural to question what we do not know because we do not yet have enough information to determine how to think about something. Different does not give license to an automatic judgment of bad, wrong or inferior because it is highly presumptuous to stick every person with a disability in a single category. Just as able-bodied people look, act, walk, talk, and think differently, so do people with disabilities.

Individuals with disabilities may in fact want to speak and express their thoughts and opinions but are not sure how to. Being the first to initiate a conversation is challenging as it is, but initiating a conversation that involves being vulnerable about personal or medical issues makes it that much more challenging. Individuals, both disabled and able-bodied, will vary in the degree that they are willing to share about their lives. However, it is important to remember that as humans we are social creatures by nature and that positive interactions with others allow us

to thrive. These positive interactions heavily affect how we see each other in society as it provides us with feedback that we are safe, appreciated, and valued enough to be included. The feeling of inclusivity, safety and appreciation should not be seized from anybody, especially those with disabilities. As individuals with disabilities we may need adaptive equipment to get us from point A to point B, an extra pair of hands to pick something up or something from, a computer screen to dictate or apps to help focus, but that does in any way mean that our agency has been stripped. Though individuals with disabilities may need assistance in various capacities, individuals with disabilities are humans who also crave the same positive interactions as our able-bodied counterparts do. Assistance from another human or a piece of adaptive equipment does not preclude individuals with disabilities from being able to rationalize, engage, and perceive what occurs around them.

Different is hard and confusing and, well, different. The profundity of an individual's character is not based off of their disabilities, but rather in the same visceral desire to carry out their own hopes, goals, and need for accomplishment. I can only relay interactions and their effects on my narrative, but I strongly embolden you to take my hypothetical scenario and observations as free form thoughts to mold into your own narrative and springboard off into exploring how similar situations and ideas apply and effect your story. I hope to chip away at our preconceived notions of what is normal in an interaction with an individual who identifies as having a disability and how a seemingly mundane day going to the store to pick up some cookies may impact somebody for the rest of their lives. Change is inevitable and differences will always be present but an open mind, the patience and willingness to learn about others, and kindness can help dissipate our fear of different and instead allow us to embrace it.