

## Disability

I'd been having some problems with one of my college courses. I just couldn't see the relevance. Until I met Peter.

As an education student I'd been taking lots of courses that I knew were valuable. They were a lot of work, but I knew they'd be useful some day. I hoped. If I could ever get a job.

But the course about student disabilities and 'inclusion' that I was currently enrolled in was something else entirely.

It was all about the different diseases or disorders that children can get, and what to expect if I found myself with one or more students like that in my classes, sometime in the future. Anita and I were talking about it one day, after the lesson had finished, about two weeks into the course. The instructor always gave us time to talk about what we'd learned that day, and to get help with papers that had been returned.

"I don't get it, Anita. Why are they telling us all this stuff? Surely these kids would be better off with some special help ..."

"I think they'll still get that. It's just that they'll be in your classroom most of the time."

We were learning about a whole group of disorders that kids get. In addition to Multiple Sclerosis and Muscular Dystrophy, there was also Autism, Asperger's, Attention Deficit Disorder, Hyperactivity, and Cystic Fibrosis. I was having trouble remembering all the symptoms, and distinguishing one from the other. In fact, we'd just had a test on that. I suspected that I hadn't done very well.

"But how am I supposed to teach the rest of the class with kids like that in the room? And what can they learn ...?"

Neither of us really knew the answer.

The next day, as class was beginning, a wheelchair was pushed into the aisle next to where Anita and I were sitting. I glanced over. And I immediately looked away. The young man in the wheelchair obviously had Muscular Dystrophy. At least, I thought so. His limbs were distorted and curled up, and his head was tilted. There was a voice recorder on the tray in front of him; apparently he was recording the lesson.

In the discussion afterwards, Anita asked me "Have you been thinking about what we talked about yesterday?"

I glanced over at the guy in the wheelchair. He seemed to be out of hearing range.

“Yeah. I still don’t get it. What can I do for these kids? I’m supposed to be teaching a curriculum. Don’t they need special help or something? What can I do for them?”

“You really don’t get it, do you?” I glanced over at the wheelchair. I tried not to look at the guy in it. His head was canted at an odd angle, and he was drooling. What he had said had sounded more like ‘Ooh eally don’ geddit, ooh you’.

“Uh, pardon?” I didn’t look at him.

“You really don’t get it” His pronunciation was just as bad the second time. “I can tell from your paper there.”

He was referring to the test I’d just got back. I hadn’t done very well. Just a C.

“I got an A”. Which came out as ‘I ot an A’.

“Uh ...” I didn’t know what to say. And I still couldn’t look at him. I was embarrassed.

“I have muscular dystrophy. It makes my body look this way. But inside,” he gestured towards his head “my brain works just fine. I’m really just a normal person trapped inside this body that I can’t control.”

It took him a long time to get all of that out. And he drooled. What he was saying came out in short, garbled phrases. ‘Rapped iside is oddy I can’t contol’. But I understood him.

“You’re having problems accepting why little kids with disorders like mine should be in your classroom, aren’t you?”

I was able to understand him pretty well by now. And I was looking him in the eye. I thought I detected a hint of a smile.

“Yeah, I guess so. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry.” Which came out as ‘on’t ee sorry’. “Most people feel that way. My name is Peter, by the way.”

“Uh ... I’m Melissa. And this is Anita”.

Peter went on to tell us more about his disorder. About how he had lost control of most of his muscles. And the fact that there was no cure.

“I’m just auditing this course. I need some background information for the thesis I’m writing for my Master’s degree.”

It sounded so strange when he said it. ‘Or eye aster’s degee’.

“Why should kids with disabilities, even ones like mine, be in your classroom?” He was looking at me when he said it.

I didn’t have an answer. Peter knew that. He continued.

“Part of it is so that the other kids in the room will get to know about the disabilities kids get, and feel more comfortable with them. They’ll get to know that we’re just people like them”.

He laughed. It was more of a snort. He was drooling a lot now, probably because he was speaking so much. It didn’t bother me.

“And many kids with disabilities can learn. Especially kids with any of the autism spectrum disorders. You’ll see some of those in your classes”.

“So ‘inclusion means ...’ I wasn’t sure how to continue.

“Inclusion means letting kids with disabilities be a part of a classroom, instead of off by themselves with a caregiver. They can learn, and so can the kids who get to know them”.

“I guess that makes sense”. I think it did. I still wasn’t sure.

“Of course it does. You’re looking at me now. And my drooling doesn’t make you frown any more. Why?”

He was serious. I had to think for a moment. “Because I’ve been talking to you. I’ve got to know you a little bit. You’re a person”. I hadn’t meant to say that.

Peter laughed. “Very good, Melissa. You’ve figured it out! Do you know how few people I actually get to talk to like this? Most people just look away, and keep walking. Sometimes when I say something to someone, they pretend they didn’t hear, and ignore me”

I was ashamed that I had done the same sort of thing when we’d first started talking. But I laughed. “Well, you do look a little ... unusual!”

Peter snorted. Talking was a laborious process for him, and he garbled every second word. But I wasn’t even noticing that now.

“When you become a teacher ...” he paused for a moment. “try to get to know all your students. Especially ones with disabilities. You’ll be glad you did”.

Anita finally said something. “Peter ... uh... you said there’s no cure?”

“Not yet. But I’m always hopeful”. There was that hint of a smile again. “Why don’t we go for coffee after class and talk some more?”

“Uh ... you drink coffee?” I couldn’t help myself. It just came out.

He laughed. “Actually I prefer cappuccinos. But my caregiver ...” he looked around “who seems to be missing at the moment ... won’t let me have them. He says they make me have to use the washroom too often. And he should know ... he has to do all the work!”

Anita and I both laughed at that.

“OK, let’s do it. I’ll push ... maybe we’ll find him on the way out”.

Over the rest of the term Anita and I got to know Peter a lot better. After classes he even helped us with the course work. We laughed a lot.

And we both got A’s.