

Invisible and On Center Stage: Who Do We Think We Are, Anyway?

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We are each made up of a myriad of identities forged through our interactions with other people. Disabled women experience a lack of role models, especially positive ones through which to form our own identities. We are apt to be invisible to others or seen only as our disabilities.

We develop strategies for maintaining positive self concepts when vital parts of our selves are unacceptable to those around us. Withdrawal, passing and disclosing our identities are all ways we work to be ourselves and be O.K. with ourselves. Sometimes it is safer to withdraw from interaction with others than disclose our vulnerabilities to a hostile audience. At other times we may choose to interact, but pass ourselves off as able-bodied. Those of us with invisible disabilities can do this to the extreme, whereas visibly disabled women may have no choice about sharing some aspects of our disabilities. On rare and special occasions we feel safe and are totally open and sharing about our issues.

We may bounce back and forth among these ways of presenting ourselves. There are costs and rewards involved in using each. Withdrawal, while protecting us from negativity also insulates us from all that is positive and life sustaining in relating to other people. In a vacuum, we may feel very alone and isolated and may never come to know who we really are. We may internalize negative attitudes about ourselves and feel ashamed and embarrassed about being disabled. Passing as able-bodied may allow us to avoid being seen as only our disabilities, and feel, if for only a short time "normal," a part of a world designed for the able-bodied. But the risks are heavy. We may come to dislike ourselves for being less than honest about who we are. We may endanger our physical health rather than admit we need the cooperation of others to meet our disability needs. By acting as if we have no needs, we may perpetuate a "super-crip" image—disabled people can do anything we want if we only try hard enough. We may exhaust ourselves trying and come to believe that we are better than other disabled people who have not accomplished as much. This can separate us from a very important resource in developing whole self concepts—other disabled women. As disabled women, we may also fit the social expectation for disabled women by appearing dependent, compliant and pitiful.

Sharing our disabilities with others makes it clear where we can and where we cannot get the support we need. Some people refuse to discuss our disabilities, or blame us for our condition. They have a hard time believing we are really disabled. We can choose to associate with people who acknowledge and accept all of who we are. Through this

process, we begin to incorporate our disabilities into realistic and positive conceptions of ourselves. Holding onto our positive self images is a more difficult task if we are also old, lesbian, or women of color. Each of these identities needs nourishment to grow.

Our bodies and our abilities are an integral part of our identities. We need visible, available role models of other disabled women who can share with us realistic pictures of their lives. We need a shift in societal values, so that these genuine pictures are allowed to be seen instead of only images that offer false reassurance to able-bodied and disabled people alike. Our disabilities need not dominate our lives and identities if the individual differences of all people are valued and accommodated.