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Remarks

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For eight years I sat on the Board of Trustees of the Uniformed Services University for the Health Sciences. I spoke at three of its Commencement Exercises as young men and women of the Army, Navy, and the Air Force graduated with the degree of MD. One of my trainees of the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, Dr. Victor Garcia, was the pediatric surgeon at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center and in as much as his colleagues organized this event and gave me carte blanche for my topic, I chose to talk about handicapped children.

The reason I included this lecture in the archives, which already bows sufficiently to the problems of handicapped youngsters was to raise the question, “Who are truly the disabled among us?”

I began by talking about conventional wisdom and used as an example, a patient of mine with multiple congenital anomalies. This youngster’s parents had been told by three surgeons to put him in the corner of the nursery and let him die. I elected to treat him aggressively, inasmuch as if he had any one of his anomalies alone, they would have been repaired without question. After 55 operations, half of which I did, I reported that this youngster was a strong decent bright young man as of the time of the lecture. (I can add now that he went on to college, seminary, and has now graduated and is awaiting a call to the gospel ministry.)

Conventional wisdom says that we should call this youngster a disabled, handicapped child, but he was so courageous and so innocent that he refused to be either disabled or handicapped. I then went into some of the personality traits that he and his family had that made all this possible.

I moved on to discuss another patient of mine. This youngster had a learning disability, but he had a remarkable, supportive and loving father. I used this particular patient to point out that he taught his family a great deal about life. You and I would say he was and is a disabled child, yet he made the rest of his family able to care deeply about each other...able to give each other

genuine, unabashed love and affection...and made them able to extract from their own hearts and spirits the finest, purest instincts of humanity.

The end of this story is almost unbelievable. This youngster so enriched his family that they made a momentous decision. With seven children of their own, they moved to a larger house out of town and adopted twelve retarded children.

Early on when I first knew this youngster, he became a cub scout and he told me he hoped to become an eagle scout someday. He never accepted the fact that he was a disabled person with limitations on his personal life and ambitions. I promised him that if achieving his eagle scout status ever happened, I would be there to give him his badge. One of the great moments of my life was that I was able to do just that and take part in a modest ceremony where I pinned the Eagle Scout badge on my friend.

I wished at the time that anyone who thought he had a tough time in life could have been there when that youngster, accepted his badge, thanked his parents, his scout master, his doctor, his five healthy normal sisters, his gifted younger brother, and his 12 adopted retarded brothers and sisters. He thanked us all for the help and encouragement we'd given him so that he could achieve his ambition of being an eagle scout. Now, that is not a textbook example of a "disabled, handicapped" child – our textbook however, not his.

These two youngsters were really unfinished little people. And I learned tremendous things from both of them. So much so, that I've had to ask myself, "Just how complete and able and perfect, am I, if they can teach me so much about the wonder of life?"

"Disabled children are different" – but different in special, discrete ways, not different altogether. A physical or mental disability should not suggest or pre-suppose an emotional or spiritual disability is present, also.

So I repeated the question, "Which of us is disabled?"

It's hard to summarize where my life-long experience with so-called handicapped children has taken me, but one way to say it is that we are sometimes mesmerized by systems design and the wonders of high technology. But these are all severely limiting...they are our handicaps, when we try to respond to the needs of disabled children.

I pondered some more about some of the philosophical things I'd learned and once again asked the question, "Which one of us is disabled?"

I'd like the user especially to read pages 21 through the end of the lecture. They answer my question about "Who is disabled among us."