

**Unraveling Stigma and
Prejudice: Preventing Disability
Discrimination at its Core**

DAVID W. SHANNON

B.A., LL.B., LL.M.

I'm going to discuss why perceived barriers within a society exist - identify those barriers - and propose a model for change. This model will create a welcoming community for all people with a disability based on the principle of dignity.

“I don’t need politicians with special powers to protect me, because I’m no weaker than you are and I don’t need them to protect me.”

- Pierre Trudeau

Let us look at the world today not as objective examiners and critics, but rather as professionals who have the power to commit to freedom and decency and justice.

According to Statistics Canada,
2006, the percentage of persons
with a disability is nearly 13%.
Nearly one out of every seven
Canadians, over 4.4 million in all.

Imagine if you awoke one morning and discovered that in CANADA, almost all the citizens of greater Toronto or almost the combined total of Ottawa, lower mainland Vancouver and Montreal had suddenly become disabled.

**Give us the tools to break down barriers.
Give us the tools to build productive lives.
Give us the tools to create a welcoming
community. We will finish the job.**

All too often they live alone, scattered,
isolated from the mainstream of human
events and leave the road of human
opportunity untraveled.

‘For all those whose cares have been our concern, the work goes on, the cause endures, the hope still lives, and the dream shall never die.’

Ted Kennedy

The most precious gift that a civil and civilized society can grant to its individual citizens is that of dignity. By all means, dignity should be a right.

Dignity as a concept or as a theory is realized through individual freedom. That freedom is manifested and brought to life through meaningful decision making and exercise of individual responsibility.

Six Degrees of Dignity

- 1) Dignity in Public Perception
- 2) Dignity in the Community
- 3) Dignity in Law
- 4) Dignity in Public Policy
- 5) Dignity of Self
- 6) Dignity in Future

Dignity in Public Perception

So long as the public perception of people with disabilities is that their lot can only be improved by means of a medical solution, that will leave the vast majority of the disability community in social stasis, and that simply is not acceptable to intelligent people who want nothing more than the same equal rights to prosperity and happiness as their neighbours.

Dignity in the Community

The community issues for people with disabilities goes well beyond such visible symbols as ramps and accessible transportation. Rather, what I am referring to is the Independent Living Movement where a person with a disability has the same opportunities to earn a wage, have a career and return to his or her home each night. These are all things that most of us take for granted in our daily lives.

Dignity in Law

There has been progressive judicial decision making to assist people with disabilities in achieving equality. Key among these advances has been the evolution of the legal duty to accommodate, but this should be seen as a first step rather than an end in itself. It would be pure folly to rely exclusively on pronouncements from the Supreme Court of Canada to achieve full equality for people with a disability while ignoring the dynamic opportunities guaranteed by implementing the other five degrees of opportunity.

Dignity in Public Policy

- 1) Do much more than merely abstain from taking measures which might have a negative impact on persons with disabilities.
- 2) Take positive action to reduce structural disadvantages and to give appropriate preferential treatment to people with disabilities in order to achieve the objectives of full participation and equality within society for all persons with disabilities.
- 3) Employ additional resources for this purpose.
- 4) Provide a wide range of specially tailored measures

So, we must put our governments to the test as well

- 1) Is the government of the day deferring responsibility for comprehensive disability policy while appearing to be addressing the issues?
- 2) Does the Act or Law or Commission amount to pronouncement without enforcement?
- 3) What is the jurisdiction of the Tribunal, and what are the limits to its scope?
- 4) Will the government politicize the appointment process because it retains control?
- 5) Will the Tribunal or Advisory Council be adequately funded?
- 6) Will the critical capacity building role of disabled persons organizations be shoved aside by the new administrative bodies?

Dignity of Self

You might term this the Pursuit of Happiness section. Dignity of Self is the development of such vital life skills as rational decision making, freedom of choice, self-respect, physical and psychological integrity, and personal empowerment.

Dignity in Future

‘The UN Convention represents important principles ... basic recognition and equal protection of every person under the law, non-discrimination, the fundamental importance of independent living, and the right to make basic choices about our lives ... We are demonstrating that society, as a whole, is richer and better off when people with disabilities are included fully in every aspect of life.

My friends, the dream lives on