

Disability: No Longer a Hindrance

Disability is a term that, in today's society, immediately conjures up negatively connotated images in one's mind; stereotypes of disabled people are that they are mentally challenged, incapable, and should be pitied. In this respect, society is ignorant. Most of the disabled beings are just normal people who have either been the victims of traumatic accidents or the victims of incapacitating diseases. These are normal people who are just physically handicapped, yet continue to see society turn its back on them. Nancy Mairs, Andre Dubus, and Harriet Johnson are three disabled authors who have experienced the prejudice of society. Through their essays, they convey a powerful message to society that the disabled are perfectly capable of living and expressing themselves as normal people. Mairs, Dubus, and Johnson all have differing views on the disabled, but they all use similar resources of language to communicate their message; their use of life experiences, exemplification, and emotional tones persuasively express their viewpoints to the reader.

Nancy Mairs is crippled with multiple sclerosis, yet knows she is as fully capable as another, non-disabled human being. She is very astute, and it is for this reason she openly criticizes the media in a sarcastic and disgusted tone. Mairs argues that the media needs to stop treating disabilities as such a negative thing, and accept it as normal. She exemplifies that while ordinary people have popular celebrities and people they can relate to, the modern media has nothing the disabled can connect with. When one cannot relate to anything, one might believe that "there is something queer about you, something ugly or foolish or shameful...you might feel as if you don't exist." Powerful diction is used to convey her message that the media refuses to acknowledge disabled people as part of a normal society because "to depict disabled people in the ordinary activities of daily life is to admit that there is something ordinary about the disability itself, that it may enter anybody's life. If it is effaced completely, or at least isolated as a separate 'problem', so that it remains at a safe distance from other human issues, then the viewer won't feel threatened by her or his own physical vulnerability." Not only is this statement teeming with sarcasm, but it introduces Mairs's opinion about ordinary people; people hate disabilities, but everyone will eventually become disabled, so "it will be a good bit easier psychologically if you

are accustomed to seeing disability as a normal characteristic, one that complicates but does not ruin human existence.” I partially agree with Mairs; disability is not a horrendous characteristic, and it is one people should not be afraid of. Because it is so common, the media should definitely be willing to show it. The media does have a strong influence on how people view minorities such as the disabled people. I work with disabled people in a program called NEHSA (New England Handicapped Ski Association) and help the disabled learn how to ski. They are perfectly normal people with physical disabilities, and are just trying to enjoy life to the fullest. However, Mairs’s cynical look at ordinary humans is very biased, and I believe that a disability should not become the focus of peoples’ lives.

Andre Dubus was a perfectly normal man, who unfortunately ended up in a car accident that took away the use of his legs. Like Mairs, Dubus relies upon exemplification and anaphora when expressing his opinion on the “able-bodied”. This use of anaphora relies heavily upon pathos. “The quadriplegic will not walk. He will forever depend on someone. He cannot sit on a toilet, he cannot wipe himself, or shave, shower, make his bed, dress. He will use a catheter. He cannot cook. He will not feel the heat of a woman, except with his face.” Dubus expresses what a cripple cannot do; the harsh, physically and emotionally demanding life of a disabled person is a reality. He does this not only to show how hard it is for cripples to live, but also to show why he now has some resentment towards ordinary people. This is expressed when he talks about the rage he felt at a reporter and editor who wrote an article about a quadriplegic; ordinary people will sympathize with the disabled, but will never truly understand the physical and emotional pain. I agree with Dubus because ordinary people cannot imagine the pain of being a cripple. Unlike Mairs, Dubus does not try to make himself seem like an ordinary person. He knows he will always be different, and that his life will be full of challenges. Whereas Mairs uses numerous examples to make herself seem like a normal person, Dubus clearly accepts he will never again be normal in society. He even says, “I sing of those who cannot...what we need is not the sounds of horns rising to the sky but the steady beat of the brass drum.” I believe that what Dubus is saying is true; cripples do not need uplifting events and pity, but the enduring respect from society. Both Mairs and Dubus use antithesis to make their message clear. Dubus

states that “seeing the flesh as only a challenge to the spirit is as false as seeing the spirit as only a challenge to the flesh” when he wants people to understand that both disabled and non disabled people have some limitations, the former with their bodies and the latter with their wounded spirits.

While Mairs and Dubus were disabled at later stages of their lives, Harriet Johnson was disabled from birth. However, all three authors know the drastic effects of being a “cripple.” The use of this demeaning and insensitive word used by all three authors to describe themselves is used to shock the reader and send a powerful message that this word might as well be used because of the insensitive way that they are being treated by society. All three authors establish their expertise in this area very early on in their essays by stating that they are “crippled.” Also, they all use negative connotations with being crippled to help convey their message; Mairs uses diction such as “totter”, “peculiar gait”, and “degenerative”, Dubus uses words such as “rage”, “damaged”, and “helpless”, and Johnson uses words such as “kill”, “oblivion”, and “ugly.” By acknowledging all their disabilities in negative ways, the authors establish a stronger emotional connection with the reader and draw sympathy and understanding. Mairs and Johnson use some humor as well as irony in their writing style to show how ridiculous ordinary people can be in their treatment of the disabled. In contrast, Dubus does not express any humor and is more serious about how he and his disabled friends are treated. Another similarity between all the essays is that that they all use a narrative writing style; this not only brings out a lot of exemplification, but also helps establish pathos because of the first hand accounts. However, Johnson uses a lot of vivid description to describe herself, unlike the other authors. She says, “I’m Karen Carpenter thin, flesh mostly vanished, a jumble of bones in a floppy bag of skin.” She does this to make the reader sympathize with her, and the metaphor, analogy, and imagery enhance the effect. Also, Johnson is more positive about her disability, and less critical of ordinary people than the other authors. She uses anaphora to make her point, “We take constraints that no one would choose and build rich and satisfying lives within them. We enjoy pleasures other people enjoy, and pleasures peculiarly our own. We have something the world needs.” Throughout her essay Johnson chronicles some dialogues she has with her challengers

who argue that assisted suicides should be an option for disabled people because of the poor quality of life they would lead. The use of dialogue makes her argument more interesting to read. In addition, Johnson's varied use of syntax with long and short sentences to get her point across is effective.

Having a disability can be a challenge and it can be hard to deal with mainly because of the reaction of society towards disabled people. However, like all three of the authors, I believe that a disability should never limit the success in peoples' lives in any way. They should be able to live life to the fullest within their capabilities. A famous example of a person who succeeded despite his severe disability is Stephen Hawkins, who became a world renowned physicist despite being wheelchair bound. This type of success reinforces Johnson's message that disabled people can lead full lives and should not be considered a burden. I think Dubus is right in assuming non-disabled people don't truly understand the hardships disabled people go through. Though disabled people face many barriers, especially poor acceptance by society, a desire to overcome the odds against them helps many disabled persons to be very successful. This demonstrates that disability is not the most important component of a person's character.