

## The Unrecognized Citizen

By Ted Kuntz

*Language has the power to form our reality.  
It creates our way of seeing others and the world.*

I had a life transforming experience a few weeks ago. I attended a conference in Hull, Quebec, Canada where most of the presenters and participants spoke French. As an English only speaking individual I found the experience frustrating and challenging. Fortunately for me, every few minutes the presenter would pause and someone would translate the essence of the message to me and others handicapped by our limited understanding of French. This experience was a valuable one for me. As I sat patiently, and sometimes not so patiently waiting for a translation, it struck me how “disabled” I felt. I felt completely inadequate to participate and contribute in my usual ways. Usually I feel able and competent. However, in this situation I felt almost totally disconnected and disabled.

Being “disabled” offered me an insight I had not understood before. It wasn’t me who was *disabled*; I was the same person I was before the conference. Rather, it was the context or circumstances I was in. My disability was *contextual*. It was *the circumstances that handicapped me* and affected my ability to relate effectively with others. It was my relationship with others which was “disabled”.

I mused on this for awhile. (I had lots of time between translations!) I began to consider the word “disability” and how we use it in our culture. We use it as a label to describe *people*; to refer to people who are “not able”. The impact of the use of language in this way is that we come to perceive people as disabled, rather than the relationship. This led me into a new area of thinking. I propose that the so called “disability movement” is at a stand still in its efforts to acquire full inclusion and to create the experience of full citizenship for those individuals who have been labeled “disabled”. The barrier to further inclusion is *the very language we utilize*. Language has the power to form our reality. It creates our way of seeing others and the world. It constructs our paradigm.

I believe that as long as we use words as “the disabled” further progress will be thwarted. This language, all too powerfully, describes what these individuals are not. They are *not* “abled”. The “not abled”! It is time to formulate new language – a language that acknowledges a new vision. A vision where all citizens are valued and included and have the opportunity to contribute.

### A Suggestion

I offer a suggestion. It is not the final language, but is possibly the next language in our evolution. I propose we identify a word that means, “the unrecognized citizen”. I propose this idea for a number of reasons. Firstly, imbedded in this language is the acknowledgement of citizenship. Citizenship for all. It doesn’t debate the merits of having individuals with a disability as citizens. It simply presents citizenship as a given. Secondly, “the unrecognized citizen” speaks more of the inability of others and the community to recognize the citizenship of those individuals we have labeled as “disabled”, rather than pointing to an inability on the part of the individual. Thirdly, this new label speaks to the

relationship we have with these individuals. The label invites us to recognize these individuals as citizens, to take action, to correct this condition.

### **It is the Relationship that is Disabled**

My experience in Quebec informed me that it is the *relationship* between other citizens and myself that is disabled. It is not me that is disabled. My dignity remains intact. When this is fully acknowledged, the focus is shifted to changing or augmenting the *relationship* to allow me to participate more fully. And this is what I believe is at the core of all of our work and care of people we have labeled as “disabled” – to assist in ensuring their ability to participate even more fully in the fabric of society.

When a fish is in water, the fish is agile, effective, and competent in its relationship with others and its environment. Placing a fish on land “disables” the fish. It causes the relationship between the fish and its environment to become “disabled”. The corrective measure is not to change the fish, but to change the environment, change the relationship between the fish and its environment. So too with humans. Corrective measure is best focused, not on changing the individual, but on changing the environment, changing the relationship between the individual and their environment.

I think this new language has the potential to focus all of us, professionals and community members alike, in a more positive, constructive, and respectful direction.

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For information on the Philia Dialogue on Citizenship  
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