

What's in a Name?

Ann Rae

(This article first appeared in the International Rehabilitation Review in 1989).

There is an ongoing argument within the disability movement around the world how we, disabled people/people with disabilities, should be referred to.

Some people with disabilities argue that we are people first, and that our disabilities (impairments) have nothing to do with who or what we are, or what we can or cannot do.

Others, who identify themselves as disabled people, argue that we are disabled more by environmental and economic barriers than by our physical/sensory impairments - and that the term disabled people allows full exploration of what we are disabled by.

There is a healthy debate because establishing the fundamental principles of disability issues is vital for understand our position in society, and confronting it effectively.

What is not helpful is new, convoluted terminology for disability which can only cloud the issues.

But need them or not, new "right on" phrases for disability are being bandied about. They seem to be floating across the Atlantic from the USA.

Participation and integration for disabled Americans is much more than a reality than it is for us. There is an Anti-Discrimination Act for Americans with Disabilities progressing through Congress now. Experimenting with language is a luxury they can, perhaps, afford.

Here is a glossary of phrases, with my comments.

Physically Inconvenienced - This trivialises the problems confronted by disabled people to the point of being quite offensive.

Those of us unable to move around our own homes or out of them are not inconvenienced: we are prisoners.

Those of us unable to use public transport or get into public buildings are discriminated against. Those of us denied access to full educational and training programmes are denied the right to knowledge and to further our intellectual potential. Those of us unable to work for all the contributory reasons above are living below the poverty line. We are not inconvenienced by being regarded as asexual: we suffer identity loss and the denial of sexual fulfilment.

Physically Challenged - This certainly has a good ring to it. It brings to mind all those heart-warming tales of daring: of disabled people who climb mountains or are lionised for being literary geniuses in spite of their "severe disabilities".

Quite a lot of them go to Buckingham Palace and get awards... and are burdened by becoming role models.

Or is it the overwhelming majority of us, who struggle from day to day just to exist, who are burdened by having to live up to these role models?

Being physically challenged for able-bodied people and disabled people should be a matter of choice. The phrase smacks of failure for those of us not perceived as responding to "physical challenges".

Quentin Crisp (The Naked Civil Servant) once asked on Wogan (a television chat show popular in the 1980s) 'What's wrong with being a failure?' and nearly got a standing ovation.

Differently Abled - Well, isn't everybody? Able-bodied people often latch onto this phrase in their early attempts to understand our oppression.

Apart from its superficiality, it also feeds the myth that we are "special people", with a special perspective on life which is more enlightened than that of able-bodied people.

Of course we often have a different perspective - our segregation from mainstream life ensures that - but the conclusions we arrive at should be no different to those of able-bodied people, aware of the injustices heaped upon minority groups.

Temporarily Able-Bodied (TABS) - This was introduced (in England) by Judy Heumann, founder of the Work Institute on Disability.

In an interview for Link (a TV programme) she observed, with great perspicacity that we are the only minority group to which anybody could belong, and she thought able-bodied people felt very threatened by that and therefore, by us.

Why then should we use a phrase which will remind people that they can become what they most fear, if our very existence does not already? It will do our cause no good.

Reminding planners, architects and policy makers that access for all is morally right and economic sense is one thing. Wagging our fingers metaphorically at people saying "Wait until you're disabled" is another akin to "You wait until you grow up", etc.

Finger wagers are not endearing people, and I'm not entirely sure that able-bodied people who refer to themselves as TABS are either.

One thing is for sure, we're all "TAPS" - "Temporarily Alive People". But do we want to be reminded of this too often? I bet there's somebody out there who will say yes.

