

Jane Allen

NORMAL DISABLED, or DISABLED NORMAL

My heart condition was bad, I looked 'normal' and I tried to push myself to do all the things expected of a normal person, what I expected of myself. Once, in London, waiting for a bus opposite Broadcasting House, I felt so exhausted I felt I couldn't stand any longer - I went to sit on a doorstep. It was already partially occupied by an old man, whom we might term a down and out. I asked if I might share his seat - the bus queue of 'nice respectable' people looked at me in horror! "People don't usually want to sit as low as me" he said, and we talked till the bus came. I got on last, as I needed to move slowly from the doorstep and sat with a sigh beside a well-dressed woman who had been queueing. Her face registered distaste and she got up quickly and moved to the only empty seat at the front of the bus. Maybe she thought I'd caught fleas to pass on, but I had a sense that somehow she was afraid of this odd woman who didn't behave normally.

At this moment I wonder about those terms 'normal' and 'disabled'. I felt normal, although disabled by my heart condition. I had been welcomed by the old man who had nothing, I had had a sense of being rejected by the woman who, in terms of her clothes, had everything. It didn't worry me because of my great relief to find a seat close to the door. But now it sets me thinking - was that lady perhaps as disabled as I was, but by her fears, whatever they were?

Are we supposedly normal people often paralysed by our fears, fears of what people may think of us, or what will happen to us, so that we don't even acknowledge that we are deaf or blind to our real needs and the needs of others, because we have become atrophied in our idea of how things should be and we won't budge an inch!

There are some people who are beginning to explore their inner world of feelings and thoughts to help themselves out of some of their dilemmas, such as lack of confidence, anxieties, rigidity of viewpoint, and yet they sometimes have to hear the "you're odd" stigma put on them by so-called normal parents, spouses and friends.

Often we read in newspapers and magazines, accounts of how physically disabled people have won through to a satisfactory life; they have the will, against incredible odds to make the most of their talents, they have experienced great hardship and coped with great spirit. Have we become too soft in these recent years wanting so much, too easily - *"I must have my comfort"*. The country is facing massive unemployment, let us not forget that it feels disabling not to find any work. I have a cutting on my desk from words of Mother Teresa, that great woman working in appalling conditions in Calcutta - she ends with this quotation from St. Teresa *"HE has no body on earth but ours"*.

Our bodies contain our feelings and our thoughts **and** our soul. As we go to meet our disabled friends and 'normal' neighbours, let us allow ourselves to meet some of our own disablement of feelings and thoughts. What right have I to be impatient with a disabled person when I may not be willing to look at my crippling disablement which makes me so impatient.

We have the great gift of imagination - let us use it to imagine what it is like to be stuck in a wheelchair utterly dependent on another's kindness, to be blind and unable to refresh ourselves with the sights of beautiful country, people's faces, or even the sight of bread and butter, or to be deaf, shut in a world alone. Then use that imagination again creatively to see ourselves with some of our disablements - willing to let go of them, what a difference it would make to our lives and to the lives of the people with whom we come in contact.

I wonder how many of us in the Year of the Child let the child in us have fun - sing, dance - explore!

The old man's words echo - *"People don't usually want to sit as low as me"*. Dare we allow ourselves to allow Christ in us to meet Christ in the other, regardless of bodies, feelings or thoughts?

Let us make this Year of the Disabled a year when we make no differentiation, but journey together to discover and experience something of the wonder, the joy, the responsibility of *"HE has no body on earth but ours"*.

As a Psychotherapist I work with many people who are sadly disabled within and for me, the only way to work is to help them find God within - and it may not be appropriate to use that term - to enable them to let go of old patterns that have been disabling them.