# Being Realistic Isn't Realistic:

## Collected Essays on Disability, Identity, Inclusion, and Innovation

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# CHAPTER 5: DO YOU KNOW WHERE OREGON IS?

**Norm**

I thought it was going to be another routine flight to a speaking engagement in Portland, Oregon. I had a stopover in Boston, so when the agent asked me where I wanted my bags sent, I absentmindedly said Boston rather than Portland. I realized my error at the departure gate and tried to correct the problem with the gate agent. Directing my baggage to the wrong destination proved to be a fortunate accident.

When I told the agent that I had mistakenly checked my bags to Boston and that they needed to be checked right through to Portland Oregon, he said, and it wasn't a question, "You mean Portland, Maine."

I corrected him. "No. I'm going to Portland, Oregon."

"But you have a ticket to Portland, Maine."

I immediately realized the problem. My travel agent had accidentally booked me to the wrong Portland. It was a simple oversight that I hoped could be easily fixed.

"Why are you going to Portland?" he asked.

I wasn't exactly sure why he needed to know this, but I told him anyway. "I'm speaking at a conference."

"What type of conference is it?" The agent was skeptical.

I began to see where this was interchange was headed, so I began using multisyllabic words. This is often helpful when I feel underestimated.

"It's an interdisciplinary conference on disability rights and inclusive education."

"Are you sure," he asked me, enunciating carefully, "that the conference isn't in Portland, Maine?"

"Yes, I'm sure it's in Oregon. I've been dialling the 503 area code for the last two months, and 503 is the area code for Oregon, not Maine."

And then, incredibly, he asked "Do you know where Oregon is?"

I held back the urge to confront him. It would, I realized, only complicate the situation. My goal was to get to Portland that evening, and it was already two thirty. I swallowed the implied insult.

"North of California, south of Washington State." I hoped my sarcasm wasn't too obvious. "Look," I went on, "I'm a professional speaker, and I'm giving a keynote

speech at an education conference at nine o'clock tomorrow morning. I need you to change my ticket to Portland, Oregon."

Unbelievably, he wasn't done. "Do you have any letters or brochures about the conference?"

It was humiliating, but I showed him the correspondence and contract. Clearly this was the only way he'd believe me.

He sighed deeply. "The ticket is going to be more expensive."

My patience was quickly evaporating. I slammed three credit cards on the counter.

"Take your pick," I said, trying to control my irritation. "Visa, Diners Club, or American Express?"

He finally consulted his computer and told me that my only option was a three thirty flight to Chicago that connected to Portland, Oregon. The flight, of course, was at a different terminal, and I had to go back to the check-in counter to buy a new ticket.

I suspected that I'd likely have to repeat this interchange with the new agent at the check-in counter. Thinking ahead, I asked this agent to help carry my bags, knowing that the ticket agent would be more inclined to believe him than me.

We rushed to the check-in counter, where he explained the situation, dropped off my bags, and left. It was now two forty. I knew I'd need at least ten minutes to get to the other terminal, ten minutes for security, and five minutes to get to the gate. I could just manage.

However, my escape to the gate was undermined by the new agent. She had inch-long glossy fingernails and, despite my urging, plucked lazily at the computer keys, manicured forefinger by forefinger. It was now two fifty. With luck, I could make the end of the boarding process. I continued to glance pointedly at my watch. Unfortunately, she was oblivious to all of my nonverbal cues. Finally, she finished. Holding the ticket in the air beside her ear, she began giving me instructions in a loud, slow voice.

"OK. This is your new ticket. Put this ticket in your bag. Go out to the big glass door, and get on the bus with the big red number one in the window."

I interrupted, "I know how to get to terminal one. Just give me the ticket, please."

Undeterred, she continued. Detailed instructions for security were followed by step-by-step directions to the gate. I briefly considered trying to snatch the ticket out of her hand but concluded that if I missed, my credibility would be further minimized. This would undoubtedly lead to an even longer delay. She finally handed the ticket to me at three o'clock, and I managed to get to the gate by three thirty-five. Luckily, the flight was late boarding, so I made it, not exactly unscathed, to Oregon.

**Norm and Emma: Is it Just Ignorance?**

When we share these experiences with others, we are often told that these are not examples of prejudice against disabled people; they are instead the actions of well-intentioned but uninformed people. These people, we're told, mean well. They just don't know any better. But is this a correct interpretation?

There is a double standard regarding the prejudice directed against disabled people and the prejudice directed against other marginalized groups. If a person acts on the presumption that women are less intelligent or capable than men, this is seen as an expression of blatant sexism. Likewise, if a person acts on the presumption that people of colour are less intelligent or capable than white people, this is seen as an expression of outright racism. But if a person acts on the presumption that disabled people are less intelligent or capable than they are, this is seen as a lack of education.

Why are people seen as not knowing any better when they are disrespectful towards disabled people but are told they should know better when they are disrespectful toward women and people of colour?

We believe this double standard arises out of some confusion between sympathy and prejudice. It is largely assumed in our society that if we feel sympathy toward another person, we cannot, by definition, be prejudiced toward them. Sympathy precludes prejudice. In simple terms, being sympathetic means having nice and compassionate thoughts toward someone, whereas being prejudiced connotes having mean thoughts toward them.

When you have a disability, however, you find out very quickly that sympathy and prejudice are not mutually exclusive. In fact they often come wrapped together in the same insidious package. As an example, a friend told us that she received a sympathy card after giving birth to a beautiful daughter with Down syndrome. In the midst of her excitement and joy over having a new baby, she felt slapped in the face by her friend's card. The frustrating part of merging prejudice and sympathy is that it is almost impossible to confront the prejudice. Had she confronted her friend about the insulting nature of the card, her objection likely would have been dismissed. When people mean well, they generally don't question their actions. It seems that a prevalent belief is that intention trumps impact. In other words, if I mean well, then any negative impact my actions have on you are mitigated and become your problem. Unfortunately, benevolent people often suffer from an absence of self-doubt. Any objection to their intended benevolence is typically seen as ingratitude or deliberate misunderstanding.

It is this unconscious conflation of sympathy and prejudice that made those interchanges with the airline agents so difficult. Sympathy and benevolence, despite the best of intentions, can often be expressions of prejudice. However, for the purpose of this discussion, let us assume that the sympathy and benevolence are as innocuous as many believe them to be. What we find is that even with this constraint, it is possible to expose the airline agents' prejudice.

Ignorance, by definition, most often implies an absence of education or information. To assume that these airline agents were completely unaware would imply that they had no presumptions about disabled people at all. It would be describing them as empty vessels. However, if they'd been truly unaware (a cultural impossibility), then you might reasonably expect them to recognize Norm as a competent adult once he began speaking to them in a coherent manner.

However, this was clearly not the case. Despite an adult vocabulary and rational conversation, they persisted in treating him like an unaccompanied minor who required their guidance and supervision. Their attitudinal vessels weren't empty; they were full. So full, in fact, that there was no room for any alternative information.

The problem wasn't that the airline agents didn't know *what Norm was capable of*; the problem was that they firmly believed that he was *incapable*. The first is ignorance; the second is prejudice. They may have felt sorry for him; they may have been genuinely trying to help, but their sympathy and desire to help were completely unrelated to their underestimation. Sympathy, benevolence, and prejudice can coexist. They often do.

**Being Polite**

In the face of prejudice, we are often encouraged to be understanding and patient. Criticizing or becoming angry when people (perhaps unintentionally) insult disabled people is often seen as unjustified and even mean-spirited. We've often wondered why disabled people are encouraged to adopt the demeanour, if not the responsibility, of monks when everyone else is given the right to confront and question insult and underestimation.

When women or people of colour are confronted by bigoted comments or actions, their anger is not only seen as justified; it is seen as the necessary first step in changing the dialogue and foregrounding social justice. Encouraging members of these groups to be patient and understanding in the face of sexism and racism only perpetuates the bigotry. Yet when disabled people become angry, they are seen as maladjusted; the presumption is that they "have a chip on their shoulders" and are projecting their anger at being disabled onto non-disabled people. What should be understood as a political interchange is transformed into evidence of personal dysfunction.

At times feminists who challenge male patriarchy have been accused of projecting their anger about being women and their desire to be men onto the men that insult them. However, this Freudian idea of "penis envy" has become outdated, and most people don't believe it anymore. Yet the same claim is still seen as unquestionably legitimate when it is levelled against disabled people. All disabled people *must* want to be non-disabled. Even if the people who object to our anger acknowledge that that those airline agents probably carried prejudicial attitudes towards disabled people, they still often insist that we should refrain from directly confronting the prejudice. They claim that polite, non confrontational discussion and education is the most effective way to change erroneous perceptions. Unfortunately, history tells us unequivocally that this is seldom the case.

Adam Kahane, a renowned international mediator who worked extensively in the Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa, spoke eloquently about the perils of politeness. In his book *Solving Tough Problems* (2004, 2007), Kahane wrote:

> Politeness is a way of not talking. When we are being polite, we say what we think we should say: "How are you?" "I'm fine." We do not say what we are really thinking because we are afraid of a social rupture: "How are you?" "I'm terrible." When we talk politely, we are following the party line, trying to fit in and so keep the social system whole and unchanged, even though the whole may be diseased or counterfeit… When somebody speaks personally, passionately, and from the heart, the conversation deepens.

> Politeness maintains the status quo… As long as the status quo is working, we can afford to remain polite. But when we see that the status quo is no longer working, we must speak up. (p.56)

Kahane's comments led us to realize that many of the people who urge us to be polite and non-confrontational are people who are probably afraid of conflict. They aren't necessarily encouraging us to avoid confrontation because confrontation isn't the best way to change perceptions; they are encouraging us to avoid confrontation because conflict makes them uncomfortable, and they wish to reduce their own anxiety.

Many people prefer to view prejudice towards disabled people as ignorance rather than bigotry, and suggest that the best response is education. However, the uncomfortable truth is that in many instances no amount of educational intervention is adequate to effect the necessary change in attitude. Most often, it simply engenders defensiveness or outright denial: "That's not what I meant!" Those who would have us endlessly turn the other cheek might do well to notice that the status quo is simply not working for disabled people.

With this understood, we were still left with the question of how to respond effectively to interchanges like the ones with the airline agents. Kahane is right: being polite isn't efficacious; it is naive at best and an abdication of responsibility at worst. Not to mention the fact that it accomplishes nothing. Perhaps one of the most perceptive and concise answers to the question of how to proceed effectively came from a university friend who was working his way through a master's degree in social and political thought by being a bouncer in a pub. During the day he attended classes and engaged in thoughtful and measured dialogue. However, later at night he could be seen putting disruptive patrons in half nelson holds and escorting them out of the pub. When asked about this apparent contradiction in his behaviour, he chuckled and said, "It's true that you can only foster insight through dialogue. But first you have to get their attention!"

We recently objected forcefully to an action taken by a prominent person—an action with potentially dire consequences for some members of the disability community. In the public discussion that followed, those of us making the objection were accused by one individual of violence. This accusation was perplexing since no threats were ever made. It seemed that our accuser believed that *any* form of criticism or disagreement could be categorized as damaging and counterproductive, even violent. Her argument reminded us of that old adage that many of us heard from our parents: "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all."

Unfortunately, as Kahane and our university friend so eloquently pointed out, saying nice things isn't always effective. It can result in a lack of necessary clarity and thus miss the mark entirely. In fact, in the instance above, our subsequent ability to have a fierce but respectful conversation with the person concerned resulted in a change of heart and a different action. But first that person had to know exactly what the problem was and why we objected so strongly.

Does this mean that we are advocating for wholesale rudeness or personal attacks? Of course not. Respect and clarity are not mutually exclusive. Confronting the status quo is not always a comfortable activity, but it's necessary, and it can be done well. This is what we try to do even though we acknowledge that there have been times when frustration and fatigue have caused us to lash out

unproductively. There are also times where we have simply sighed and let an insult or slight pass because the energy it takes to deal with the situation just seems too much. Like many other disabled people, we get tired of the responsibility of continually being required to educate the public and take on and confront societal bigotry. However, while we understand that we are under no obligation to continually engage in the process of such education, we also recognize that our ability to step away from it is a luxury that disabled people can ill afford. We recognize that when we have the courage to speak out about injustice, we don't do it only for ourselves. We pave the way for the others who come behind us. Every time we note the absence of a ramp or the presence of some other barrier to our full inclusion, and every time we call out condescension and underestimation and bring it to the attention of someone who has the power to make a change—whether structural or attitudinal—we make the world just a little more accessible for the people who follow.