

Finalist, Non-fiction

**What If?**

by Deb Martens

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What if all persons had the opportunity to fully experience their lives without society's restrictions of a framework of: smart and dumb, rich and poor, superior and inferior, fat and skinny, talented and untalented, able and disabled?

I am wife, mother, sister (guardian), friend, and advocate for many individuals who have been "labeled" with a variety of "disabilities." As I have given focused thought to putting pen to paper to share my personal experiences, I came up against an intense anxiety sensing my blood pressure rise higher every time I sat down to begin the process.

The very words "handicapped" and "disabled" evoke an array of negative connotations (and for me, negative emotions)! To allow the "them" in society to oppress certain populations with an experiential infrastructure of being: inferior, dumb, slow, restricted, and unable is unacceptable and completely contrary to our nation's core tenant of the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness!"

Rather than allowing the negative energy to flow through my being, which perpetuates giving power to the "them" (the oppressors) I will concentrate on the positives and the "what ifs" that can become our society's new framework so that all individuals can "be."

What if each of us chose to look at life and the individuals around us through a prism? Webster's dictionary asserts literal and figurative definitions of prism. Both definitions are beneficial to consider as we explore the "what ifs."

Prism: “Optics a glass or other transparent object in this form, esp. one that is triangular with refracting surfaces at an acute angle with each other that separates white light into a spectrum of colors. Also, used figuratively with reference to the clarification or distortion afforded by a particular view point.”

I recently began my master’s degree program in Self Design—Building Learning Communities. During my first course, I participated in a group exercise of looking through a prism (ironically, I had never looked through a prism my entire life). Our assignment was to walk around as a group and to make observations of the world around us as we looked through our prisms. If each member of our group did not “see” the same image, we had to wait patiently for everyone to experience that “view.” The activity was a beautiful experience as the world unfolded itself in new ways to us. The benefit of being challenged to see things a certain way that did not always come easily to me but did to others in my group continues to profoundly impact my life. There were even a couple of instances when I could not physically see what the rest of the group saw. Those moments stretched me to persevere and trust the insights of my peers and to acknowledge their perspectives were real and just as valid as mine.

So, what if we viewed humanity through a prism?

My husband and daughter would not feel dumb or inferior because of their challenges with dyslexia. They would be embraced and cheered on in their amazing abilities to envision things in their minds’ eyes in 3-D and transfer that to hands on projects that are creative, inspirational, and of value to others around them. They would not feel judged negatively because they learn in a different manner than most traditional schools allow.

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My sister would not have been denied permanent residency in Canada due to her “disability.” There would have been a culture of compassion and understanding that her mother; her only care provider died and that it were crucial for her to live near

family. She would have been viewed as a contributing member of society rather than a “potential financial burden on the Canadian government.”

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My friends who have different challenges than me and whose children with more intense needs than my own child would not feel alone, betrayed, and abandoned by our “democratic” countries we live in. They would be completely supported in their journeys and have the resources necessary to live vibrant and rich lives within in their family units and communities. These individuals and families would be empowered to thrive verses barely survive!

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I, personally, could be at peace with these particular injustices in our culture (because they would be non-existent) and move onto other areas of passion; to become an advocate and agent of change for others who need a voice!

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We all would live in community and honor the white light that separates into a majestic spectrum of colors!!!