

I DON'T KNOW THAT I'D SAY I'M NORMAL ANY MORE THAN ANY OTHER PERSON IS NORMAL BECAUSE EVERYONE IS THEIR OWN UNIQUE SNOWFLAKE. BUT I THINK THAT I'M A GOOD PERSON. I'M PRETTY IRREVERENT ABOUT MOST THINGS. I DON'T TAKE TOO MUCH TOO SERIOUSLY. I THINK ALL OF LIFE CAN BE A JOKE ON SOME LEVEL, EVEN IF IT IS A BIT TWISTED. BUT, I HAVE A CHALLENGE. NINE AND A HALF YEARS AGO I GOT SICK. WITHOUT GOING INTO THE TECHNICAL DETAILS, IT BASICALLY DESTROYED MOST OF MY OPTIC NERVES. SO, NOW I AM LEGALLY, BUT NOT COMPLETELY, BLIND. WHEN IT HAPPENED TO ME, I WAS 23, AND I HAD JUST LEFT A JOB, HAD TAKEN OUT A BUNCH OF STUDENT LOANS, AND SIGNED A LEASE ON AN APARTMENT DOWN IN NORTH CAROLINA. I DIDN'T HAVE ANY OTHER OPTION IN MY HEAD OTHER THAN TO JUST ROLL WITH THE NEW CIRCUMSTANCES OF WHAT HAVING THIS IMPAIRMENT MEANT.

I DON'T SEE ANYTHING OUT OF MY RIGHT EYE, EXCEPT FOR A LITTLE BIT OF MOVEMENT IN THE CORNER, AND THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LIGHT AND DARK. IN MY LEFT EYE I'VE GOT CENTER VISION LENS CORRECTED DISTORTIVE NORMAL BUT I HAVE A SUPER, SUPER RESTRICTED FIELD OF VISION. SO I LIKEN IT TO BASICALLY SEEING THE WORLD LIKE YOU WOULD BE LOOKING THROUGH A FOGGED UP WINDOW WHERE SOMEONE HAS CLEARED A TINY LITTLE AREA IN THE CENTER.

TO BE FAIR, THERE ARE SOME PEOPLE WHO REALLY DO TRY TO DO THE RIGHT THING, HAVE THE CONVERSATION WITH YOU, AND WORK WITH YOUR INDIVIDUAL CIRCUMSTANCES. THEY ARE VERY TACTFUL AND UNDERSTAND THAT WITH A LOT OF DISABILITY IT IS NOT "CUT-AND-DRY." IT IS SORT OF AN ITERATIVE PROCESS TO UNDERSTAND HOW A PARTICULAR IMPAIRMENT WOULD MANIFEST ITS SELF IN A PARTICULAR CIRCUMSTANCE. THAT'S THE BEST END OF THE SPECTRUM.

THEN THERE ARE PEOPLE WHO TRY TO DO THE RIGHT THING, BUT THEY HAVE A VERY RIGID, OR LIMITED, SENSE AS TO WHAT DISABILITY IS, OR ISN'T, OR SHOULD, OR SHOULDN'T LOOK LIKE. THAT'S TRICKY BECAUSE, YOU AGAIN WANT TO BELIEVE THAT PEOPLE COME AT IT FROM THE RIGHT ANGLE BUT, IF THEY ARE DECIDING FOR YOU WHAT YOUR DISABILITY MEANS THEN THEY'VE TAKEN A LITTLE BIT OF YOUR VOICE OUT OF THAT CONVERSATION. THAT'S NOT A FAIR DYNAMIC. THEY THINK OF IT AS HELPLESS, OR THEY THINK OF IT AS INEPT. SOMETIMES IT IS A CHARITY CASE. THERE'S MAYBE A THOUGHT THAT PEOPLE THINK THAT YOU'RE LESS CAPABLE. OR THAT YOU ARE DUMB. ONE OF THE THINGS THAT PEOPLE ALWAYS ASK ABOUT WHEN THEY LEARN THAT I'M VISUALLY IMPAIRED IS, "HOW ABOUT YOUR OTHER SENSES? ARE ONE OF THEM BETTER?" I THINK THEY THINK IT IS SORT OF LIKE CAT LIKE HEARING OR, SUPER GREAT REFLEXES. I TELL THEM THAT THE SENSE THAT'S BEEN IMPROVED THE MOST BY THIS WHOLE CIRCUMSTANCE IS MY SENSE OF HUMOR. BECAUSE, THE CHANCES ARE PRETTY GOOD THAT I'M GOING TO DO SOMETHING THAT'S AWKWARD, OR THAT OTHER PEOPLE MIGHT NOT UNDERSTAND. OR I MIGHT BE A LITTLE OFF-PUTTING. I THINK IF YOU GET TO KNOW ME AS A PERSON, YOU REALIZE WELL, "THAT'S JUST LIZ, SHE'S GOING TO BE A LITTLE BIT OF AN AWKWARD TURTLE ANYWAY. THE BLIND JUST MAKES IT A LITTLE BIT, KIND OF FUNNY. OR AT LEAST GIVES DIFFERENT FODDER FOR AWKWARD CIRCUMSTANCES."

IF YOU UNDERSTAND THAT REALLY, INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY IS JUST ABOUT UNDERSTANDING, WELCOMING, AND BEING OPEN TO THE THINGS THAT ARE ALREADY THERE. IN WHAT WE EVEN THINK OF IT AS NORMAL. THEN I THINK IT IS JUST AN EASIER CONVERSATION. THE WAY I LIKEN IT IS A LOT OF TIMES, PEOPLE SAY, "OH LIZ, WE HAD NO IDEA THAT YOU WERE BLIND." OR, "I FORGOT." THAT'S GOOD AND BAD BECAUSE, IT'S NOT A VISUAL THING – FOR OTHER PEOPLE. IT'S NOT IMMEDIATELY APPARENT, BUT THEN LOOK AROUND AT A MEETING. LOOK AROUND AT YOUR GROUP, HOW MANY

PEOPLE ARE BRINGING IN SOMETHING THAT YOU CAN'T SEE? MAYBE SOMEONE DOESN'T HEAR WELL. MAYBE SOMEONE IS A SINGLE PARENT. MAYBE HAS A CHRONIC MEDICAL CONDITION, OR A SPOUSE AT HOME WHO'S GOING THROUGH A HARD TIME. I MEAN, PEOPLE ALL COME TO WORK WITH A LOT THAT THEY CARRY WITH THEM. INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY IS JUST BEING OPEN TO THE WHOLE OF THE PERSON THAT COMES IN, WITH WHATEVER THEY CARRY WITH THEM.