

The Real Handicap
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I have always thought of myself as an open-minded person, free from prejudice, free from the burdens of sexism and racism, tolerant of all religions. I was able to fully embrace Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism when it entered my life because the Goshu speaks to women with great respect (a rarity in world religions!). I was able to join the SGI because I believed in its causes for kosen-rufu and saw the effects in the racial diversity of every meeting I attended. This is where I belong! Little did I know that, despite my "modern" view of the world, I was still intolerant of a portion of the population I chose to ignore: the handicapped.

I am teaching a directing workshop as part of my guest residency with the Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wis. — theatrical directing. Although I have never taken a directing workshop before, I have been a prolific producer/director with a long list of credits to my name.

Here was the opportunity to examine my own methods and philosophies for the first time. I plunged into the challenge eagerly, burying my nose in whatever books I could find on the subject. I made a long list of interesting quotations and a full course outline: I was completely prepared for a high-powered, college-level seminar on the Art of Directing.

On the first day of class, I was shocked and disappointed to discover that my eight students were total novices: Only one of them had ever directed before. Five were still in high school. One was in college. One was deaf and physically disabled.

"This is just great," I thought to myself as I struggled along, trying to keep the discussion afloat single-handedly. After our first session, I was frustrated, angry, blaming my superiors for the disaster. Why hadn't they told me about the ages and capacities of those enrolled? The presence of the deaf girl, Jenny, made me especially angry, because she was clearly holding the class back with her simple questions and ridiculous non sequiturs. To top it off, she was hard to look at with her grotesque facial expressions and bizarre physical postures. "She is retarded!" I told my fiancée angrily.

I often use chanting to help me stop focusing on a "problem," so that I can try to find a solution instead. The next day, I approached my producer. "I would like to add an extra day to my workshop," I said enthusiastically.

"You will not get extra pay for this," my producer warned.

But that was OK. I didn't need the money.

So I called the students one by one and asked them if they would like to extend the workshop. They all agreed. Jenny called me back but got my fiancée instead. They communicated through a special phone service that involves a third party typing words on a computer screen for the deaf person to read.

"She's very intelligent," Michael said to me, quietly. "There's something about her...." He couldn't put his finger on it.

The next day in class, Jenny brought a 150-page manuscript out of her backpack and plopped it onto the table in front of me. It was titled *Jenny's Journal*. I thanked her and told her that I would be delighted to read it, thinking: "I am so busy! When will I have time for this? What a waste of time!"

Eventually, I did open the cover and look inside. Chapter 1 was titled "Jenny's Journey B.C. (Before Crash)." Chapter 2 was titled "Jenny's Journal A.D. (After Damage)." With a sick feeling in my stomach, I began to read about the 16-year-old athlete, scholar and homecoming queen who was driving home from a 4-H activity one evening with a couple

of friends when they ran a stop sign. The two girls in the front seat were killed. Jenny lived for several months in a coma, supported artificially. Everyone thought that she would be a “human vegetable” if she survived at all. And here she was, walking up the three flights of stairs with a cane to participate in my workshop.

Suddenly my arrogance withered to shame. This manuscript was a testimony to the dignity and courage of this young woman. Again and again, she raged about the injustices against the handicapped — the abuse, the neglect, the ridicule. “I am not retarded!” she exclaimed with the clarity of the typewritten word.

I was supposed to be Jenny’s teacher, but she has opened my eyes. We are working together to create a stage or screenplay of her story. Communication with her is difficult but far from impossible. The more arduous our struggle, the more I stand to learn.

Jenny’s presence in my life is a gift from the Gohonzon. If anyone is handicapped in this relationship, it is surely me....

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