

INDEPENDENCE DAY

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all [people] are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

On July 4, 1776, the Declaration of Independence led to the birth of our nation. Of the 1,321 words in the Declaration, the 35 words above represent not only an extraordinary philosophy, but also the foundation for our daily lives.

Throughout our history, however, these precious words haven't applied to all Americans. In response, people of color, women, and others have worked to ensure these words *did* apply to them, which has helped our society move closer to the goals of our Founding Fathers. But are these words relevant in the lives of people with disabilities?

In your mind, is it SELF-EVIDENT that people with disabilities are CREATED EQUAL? According to history books, our Founding Fathers included these words based on their belief in a “higher law” than the law of man-made government. Or do we consider them to be CREATED EQUAL only if and when they achieve an “able-bodied standard” and/or someone's definition of “normal”? That criterion isn't found in the Declaration of Independence, but it seems to be the driving force behind many of today's programs and services, as well as our personal attitudes and actions.

If we *do* believe that people who happen to have disabilities are, indeed, CREATED EQUAL, why do they live unequal lives, physically separated and socially isolated in the segregated settings of public schools and in congregate living and work settings?

As a society, do we truly believe people with disabilities are ENDOWED BY THEIR CREATOR WITH CERTAIN UNALIENABLE RIGHTS...[TO] LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS? If so, why are so many children and adults with disabilities denied opportunities to lead the LIFE of their dreams, included in

their schools, communities, and workplaces? Why are they denied the LIBERTY to make their own decisions, to freely associate with others, and enjoy the ordinary opportunities for personal freedom most Americans take for granted? And why are they not allowed THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS? Why is the American Dream an empty promise for so many people with disabilities? Why are their hopes dismissed as “unrealistic”?

Many believed our Founding Fathers were *unrealistic* when they attempted to free themselves from the shackles of an oppressive King in England. But their determination and belief in the rightness of their cause, coupled with the support of others who shared their beliefs, led to the birth of a new nation.

Isn't it time for Independence Day to have meaning for the millions of adults and children with disabilities in our country? Perhaps it will when we follow in the footsteps of our forefathers. We can take active steps to *believe* all people with disabilities are CREATED EQUAL, and *take actions* to ensure they enjoy their UNALIENABLE RIGHTS to LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS. We can also support their determination to live the lives of their dreams, instead of trying to change them to fit the so-called norm.

Unlike our forefathers, we don't need to go to war to make changes. We can, instead, free people with disabilities from the invisible shackles that bind them, by creating a gentle revolution with our words, attitudes, and actions. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all [people] are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” Isn't it time for these words to apply to the lives of *all* Americans?