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Abstract

This short, satirical article, adapted from an article written in 1975, asks us to imagine what it would be like to be an able-bodied person living in a town inhabited and run by physically impaired people who all use wheelchairs. The story is a sad reflection on the prejudice that exists - even today - in society and the way that this prejudice alienates whole sections of our society. **Keyword:**
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WHEELCHAIR VILLAGE

Imagine a town full of physically impaired people, all wheelchair users. They run everything: the shops, the factories, the schools the television studio, the lot. There are no able-bodied people, so naturally, when the town is built the community decides that it is pointless to have ceilings ten feet high and doors that are seven feet high. "It's just a lot of wasted space that needs heating," they say. So the ceilings are built at seven feet and the doors at five feet. In every way they design the place the way they want it, and over the years these proportions are standardised by regulation. One day a few able-bodied people come to stay. One of the first things they notice is the height of the doors. And the reason they notice this is because they keep hitting their heads. They come to stand out by the bruises they carry on their foreheads. Some doctors, psychiatrists and social workers become involved. The doctors do extensive research and conclude in their learned reports that the disabled able-bodies suffer from 'loss of or reduction of functional ability' and the resulting handicap causes 'disadvantage or restriction of activity.' Working parties are formed. Many professionals and caring people are worried about what becomes known as the 'problem of the able-bodied'. Throughout the town there is a rapid growth of real concern. Specially strengthened helmets are distributed free to the able-bodied to be worn at all times. Orthotists design braces which give support and relief while keeping the able-bodied wearer bent to a normal height. Finding employment is a major problem for the able-bodied. One man, for instance, applies to become a television interviewer. But he must have a special medical examination when he applies for a job. The doctor, naturally, points out in the report that it would be rather strange to have a television interviewer with a bent back who wears a helmet all the time. Of course the man doesn't get the job and is advised to accept the limitations of his disability. Finance, of course, becomes a major problem. Various groups of compassionate wheelchair users get together and form registered charities. Twice yearly they hold a collection day, and of course there is the annual telethon, and the 'Miss Wheelchair Village' quest. Upturned helmets are left in pubs and shops for people to drop their small change into. There is heartening support for organisations such as 'The Society for Understanding the Disabled Able-Bodied'. There is talk of founding Special Homes. But then one day it dawns on the able-bodied that there is nothing actually wrong with them, just that society excludes them. They form a union to protect themselves and campaign against segregation. They argue that if ceilings and doors were raised, there would be no problem. But this, of course, is a foolish suggestion. You cannot deny disability.

- Adapted from Bruck, L. 'The Adventures of the Disabled Village', Rehab. Digest, Vol.10, No.2, May/June 1975.