

A Little History Worth Knowing

by Timothy M. Cook

The Alabama legislature declared them "a menace to the happiness...of the community." A Texas law mandated segregation to relieve society of the "heavy economic and moral losses arising from the existence at large of these unfortunate persons."

Ancient penal statutes for convicted felons? NO! Racial epithets from the Jim Crow era? Not quite, though these declarations did arise in that period.

Such was the treatment accorded disabled persons, especially those...with severe disabilities, by democratically elected state legislatures, in this century.

Nor was the government-mandated regime of segregation, exclusion and degradation of people with disabilities limited to the South. In every state, in inexorable fashion, the policy was to keep us out of polite society.

In Pennsylvania, disabled people officially were termed "anti-social beings;" In Washington, "unfitted for companionship with other children;" in Vermont, a "blight on mankind;" in Wisconsin, a "danger to the race;" and, in Kansas, "a misfortune both to themselves and to the public."

In Indiana, we were required to be "segregate[d] from the world;" a Utah government report said that a "defect wounds our citizenry a thousand times more than any plague;" and, in South Dakota, we simply did not have the "rights and liberties of normal people."

The United States Supreme Court, in an opinion by Justice Oliver Wendall Holmes upholding the constitutionality of a Virginia law authorizing the involuntary sterilization of disabled persons, ratified the view of disabled persons as "a menace." Justice Holmes juxtaposed the country's "best citizens" (nondisabled persons) with those who "sap the strength of the state" (disabled persons), and to avoid "being swamped with incompetence," ruled "It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind."

So, the next time someone tries to explain to you that handicappism is a more "benign" form of discrimination, tell them how the segregation and exclusion of people with disabilities all began. Tell them how, historically, a lot of important decision-makers passed laws sending us away.