

An Oft Ignored Power

Huge potential lies in the most unlikely places. Entering my daughters “little chicks” class for the first time, I was totally unprepared for the mysterious power these little lives held. Only a half dozen pre-schoolers, each facing differing, monumental challenges—for this was not just some day care, but rather deaf school. Each child had little to no hearing, and many faced other trials as well, legs that couldn’t walk, brains that struggled to function normally, and faces that might bring some strangers discomfort. They were all beautiful children.

Each parent of those little lives carried a searing pain in their chest, and a tear that was always close to the surface. To watch a child grow up in a misdirected world is a painful thing. A world that claws at a “success” measured by price and productivity. To such a world, their child might seem a burden to be glanced at from the corner of one’s self-superior eye, or at best pitied. Such a world misses the point of what it means to be human.

But each parent undeniably also has encountered a power in their child—a force that cannot be ignored, and has the capacity to destroy them or resurrect them, or in many ways do both. Disability can bring a person, a family, to their wits end. The grief, the anger, the stress, the frustration can take over, can conquer, the most stable home.

People with disability have power. Certainly there are the fantastic cases. Hikari Oe, is epileptic, developmentally delayed, and visually and physically impaired. He is also a musical savant. Hikari’s CDs have been bestsellers, earning him one of the **top musical awards** in Japan. Despite his weakness Hikari empowered his father. In the struggle of raising a son with disability Oe Kenzaburo earned the Nobel Prize. Or consider Ototake Hirotsada, who though lacking arms or legs still shines bright. His book *Gotai Fumanzoku* was the best seller of the 90’s, and number two book of the last half century. Or what about blind pianist Kakehashi Takeshi—recently giving a powerful performance at Carnegie Hall in New York to over 3,000. His rendition of Beethoven’s (who by the way, wrote music while deaf) Piano Sonata No.23 “Appassionata” brought a standing ovation. What irony, a blind man playing a deaf man’s music. Doting father that I am, I can’t resist mentioning my five year old Ayame, though born deaf she has been tackling four languages and recently decorated the front page of the Yamagata Shimbun. Each of these inspire us because of their disability—it is a power they never asked for and paid a high price for. Such cases inspire us, but what about the hoards that lie limp? I have found that every life has meaning and power. My friend Shotaro was mentally only about five, blind, and unable to speak, eat, or stand, in the end all he could do is listen and be—his silent

suffering was more powerful than any sermon I have ever heard. One of the most inspirational families I have met have a son who though now almost twenty is mentally a few months old and still in diapers. How they do it I cannot fathom. Most families with disability disintegrate. Most suffer with abuse or end in divorce. The emotional, social, physical, and financial stress is gargantuan. These families will never change the world in some grand fashion, but they may change their own world, and perhaps change the larger world on a plane that many do not see.

So what is it this society holds dear? Everything points to money, and our preoccupation with it has been the downfall of this society. But those with mental disabilities don't think a whole lot of money, what's important to them is people. I heard someone say that when they were young they were impressed with people who were intelligent, but when they grew old they were impressed with people who were kind. I used to be impressed with people who had money, now I am impressed with people who have suffered. Those with disability may be just what we need to bring equilibrium in this country. They are a gift to society—to teach us the intrinsic value of each person, the preciousness of life, and the preeminence of love. Their mere presence spreads hope and courage—precious commodities in this dark age. Their simple being can dash a multitude of vanities, melt the most frigid heart, and cause springs of gratitude to flow in a parched land. They are not angelic life forms, they are not creatures to be pitied, they are human beings, and perhaps they have a better understanding of what it means to be human than the most of us. Perhaps they can heal the spiritual handicap of our misconstrued lifestyle. It is critical to note that how society deals with its weakest members is the defining statement of its health. And since those with disability have been neglected and ignored, creating a better environment for them could have astounding results.

In the Bible, the prophet Elijah goes to meet God. But first comes a terrible wind, afterward comes a mighty earthquake, and finally a raging fire. In the tumult of such horrible powers even the rocks split open. But God was not in these forces. Finally, all is calm, and in the silence the prophet hears a small voice, like a whisper—it is the voice of God. In this age there is a lot of rumbling and clattering, and I wonder, could the smallest voice be the one with the most power? Could the whimper of the suffering child, be the voice of God?