

What are Words Worth?



For as long as I can remember disabled people have been discussing what kind of language we prefer to be used when describing us. When I worked at the BBC, during the 1990's, there were heated discussions around the correct term to be used. Were we "disabled people", "people with disabilities", "differently abled", "ability challenged" or even "special"? (urgh). The list was actually longer, but to be honest I phased out a lot during these meetings. After nearly ten years we chose 'disabled people' (which is where we started out), but it does demonstrate the amount of time spent on language. But why does it matter?

Well I think there are two reasons. Firstly there is a need to stop the use of those words and terms that disempower us. I am not "invalid" or "wheelchair bound". I do not "suffer" from my impairment either. While there is discussion over the historic route of "handicapped", whether it comes from "cap in hand" (begging) or from the horse racing term to level the playing field, the fact that most British disabled people don't like the term means that it should not be used. That is the key issue here. We should be allowed to decide how we are referred to. That grasping of the power of words is the second reason. We need to be in control as the first step to ensuring disabled people gain equality in our society.

But some language does throw up questions for us all. With the Paralympics having core values that include courage

and inspiration, much of the media coverage has focused on stories of how these worldclass sportsmen and women have "triumphed over tragedy". It could be claimed that these sporting heroes will inspire many disabled people to take up a sport and get more active, but we all know that the word inspirational will be used by the media to focus on their impairments and how they have battled to overcome them.

But this is where another question raises its head. If I wrote down my life story (which I have in an autobiography... any publishers out there?) it would read like the archetypal triumph over tragedy story, and the same goes for so many disabled people I meet. In addition to this, we all have to have huge stores of courage to spend every day trying to live and succeed in a society that does tend to make us play against a stacked deck. So what is it about this kind of story and language that annoys so many of us?

For me it can create the impression that all disabled people are in some way filled with an extra reserve of bravery. Other members of our society who are thought of as brave,

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like firemen or soldiers, know the pressure that puts on them and they always explain when having completed acts of heroism that "anyone would have done the same". To be honest, I have never been sure what the choice was when I found myself a wheelchair user. It was a case of get on with it. But of course there were times when I was definitely not brave or courageous, and during those moments I felt like a failure.

Even today I have times when it all gets too much, but now I get angry rather than down. This tends to gain a different reaction. For those people who have just come to their disability those moments of lack of courage or stoicism can make them feel like they are lacking something that other disabled people all have that got us through the bad times, and thus makes those times even worse for them.

This is why getting it right around language is important for all of us. The disabled community is the only one you can become a member of in a blink of an eye and can be from any walk of life. But I am sure that most of the language disabled people don't like stems from the fear around disability.

But the great thing about language is that it can change. I can't get over how far we've come in my 47 years on the planet. So let's just see if the coverage of the Paralympics leads to the change in portrayal and language that we all dream of. ■