

Charlie Crawford
Portraits of Disability and Difference
Professor Lindgren
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Portraits Reflection

While perhaps not the most creative opening, this class has genuinely changed the way I see disability – both in relation to myself and to other people. Looking back now, I can see the assumptions that I used to make about disabled people and the ways that this class has changed those. During quarantine, I watched a lot of content from a wheelchair-using video game streamer, but I remember thinking how it was nice that this medium was providing him a job given his disability. Looking back now, I can see how many assumptions like this I made about disabled people – even after watching hours of his content and getting to know him more as a person, I still thought that the only job he could handle was one sitting behind a desk at a computer. It was these kinds of assumptions about disability that were so seeped into my life that I never thought to question them. It was deeply ingrained enough that when I saw disabled people, I saw their medical diagnosis more than I saw the person and thought about their experience only through that one lens. In some ways, this transformation reminds me of my K-12 experience as a transgender male student at an all-female school. Growing up surrounded by so many examples of strong women succeeding in various aspects of life, I never once doubted that women would be able to do anything. I think if I had grown up being taught the same about disabled people, I would not have been making these kinds of assumptions about what jobs that Youtuber was qualified for. Not to mention the fact that I have been slowly unlearning the assumption that your value is mostly based in your ability to succeed in a capitalist world, and slowly getting myself out of that toxic mindset.

Beyond this example of the ways that this class has changed my assumptions about other peoples' disabilities, this class has truly altered how I see my own. I remember in the past how whenever I would talk about my hearing loss with my friend, I would always say something along the lines of "well, I don't identify as disabled of course." Not because I felt that it was something shameful (though that assumption could very well have played into it in hindsight), but because I felt it was something I did not qualify for. Being at 25%-30% hearing loss, I have always felt on the cusp of disability, and in many ways this is still something I struggle with and still an area I am exploring. But it was not until this class that I realized there even was a community of other people whose experiences do not quite fit into the hearing or able-bodied world. Disability, to me, always felt like more of an extreme. If you were disabled, you park in the blue spaces at the grocery store, or you are completely deaf and go to a deaf school, or completely blind and have a seeing-eye dog. Not even to mention the fact that I never really considered mental disabilities part of that community until this class. This class has opened my eyes to the fact that, like many things, disability is also a spectrum. Somehow I, as a person who has identified as queer since I was 12, was not able to see a spectrum right in front of me, but that is besides the point. In any case, this course has opened my eyes to this spectrum and I can start to see the way that my disability – which I always simply considered as an interfering "medical issue" – goes far beyond that definition. I am able to see now the ways that I am not just a hearing person with hearing loss, as well as the ways that disabled people are not disabled by our medical diagnoses, the ways that disability is only formed when the needs of disabled people are not met in society, and the ways that a community can form by those whose needs are not met. It was not until taking this class that I realized how much I needed to learn these things.