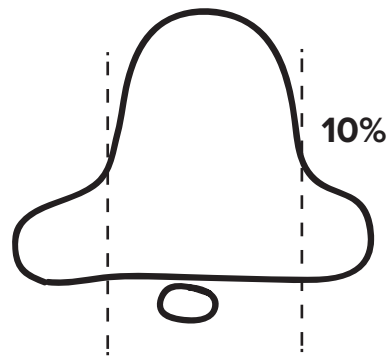




The second reason we need to stand up against society's system and have a Dignity Revolution is because what society says we have to have, or be, or do to feel good isn't fair. I've tried to draw a bell for you. Note I said, "Tried." I never got an A in art; I never got a B in art; I never even got a C or D in art class. You might need to use your imagination, but let's say my drawing of this bell represents society. Just like society itself, this bell isn't perfect. Imagine there is a section of this bell representing 10 percent of society. Some people in society's system call this portion gifted.



If a guy is seven feet tall in America, you assume he might be gifted at basketball, right? During training, the coach tells him, "See the basket? See the ball? Put the ball in the basket." So, the guy dribbles the ball downcourt, jumps, makes a slam-dunk and everyone cheers. I'm not sure why people get so excited about it, though. The guy is so tall he could probably slam-dunk the ball without jumping at all.

When I was in high school, a lot of people said I was gifted at football. The coach would say to me, "Hey, Bob, see the guy with the ball?"

"Yeah," I'd reply.

"He's the quarterback."

"Oh," I'd say.

The coach continued, "See the guy in the other color?"

"Color? Uh-huh," I'd reply.

"You need to stop him."

So, I asked the coach how and he responded, "Stand in his way. It's called blocking."

"Oh, okay." Actually, I was pretty good at blocking.

Am I cutting down sports? No. If you are gifted in those areas, live it out to your full potential, drug- and alcohol-free. What I am asking, though, is this: Is a guy gifted just because he's seven feet tall, or am I gifted because I'm seven feet wide? Perhaps not, and it's unfair to make those assumptions.

The reason I don't think it's fair is because the system bases giftedness on the externals, a bunch of what I call the "P's" of society:

Physical appearance – what you look like

Performance – how well you do or how successful you are

Possessions – the clothes you wear, the car you drive, or the house you own

Popularity – how many friends you have

Pleasure – doing what you want, when you want, because it feels good

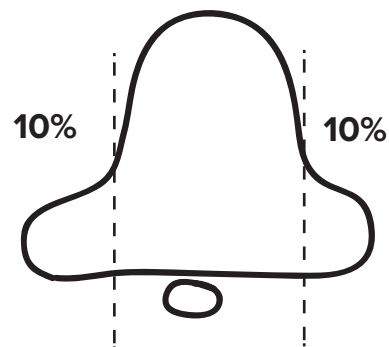
Prestige – how recognized or respected you are

Power – how much influence you have over others

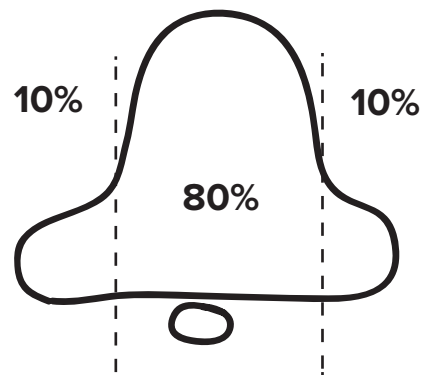
No matter which school I visit, I inevitably see a certain group of guys huddled together, leaning against their lockers in the hallway checking out the girls and making rude comments. I used to think it was just guys discriminating against girls, but I've been on enough campuses to see how the girls respond when a cute guy walks by. Girls just do it a bit differently.

Making comments like these is not fair, and the reason it's not fair is because it's still basing the other person's value on the externals, the outside. A system like this bases identity only on what you have, what you look like and what you can do.

If 10 percent is somehow deemed more important because of their giftedness, then I propose there is another 10 percent of society just as unique, just as human, just as important. Society sometimes calls them handicapped, mentally-challenged or special-needs persons.



That leaves 80 percent who are average or normal, a bad word nowadays.



Society's system was demonstrated to me on a plane returning from a speaking engagement. As I walked onto the plane, to my left I saw the cockpit where the pilot would sit. When I turned the corner to my right, near the front of the plane I saw these large seats that looked like recliners. Yes, I thought, finally a seat that fits.

The seat wasn't for me, however. It was for someone who "possessed" something I didn't: lots of money. The seat was for a little lady with a briefcase. She sat down, with enough room for two more of her. It was the first-class section, made up of a small percentage of the seats on the plane. I had to go to the back of the plane where the majority of the travelers had to sit: second class. Of course, they didn't call it that. It wouldn't sell if they did. They called it coach class.

I got to my seat and thought, "Do they seriously expect me to fit into that?" As I slid into the small seat you could almost hear the squeaking sound of my body squeezing into position. If you think getting in was difficult, you should have seen me trying to get out. A crowbar would have helped, but they wouldn't allow one on the plane.

There was another 10 percent on the plane that day: luggage. The airline didn't handle it with much care. They mostly just threw the luggage into the baggage area. Passengers used to be able to bring along a free bag, but now most airlines charge for luggage. If you check in late, or use carry-on luggage to avoid an extra charge, and if the carry-on is too big or weighs too much, it might have to be moved to the baggage area of the plane, holding up the flight. The excess baggage is a problem that needs to be eliminated.

Like society's system, the airlines consider some people who have the right stuff to be worthy of special treatment: first class. The majority of passengers are just average, run-of-the-mill travelers: coach. What about luggage, the stuff that doesn't quite fit in with the other passengers? Well, it is just considered baggage that is thrown out of sight, out of mind. Or worse, some believe we should eliminate the excess baggage altogether.

In some ways I think society's system works the same way. Some people may be considered gifted because they have a good body, nice hair, a clear complexion, good grades, or are good in sports. Those are all good things, and I'm not saying we shouldn't pursue them. But what happens if, for some reason, you don't have those qualities? Or worse yet, what if you don't even fit into the average category? What then? Does that mean you're just luggage and if there isn't room, you should be eliminated? I don't think so. Any system that says some people are gifted and other people are just "luggage" to be eliminated is a system I don't believe is fair.

I have a friend who would fall into this category. Not only is she a friend, but she's my sister. My sister's name is Lois and she has special needs. She is mentally challenged. If you say, "Shut up," in my house, you'll hear Lois respond, "Oh, that's not nice." She's so innocent. She's so awesome. As I shared embarrassing moments before, I failed to mention one involving Lois. You'll soon understand why I hesitated to share it.

Like many small towns, in my hometown, the private and public middle schools came together to form one school for high school. As a freshman, I was with a new group of guys trying to make new friends, and I invited them to our family's cottage. We were all having a great time together water skiing and swimming.

After the water activities, we gathered around the picnic table to play cards. All of a sudden, I noticed Lois coming toward us from the cottage. My friends had never met her and she was doing something embarrassing to me. I tried to get her to stop by holding up my hand, but she couldn't see me. Her handicap has severely affected her eyesight that glasses cannot correct. So, she kept walking toward us.

What embarrassed me was what she was wearing over the top of her head, nose and mouth. It was an athletic supporter. There I was with my new friends trying to fit in, when Lois came walking up with it stretched over her face like a mask you'd see worn in an operating room. Panic gripped me. If that wasn't bad enough, Lois said, "You guys wanna play doctor?"

I cringed and braced for my friends' reactions. They weren't sure how to react, whether to laugh or not. One of them asked, "Bob, who is this?"

I'm ashamed to tell you I didn't stand up for my sister. I struggled with my own identity and wanted to fit in so badly. "I don't know," I said. "It must be some neighbor girl my mom is taking care of."

I denied she was my own sister. I made believe I didn't know her. I didn't have enough guts to stand up against the system. I didn't have enough guts to stand up for the dignity, worth, and beauty of my own flesh and blood. I thought the approval of my friends was life to me. I'll never forget the guilt and emotional turmoil I felt by denying my relationship with my own sister.

Never again will I deny Lois the dignity she deserves. That's why I speak, and that's why I'm writing this book. Every person has value. No one deserves to be bullied, harassed, put down, mocked, or made to feel alone or worthless. And no one deserves to feel abandoned, invisible, or rejected like I rejected my sister that day.

If you're not willing to stand up against the system, would you please tell my sister she's not valuable or gifted? Would somebody please have enough courage to say, "Lois, I'm sorry, you don't have what it takes. Lois, you don't have a nice body, a clear complexion, or nice hair. Lois, you're not very intelligent and you'll never go to college. You'll never have a boyfriend, never drive a car, and you'll never own a home. Lois, you're just not valuable."

Would you say, "Lois, I hate to tell you this, but not only are you not gifted, you're not even normal. According to society's system for determining self-worth, you're nothing but luggage. Lois, if we get too much luggage, if we get too many handicapped people in society, it's going to drain us financially and become a burden. You know what happens to excess luggage, don't you? We'll simply have to eliminate some. We'll just call it mercy-killing, because what kind of an identity can a retarded person have anyway?"

Sounds harsh, doesn't it? Obviously, this is not meant to be taken literally, but to make a point. Who would ever say such a thing? I love the campaigns to get rid of the "R" word. But believe it or not, as I've traveled around the world I've actually met people who have said they would say these words to Lois. Some have joked, but others have said with complete sincerity, "I'll tell her because it's true."

It seems hard to believe anyone being so cruel, but it's more common than we'd like to admit. This kind of societal system and belief has been demonstrated in other ways throughout history. This type of societal system is unacceptable and unfair, and I fear if the system isn't reversed through a Dignity Revolution, it may continue.

Excerpt from *Dignity Revolution: Standing Up for the Value of Every Person* (Lenz 21).