

The Voice

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He is a regular student at a karate school. He never misses a single lesson. His will and determination are remarkable. But at first glance you would think he is weak. He has short arms and legs. Standing only about 130 centimeters tall, you would think he was only six or seven years old, but he isn't. Daichi is fifteen. He is a real head turner not because he is extremely handsome, but because of his abnormally short stature. He is a high-schooler who barely rises to the shoulders of teenagers his age. He was born with a condition called dwarfism.

I go to the same Karate school as Daichi does. In fact, the first time I met him was the same time I sparred with him. When my coach called me to spar with him, I said to myself, "I don't want to fight him. He is too short and too weak to be paired with me." With much hesitation, I fought him, but I fought him with pity. I did not give my best; instead I let him win. That was the first time losing in a sparring felt so good. I thought I did the right thing. I thought that by letting him win, I was helping. When the class was over, he approached me and gently told me that by treating him with pity, I had unconsciously mocked him, looked down upon him and not believed in his capability. My jaw dropped as I heard those words. My good intentions turned out to be bad.

Wanting to know more about physically challenged and mentally handicapped people and their points of view, I started doing some research. I also read blogs about them and saw movies, which featured them. From the movies I saw and testimonies I read, people naturally show pity or too much kindness to physically challenged people, which ironically makes them feel even more inferior or incapable. One lady in a wheelchair says, when she wants to ride a boat, many will rush to the dock where she is at and help her get onto the boat, carry her in her wheelchair to the place for the disabled or the safest place possible. And whenever she humbly tells them she prefers the deck outdoors so she can enjoy the sight of the sea, those who helped her frown as if she didn't know how to appreciate kindness. Don't you think it's ridiculous to deprive her of her right to enjoy nature just because people have already decided the best spot for her?

We all have been taught to be kind and sensitive to others. But if our kindness and sensitivity come from pity or superiority, they are not kindness and sensitivity at all. Instead of looking at what they can do, we focus on their imperfections, assume that we know what is good for them and offer unnecessary stereotypical kindness.

So, what do you do if you come across people with special needs? Are you going to assume that you know what is best for them? Well, this is what I suggest you do. Ask them, talk to them, and let their voice be heard. Who knows? You might be the one needing their help.

The last time I sparred with Daichi, we gave it our all, and we both loved it. Would you like to know who won the sparring? (Chuckle) I'm sorry, but I won't tell who.

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