

The Futures of Persons with Disabilities: Assuming the Future Perfect

Robin Brandt

Introduction. Dr. David Pfeiffer is a generous and humble man. He could be a guide to a better future, one that provides social justice to yet another conspicuous minority that is mistreated and demoralized daily. But he needs to tell us more, possibly fantastic stories about the future and disability. I want him to challenge the conventional wisdom and convince me that that future is possible. Seriously. Let me explain why.

Generosity of Thought. David provides the skin and bones of two conflicting models (the prevalent medical of disability versus disability as a policy issue) for inspection and then outlines optimistic and pessimistic scenarios with a little extra discussion. I would label them the probable and possible futures, respectively. He assumes that futures researchers and others who read his article have a good grasp of the many complexities that reside in the background of his discussion--issues that are finally being discussed in dissertations relating to the disability experience, a growing body of stories by persons with disabilities, disability research and policy that is daily fought for in Congress. He assumes that we are familiar with, sensitive and empathetic to the "other." He is too generous.

Unfortunately, futures researchers have no special claim to an understanding of the other, even when faced with judgments about their own interests. We are all lumped together as closet Star Trekkers, diviners with crystal balls or build mathematical models on our computers to predict the future. There are other stereotypes with which we have been confronted. But futures research is like a cape or article of clothing that we can wear or allow to remain in our closet for the appropriate event. For many people with disabilities, their disability is the first thing that people mark and remark upon. It becomes the single most easily defined characteristic of that individual in the eyes of others. I don't need to tell Dr. Pfeiffer about that--but I have gained from his assistance and that of others with disabilities an understanding of the depth of their experience without making these folks live their life or relationship with me through only a filter of being disabled.

The Preferred Future: Full Implementation of the ADA. When budding futurists enter a class with Dr. Jim Dator, they must research two futurists in depth. One studies the models, background, schooling and other aspects of life that influence the perspective of the futurist. Consider Dr. Pfeiffer in this context. Understand the Dr. Pfeiffer refers to himself as a policy analyst, schooled in public choice. He teaches courses on, among other things, disability and policy -- quite separate from health and policy. Dr. Pfeiffer has written

extensively on policy and disability issues. Although he does not speak of it often, he did admit to being invited to the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). I suspect that his role in making this piece of policy into a reality is his greatest contribution toward a preferred future. Perhaps this is why he fails to provide a preferred future here. It already exists in national policy and is in the process of implementation.

Dr. Pfeiffer is a long time activist and leader in the community, linking the efforts of persons who live with disability with those who are "temporarily able-bodied" (Zola). He has acted as a translator who has lived life with the privileges of a "white male" but also with disability. David assists people in challenging conventional assumptions about disability, primarily the idea that disability "won't be me and it won't be anyone whom I know or for whom I care." Certainly he has probably heard the usual, but shocking, question I heard from my dentist one morning, several years ago. "How much money should be spent on people with disabilities?" he asked academically, but with honest concern. My best response strips away the questioner's surety of self-sufficiency and safety for one's self and one's loved ones. I asked him to make the question personal rather relate it to a nameless, faceless person with a disability. "What would it be worth.....what is the amount of money you would want spent, if your child suddenly become disabled?" My dentist looked stunned and admitted that he had never thought about disability in those terms. Many persons in the disability community would argue that disability studies should only be taught by those with "visible" disability, that the message about disability and prejudice is best explained by those experiencing disability. But Dr. Pfeiffer knows that it will take a long time to get the message out, and there must be diverse alliances built -- with those who are not currently disabled, between persons with disabilities and antiabortionists, among persons with disabilities and feminists, with persons who do not want to identify themselves as disabled (e.g., people with AIDS or the elderly) and others--to be most effective.

Dr. Pfeiffer has hope for change in the future.

From notes in my policy class with him in the summer of 1996, I paraphrase his thoughts. Policy defines disability, and the criteria can change. For example, there have been changes in how mental retardation is defined. Disability is not stigma--there is no natural link between these concepts. By changing policy, by implementing and enforcing the Americans with Disabilities Act, attitudes of the current generations will not change, *but behaviors will change*. We will not see changes in attitudes towards people with disabilities until the following generations who grow up with different expectations of persons with disabilities. Being disabled will be an "unexpected difference." In his life, David has seen people change the response they have to him and his disability. Disability is a normal part of life, and this will be accepted in

the future. In the future, he said, disability will not exist unless an individual with a disability suffers discrimination. This does not mean that everyone will stop doing or saying things that are unwittingly offensive to persons with disabilities, but a "purposeful" discrimination meant to do harm or continue stigma will diminish and cease.

Sharing More About the Future. Story telling is an effective means of sharing about the future. Dr. Pfeiffer is a story teller, and that may come from growing up in Texas. He has more stories to share. If you get a chance, have him tell you some stories not only about the past and the present, but insist that he tell you about the future. And get David to share some of his favorite songs with you. I particularly liked Ian Stanton's song called "Shrinking Man." Dr. Pfeiffer says that the number of persons with disabilities creating and selling music and art related to the culture of disability shows the success of this social movement. These are all part and parcel of creating that preferred future.

Enter it at your own risk.

(Professor David Pfeiffer declined to write a rejoinder to Robin Brandt's reply--v.k.p.)