



Mandela Washington Fellowship Summit

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Leadership for the Future: Resilience and Inclusion

Dorothy Lensa Ignite Talk Transcript

Speakers

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Session Transcript

A few years ago, I was facing discrimination. I went to the National Council for Persons with Disabilities to seek assistance. On going there for about one and a half years, I realized they were either unwilling or unable to assist me, so I gave up. After a while they organized their disability advocacy seminar, and I was invited. At the seminar, on speaking with one of the organizers, I asked them why I wasn't helped when I needed it. From the ensuing conversation, I realized that they had been operating from the opinion that it was my fault, I was in a situation where I was being excluded, I needed their support in being included, and two, I was in the wrong for going to them for assistance, and that's why I had failed in being included.

A few weeks ago, I was at a leadership training seminar, and the trainer on issues of working with family suggested we operate from the opinion that the mother is the getter into the family. If the father hates the mother, he will have no goodwill on the children, and therefore it will be the mother's fault that the father will abuse the children. Of course, I argued that such a theory is both harmful and wrong, since a father's parenting is equal to a mother's parenting and the responsibilities that follow. So, if a father abuses the child, the father must be held accountable, and likewise, the same should apply for the mother. From the ensuing debate I realized that they had been operating from: the mother is intrinsically evil, and part of their evil was that they manipulated people like me and myself in this situation, into seeing their humanity and wanting them to be equal to the father, and that that was the natural order of things – that it cannot be escaped, and I'd be frustrating myself in trying to escape it.

From these two experiences, I learned four ways disability exclusion happens. One: when a person with a disability is being excluded, they are seen as being in the wrong for already being in that situation, as if they are overstepping the boundaries. Two: when the person with disabilities is seeking assistance, they are already being seen as being in the wrong for being in that situation, and now they are being seen as burdening independent bodies in trying to include them. Three: when the person with the disability is being excluded, the people advocating for them are being seen as having been manipulated by an already evil person into trying to change nature. And last of all, people being excluded and living a life where they are already being excluded are seen as the natural existence –



that therefore exclusion is seen as the natural order of things that cannot be escaped and should not be worked against.

15% of the world's population is people with disabilities. I have worked with politicians who said, "That number is too small; we can't expect to include everyone." I've worked with entrepreneurs who said, "That number is too large; it's too expensive to include them." I've worked with people engaging in advocacy who say, "This is the natural way things are – we can't change it, 15% is not enough."

I'm going to address the Fellows today: where you work, do you see that people with disabilities are being regularly excluded? Have they given up coming to your place because they know they will not be supported? And worst of all, are you working specifically for people with disabilities? My call to you is to be the reason inclusion happens. 15% is just enough people that those that don't want to include them have to come up with excuses that are both wrong and unfair to keep them marginalized. You take up the matter today. Start working, start assessing, and start seeing the best ways to do these things. Be the reason inclusion happens. Thank you.