

Disability Etiquette!

by Mike Walker

A while ago I had the joy of reading a fascinating theological book called *Copious Hosting: A Theology of Access for People with Disabilities*. In that gentle and prophetic text, Catholic disability-advocate Jennie Weiss Block sets out to define disability and accessibility theologically, explore the history and the concerns of the American disability-rights movement, and offer an inclusive theological account of disability based solidly in friendship and compassion. I highly recommend it! For now, I want to share ten tips for “disability etiquette,” as stated by Block (pp. 142-148).



1. Do not make decisions that affect people with disabilities without their participation.
2. Use common sense. People with disabilities are just ordinary people and want to be treated in the same way you would like to be treated. Act in the same way that you would normally act, appropriate to the situation at hand.
3. Always speak directly to the person with the disability, not to the person accompanying him or her.
4. Be aware that a person with a disability sometimes needs extra time. Make this accommodation willingly, in a way that does not make the person feel uncomfortable.
5. If you are planning a meeting or event, try to anticipate what specific accommodations people with disabilities might need.
6. It is fine to use common expressions like, “See you later,” or “I’ve got to run now.” What is not appropriate is to use disability slurs or descriptions that have negative meanings.
7. Never pretend to understand what a person is saying. Listen attentively and be patient.
8. If a person uses a wheelchair, respect the wheelchair and the space around it. Do not touch the wheelchair, or lean on it, or push it without being asked.
9. If an individual has a developmental disability, keep the communication direction and simple. Stay focused on the person, and give them time to understand and answer.
10. Become knowledgeable about the different types of disabilities among the members of your own community, and offer the spiritual, moral, and physical things that are needed to offer these individuals access.

The first tip is most important: because we have agency like that of others even with our limitations, people with disabilities (or our caregivers) need to be involved in the choices that make up our lives. All ten tips for disability etiquette really fall under the second point, because people are people. Use good sense and compassion when you encounter us! We don’t bite; I promise.



Mike Walker (ma.walker@mail.utoronto.ca) is a theologian of disability and poet with spastic cerebral palsy from Prince Edward Island, currently based in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. He aims to be a practical theologian, and an advocate for both people with disabilities and others who are vulnerable; when not working, he loves to read, write, exercise, and hang out with friends. Feel free to contact Mike if you are interested in conducting an accessibility audit.