Emily Pieper Defining Disability Glossary Entry for “sick”

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Albert Einstein once said that “Everybody is a genius, but if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.” This man, undoubtedly one of the smartest men of all time, was once believed to have a disability or sickness. Einstein struggled in school as a young boy, and because of his slower learning style he was labeled as having a learning disability. It seems in retrospect though that “…it was the circumstances that ‘handicapped’ Einstein, rather than his own personal inabilities” because “…memorizing words, texts, and names caused him considerable difficulties” (Wolff and Goodman 2). Since the traditional method of memorization and recitation didn’t fit Einstein’s learning style, people around him labeled him as being different, disabled, and even sick. While society tends to give negative connotations to the word “sick”, people who are sick are by no means of lesser value. In fact, those who are sick are better off than “normal” individuals in some ways because they must learn to live their lives with the added strains of being sick. However, to truly understand the word “sick”, it is necessary to examine the different contexts the word is used in.

In general, being sick means that in some way or another one is not in a state considered to be normal by society. Today, people attach many different meanings, usually negative, to the word based on what they believe falls outside of the norm. According to the Oxford English Dictionary alone, the definitions of “sick” include “Suffering from illness of any kind; ill, unwell, ailing”, “Of parts of the body: Not in a sound or healthy state”, “Mentally affected or weak”, and “Of humour, a joke, etc.: macabre, providing amusement by reference to something that is thoroughly unpleasant” (OED 1-13). Simply saying that someone is sick can therefore be taken to mean a wide array of things. To some, it can signify that the person is throwing up, or has a fever. In another person’s mind, someone being sick can mean that they either have a legitimate mental illness or that they are just joking around and making a “sick” joke about something that should not be taken lightly. Some people also use the word “sick” in a complimentary or positive way that may irritate or seriously offend some people who are living with sicknesses. For example, one might hear another say “Man, that’s sick!” to someone who has just won a gold medal at the Olympics. Since winning a gold medal at the Olympics is, for lack of a better word, cool, the word “sick” is given a positive connotation. Whether people think of being sick as good or bad, they are still referencing something that is outside of its usual state. When used in a negative context the word “sick” refers to something that is unhealthy, unwell, or just disgusting, but when the word is utilized to describe something in a positive manner, it suddenly changes its meaning to be something desirable, awesome, or just cool.

However, as Christine Miserandino’s story shows, using the word “sick” to talk about a positive thing can be offensive to some people. In her blog post titled “The Spoon Theory”, Christine relates how she helped her friend understand the difficulties of living with a sickness. When her friend asks her what it is like to be sick with Lupus, Christine comes up with the analogy that being sick is similar to having a limited amount of spoons. While at a diner, Christine gathers as many spoons as she can find and hands them to her friend, saying that those spoons represent energy. As her friend talks through her daily activities, Christine makes her give up a spoon with each activity. Everything from getting dressed to making breakfast to driving to work requires energy, and her friend must give up a spoon. When she runs out of spoons, she theoretically has run out of energy for that day. This is Christine’s way of showing how difficult it is for people who are sick to function on a daily basis. Healthy individuals wake up every day and have endless opportunities awaiting them, mostly unaffected by sickness. On the other hand, sick people have to carefully plan out and decide what they are going to be able to accomplish each day (Miserandino 1-3). Always being limited by a sickness is not something that most people would wish for. By giving the word “sick” an alternatively positive meaning, it may seem to be mocking the difficulties faced by people who are sick, and consequently offend them.

So the point that I want to make and that Christine made with the Spoon Theory was that some people don’t realize the extent to which sicknesses can control lives on a daily basis. Being sick isn’t as simple as taking some medications and visiting the doctors occasionally; it involves a complete life upheaval and transformation. People may have to alter their lifestyles to live with sicknesses, but they should not be looked down upon or viewed as being less important. This is why it is inappropriate to throw the word “sick” around as it is today. It is one thing to say “I feel sick” in reference to a sickness such as the stomach bug or the flu, but it is a completely opposite thing to say “Man, that’s so sick” in reference to something that is desirable or awesome. Being sick is an extreme life challenge, and its only awesome aspect is how impressively many people are able to juggle their sickness while living their everyday lives.

Works Cited:

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