



Respect, dignity, and guarding each other's humanity

In disability communities, we have long known that the r-word is a disrespectful and dehumanizing slur. Today I want to talk about respect. Respect is for everyone. All means all.

As a student, whenever other kids called me ugly names (including the R-word) on the playground, it hurt. And during those lonely times I comforted myself by saying: “they’re wrong. I’m smart.” I repeated that to myself, over and over and over again, to tell myself that I’m worth something. That I’m a person. Little knowing that my way of defending my own dignity was sacrificing someone else. So, if I was worth something because I was “smart”, what did that mean about people weren’t “smart”? It would be saying that someone else isn’t human—and isn’t worthy of being treated like a person.

I didn’t know then, as lonely child who wanted to have friends, the potential impact my way of coping may have had on someone else. As I got older, I found words for those vague, uneasy feelings. And I began to understand how my way of dealing with pain affects other people around me. When I put it into words, it became clear: That’s not right. “Smart” does not equal human. “Smart” does not equal worthy of inclusion, belonging, friendship, and respect. We need to get at the central issue: No one should be segregated in places they don’t want to be, with no choices. Everyone should have opportunities to grow, chances to try hard things, and make mistakes. Everyone should be treated with respect and not bullied.

Fast forward many years later. The world has changed in many ways—but the old dehumanizing stigma has stayed very much the same. Except now, contempt for disabled people is no longer held back. It is openly blunt, crushing and cruel. Amidst the heaviness and uncertainty of our current climate, respect is more important than ever. We must all show respect to the most disrespected people in our communities—

including non-speakers, people with intellectual disabilities, and disabled people with 24-hour care needs.

It is all of our jobs as human beings to guard each other's human dignity. Especially our people who are the most disrespected. People with disabilities: In all that you say and do; communicate respect for all with a disability. **All means all**. Stand up against casual devaluing. Parents of kids with disabilities: if others see your kids as "high functioning" or one of "the smart ones" **SHUT THAT DEHUMANIZING ABLEIST GARBAGE DOWN!** Do not accept ableism against someone else as a compliment. The only "threat to the American people and our way of life" is **discrimination, devaluing and disrespecting other human beings**.