

TED TALK BY STELLA YOUNG: I'M NOT YOUR INSPIRATION, THANK YOU VERY MUCH

Transcribed by: Adrienne Smith & David Widmann - Humber College

[Ethereal introduction music]

[Applause]

STELLA: I grew up in a very small country town in Victoria. I had a very normal, low-key kind of upbringing. I went to school, I hung out with my friends, I fought with my younger sisters. It was all very normal. And when I was 15, a member of my local community approached my parents and wanted to nominate me for a community achievement award. And my parents said, "Hm, that's really nice, but there's kind of one glaring problem with that. She hasn't actually achieved anything." [Laughter]

And they were right, you know. I went to school, I got good marks, I had a very low-key after school job in my mum's hairdressing salon, and I spent a lot of time watching "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and "Dawson's Creek." Yeah, I know. What a contradiction. But they were right, you know. I wasn't doing anything that was out of the ordinary at all. I wasn't doing anything that could be considered an achievement if you took disability out of the equation. Years later, I was on my second teaching round in a Melbourne high school, and I was about 20 minutes into a year 11 legal studies class when this boy put up his hand and said, "Hey miss, when are you going to start doing your speech?" And I said, "What speech?" You know, I'd been talking them about defamation law for a good 20 minutes. And he said, "You know, like, your motivational speaking. You know, when people in wheelchairs come to school, they usually say, like, inspirational stuff?" [Laughter] "It's usually in the big hall."

And that's when it dawned on me: This kid had only ever experienced disabled people as objects of inspiration. We are not, to this kid — and it's not his fault, I mean, that's true for many of us. For lots of us, disabled people are not our teachers or our doctors or our manicurists. We're not real people. We are there to inspire. And in fact, I am sitting on this stage looking like I do in this wheelchair, and you are probably kind of expecting me to inspire you. Right? [Laughter] Yeah.

Well, ladies and gentlemen, I'm afraid I'm going to disappoint you dramatically. I am not here to inspire you. I am here to tell you that we have been lied to about disability. Yeah, we've been sold the lie that disability is a Bad Thing, capital B, capital T. It's a bad thing, and to live with a disability makes you exceptional. It's not a bad thing, and it doesn't make you exceptional.

STELLA: And in the past few years, we've been able to propagate this lie even further via social media. You may have seen images like this one: "The only disability in life is a bad attitude." Or this one: "Your excuse is invalid." Indeed. Or this one: "Before you quit, try!" These are just a couple of examples, but there are a lot of these images out there. You know, you might have seen the one, the little girl with no hands drawing a picture with a pencil held in her mouth. You might have seen a child running on carbon fiber prosthetic legs. And these images, there are lots of them out there, they are what we call inspiration porn. [Laughter] And I use the term porn deliberately, because they objectify one group of people for the benefit of another group of people. So, in this case, we're objectifying disabled people for the benefit of non-disabled people. The purpose of these images is to inspire you, to motivate you, so that we can look at them and think, "Well, however bad my life is, it could be worse. I could be that person."

But what if you are that person? I've lost count of the number of times that I've been approached by strangers wanting to tell me that they think I'm brave or inspirational, and this was long before my work had any kind of public profile. They were just kind of congratulating me for managing to get up in the morning and remember my own name. [Laughter] And it is objectifying. These images, those images objectify disabled people for the benefit of non-disabled people. They are there so that you can look at them and think that things aren't so bad for you, to put your worries into perspective.

And life as a disabled person is actually somewhat difficult. We do overcome some things. But the things that we're overcoming are not the things that you think they are. They are not things to do with our bodies. I use the term "disabled people" quite deliberately, because I subscribe to what's called the social model of disability, which tells us that we are more disabled by the society that we live in than by our bodies and our diagnoses.

So, I have lived in this body a long time. I'm quite fond of it. It does the things that I need it to do, and I've learned to use it to the best of its capacity just as you have, and that's the thing about those kids in those pictures as well. They're not doing anything out of the ordinary. They are just using their bodies to the best of their capacity. So, is it really fair to objectify them in the way that we do, to share those images? People, when they say, "You're an inspiration," they mean it as a compliment. And I know why it happens. It's because of the lie, it's because we've been sold this lie that disability makes you exceptional. And it honestly doesn't.

STELLA: And I know what you're thinking. You know, I'm up here bagging out inspiration, and you're thinking, "Jeez, Stella, aren't you inspired sometimes by some things?" And the thing is, I am. I learn from other disabled people all the time. I'm learning not that I am luckier than them, though. I am learning that it's a genius idea to use a pair of barbecue tongs to pick up things that you dropped. [Laughter] I'm learning that nifty trick where you can charge your mobile phone battery from your chair battery. Genius. We are learning from each other's strength and endurance, not against our bodies and our diagnoses, but against a world that exceptionalizes and objectifies us.

I really think that this lie that we've been sold about disability is the greatest injustice. It makes life hard for us. And that quote, "The only disability in life is a bad attitude," the reason that that's bullshit is because it's just not true, because of the social model of disability. No amount of smiling at a flight of stairs has ever made it turn into a ramp. Never.

[Laughter and applause]

Smiling at a television screen isn't going to make closed captions appear for people who are deaf. No amount of standing in the middle of a bookshop and radiating a positive attitude is going to turn all those books into braille. It's just not going to happen.

I really want to live in a world where disability is not the exception, but the norm. I want to live in a world where a 15-year-old girl sitting in her bedroom watching "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" isn't referred to as achieving anything because she's doing it sitting down. I want to live in a world where we don't have such low expectations of disabled people, that we are congratulated for getting out of bed and remembering our own names in the morning. I want to live in a world where we value genuine achievement for disabled people, and I want to live in a world where a kid in year 11 in a Melbourne high school is not one bit surprised that his new teacher is a wheelchair user.

Disability doesn't make you exceptional, but questioning what you think you know about it does. Thank you.

[Applause]

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Source: Young, S. (June 9, 2014). I'm not your inspiration, thank you very much. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/stella_young_i_m_not_your_inspiration_thank_you_very_much?language=en