



## Label Jars, Not People

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and Burton Blatt

"Ugly" is a label. It arbitrarily and subjectively defines a physical condition. And, even when "accurate"—that is, when there is wide agreement that the label has been appropriately applied—it is rarely helpful to the person so stamped. Most labels do more harm than good. The label ugly, for instance, is sometimes associated with criminality, even monstrosity. The mass media has linked ugliness and disabilities with evil and violence for a long time. The monster Frankenstein, the wart-nosed witch of Snow White fame, and the Hunchback of Notre Dame exemplify this tradition.

Disability labels such as mentally retarded, blind, deaf, physically disabled, emotionally disturbed, and learning disabled, like the label ugly, have their origins primarily as descriptive terms, applied to people who appear or behave in ways that are considered to be different. Now, however, those terms may evoke more than their creators intended. Disability labels often act as cues for images of dependence, pity, guilt, childishness, incompetence, unusual personality formation, sexlessness, and sexual deviance. Television can either perpetuate these stereotypes or promote more positive images of people who have disabilities. By describing negative images commonly associated with disability labels, we hope to identify some of the inaccurate stereotypes that should be discarded.

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Disabilities are sometimes viewed as tragic, and therefore as cause for great sadness. Obviously a disability can significantly impair one's lifestyle, but it need not have tragic consequences or engender endless misery on the part of the disabled person. Despite the popular image of sadness and tragedy, many disabled people do not consider themselves tragically afflicted or extraordinarily sad. People who are blind, for example, may wish to be able to see, but that does not prohibit them from experiencing happiness, love, achievement, and all of the so-called "positive" emotions that anyone else experiences. People with disabilities should not be typecast, either as sad victims of tragic circumstance or as forever smiling, carefree people, but rather shown as people who experience a range of emotions just like everyone else.

Disabled children are frequently placed in separate schools and institutions solely for handicapped children. Just as often, the media portrayal of these special settings is uncritical. Indeed, many believe that the disabled are happier with their "own kind," away from competition with "normal" people. So, while the media's portrayals may be representative of the larger society's attitudes and practices, are they helpful? Do they teach us to be better and to want something better?

The argument that the disabled are happier with other disabled people has been applied most frequently to the mentally retarded. Perhaps for that reason the preponderance of research on the integration/segregation of the disabled has focused on them. But the conclusions of that research have not proved that there is any advantage to segregating people labeled retarded.<sup>1</sup> Recent legislation and federal court decisions have now translated those research findings into a national policy to provide the "least restrictive" services possible; that is, to integrate disabled children into regular schools by providing appropriate specialized programs in the mainstream of society.<sup>2</sup> This principle of integration applies for children labeled deaf, blind, mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, and physically disabled. Television can promote more positive attitudes by showing disabled children located in regular schools and service settings rather than isolated "with their own kind."

Disability labels frequently evoke images of dependence, helplessness, and incompetence. It is too often presumed, for example, that people who are mentally retarded cannot make decisions of any sort. In fact, the majority of people who have been labeled retarded can make rational decisions in their own best interests. We cannot presume incompetence. In one study of institutionalized retarded persons it was found that retarded people were often capable of

manipulating institutional staff by managing their own behaviors, and even their performances on psychological tests, to create desired impressions.<sup>3</sup> It is generally agreed within the professions that mental retardation does not signify blanket incompetence, but rather involves variations in ability measured against a societal average. Many retarded people can understand and make decisions about marriage, birth control, medical operations, commercial contracts, living arrangements, and employment.

For people who are retarded, blind, deaf, emotionally disturbed, or physically impaired, the primary cause of their dependence may not be the disability so much as society's unwillingness to accommodate for disabilities. Accommodation would take the form of ramps and other architectural designs to promote access, an end to exclusion from school on the basis of disabilities, and nondiscrimination in hiring.<sup>4</sup> Disabilities can cause people to make mistakes, and they may prohibit people from accomplishing or comprehending certain tasks or situations. But the child who does poorly in mathematics class may excel in music. Consequently, it is important to portray people with disabilities as neither overly mistake-prone nor totally dependent. People with disabilities, like all people, are at once limited and competent. We recommend that television show people with disabilities helping others (an interdependent role) as well as in the more stereotyped role of being helped.

The presumption of incompetence and dependence can only promote both. In the television movie "Larry," the institutional psychologist worked tirelessly to teach Larry skills and to enable him to leave the institution.<sup>5</sup> The psychologist did so because she discovered that Larry had normal intelligence. But while Larry received enormous support, the rest of the institutional population remained in the background, relatively unserved, engaged in children's games, and were hardly, if at all, encouraged to prepare for independent lives outside of the institution. They were assumed to be too incompetent and hopelessly dependent. "Larry" is a success story for one institutional resident, and a quiet disaster for all of the other residents for whom no one expressed much hope.

Had Anne Sullivan presumed incompetence on the part of her young and later famed student, Helen Keller might well have remained forever dependent and bizarre like the background characters in "Larry." It is important to regard Helen Keller's success as a model of human development. At the same time, however, we must not regard the competence and success achieved by people with disabilities as extraordinary or unusual. Too often, when people with disabilities become productive in societally valued ways, they are

regarded as incredible, unique, amazing, or extraordinary. A successful disabled person is rarely perceived as ordinary. We recommend that disabled people, even those with severe disabilities, be portrayed in ordinary roles.

When adults are labeled disabled, they are sometimes treated as children.<sup>6</sup> Notice, for example, that feature films about mentally retarded and physically disabled people are frequently titled with the lead character's first name ("Joey," "Charlie," "Larry"), in the casual forms usually reserved for children.<sup>7</sup> Mentally retarded adults are often portrayed as foot-shuffling, head-bowed, naive people who speak in "gee-golly" phrases. In daily life, professionals sometimes speak in front of disabled adults as if they were not present, and nondisabled people frequently speak for disabled adults as if they could not speak for themselves.<sup>8</sup> Blind people are often spoken to loudly. Old people are spoken to in voice tones more appropriately applied to children.

Probably much of the "disabled adult as child" imagery comes from the concept of "mental age." Retarded adults are sometimes assigned mental ages of children. And this leads to the colloquialism, "He looks like an adult, but he has the mind of an eight year old." It should be noted that the concept of mental age is a grossly inadequate and misleading way of describing mental retardation.

Labeled people are often encouraged to enter certain vocational fields. It is presumed that certain jobs are particularly suited to the blind, deaf, mentally retarded, and physically impaired. People who are retarded are supposed to enjoy boring, tedious, repetitive work. Many sheltered workshops promote this stereotype. Yet the retarded experience boredom as much as any other group of people, and need relief from endlessly tedious jobs. Similarly, deaf people are said to enjoy art and design work, and the blind to make good newsstand keepers. One man who has a physical disability has written about this societal pressure to live a stereotype. Leonard Kriegel describes what he felt when a man said to him, "Why don't you plan to get yourself a nice store . . . where you don't have to work so hard but could earn your own living? That's what you should do."

And so I learned that I existed for him as an abstraction. . . . The cripple had been linked to the Negro. A new *they* had been born. As a man of the world, who did not need to move beyond abstraction, he assumed that he had every right in the world to decide what the cripple or the Negro wanted. He knew what I "should do" because he possessed two good legs and I didn't. It was another example of the normal deciding how that which dared not to be normal should live.<sup>9</sup>

We recommend that people with disabilities be portrayed in diverse, nonstereotyped roles. People with disabilities are employed as computer programmers, congressional aides, business people, clerks, teachers, human services administrators, industrial workers, and laborers. If we are ever to overcome the current stereotyping and job discrimination—according to 1970 census data, 64 percent of all disabled adults in America are unemployed—the media must promote alternative role models.

Nondisabled persons often experience discomfort when they come into contact with disabled people.<sup>10</sup> They sometimes ignore disabled people. Consequently, being disabled often means being alone, given the cold shoulder, and stared at from a distance. Nondisabled people sometimes focus so intensely on a disability as to make it impossible to recognize that the disabled person is also simply another person with many of the same qualities and interests as other people. The disabled are objectified. This practice is reflected in the perennial musings, "What is it like to be deaf?"; "It must be hard to get around in a wheelchair"; and "You must really wish you could see sometimes." We recommend portraying disabled people in situations in which others clearly accept their disabilities without focusing on them.

In the media, presentations that involve disabled people often highlight emotional problems, feelings of inadequacy and frustration, problems of adjustment, and other psychological difficulties. While many of these problems do arise when a person becomes disabled or during a child's formative years, such experiences are only one small element of a person's whole experience, most of which has nothing to do with being disabled. The casting of disabled people as psychological cases—pathologies—simply contributes to the overall image of the disabled as different and problematic. We recommend bringing disabled people out of the doctors' offices and hospitals and into more ordinary, nonclinical interactions.

Disability labels are often associated with character or personality types. In fact, numerous texts have been written on the personalities of people with certain disabilities, including "the mentally retarded type," "the learning disabled type," and "the blind type." These so-called types usually reflect stereotypes of worst behaviors rather than accurate views of people's disabilities. We tend to develop images of mentally retarded people seeking more affection than other people, needing frequent reassurances, and talking loudly and inappropriately. Similarly, the learning disabled are sometimes thought of as rowdy and prone to delinquency as a result of frustrations in the classroom.<sup>11</sup>

Although similar stereotypes are associated with other disabilities, there is no discernible link between behavior types and particular disabilities. Rather, most of the bizarre or inappropriate behaviors and personalities that people associate with particular disabilities are learned in institutions, in separate schools, in sheltered workshops, and in the context of a discriminatory society. We recommend that the media avoid these stereotyped personalities.

Labels evoke pity. One way to dehumanize people is to characterize them as inferior: as poor, pitiable, wretched souls. Unfortunately, people with disabilities often experience the weight of those perceptions daily. Teachers of disabled children are familiar with these attitudes, for they are often told, "You must have such patience to work with the poor souls. I would get depressed. It is so good of you to give up your life for them." Such remarks belie an attitude of pathos toward the disabled.

Charity drives also promote pity.<sup>1 2</sup> Potential donors are encouraged to give to the "less fortunate." Disabled children are highlighted on telethons and poster campaigns; they represent one more way to generate pity and contributions. Services created from such funds are perceived not as a right but as a privilege, more evidence that the disabled person is perceived as being slightly inferior to other people. We recommend that adults and children with disabilities be portrayed as equal to their peers, not as the objects of pity.

The reader may have noticed that we have not discussed *why* disability labels evoke negative and stereotypical images of people with disabilities. We have virtually ignored the causes for people's cruelty toward others. To be sure, social scientists and psychologists have put forth convincing explanations for systematic and pervasive dehumanization. They speak of such societal needs to find targets for hostility, of one group's need to promote itself at the expense of another, and of industrialized societies' curious penchant to define personal differences in the language of pathology.<sup>1 3</sup> But the psychological and sociological literature also assures us that societies can both change the targets of labels and abolish them altogether.

This fact buoys our spirits. It says that people can change their attitudes. It says that the practice of associating disabilities with evil, violence, pity, dependence, incompetence, sexual deviance, and sexlessness is not inevitable or predetermined. And so, while it may seem important to discover why people label and dehumanize other people, it is more important and eminently possible to create ways of demonstrating *how* people with disabilities defy the labels and myths.

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