

## EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK/Bernard Rimland, Ph.D.

## BEWARE THE ADVOZEALOTS: Mindless good intentions injure the handicapped

In recent years our society has increasingly been directed—often to the great detriment of the handicapped—by ideas that are based on good wishes and fantasies rather than on factual information and rational thought. People who should know better have subscribed to the idea that if you pretend that the handicapped are not really handicapped, the handicaps will disappear and everyone will live happily ever after. The legions of mentally ill homeless, seen shivering in doorways and rummaging for food in dumpsters, are a prime example of what can happen when ideology overrules common sense. People who are unable to care for themselves, and were once sheltered, fed and protected from criminal assault in institutions, are now living in wretched conditions in “the community.”

How was this accomplished? In part by the manipulation of language. All institutions were characterized as inherently oppressive, and “the community” as *invariably* loving and supportive.

The people who wrought such great harm on the institutionalized mentally ill are still at work. Now they are destroying the institutions needed for the most severely retarded and autistic people. Under the banners of “empowerment,” “human rights,” and “full inclusion,” they have also set out to destroy the special education system created by decades of advocacy and hard work on the part of the families of mentally handicapped children.

I have coined the word “advozealot” to characterize the people who purport to be advocates for the handicapped but are in fact zealous advocates of their own Alice in Wonderland ideology, in which handicaps can simply be assumed out of existence.

A major weapon of the advozealots is “politically correct” (PC) language. There are many forbidden words. They insist that words such as “autistic,” “retarded” and “handicapped” not be used. They insist that the silly euphemism “challenging” be used to describe severely self-injurious or assaultive behavior.

Professionals working in the field of severe mental handicap have in recent years been subjected to ridicule, censorship, and even intimidation to compel them to comply with the politically correct language insisted upon by the advozealots, who are certain that their way is the *only* way.

One of the major contentions of the advozealots, the self-appointed spokesmen for the handicapped, is that the mentally handicapped be referred to by means of “people first” terminology. One, for example, must say “children with autism,” rather than “autistic children.” Professionals who do not comply with these purportedly benign edicts have been threatened with refusal to publish their books and papers, with rejection of their grant proposals, and even with the loss of their jobs.

Even the federal government has succumbed. In Office of Education Regulations issued on September 29, 1992, “technical changes” are announced which include

deleting all references to “handicapped children” in the regulations and substituting “children with disabilities.” Why are our tax dollars used to promote such nonsense?

Insistence upon the use of PC terminology is a violation of the rights of speakers and writers to exercise their freedom of expression. If you wish to say “children with autism” rather than “autistic children,” go right ahead. BUT do not insist that I do so.

Although at first glance the matter may seem inconsequential—merely quibbling about words—the issue has real implications about real people in the real world. It is no coincidence that those who insist on people-first language are also those who insisted upon closing institutions and farm residences, so “community” living in urban jungles is forced upon the handicapped. These are the people who insist that special education be discarded so that “full inclusion” is forced on the handicapped, and on normal people as well—very often to the detriment of both groups. Research evidence does not support these goals. It is strictly an ideological campaign.

But why are the people-first people so zealous in demanding compliance? The answer brings us to the crucial reason for rejecting the terminology being foisted upon us by the purveyors of PC. Underlying the PC terminology is an insidious and deeply pernicious ideology that is based solely on a naive view which I call the fantasy assumption: if enough people join the fantasy, by choice or by coercion, the fantasy will come true. In the present instance, the advozealots appear to believe that if one deliberately trivializes the difference between mentally handicapped and non-handicapped persons, the differences will somehow disappear, and thus no one will be handicapped. Reality does not work that way. Closing down institutions for the mentally handicapped on the assumption that there really was no difference between people inside and outside those institutions has not worked. It has resulted in the displacement of tens of thousands of now homeless mentally handicapped people to the streets where they must fend for themselves. Playing “let’s pretend” is a game that’s fun for children. Playing let’s pretend when the lives of people—especially mentally handicapped people—are at stake, can lead to senseless tragedy.

Contrary to what the advozealots want us to believe, being a “person with autism” or a “person with retardation” is not like being “a person with a plaid jacket” or “a person with a cane.” Autism, mental retardation, and other mental handicaps pervade and permeate every moment of a person’s life. You can’t shed autism, or retardation, like a plaid jacket or sunglasses. The PC people are trying to brainwash us into believing, as they seem to, that there is no real difference between the mentally handicapped and the rest of us, but there is. To deny the difference is to reject the disability, to paper over the distinction. It deprives the handicapped of their most valuable asset—the

recognition of their disability by the rest of us. It annuls their right to our compassion and to the special treatment they need if they are to live secure and fulfilling lives. Pretending the handicapped are not really handicapped robs them of the respect they deserve for the tremendous effort they must exert to achieve the small accomplishments that come easily to the rest of us.

Douglas Biklen, in his book on facilitated communication, *Communication Unbound*, devotes the last of the seven chapters to “Ending the Ability/Disability Dichotomy.” He entreats us to abandon the “blindness of disability.” He believes (or at least appeared to when he wrote the book) that the supposed ability of virtually all the handicapped to communicate via facilitated communication proves that the handicaps were not real: handicaps are merely a myth.

Biklen’s ideas are specious. Yes, there are people on the borderline between normal and handicapped. Does that mean that no one is handicapped? Yes, there are shades of gray. Does that mean there is no black and white? Does twilight disprove the difference between day and night?

You can’t solve problems by hiding from them, or trying to smother them in a fog of murky words. You are much more likely to solve problems by recognizing them explicitly and thinking about them clearly.

In a talk given earlier this year, Clarence Sundram expressed the situation with great clarity: “...we have tended to be seduced by the power of these new ideas of equality, autonomy and inclusion to the point that we have relied more upon hope and belief than upon good judgment and careful planning to help make these ideas a reality. In the process we seem to be replacing the old stereotype of people who are mentally retarded as hopelessly dependent, with the new stereotype of a rugged individualist, capable of coping with a hostile and dangerous world, if only given the chance. Both stereotypes contain serious misconceptions and fail to confront the reality that ...mentally retarded...embraces a broad range of functioning capability and includes people with significant areas of incapacity as well.”

How do we combat these seductive but pernicious ideas, which are being implemented so uncritically?

Do not meekly accept the advozealots’ arrogant assumption of the moral high ground. Experience and common sense should carry at least as much weight as the strident repetition of PC buzzwords. Do not betray the handicapped by accepting the “people first”/“challenging behavior”/“in the community” ideology, nor any other ideology which is intended to trivialize the difficulties which beset the handicapped. Speak out: do not be afraid to exercise your freedom of expression, and freedom of thought. The advozealots, some with a hidden agenda and others with the best of intentions, have done much harm. If you are truly concerned with the welfare of the handicapped, resist!