

# Tiny Tim Redux

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It's that time of year. Leaving aside the contrived frenzy to spend, spend, spend, this is a traditional time for giving thanks and sharing, a time of reflection and appreciation.

But I feel conflicted.

Several years ago, I wrote a column for the season entitled "I hate Tiny Tim." I wrote that Dickens' Tiny Tim "helps shape some of society's most cherished attitudes – charity and pity for poor little Tiny Tim and people like him." Tiny Tim, plucky, sweet and inspirational, tugs at the public heart. He has become Disabled Everyone in popular culture. He is Jerry's Kids. He is me.

Society idealizes this sentimental image of disability as a pitiful child in desperate need of help. People feel better when they give a few bucks or a little toy for a kid with a disability.

The problem is: not all people with disabilities are children, but we all tend to be treated as if we are.

When I'm in stores and malls this time of year, I get a lot of smiles meant for Tiny Tim. How do I know? Well, I am a middle-aged and balding adult in a power wheelchair and people, mostly women, flash those smiles at me.

Not the kind of smiles most men would hope for from a woman, nor the neutral courtesy smile exchanged by strangers passing on the sidewalk, but that particular precious smile that mixes compassion, condescension and pity. It's withering to the person on the receiving end.

But, I would not say that I "hate" such occurrences now. Perhaps I have matured.

The "smiles" still happen and there is no question, though, that they constitute a strong challenge to my sense of self. But these days, when I look at my reflection in the morning mirror, I think about who I really am, and I confess. I tell myself: "I'm so beautiful!"

And it's true.

Sure. I'm as flawed as the next person, but still I have a load of positives. Not only have I survived as a person with a significant disability, but I have thrived. Pushed and encouraged by people who believed in me, I worked hard to get an advanced education.

I wheeled myself into a career in the newspaper business, a career in which I succeeded and which I loved. I'm also a husband, a friend, a colleague, a responsible voting-taxpaying-citizen who tries to volunteer for public service.

Sure, having a disability is an important – and sometimes difficult – part of my life, but it is only a part. Often it is humbling. But it should never be humiliating.

I have a great ability to adapt and solve problems, and that is far more meaningful. I embraced and joined the emerging disability rights movement, forging strong, enduring relationships with others.

And as a result of that work, I have influenced a wide range of non-disabled people and the community in which I live.

I am not a person who needs to be taken care of by others. And, I am not totally independent, either. I am interdependent, receiving and giving through a myriad of relationships. Just like everybody.

So as I encounter those stinging smiles and looks this year, I will remind myself that I am not just a "Tiny Tim." I am not diminished by disability. I am a whole person, and I am filled with appreciation for all that I am. I give thanks for all the relationships with people who make my life so chaotically rich and fulfilling.

God bless them everyone.

*Bill Stothers is a long time editor and consultant on media and disability policy. He edited Mainstream, a national advocacy and lifestyle magazine for people with disabilities and major newspapers in Toronto and San Diego. He is a member of the Board of Directors of Post-Polio Health International and currently serves as its Chair.*

Source: Post-Polio Health International ([www.post-polio.org](http://www.post-polio.org))