



Our Common Uniqueness

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[1] It is a tremendous honor to be here as part of this panel of distinguished colleagues. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think I would be in a position to share such personal information in a national venue such as *MTO*. To be included here is extremely gratifying on so many levels.

[2] Three of my immediate family members have diagnosed disabilities, both physical and cognitive. I was born without a right ear, with an ear canal that is completely closed, so I have no hearing on my right side. Between the ages of 5–15 I underwent approximately 20 surgeries to construct a visible ear on my right side; this was strictly cosmetic, something that I wanted as a child and my parents supported. Throughout my life, I have never really felt handicapped, although I definitely felt I was different from the “norm” until I graduated from high school.

[3] My mother and father always taught me that I could do anything I wanted to, if I put my mind to it. I was taught that I was special and unique, with my own set of gifts and abilities. I did get teased occasionally, especially when I would go to school with a big bandage around my head, but the teasing was always by kids who didn’t really know me. I actually got teased more for being a good student or a “nerd” than I did for my disability.

[4] Throughout my college years and until just a couple of years ago, I told no one in my professional circle about my hearing loss. I had an underlying fear of being kicked out of the music program, or of being denied a job teaching music, worried that someone might think me less than capable. Now I am comfortable sharing this information when there is a purpose behind it. I especially appreciate opportunities to share my story with students who themselves have diagnosed disabilities or who feel inadequate or self-conscious about their abilities in the classroom.

[5] Though I don’t really feel disabled, I do have a few limitations related to my hearing. My wife knows to sit on my left side when we are at concerts or at restaurants, because otherwise I am unlikely to hear what she says to me. In large social crowds, it is difficult for me to pick up on conversation, and everything tends to sound like a mishmash of noise. I have learned to read lips fairly well, and I sometimes have to look at someone’s mouth in order to understand what is being said. Headphones don’t work well for me when listening to music, unless all the sounds are coming through to my “good” ear. Honestly my one “good” ear provides everything I need for hearing. At Butler University I was hired especially for my experience and interest in aural skills, in order to supervise the aural skills program there. I now find that ironic, considering my hearing disability.

[6] My experience growing up with this disability has led me to be drawn to people who are also considered different, or unique, or set apart for some reason. One of my best friends since second grade (going back 40 years) has severe scoliosis

and spent most of his childhood wearing a back brace. He and I spent many days in gym class, sitting on the sidelines while the other boys were playing touch football.

[7] As an adult I was drawn to adopt a child with special needs. My 15-year-old daughter Kelly was adopted as an infant. Kelly has Down syndrome, and at age six she was also diagnosed with Crohn's disease. Kelly struggles with speaking clearly so that others can understand what she is saying. She also struggles with math and reads at a third-grade level. She has managed to learn many skills, but it generally takes her a lot longer to learn them than it does most kids.

[8] Kelly has great social skills and acts like an ordinary teenager. She is a gifted athlete, which is rather unusual for a person with Down syndrome. Her sense of direction is much better than mine. She often helps me in the car to get us where we need to go. She has an amazing ability to memorize a movie scene or a choreographed song, after just one or two viewings on DVD. She memorizes her school bus numbers and other numbers almost immediately. I have to write everything down, because I have difficulty memorizing anything. Kelly has some great strengths where I have weaknesses, so we make a good team.

[9] Three weeks ago my wife and I traveled to South Korea to meet our newly-adopted son Joshua and bring him home. Joshua is eight years old and was abandoned by his birth parents when he was one month old. I was particularly drawn to him when looking at child profiles, because he has disfigured hands and feet. Joshua has four fingers on one hand and an undeveloped thumb on the other, and his feet are large and thick with practically no toes. I felt an immediate connection with him because of my own physical imperfections. He has no cognitive problems. Like myself, Joshua has had some bad experiences in school back in Korea, where his classmates made fun of him because of his hands. After seeing Joshua in action, it is clear that his hands and feet do not prevent him from doing anything. He uses chopsticks perfectly, can use a computer and play piano, ice skates better than I do, and walks as fast as I do, which is pretty fast.

[10] My household is a working demonstration of how to overcome limitations and get around obstacles, particularly in the last two weeks where language is concerned. Joshua has limited English vocabulary and my wife and I know only a couple of Korean phrases. We manage well with a few dictionaries, and we are learning to use hand signs and pantomime effectively. We have a couple of Korean friends who can translate complex issues every few days. Basically we live through each day trying to figure out how to do what we need to do, using the limited resources and abilities we have at the moment.

[11] The greatest marvel is to see my daughter Kelly, with unclear English pronunciation, communicating so effortlessly with her new brother who knows very little English. They understand each other so well after just two short weeks. They find the words they need, and when they don't have words, they find other means to connect with one another.

[12] As a parent, I celebrate the unique qualities of my two children. I celebrate not only their amazing strengths, but also the challenges they work so hard to overcome. I want them to grow up feeling good about themselves, with the realization that their perceived handicaps do not have to prevent them from accomplishing their goals. It's fine if they have to take a different route than the average person does to learn a task. They simply may have to find their own unique way to make things work for them, using the tools they have. It is my responsibility as a parent to help guide them through that process.

[13] I feel a similar responsibility in the music theory classroom. Each student is unique, with various strengths and weaknesses that may affect how that student may process and master the concepts being taught. When a student has a problem, I have to be ready to guide that student in managing his or her strengths and weaknesses according to the student's best learning style, so that the student can achieve success.

[14] More often than not, a student arrives at my door in desperation, stating, "I just can't do this," "I just don't understand," or "I can't do this fast enough." At such times I prefer to sit down and observe the student completing the task at hand, while he or she thinks out loud. Then together we evaluate the entire process and determine what specific strengths and weaknesses are apparent. With this detailed evaluation, the student can learn to rely on the strengths, work to build up the weaknesses, and even discover ways to work around those weaknesses in order to successfully achieve the goal.

[15] At times the path to success for a student may be unique to that student and unlike the typical route. I have to be willing and ready to try many different methods until something works. This is the same process I use at home on a daily basis.

[16] Even the strongest students have weaknesses, and even the weakest students have strengths. Knowing what these are for you, and being able to admit what they are, is important. I have begun to use self-assessment tools as homework assignments or sometimes as follow-up to an exam. Other times I utilize self-assessment techniques in one-on-one consultations with

students.

[17] This past year I have broadened my research interests to include disability issues in the college classroom. I have been gathering data from music theory instructors who have experience teaching students with disabilities.

[18] My own recent experience teaching two blind students has generated a special interest in doing further work in that area. This year I have learned literary Braille and the music Braille system, and this past summer in Philadelphia, I assisted at the Summer Music Institute for Blind College-Bound Musicians.

[19] The more I go through life, the more I realize that we all have things that set us apart, that others may see as a handicap or something that makes us less than perfect. For me this is a positive thing for each of us to recognize, because it reveals something that we all have in common, something that connects us and builds community, even in the classroom. It is exciting to me to create an environment in the classroom where our “uniquenesses” can be shared openly and even embraced as something positive.

[20] The values we try to foster within the family are worth fostering in the classroom as well. It is fine to be different from others. Each of us has strengths we can use, and weaknesses we have to work around or work extra hard to strengthen. We each have different needs and require different means of support and encouragement. By recognizing and accepting these differences among us, we can help foster a strong community in which individual learners are allowed to forge their own unique path to success.

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