

Anderson: A long way to go to reach equality for all

Contributed by Andrea Anderson
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I have been thinking about how much celebration there is these days based on the belief of how far we as a people have come in the civil rights movement, based on our selection of presidential/vice presidential nominees and the election of our new president-elect. And, though it is true, it is a giant step for civil rights with regards to African Americans and women, I still can't help but think about the struggles other minorities have gone through and are still going through and I wonder if we realize how far we have yet to go.

As a friend said to me, the other day, "As the first state to overturn the ban on interracial marriages, it seems we have taken a few steps backwards, as far as civil rights are concerned. In fact, we are now officially more concerned about the rights of farm animals than we are about the rights of humans."

With this in the back of my mind, I write this, as I can't help wonder if we the people realize how far we have left to go to truly see "the promised land" of freedom, liberty, justice and equality for ALL.

As the new President Elect Obama gave his acceptance speech, I was touched. But not touched in the way most people were. Instead of rejoicing of how far we have come, I was reminded of how far we have left to go. I was reminded of my own life and the struggles I had gone through and continue to go through as well as the struggles I continue to see other minorities go through currently on a daily basis.

I write this not thinking of myself (as it may seem, as you read further) but of others who have had it far worse than me and continue to struggle as a result of being a minority. In fact, as you read, keep in mind that I consider myself rather fortunate. Those who know me know that I do not dwell on these things daily but rather have spent my entire life overcoming these things to live a very good life despite them. My struggles and the struggles of "my people" have been minor compared to the struggles of many others whose civil and human rights have yet to be acknowledged.

Therefore, let it be known, I am not writing to gain pity but to share perspective and to shed a little light on the subject so that you may understand that minorities and the struggles for their equality against discrimination come in many forms and still very much exist even as many of us celebrate the latest "victory" in the "civil rights movement."

I am a physically challenged woman. It isn't a label I am most comfortable with but it is the one that is most relevant at the moment and it is my label as a "minority."

There are other labels for me, as well. Labels like handicap, cripple, gimp and "hellip; my personal favorite (which my own grandmother on my father's side likes to use) "invalid. No, I didn't spell that last one wrong. The same word used for someone who is disabled or chronically ill is the same word used for not being valid because it has been based on a mistake. Put that up against pretty much any label used as a racial slur against African Americans or women and you might just understand where I am coming from as a minority. Even the word "disabled," when broken down, is quite an offensive term, as it means "rendered unable to function." And disabled has been rendered the "politically correct" label.

And, while laws for rights of women and African Americans were being put on the books in the 1890s and in the 1950s, it is a little realized fact that the first laws concerning physically challenged people's rights didn't come about until the 1990s.

In fact, historically, even less than a half of a century ago, people equated "physical disability" with "mental disability" and as such even the least physically challenged people were kept in asylums and mental hospitals and as a general rule were segregated not just from society but from their own families through ignorance and shame. It was also not so long ago that physically challenged people were considered everything from idiots to freaks.

And, technically, even today, forms of "genocide" are still being used on physically challenged people through the forms of termination of pregnancies and "mercy killings" because (again) they are considered mistakes or unable to function in life. (I found this out, recently, when I attempted to look up my own specific physical birth "defect" and found that it has become very rare not because they have found a way to cure or prevent it but because technology allows early detection of it and therefore early termination of those who have it.) That is the past and present "history" of "my people".

In my own recent history, as a physically challenged person, I spent my first three years of grade school in a "handicap school" completely segregated from able-bodied children (of all races and religions). Yes, that meant that as I watched African American children being "integrated" I myself was still segregated.

In fact, my parents and I actually had to "prove" through numerous IQ tests and other psychological and mental tests that just because my legs didn't work didn't mean my mind didn't work before I was "allowed" to receive an equal education. (It reminded me of how African Americans had to go through a number of tests to prove their intelligence before they were allowed to vote despite their inalienable rights and ability to do so.)

Much to the surprise of even my parents, my IQ was higher than the average "able bodied" student, and this is what broke me out of segregation (this and my parents threatening to sue the school system) putting me into a "public school," as integration of the physically challenged was not a mandate of the government, at that time. This was in the mid-1970s.

And, despite the many positive changes brought about recently by the ADA, I am still faced (on a daily basis) with many forms of inequality, discrimination and even segregation. Very similarly to the way African Americans and women were not allowed in certain places or in certain areas due to their "color" and "gender," I am still restricted from certain places and segregated, even in this day and age.

In fact, my basic and essential need to access a bathroom is restricted on a daily basis because there are so many places I can't go to the bathroom due to inaccessibility. And, many of the bathrooms I am able to use are labeled strictly

for "handicapped" (by the way, there is another one of those derogatory labels … as handicap comes from cap in hand referring to the physically challenged people who had to beg on the streets with cap in hand because they could not get hired for a job) which reminds me of when things (like bathrooms) were labeled "colored."

Even my choice in housing is limited, as I cannot get into many private dwellings due to their lack of accessibility, despite a number of housing discrimination laws. In fact, there was a time in my life where I was stuck living in a home for senior citizens (in my early 20s) because that was the only "accessible" apartment complex I could get into.

There are restaurants I cannot get into, due to the lack of accessibility. I can't tell you how many times I have had to enter through the service entrance to get into a restaurant and how many other times I could not even get into a restaurant much less their restrooms. I even remember having to use the service elevator to get to an accessible bathroom which was located in a dark basement of a club whereas other "able bodied" people could use the bathroom on the first floor. (Reminding me of how African Americans had to use the service entrances of restaurants, clubs and hotels.)

In fact, everywhere I go, steps and curbs dictate where I can go and where I cannot – steps and curbs made not by nature but by the people of this country. I lived on the East Coast for awhile and even one of the most famous civil rights monuments, the Lincoln Memorial, was off limits to me. Imagine that. And, once, attending an awards ceremony where I was to receive an award, I had to come in through the back entrance, I could not get on the stage to receive the award and there was no accessible bathroom for me after sitting through an awards ceremony of several hours.

When I go to theaters, if I can get into them, I am often forced to sit in the back of the theater in a special "handicapped" area. This is a minor thing but when the theater has Dolby sound it is a nightmare as it is set up for the main dialog to come out of the front speakers and the background noises to come from the speakers in the back of the theater so all I get to hear is the background noises making the experience very unpleasant and a complete waste of my money. (Again, this reminds me of how African Americans were forced to the back of the bus.)

Speaking of buses, because of the way the bus systems are set up, with so many inaccessible bus stops, I am forced to actually pay more than the average person who rides the bus in order to get to the same places they are going, As well, I am usually put in the back of the bus as that is where the "handicapped" seating is located most of the time on buses. Many of the bus systems I have to ride (like Dial A Ride) stop their pickups early (Dial A Ride's last pickup being 5:30 p.m. to 6 p.m., which means I have to be ready and waiting for them at 5:30 p.m.) whereas the routes for able-bodied people go well into the night.

And, last but not least, this year, on Nov. 4, when I went to vote I was segregated, ushered to the back of the room, to vote, as there was no place for me to vote in the area where everyone else was voting. As I went to put my ballot in the box, someone else had to put it in the box for me because the box was located out of my reach. Again, simply a reminder of how far we have left to go.

Again, as I have said, I don't dwell on these things and I am not bringing them up now as a request for your pity. I am not asking for your pity but for your awareness. These are issues I rarely bring up personally and even more rarely bring up publicly, partially because I have kind of grown accustomed to this sort of treatment, partially because I feel it is easier to change myself than ask the world to change, but mostly because I have learned to adapt and live focusing on the good things in my life rather than the bad.

But, when I see everyone getting all excited about how far civil rights have come and celebrating as if the struggle for equality is over because we now have a president of obvious mixed race, I am reminded of my own struggles as well as the struggles of less popular minorities. I really do feel deeply in my heart that we need to be reminded that we have a long way to go before we have truly created freedom, liberty, justice and equal rights for all.

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