

Speaking for the “Unfit”

A Commentary on Disability, the Holocaust and the Modern Eugenics Movement.

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I am **proudly**, a person with a disability. I have a mobility impairment and use a wheelchair. My legs are obviously deformed and my gait is noticeably uncomfortable to watch if I attempt to walk.

I am a capable businessman, happily married for many years and the father of two. I am successful in my family, work and social life. Involved in politics, a two term elected public official and very involved with my community.

Recently while doing some research into disability history I began to explore the story of how people with disabilities were involved in the events of the holocaust. The information that I found has literally changed my life and imbedded my membership in the disability culture deeply into my life, heart and soul.

Eugenics, Disability and the Holocaust

In Germany in the late 1930's the history of the disabled community would change forever. The Germans were about to embark on a new experiment called eugenics. Eugenics is a nice, clean, very medical sounding, term that basically means race purification. The Nazi regime intended to remove any genetic imperfections from their race, but where, and how to begin?

Obviously those with the most visible imperfections were the many Germans with physical and mental disabilities. A massive sterilization effort was launched and literally hundreds of thousands of people with disabilities were sterilized. Besides the more traditional methods such as vasectomies and tubal ligations more horrific methods such as castration and the use of gamma radiation were also used, causing terrible pain and suffering in many cases.

Once the sterilization project was underway there was the realization that while it may prevent any further imperfections, it did nothing about the many “unfit” people currently alive. These people with disabilities were often children and were referred to as “Lives unfit for Living” and “Worthless Eaters”. The government saw them not only as a reminder of racial imperfections but also as a draw on the nation's economy. They used their propagand machine to brainwash people into thinking that these disabled people were living horrible and meaningless lives and that they should be shown “mercy” be relieved of this terrible burden and as an added benefit the country would save the money they had been spending on their care. Eliminating these people, they tried to claim, would be in the best interest of the country and the person as well.

“Action T-4” was an experiment in making killing and disposal of large quantities of people more efficient. Hospitals full of patients were “evaluated” to determine if they deserved or were “fit” enough to live. Medical charts were passed out and marked by the physicians to decide the fate of the patients. Blue Dashes, or minus signs, were placed on charts of patient who would live. However, if a patient’s chart was marked with three red Plus Signs, they would be eliminated. Patients who were blind, deaf, mentally ill, developmentally disabled, epileptic, or had some type of physical deformity were immediately identified as unfit and in need of someone to end their suffering. Had I been alive at the time, I would have worn the three red marks and the term “kruppel” or crippled and would have been eliminated.

“Unfit” patients were not simply “euthanized” however. The Nazi government saw an opportunity to do a little research. Hitler’s future plans called for the purification of many other types of imperfections in the German race. Here in the community of people with disabilities he had a perfect captive group of test subjects. How could they eliminate hundreds of thousands, millions even, of “imperfect” people efficiently and without raising a total public outcry? Thus began “Action T-4”, named after the hospital building it was housed in.

Various methods of elimination were used. Starvation, over medication, poison gas, and mutilation are just a few of the horrific examples of purification methods used in the name of mercy and eugenics. Disposal was also an issue. Obviously burial was a time tested method but it was labor and property intensive. It also allowed for the potential for discovery of their experimentation if someone investigated a burial site. Cremation was determined to be the most efficient method and the chimneys of hospitals such as Hadamar burned black with the disposal of hundreds of thousands of bodies, a sight that would be all too familiar at concentration camps across Germany and Europe in the coming years.

In the end, over 350,000 people with physical and mental disabilities were killed and hundreds of thousands more were sterilized for no reason other than being imperfect. They did not look or act like some people thought they ought to. Someone decided, on their behalf, that their lives were unbearable and meaningless and that death was a far better option to life in their case.

The facts of the matter were that many people with disabilities that were killed lived very full, successful lives. They had jobs, families and some were even quite well off. In those cases not only were they eliminated but their homes and possessions were looted and claimed by the government.



The propaganda machine was in full power at the time with images of people with disabilities being shown as helpless, unable to live a fulfilling life and simply a costly burden on society living in pain.

The image shown to the left reads;
"This person suffering from hereditary defects costs the community 60,000 Reichsmark during his lifetime. Fellow Germans, that is your money, too."

What of their neighbors who must have seen the smoke of the crematory chimneys? Why did they, no, how could they remain silent? Surely they saw the patients coming and going, smelled the acrid smoke

from the incinerators, noticed the ransacked houses. Perhaps the jobs at the hospitals or the many special benefits they received from the Nazis as "hush money" kept them silent.

It was not just the Nazis however as this quote from the *1942 American Journal of Psychiatry* shows. They published a debate on the "**Ethics of Killing Children with Severe Disabilities**", in which one "Professional" stated:

"I believe when the defective child shall have reached the age of five years - and on the application of his guardians - that the case should be considered by a competent medical board...then if the Board should decide that the defective has no future or hope of one; then I believe it is a merciful and kindly thing to relieve that defective, often tortured and convulsed, grotesque and absurd, useless and foolish, and entirely undesirable - of the agony of living."

But that could never happen today, Right?

Modern Medicine and Eugenics in the 21st Century

How does all of this unpleasant and uncomfortable to read and talk about information affect us today? With all of the advances in medicine and technology, eugenics is once again being discussed openly. Through genetic engineering, parents are now also able to genetically select the sex, eye color and many other features of their unborn child as well as remove any genetic tags that may lead to a disability.

In China, the government limits parents to 1 child and eugenics rears its ugly head as parents push to ensure that they can carry on the family line with a male child. Many other things are able to be determined before birth as well, giving parents the option of terminating a pregnancy if there are unwanted test results.

Both times when my wife and I were told that she was pregnant, we were asked if we wanted to have a test taken to determine if our unborn child would have a disability so that we could then abort the child. Remember now that I am a person with a disability myself and sitting in the doctor's office in my wheelchair when we were asked. All parents are asked this question and then must make several decisions. Do they take the test? Do they terminate the pregnancy if the test shows a possible disability?

Now you may be thinking, how is that a bad thing? Let's just think about the same question in another way. Disability, while genetic in many cases, is often a random occurrence. Let's say for the sake of discussion that skin color was equally as random and that a white couple could have a child with any skin color. Now, let's say there was a test available for the expectant parents that would determine the skin color of their unborn child and they could then decide if the child was going to be the color that they wanted or not so that the child could be aborted if it was not the skin color they considered to be acceptable.

Would society think it was appropriate or acceptable for parents to terminate a pregnancy simply because the child was not the skin color that they wanted?

As a parent, I can understand every parent's desire for a perfect, healthy child, but that isn't what always happens. If I had been alive in the days of the holocaust I would have been KILLED simply because of my deformed limbs. My life is certainly NOT meaningless or unbearable. I have a loving family and contribute to my community in many ways. I have met Presidents, addressed Congress and touched thousands of lives. Should I have been terminated simply because of my disability?

How is the option of termination based solely on disability, or race, or gender here in the technologically advanced 21st century any different or more appropriate than the eugenics of the Nazis in the 1930's and 1940's?

Wearing the Mark of the Beast

As I read the history of my people during the holocaust, I found myself sitting at my computer and simply sobbing, I just couldn't stop. Each time I thought about the hundreds of thousands of people killed, each time I thought of the thriving deaf culture in Germany at the time that was completely eliminated, each time I realized that we are still killing people simply because they might be different, it made me more sad and more determined to try to educate others through my own personal experience.

On July 11, 2004 I went to my local tattoo artist and had him mark the inside of my right forearm with three, hand drawn, red plus sign marks and the word "krüppel".



Many people do not understand why it is so important to me to wear this mark. They think it is morbid or dark, but I see it as recognition of the horrors suffered during the holocaust and a memorial to the lives of those 350,000 people with disabilities. It is also my acknowledgement of how lucky I am to be alive today. Had I lived during the Nazi regime I would have been killed. Had the modern prenatal test been available in the 60's and had I not had parents who offered acceptance and unconditional love, I could have been aborted. Lastly it offers me the chance to make people think. They see my tattoo and ask what it means and I can then tell them the same story that I have told here and hopefully open their eyes to the dangerously slippery slope that we are walking on as medical advancements make eugenics and genetic engineering sound like the right thing to do once again.

There was a case in the news where the parents of a child with a profound disability requested that their medical professionals administer extreme doses of hormones as well as perform other procedures all with the goal of stunting the child's growth and keeping her...."easier to carry around and take care of". How can this be ethical? How do we justify playing God with the life of another human being simply because it is more convenient for us?

We can not let this continue. We can not continue to gloss over the senseless Murder of a group of people, who have an incredible potential to contribute to society, by calling it eugenics, mercy killing or euthanasia. We can't keep whispering tearfully about a miscarriage when the truth is that a child was aborted simply because it wasn't perfect.

Both Moses and Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. demanded "Let My People Go". What I demand of you today is "LET MY PEOPLE LIVE".

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