

When, Not If:  
Disability, Impairment, & Shame

by Niki Barker

Dear reader,

Have you ever been in a car accident?

Broken a foot?

Been in the hospital?

Then, you've had a small taste of  
disability's experience.

Do you have a long term illness, an injury, a mental  
disorder?

Do you call yourself disabled?

Many people who have these don't call  
themselves disabled, though they qualify  
medically and legally.

Many people still shy away from  
the name of DISABLED because  
they're ashamed.

Calling yourself disabled is  
still shameful in our society,  
like there's something  
wrong with you.

Let me ask you something:

Are you afraid of growing old?

Let me tell you something: disability is  
not a question of *if*, it's a question of  
*when*.

Every single one of us will be  
disabled at some point in our lives.

As each of us ages, we get  
progressively more impaired  
and disabled...

for some of us,  
it's sooner and  
different,

rather than later  
and typical.

For so long, disability has been seen as being within the disabled individual—this is termed the “Individual Model of Disability” in the Disability Studies field.

The Individual Model places the “problem” of disability, to paraphrase theorist Mike Oliver, within the individual with the disability. The model sees the “problem” as arising from the losses of the individual’s functioning.

Disability and loss are intertwined, inextricably, but not in the way they’ve been thought of for so long.

Instead, now we’re trying to think of it differently: we need to complicate the definition of disability.

This is the new way, the “Social Model of Disability”.

A disability is no longer seen as the fault of the individual. The Social Model turns the Individual on its head.

“Disability”, instead, is centered in society: it is society that is disabling to the individual.

It means that society should have the ability to adapt, not make the disabled individual do everything.

But what about the very real problem of suffering?

This is where the term “impairment” comes in.

The term “impairment” means body dysfunction, the medical condition that you have.

The problem with this dichotomy is that it’s hard to separate the two.

This way, the shame is reduced, if not taken away: it is hard for a society to be ashamed of itself.

A medical condition is rarely your fault.

This is why you need to make peace with disability.

This is why you need to question how you look at disability:

Because you will be one of us too.

Sincerely,  
I’m already there