

VILLAGE VIEW

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There was once a man living in Osterville who suffered from a speech impediment. He lisped. A lisping child can be charming; the tiny fault seems to enhance the perfections of childhood and make them all the more delightful. In all probability the trait will soon be outgrown, but in the very young, it's endearing.

A grown man who lisps, on the other hand, may project an image often interpreted as sissified.

Not so in the instance I have in mind. Nobody ever mistook Jack's lisp for an indication he lacked masculinity. Perhaps that was so because Jack was among the friendliest and kindest of people; perhaps he enjoyed the respect and affection of all who knew him because he worked long hard hours wresting his living from the sea and supporting his wife and children to the best of his ability. Or, just perhaps, it was so because he, himself, failed to imbue his imperfection with much importance.

He knew he wasn't the only person with a physical defect; he'd grown up in a place and time when many a man and many a woman lived normal constructive lives in spite of disabilities. One was the storekeeper whose feet were congenitally malformed but who kept his shop open six days a week for more than 50 years and usually walked, in his own fashion, to and from this home and stood most of each day waiting on his customers.

Another was a dear lady, a victim of polio as a child. Despite the crippling effects of the disease she supported herself serving the public, limping about with the heavy braces strapped to her ankles and knees. There, too, went Thomas who had lost an arm in the Civil War but who drove a horse-drawn wagon from village to village, selling a variety of housewares.

And Henry, gassed in World War II, had been left with a painful lung condition. George, born deaf, had never learned to speak a word. Ned, burned in an explosive fire, would carry the facial scars all his life. All of them, although carrying their individual marks, managed to hold down jobs, earn weekly wages adequate to provide for themselves and their families.

When comparing his problem with those some of his neighbors were overcoming, Jack's lisp fell into proper perspective. It was a small thing, indeed. Lots of people were less than perfect; many were far worse than off then he.

Miracles of modern science and medicine have freed thousands of people from disabilities. With the protection afforded by Dr. Salk's vaccine, polio (or infantile paralysis, as it was also called) has been practically eradicated. An infant born with a misshapen foot or leg wears braces for a couple of months, special shoes for a year or so, and the deformity is permanently and completely corrected.

Prosthetics enable amputees to function normally. Surgery relieves conditions that, in earlier eras, were seriously disabling. Plastic surgery repairs the ravages of burns and disfiguring accidents. The deaf learn speech, bones grow straight, skin-grafts cover scars. Although physical disabilities have not yet been overcome entirely, the percentage of people displaying them is greatly reduced from a few generations ago when there was no alternative but to live with them. Even lisps respond to modern speech therapy.

And the fact that fewer people must live with disabilities makes us thankful. Nevertheless, something has been lost. Because it no longer appears "Everyone must contend with something," people's personal expectations as well as their perceptions of others have changed. Instead of accepting small faults as natural and inevitable, we are inclined to demand perfection. We tend to blame failures upon whatever disabilities we can dredge up as inhibiting factors.

What has become of the attitude of acceptance, of the challenge presented by adversity?

Would the polio victim have made the effort had there not been others sorely tried? Would the man with the twisted feet have continued to run his store had he seen the amputee give up in defeat? Would Thomas, who had but one arm, have learned to handle his team and drive his route had he not known the deaf-mute who remained self-supporting? Would Henry have gone daily to work had not Ned bravely smiled his twisted grin?

Would the man who lisped have seen himself as one of the lucky ones and grown up normally, rejecting any stigma that might have been attached to him were he a member of our society today?

Turning pages of a history book from back to front is futile; yet history has its lessons. No person is entirely free of imperfection; in today's world, however, faults are less visible. Those that can't be hidden can often be compensated for to relieve both the individual and the community of the necessity to accept them. As a result, society is deprived of examples of courage and fortitude with which the afflicted, in fact, surmount the insurmountable.

The blessing, and it is without doubt a blessing, of miracles of modern science and medicine has freed millions from laboring under the yoke of handicaps and from the tyranny of crippling disease and accident. And for the millions who have been released, we can but share in their rejoicing. There remain, however, millions who suffer smaller and less significant ills and who, without the example of those suffering greatly and yet carrying their burdens lightly, have but few

with whom to make comparisons.

We become, therefore, overly-critical of our inherent disabilities and those of others, overly-expectant of ourselves and our families, friends and neighbors. At the same time we are under-stimulated to do our best within our limited capabilities.

All of us have certain limitations. Some people are physically strong, some are physically weak; some are intellectually gifted, some are mentally retarded; some are artistically talented, some are color-blind and/or tone deaf. Whatever the limitation, we tend to magnify its importance rather than accept it, do our best in spite of it, or ignore it entirely.

Some of us, without the example set by others worse off than we but doggedly doing all they are able, simply give up and do nothing at all.

Then again, there are those who fight on. The heart patient who must give up an exciting but stressful career takes an unpressured job. The stroke victim who loses the use of an arm or leg regains it through therapy and determination. The person injured in an auto accident, a fire, a natural disaster, rebuilds strength and rearranges activities to accommodate and minimize the disability.

Such as these are still among us, exerting their efforts to remain independent and self-sufficient. We owe them thanks and recognition for the role they take on the stage of life. They provide us who have less serious limitations a basis for comparison. They set us a good example. They demonstrate that alternatives can be found. Seeing them making successful adjustments helps those of us who may, in our own way, lisp, put our small problems into a proper dimension in our lives.