

When the Bus Driver Called Me ‘the Wheelchair’



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Grumble, grumble, grumble. Transportation. It remains one of the biggest obstacles for people with disabilities, especially if you can’t get out of your chair to travel. If you can get into the vehicle at all on public transit, it’s usually in a cramped space that smells like an armpit. Backpacks and pocketbooks swing in my face, and there I am, at butt level, hoping nobody has gas.

There is paratransit — the charming alternative offering door-to-door service on a smaller bus just for people with disabilities. Paratransit buses, like the “short buses” I rode in high school, in my experience, are only vaguely reliable, and they usually offer passengers large time windows, as though I have nothing better to do all day than wait for buses and leave home at 7:03 for a job that starts at 9 a.m. in an office two blocks away. These rides often feature drivers who tell inane, unfunny jokes and feel the need to narrate my ride on the lift with condescending “wheeeee!” noises. After that very thing happened earlier this week, I feel compelled to compliment the next offender who climbs up my stairs. I’ll say how skilled and inspiring I find his use of limbs. I could go on about transportation, but that is for another article.

The other morning, paratransit wanted to pick me up at 7:32, although my academic commitment (about 10 minutes away) didn’t start until 9. But my personal assistant doesn’t come until 7, so unless we had superpowers, being ready in 32 minutes was just not going to happen. Clearly, whoever makes the bus schedule has never tried to put on pants with cerebral palsy. For me, sitting up on the side of the bed can’t be that different from those insanity workouts many of my peers have mentioned. With paratransit, we fill out 10 pages of paperwork about our every impairment, only to be treated as though we should be able to race out the door whenever they see fit.

Because having pants on is a prerequisite for most professional endeavors (I say “most” to be open-minded), and I knew I couldn’t possibly be dressed that quickly, my other assistant and I made the daring decision to check the regular bus schedule and join the masses. After settling into my tiny little space, praying for safety in the sea of butts and backpacks, I was off to meet the day.

Then, the driver said loudly: “Is the wheelchair ready?” Hm. Last time I checked, the wheelchair is not able to answer any questions. I’m not ashamed of my wheelchair, and I don’t have a problem acknowledging it, but I don’t appreciate my entire identity being swallowed up by it, as if an empty wheelchair is riding the bus, ready for a successful day. The image is amusing — my wheelchair motoring through town independently. The way the driver objectified me made me feel as though my wheelchair goes out by itself and picks me up at daycare after work. I’m still cracking myself up picturing it rolling through the door and saying, “Honey, I’m home!”

All jokes aside, I am still a person, and even though I have a wheelchair, the fact that there is a person in it should not be forgotten. It seems everyday speech has allowed for my humanity to evaporate into the metal and plastic and overpriced neoprene on which I sit. Words lead to actions, and based on this woman's words, I am just a wheelchair.

My wheelchair is very much part of who I am, but it is not *me*; it is just the way I get around. If this were truly a way to talk about people, then maybe next time I should address her by saying, "Hey legs!" in a loud voice and assume she will answer.

I've never been a fan of the colorful, often cheesy posters beckoning people to "SEE ME, NOT THE WHEELCHAIR." While I don't want my personhood to disappear into the wheelchair, I don't think my wheelchair should have to be treated as invisible, either. Acting like my wheelchair has to go away for me to earn my personhood triggers the hilarious image of people putting on some kind of new-age goggles that make me appear as though I'm sitting on thin air. At worst, it triggers the thought that others don't see "wheelchair" and "person" as compatible. If you can only see me as a person when you don't see the wheelchair, it implies that the presence of the wheelchair negates the ability to treat its occupant as a human being.

My wheelchair is my constant companion, and rather than calling me "a wheelchair" or willing the chair away to see me, I challenge you to see me *and* the wheelchair, and — at the same time — see someone who is moving along in the world, looking for the same opportunities so many people take for granted.

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