

Macho Man-

An In-depth Analysis of the Prejudices of Disability.

by Bryan Tortolani



Bryan Tortolani is a happily married 36-year-old cancer survivor. Bryan's unique life experiences have taught him that education leads to empowerment. Despite entering Delta College with little more than an eighth-grade education, a GED, and a powerful motivation to succeed, Bryan will graduate in the spring and transfer to Stanislaus State in the fall. Bryan ultimately plans to earn a doctorate in history. His career goals include teaching history at the college level and freelance writing.

Because I am large and healthy-looking, people think that I am weak, lazy or outright faking my disabilities. In reality, I am a strong, highly motivated man with many health conditions that are not always readily apparent to those around me. People do not see the scars of the nearly twenty surgeries on my body, or the degenerative bone decay that is slowly eating away at my knees, hips, and shoulders, or the hepatitis that is turning my liver into a ball of scar tissue while spewing toxins throughout my system.

Most people have a preconceived notion of how a disabled person should look, and anyone who does not fit into that category often faces a wide range of prejudices throughout the day. For example, people are often outraged when they see me parking in a handicapped parking spot or speeding past them in a four-wheeled electric cart because my appearance does not coincide with their perception of a disability. Similarly, when I use my Medicare at the doctor's office, cash my Social Security check at the bank, ride on the elevator, or simply pull my noisy backpack on wheels across campus, I am often perceived as a fat, lazy freeloader taking advantage of the services reserved for the "truly" disabled. This is because many people associate disabled people with outwardly noticeable disfigurements, with easily observable debilitating diseases, or with the elderly. Anyone who does not fit into their image of "disabled" is often perceived as perfectly healthy.

I have been living with such stereotypes since shortly after my nineteenth birthday, at which time I was diagnosed with late stage Hodgkin's Disease. From the beginning, I did not fit the stereotype of a disabled person and therefore was often misjudged. Even after I lost my hair from chemotherapy treatments and a bone marrow transplant, I was still not perceived as "disabled" by many strangers who associated my baldness with

the skinhead neo-Nazi gangs that were popular in the Seattle area during that time. I was often verbally assaulted with a barrage of accusations ranging from a deranged narrow-minded sociopath to a cowardly, parasitic racist bully. Although I can sympathize with the anger many people hold toward racist bigots, I strongly resent being associated with such evil merely on the basis of my appearance. More recently, I have experienced less dramatic prejudices; however, the end result is equally degrading and hurtful.

On a typical day I experience a dozen or more incidences of prejudice. For example, just last week I faced a crowd of extremely disturbed students after parking my car in the handicapped parking spot at the community college I attend. Every day is the same in that many students race around and around the parking lot in the hopes of finding the perfect spot. Last week as I defensively maneuvered my automobile, I noticed two anxious drivers who at the same time spotted a man backing out of his parking place. I sat back and watched this old Western-style showdown unfold. There was a brief pause as they made eye contact while revving up their engines. I could almost feel the intensity and determination from each driver's eyes as they locked for a moment in a penetrating stare. Their eyes darted back and forth between the newly available parking place and one another before the man in the large red truck made his move. The smaller sporty silver Honda quickly followed suit, and in a flash the two crazed drivers accelerated their two-ton automobiles in a mad dash for the spot. Once there, however, they soon realized that the space was reserved for the handicapped.

As the two drivers grieved for a moment at their misfortune, I effortlessly guided my car into "their" parking place. I went about the task of retrieving my handicapped placard from the glove box and hanging it from

my rearview mirror, oblivious to the resentment that was building within my fellow students. It was not until I exited the car that I realized that the two drivers had not moved. As they sat in their automobiles, blocking traffic and wearing angry expressions on their young faces, a small crowd of students gathered on the sidewalk. I noticed some wore equally contemptuous expressions. I did my best to ignore them as I made my way toward my first class. Ignoring them became increasingly difficult as I drew closer. At first, the comments, although for my benefit, did not directly confront me.

"Can you believe the nerve of that guy, using handicapped parking when he's obviously not disabled?" shouted an indignant student from the crowd of student bystanders.

Then, the man from the red truck yelled, "Who do you think you're fooling -- you ain't disabled. What kind of man takes his grandma's parking placard, anyway, just so he don't have to walk a few feet?"

The other students grew angry, watching what they perceived to be a perfectly healthy student take the best parking spot in the school.

Looking at the situation from their perspective, I could somewhat understand their confusion. I am six feet two inches tall, weigh over two hundred twenty-five pounds, look fairly young and healthy. Yet I was using a handicapped-parking placard. I did not even have my cane with me because the rubber stoppers had been worn down. It was not because the cane did not work properly. Rather, I preferred the physical pain resonating from my knees to the psychological pain that accompanied the unwanted attention I received. This was because once the rubber stoppers wore down, the four metal prongs were exposed, making a loud "Ching, ching, ching" with every step. The sound would echo all across the campus as I hobbled through the crowded quad. It was then that I was subject to spiteful remarks and resentful looks from many of my fellow students.

This may seem like a trivial matter. But appearing different is difficult, especially when it is not consistent. My particular health condition fluctuates regularly; some days I look and feel a lot better than others. People are more comfortable with the familiar. It

is easier to classify someone who is always a certain way because most people do not trust change and unpredictability. For example, if I were always seen riding in a wheelchair, people would eventually accept or reject me. Either way people would feel more comfortable with whatever label they had given me. But when dealing with inconsistencies, people's prejudices come into question.

An individual may classify people according to certain beliefs: "Men are strong, disabled people are always incapacitated, fat people are lazy, and skinny people are weak and nervous." When those perceptions are proven inaccurate, the individual tends to become uncomfortable. When facing the unfamiliar and uncomfortable, people often turn to further prejudicial classifications in order to maintain their familiar, safe, and structured worldview.

It takes great courage, intelligence, open-mindedness, and integrity to resist the temptations of prejudice, big and small. Although society has advanced in the fight against prejudice, it still has a very long way to go. Some prejudices are socially unacceptable, and others are not. Many people, while exhibiting guarded behavior in some circumstances, will openly participate in prejudicial behaviors toward those individuals who fall under the radar of political correctness. It is important for society to recognize this situation. Empathy for all groups of individuals who are different or unfamiliar should be the moral compass we follow.



Then, the man from the red truck yelled, "Who do you think you're fooling -- you ain't disabled. What kind of man takes his grandma's parking placard, anyway, just so he don't have to walk a few feet?"