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Open-Mindedness in Legislation to Protect People with Disabilities...and More

On February 15, 2018, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the ADA Education and Reform Act ([H.R. 620](#)). This proposed law is feared by some to slow or even eliminate the progress our society has made in affording people with “disabilities” access to public places and businesses, while requiring business owners to provide “reasonable accommodations.” Supporters of H.R. 620 claim that businesses have been hurt by aggressive lawyers and those seeking to profit from litigation over illegal barriers to access. In considering this potential legislation (not yet taken up by the U.S. Senate), one can only surmise that either our legal representatives have a vested interest in protecting businesses or lawmakers fail to appreciate the challenges that those with disabilities have in fully accessing the communities in which they live.

What is really fueling the legislation that threatens to gut the accessibility goals of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)? For a moment, let us consider the possibility that proponents of H.R. 620 are not fully supportive of anti-discrimination laws and equal access for all citizens. Let us assume for the sake of argument that many of our authoritarian lawmakers are insensitive to the needs of “people with disabilities.”

Individuals and organizations have attempted to undermine the ADA of 1990 since President George H.W. Bush made it the law of the land on July 26, 1990. Writing in the [National Review](#), in October 2017, George Leef, the Director of Research for the former John William Pope Center for Higher Education Policy (now the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal), provoked, “It’s too bad that Bush 41 signed this vague and in my view unconstitutional law.” Leef and others want the ADA nullified or so dismantled as to eliminate any leverage on the tyrannical majority to change its prejudices and discriminatory practices.

What might cause this ignorance and social insensitivity? What psychological factors lead to the prejudices that result in discriminatory practices and the unwillingness to grant equal rights to others? Martin Luther King, Jr., reportedly said, “There comes a time when silence is betrayal.” Therefore, it is incumbent upon all of us to address the injustices rendered upon our citizens who are emotionally, mentally, and/or physically “different” or impaired, people with so-called “disabilities.”

Nearly 20 years after King's untimely death in 1968, George Will, the well-known columnist, speaking to a conservative audience, emphasized the importance of ensuring equal rights for persons with disabilities. Will said, "The most striking fact about the [disabled population]...is that it is the most inclusive. There is a sense in which we live in the antechamber of the handicapped community. I will never be black and I will never be a woman. I could be handicapped on the drive home tonight." As previously stated in the [Summer 2015 edition of the *New Worker*](#), although some of Will's word choices are now politically incorrect, the truth of his statement remains clear and unchanged.

One possibility that could explain the difference between the thinking of proponents of H.R. 620, those who consider the ADA "unconstitutional," and people agreeing with Will's concept of the "handicapped community" may be found in the nearly 70-year-old research of Milton Rokeach, a Polish-American social psychologist who attempted to measure authoritarianism (close-mindedness), whether left or right. Rokeach dedicated his academic life to the research of the "open and closed mind." His research into the nature of belief systems began with the analysis of ideological dogmatism. He pursued an understanding of how people developed and maintained intolerance through systems of belief and disbelief.

Rokeach studied the cognitive constructs of belief-disbelief systems. Although too complex to thoroughly analyze here, according to [Rokeach](#), dogmatism is "(a) a relatively closed cognitive organization of beliefs and disbeliefs about reality, (b) organized around a central set of beliefs about absolute authority which, in turn, (c) provides a framework for patterns of intolerance and qualified tolerance toward others.... Even though a person or group may reject a disbelief system it is often necessary, for the sake of achieving political or religious aims, to form working alliances with other individuals or groups. It is here postulated that such compromising varies inversely with dogmatism: the greater the dogmatism the less compromise there will be...."

In essence, the greater the dogmatism, the more unwillingness to compromise with those who maintain other belief-disbelief systems. As long as we perceive (believe) the community of disabled people as an antechamber to our society, unable to contribute (disbelief), the more likely we will remain intolerant and unwilling to open our communities to those who seem different.

Perhaps good news can be found in the research I was fortunate enough to direct in my doctoral program at Temple University, nearly 36 years ago. We learned that when research subjects were exposed to an instructional program of effective communication, including active listening, they became less dogmatic than controlled research subjects that did not have the exposure. More specifically, the research group trained in interpersonal communication ostensibly became less anxious and more open-minded. I theorized from the research data that subjects learning more effective interpersonal communication became less anxious and more open to understanding the other person's experience. Remarkable!

What would happen if we began listening to one another? What might be the outcome of people in general becoming more empathetic through truly appreciating the reality of others? What might be the outcome of lawmakers actually understanding the challenges of those who wait in the "antechamber" for inclusion? Instead, those belonging to disability advocacy groups literally pile into the hallways outside politicians' offices and shout their objections to proposals like H.R. 620. They demand justice! In reaction, "authorities" see protestors as troublemakers and throw

them out! But, is anyone – other than those who already agree with disability advocates – actually listening?

Listening *actively* could be the key. Coming to an understanding of what the other person is experiencing may be the clue to opening the mind and mitigating prejudice and intolerance. As Will implied, understanding and empathy (identifying with the other) are the keys to opening the antechamber in which we keep others isolated and excluded. All of us can benefit from King's warning that silence can be betrayal in the face of injustice, but we will be equally remiss by not listening to those who disagree with us.

My statements here are not a naïve interpretation of corrupt, insensitive, authoritarian leadership. I have never been fooled by a “members only” sign. We cannot allow so-called leadership to divide and conquer. But by truly listening to each other and understanding, we can find common ground on which we can enjoy equal rights.

Lawmakers – open your minds by listening. Members of the Supreme Court – consider the Trump travel ban with open minds. Citizens (and those wanting to become) – treat each other empathetically. The ADA, civil rights for people with disabilities, could be next on the dogmatist's agenda to eliminate.

Striving to Work

People with disabilities face several employment disparities that can act as employment barriers, including individual factors (health and functional capacity), environmental or contextual factors (labor market trends), and social and policy related factors (stigma and prejudice). [Sundar, et al.](#), (2018) recently published findings in the [Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation](#) regarding the 2015 Kessler Foundation National Employment and Disability Survey ([KFNEDS](#)) in order to understand how individuals with disabilities overcome these barriers and *strive to work*. Striving to work is defined as “any behavior that demonstrated active engagement in job preparation, job search, and/or participation in the workforce since the onset of disability.” Telephone interviews with 3,013 working-age individuals with disabilities were conducted.

At the time of the study, the majority of respondents (68.4%) were striving to work. The researchers note that individuals with disabilities actively engaged in job preparation/job searches and strived to overcome barriers in their workplaces. Although they are often portrayed as being less capable or willing to work, these results suggest that individuals with disabilities do indeed find work highly important. Interestingly, only 25.6% of respondents reported pursuing vocational/job skills training, and only about 22% of individuals recorded obtaining assistive devices or special equipment to assist with job preparation. The authors suggest that vocational rehabilitation and community agencies ought to expand their services to better serve these individuals and their families.

Among respondents, 11.4% reported the lack of workplace accommodations as a barrier to employment. The most frequent barriers reported on the job included lower pay than others in similar positions and negative attitudes from supervisors or co-workers. The authors opine that disclosure of disabilities and further conversations about disability can create awareness and help

build supportive relationships in the workplace. These findings further highlight the importance of listening actively, fostering empathy, and encouraging education about disability, not only within the legal system but also in the workplace.

Plastic Waste Finds a New Life as Affordable Housing

As many already know, this year's Earth Day initiative revolved around the issue of plastic waste. In light of that initiative, we are sharing the work of [EcoDom, a Mexican startup](#). The company's owner, Carlos D. Gonzalez, wanted to battle his country's extreme poverty rate and plastic pollution problem by creating "living quarters with a positive environmental impact."

The company collects plastic waste, melts it down, and shapes it into large panels to create roofs and walls to build insulated houses. The houses are approximately 430 to 460 square feet. Each takes approximately seven days to build and uses two tons of plastic. Families pay about [\\$280](#) in U.S. dollars per unit.

In total, the company currently repurposes [5.5](#) tons of plastic waste per day. Perhaps the U.S. can learn a valuable environmental lesson from its neighbor!

Plastic Bag Found at the Bottom of World's Deepest Ocean Trench

Even one of the most remote places on Earth (the Mariana Trench) cannot hide from the scourge of plastic trash. Learn more on [National Geographic's website](#).

Can Rocks Save the Planet From Global Warming?

Scientists like Peter B. Keleman, Ph.D., a geologist at Columbia University's Lamont – Doherty Earth Observatory, are studying the effects that rocks could have on the Earth's overabundance of carbon dioxide. Peridotite naturally reacts to carbon dioxide to create rock through the process of [carbon mineralization](#).

In Oman, erosion has exposed a patchy zone of peridotite about 200 miles long. These formations are also found in Albania, Papua New Guinea, and Northern California, among other places. The challenge will be to develop a process that speeds up the natural process and makes it more cost effective.

The Ten Commandments of Communicating with People with Disabilities

[*The Ten Commandments of Communicating with People with Disabilities*](#) is a training program that stimulates awareness of disabilities in relation to the workplace. The program, which includes a video and supplementary print materials, can offer employers/employees throughout numerous industries a better understanding of "disability etiquette" while also promoting overall disability awareness.

Ask JAN – The Job Accommodation Network

The Job Accommodation Network ([JAN](#)) has served as one of the most comprehensive resources on job accommodation and disability employment issues. JAN’s services benefit employers and employees alike – as it writes on its website, the organization “helps people with disabilities enhance their employability, and shows employers how to capitalize on the value and talent that people with disabilities add to the workplace.” Furthermore, JAN provides guidance and education regarding relevant legislation efforts and other consulting initiatives.