

## The power of mental retardation: Reflections on the value of people with disabilities.

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### **Abstract:**

The writer reflects on the value of people with disabilities and discusses how Floyd Cochran, former chief recruiter for the Aryan Nations, and Eldridge Cleaver, former spokesperson for the Black Power movement, were affected by their experiences of disability.

**Keywords:** developmental disabilities | psychology | people with disabilities | black power movement | experiences of disability | Floyd Cochran | Eldridge Cleaver

### **Article:**

#### **THE ARYAN NATIONS AND A CLEFT PALATE**

Floyd Cochran was the chief recruiter for the Aryan Nations in 1992. In his role as the fifth-ranking leader of this self-proclaimed Nazi/White Supremacist organization, he was admired for his skill in dealing with the public and the press. Cochran was very successful in using his media savvy and marketing skills to attract young people to the organization. He became the group's national spokesman and was described by the Aryan Nations' chief, the Reverend Richard Butler, as destined to be "the next Goebbels" (Hochschild, 1994, p.29). In July of that year, however, Floyd Cochran was suddenly ordered off the Nations' compound. The Reverend Butler gave him 5 minutes to leave.

This rift in Cochran's relationship with the Aryan Nations began earlier that year. Shortly before he was to speak to the Nations' Hitler Youth Festival in Idaho, Cochran mentioned to the Nations' security chief that he had just talked with his wife on the telephone. He was concerned about his 4-year-old son, who was having surgery to correct a cleft palate. The chief's response to Cochran was, "He's a genetic defect. When we come to power, he'll have to be euthanized" (Hochschild, 1994, p.34).

Cochran reported later that he was stunned by this remark. He had been a student of Ku Klux Klan and Nazi literature for almost 25 years. He had not realized or faced until that moment, however, that the intolerance for difference that he had himself preached could be applied to those he loved. When he voiced his concern over this issue, he was given the order to leave the Aryan Nations' property.

### **THE THAWING OF A SOUL**

Eldridge Cleaver, author of *Soul on Ice* (1968), died in May of 1998. During the 1960s and 1970s, he was known as a fiery and eloquent voice for the Black Power movement. After writing his book in prison, he became one of the infamous organizers, along with Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, of the Black Panther Party in 1966.

In 1968, while serving as information officer for the Black Panthers, Cleaver was involved in a shootout with police in Oakland, California. Wounded in the gun battle, he was arrested. He later jumped bail and fled to Algeria. Cleaver returned to the United States in 1975. After a long legal battle, he was convicted of assault, placed on probation, and required to do public service (Rout, 1991).

In *Soul on Ice* Cleaver (1968) spoke with rage of the experiences of African Americans and with angry disbelief of the oblivious attitudes of most white people regarding their own racism. It is rare to find a line in the book that does not scream with bitterness. And yet, Cleaver closes one of his chapters with these words, "The price of hating other human beings is loving oneself less" (Cleaver, 1968, p. 29).

In the years following his return to the United States, Cleaver was not visible as a public figure. He was no longer seen as the symbol of racial pride and rage he had been earlier. Cleaver's historic identity continued, however, to be that of a figure associated with a separatist philosophy and a militant strategy toward race relations. Given that persona, it is interesting to consider some of the public remarks he made in the early 1990s about his youngest child, Riley. Cleaver made these statements after he became an activist and advocate for children and adults with disabilities. Riley was born with Down syndrome.

In a speech in 1993, Cleaver described his feelings when he learned after his wife underwent amniocentesis, that his expected son had Down syndrome. He spoke candidly of his lack of understanding of the implications of the test, and his lack of sensitivity to the humanity and needs of the child who was to come into his life. He admitted, in fact, that he was only following the lead of the child's mother in accepting and preparing for Riley's birth.

With Riley came the barrage of terms and decisions that often engulf parents of children with disabilities. Cleaver found that the birth of his son coincided with a period when he was questioning himself about his own future. He was no longer a leader of the Black Panther Party, and he did not see a role for himself in the civil rights movement as he understood it in the 1990s. With the birth of a child with Down syndrome, however, Cleaver (1993) found that,

I no longer had to wonder what I was going to do, I was doing it. I had my hands full.... It was a struggle to understand and comprehend the situation itself, and it was a shock and a struggle to begin to realize that I was involved in a very hostile environment. I began to meet other parents.... We began to ... realize that we were up against the school system, and the legal system, and the medical system. (p. 5)

As Cleaver described his feelings of being "up against" the various social systems of his culture as his son's advocate, his words became reminiscent of the anger he expressed in *Soul on Ice* concerning American racism. And yet through his struggle to ensure that his son was not the victim of the same kind of prejudice and exclusion that he had raged against decades earlier, Cleaver encountered a new struggle within himself.

Cleaver described a child that he noticed when he took Riley to a Regional Center each day after school. He saw that Riley, who typically had a kiss for everyone as he arrived at the center, always had a special kiss for one little girl. Cleaver admitted that he was repulsed by this little girl because she had "a lot of saliva drooling" (Cleaver, 1993, p. 6). Soon the little girl showed that she was also happy to see Riley's father each day. At first there were just handshakes, then one day a hug and kiss was offered:

She stood up and came at me, and she was salivating, and I felt myself recoil. I looked at her face ... and I realized that she was reaching out in faith. And I realized that it would be devastating to her if I ... rejected her.... that confrontation with myself was really a godsend, and it changed me again, and I embraced the little girl, and I'm so glad that I did that, because at that moment of resolving that, it gave me an insight into the condition of humanity! (p. 7).

### **THE POWER OF MENTAL RETARDATION**

People with mental retardation have the capacity to enrich our personal and social lives. The deficiency and defect models of mental retardation have, however, clouded our ability to see the value of these individuals. More than a decade ago Wolfensberger (1988) identified a number of strengths that people with mental retardation may bring to their relationships with others. Among these attributes are:

- \* A natural and positive spontaneity
- \* A tendency to respond to others generously and warmly
- \* A tendency to respond honestly to others
- \* The capacity to call forth gentleness, patience, and tolerance from others
- \* A tendency to be trusting of others (pp. 63-70)

Many of the mental retardation "stories" that I have told in writing and in lectures, and many of those that have been told to me, include references to the positive characteristics of people with mental retardation. When I reflect on the importance of these people and their qualities, I find I must say something that I have often lacked the courage to say directly and publicly. Mental retardation can be a valuable human attribute. People with mental retardation can be powerful in the humanizing influence that they have on others. I am glad that I have known people with mental retardation for most of my life.

In his book *The Power of the Powerless*, de Vinck (1988) described the experience of growing up with his brother Oliver, who was born with multiple and severe disabilities. In his work as an English teacher, de Vinck often told his students about his brother:

One day, during my first year of teaching, I was trying to describe Oliver's lack of response, how he had been spoon-fed every morsel he ever ate, how he never spoke. A boy in the last row raised his hand and said, "Oh, Mr. de Vinck. You mean he was a vegetable" ... Well, I guess you could call him a vegetable. I called him Oliver, my brother. You would have loved him. (p. 9)

De Vinck described Oliver as the weakest human being he ever met. The irony, however, is that he also described his brother as one of the most powerful human beings he ever knew. When de Vinck assessed the effort and hope that go into teaching and writing and parenting, he related the impact that Oliver had on his life.

Oliver could do absolutely nothing except breathe, sleep, eat and yet he was responsible for action, love, courage and insight.... [This] explains to a great degree why I am the type of husband, father, writer and teacher I have become (de Vinck, 1988, p. 12)

There is most certainly a human ecology of power and compassion. People with mental retardation and other disabilities may have an important place in that ecological balance. The power of those who have often been considered to be powerless may be important to our health as human beings and as cultural groups. A person with a disability may temper hateful and prejudicial attitudes. A person with mental retardation may soften a heart that has become

hardened. A person with multiple and severe disabilities may have much to teach us about love.

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