

# **I Identify as Blind**

**The Power, Ingenuity, and Resilience of Disability Culture**

**By Lachi**

Represented by  
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# Overview

First, let's address the elephant in the room. *I Identify as Blind* is NOT a disability advocacy book, because I'm not a disability advocate. And while I have nothing but love and respect for leaders like Emily Ladau and Tiffany Yu, who *are* disability advocates, I'm not here to drive in their lane. I'm a recording artist, an entertainer, a personality, and a provocateur. I've met with President Joe Biden sporting a cane decked in red, white and blue rhinestones, walked the *Barbie* movie premiere red carpet serving Blind Barbie eleganza, taken my music and message on tour globally, and worked with giants like Meta and Google on accessibility campaigns. Essentially, I use my platforms in music, storytelling and fashion to amplify Disability Culture and identity pride.

A disability advocate might take the stage wearing a tailored pantsuit to deliver an uplifting keynote intended to energize people with disabilities. But me, I strut to the podium or piano in a couture dress, glammed makeup and a blinged-out cane, and perform songs or tell raunchy jokes like, "I'm not special needs, but I've GOT special needs in the bedroom" or "Cane versus baby stroller? Cane wins." I'm not a motivational speaker or an educator. I'm here to challenge preconceptions, open eyes, and give everyone a great time feeling uncomfortable. Imagine learning about Black history from Kendrick Lamar and you've got it.

That's important, because *I Identify As Blind* is as unique as I am. I wrote it to boldly redefine what it means to have a disability, to identify proudly with the riskiest parts of yourself and to wake the entire world up to the truth: Disability is an identity, a cultural force, and a reservoir of innovation, resilience, and badassery. While I'm at it, I'll also provoke some folks to introspect on their own identities—sexual, racial, ethnic, religious—and see themselves with fresh eyes. Because I'm not just blind. I'm also Black, queer, a woman, and a child of immigrants. Yes, these intersections compound the risks in navigating a society not built for these identities to thrive, but also compounds the richness of the reward.

*I Identify As Blind* celebrates the disability identity within pop culture through my own experiences and the stories and perspectives of other disabled cultural icons, and explores how to engage us in this new Cultural Model narrative.

Now, let's talk about the reason I needed to write this book, and write it now. I don't think there has ever been a time when humanity has confronted the commandment "adapt or die" with greater urgency. Climate change. Pandemics. The rise of nationalism. Economic inequality. AI. Our governments, businesses, universities, and communities have to find a way to evolve and survive together without losing our compassion and collective humanity. Who better to guide humanity on how to adapt and thrive than people for whom adaptation is our operating system? For whom creative problem solving and perseverance in the face of ignorance and apathy are default settings?

I know all too well how our culture encourages society to fear disability while encouraging disabled and neurodivergent individuals to hide our true selves behind a wall of shame for everyone's comfort. Juan who uses a wheelchair is not ashamed of his chair; if he's ashamed at all, it's because of the shame society places on him. But you know what's *really* a shame? All that our culture misses out on by "othering" disabled people, who by nature have the hacks, resilience, ingenuity, grit, patience, and compassion that, if taken seriously, could guide our society into being so much better than it currently is.

Despite being the rebellious daughter in a family of traditionalists, I was told to walk the straight path, play it safe, and not stand out. So I got a day job working with the Army Corps of Engineers. But while I excelled at the job, I was sacrificing my true self—my true voice—to fly below the radar. I let internalized shame and learned fears dictate my decisions. I experienced abuse and discrimination due to my race and disability, taking it all on the chin. The moment I quit to pursue my lifelong passion for music, my life began.

As I started to share my truth and speak out for creative artists with disabilities, guess what happened? I sparked positive change: I successfully convinced the Grammys to provide accessibility measures for their awards ceremony; I met with President Biden and discussed Blindness Awareness Month at the White House; and founded RAMPD

(Recording Artists and Music Professionals with Disabilities), a new disability advocacy network for music industry professionals. That right there is the flip—and the reason I’m writing this book. I had an epiphany:

*It was my shame that was debilitating, not my blindness.*

*Once I replaced shame with purpose, I was empowered to use my disability experience to better society.*

I know that I and my fellow disabled folk are neither saints nor charity cases. We are not diversity hires, and we’re not burdens. We’re entrepreneurs, artists, bankers, bartenders and athletes who have sex, make babies, argue about politics, drink and watch trash TV like anyone else. We’re complete people.

*I Identify as Blind* is a shameless, over-the-top, feel-good, hilarious, and game-changing manifesto to help readers—disabled and nondisabled alike—invoke new rules on engaging with disability culture. I’ve written this book to show the world that disability is an identity, a part of who we are, an asset, and a well of culture. Disability identity means having a positive sense of self and a connection to, or solidarity with, the disabled community. The concept for the book springs from a statement I used in an interview once. I said, “I identify as blind” . . . and the comments exploded with angry statements along the lines of, “Being blind is NOT an identity! It’s a condition!” When I created the #IIdentifyasBlind hashtag, I got a similar response.

But these people were entirely missing the point. “I identify as blind” means that rather than define my disability medically and try to downplay or overcome it (or deny it), I celebrate and lean into it as a linchpin of who I am, what I’m becoming, and what I can be. Disability Identity isn’t code for “looking on the bright side” or pretending disability is something other than what it is. It’s accepting and embracing the truth that while disability may have taken some things from us, it has given in equal measure—and sometimes, in greater measure. People with disabilities feel obligated to apologize for insisting on accessibility, shamed for circumstances beyond our control. But Disability

Identity says, *Do not apologize for who you are and what you deserve.* We take pride in who and what we are and stand as one not only with the disability community, but alongside those without disabilities as well.

In *I Identify as Blind*, I'll present a new blueprint for tapping into the reservoir of culture, pride, ingenuity, creativity, resilience and power that makes people with disabilities transformational assets in a fast-changing world. We live in a world not built for us, so we have to be strong, driven, persistent, perceptive, and unstoppable just to get through any given day. Imagine if we were given the tools to thrive by a culture that valued us as role models, resources, innovators, and warriors. A world where Disability Culture is treated with dignity and respect will be a world where ingenuity replaces fear and humanity replaces divisiveness.

*I Identify as Blind* sets a new narrative for building that world, full of wit and anecdotal grit, meant to provoke and entertain. By sharing my own memories, and stories of overcoming racism, sexism, ableism, and the toxic intersection of all three, as well as interviews with some of the most powerful personalities in the disability community (including deafblind lawyer Haben Girma, Wesley Hamilton of "Disabled...But Not Really," bestselling author Emily Ladau, and James LeBrecht, director of the acclaimed documentary *Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution*, and many others), I'll light the path forward and demonstrate why no one should ever overlook or underestimate people with disabilities again. And when our culture understands all the wisdom the disability experience has to offer, together we can create a more innovative, inclusive, and compassionate world.

## About the Author



**Lachi** (She/Her Black Woman Cornrows) is a blind award-winning creative artist, actress, and personality whose works have debuted on national charts, amassed millions of streams, and found placements in TV, radio, and film. When she isn't in the studio or performing on tour, Lachi is a ferocious and increasingly high-profile advocate for Disability Culture, inclusion, and accessibility in the music industry.

Lachi is also Founder and President of RAMPD (Recording Artists and Music Professionals with Disabilities), a global network of music professionals advocating for disability inclusion in the music industry. RAMPD has received national recognition in *Billboard*, the *New York Times*, the *Hollywood Reporter*, the BBC, the Ford Foundation and more for its work partnering on accessibility and inclusion with Netflix and the GRAMMYs telecast among others. Lachi splits her time serving on the GRAMMYs Board as New York Chapter Governor and DEI Ambassador, and advising on the

National Independent Venue Association and Songwriters of North America DEI Committees.

Lachi received the 2023 Lead On Award from Access Living Chicago, a Nightlife United Social Justice Award by the NYC Mayor's Office, was named a top 30 Disability Impact leader by Diversability, honored in the *100 Women to Know* power list by JPMorgan and KNOW Women, and named a 2023 Leading Woman by AdAge. She's held discussions with the White House, the United Nations, Amazon, Target, NBC/Universal, SONY Pictures, Google, The National Endowment of the Arts, major record labels, music production houses, and nonprofits about how to promote inclusion in the intersectional space where disability meets racial, ethnic, gender, or sexual identity.

From hosting a PBS' *American Masters* segment, to performing at the Kennedy and Lincoln Centers, to appearing in national ads promoting accessibility, to voicing the Audio Description on Netflix's Kanye West documentary, Lachi uses her creative talents to amplify intersectionality and Disability Culture. Named a "dedicated foot soldier for disability pride" by *Forbes*, she has also been featured in *Essence*, *the LA Times*, Yahoo Life, and *American Songwriter* among others for her work bringing Disability Culture into the pop narrative, and for her brand of fashionable, upbeat, and unapologetic disability pride. She lives in New York.

**Tim Vandehey** (He/Him) is an award-winning, *New York Times* bestselling ghostwriter and co-author who has written more than 65 nonfiction books in such genres as business, finance, sports, relationships, parenting, self-improvement, and memoir. His bestsellers include *The Wait: A Powerful Practice for Finding the Love of Your Life and the Life You Love* (with Devon Franklin & Meagan Good); *The Hollywood Commandments: A Spiritual Guide to Secular Success* (with DeVon Franklin); and *The Big Long: How Going Big on an Outrageous Idea Transformed the Real Estate Industry* (with Colin Wiel and Doug Brien). Tim is also the co-author of the 2023 release *Swipe: The Science Behind Why We Don't Finish What We Start*. He lives in Kansas City, Missouri.



# Marketing & Promotion

I will leverage my impressive social media following, press contacts, influencers, and speaking appearances and performances to spread the word about my book.

## Social Media

I have a consistent and popular presence on all social media platforms.

- Spotify: 100,000 monthly listeners
- Twitter: 32.5K
- Instagram: 83K
- Facebook: 19K
- TikTok: 15K
- LinkedIn: 4.2K

Leading up to publication, I will implement two strategic hashtag campaigns to promote pre-sales:

1. “What do you identify as? (#IidentifyAs).” When I made the statement that “I identify as blind,” the response was intense and polarizing. I want to capture that energy and turn it into a movement.
2. “Access: We’re Done Asking Nicely”—I want to invite all of social media to create a symbol (like the disabled wheelchair symbol) that represents the demand of people with disabilities that we receive full access to all that businesses, cities, universities, entertainment, etc. have to offer without restriction. Hopefully, thousands of people will create candidate symbols and I will reveal the winner on the day the book debuts.

## Press

I'm currently under contract with The Syndicate for national PR representation (thesyn.com) and expect to remain under contract with them through the book's release. I have already garnered a great deal of regular national press coverage, including:

- ***The Hollywood Reporter***, How the Recording Academy, RAMPD Expanded Accessibility and Disability Inclusion for the Grammys' L.A. Return; <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/music-news/grammys-2023-recording-academy-accessibility-disability-inclusion-1235314953/>
- ***Forbes***, "7 Blind Women of Colour Blazing a Trail," October 2022; [www.forbes.com/sites/keelycatwells/2022/10/21/7-blind-women-of-colour-blazing-a-trail/?sh=185369b37cc0](http://www.forbes.com/sites/keelycatwells/2022/10/21/7-blind-women-of-colour-blazing-a-trail/?sh=185369b37cc0)
- ***Los Angeles Times***, "Explaining Hollywood: How to become a composer for film and TV," November 2022; [www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2022-11-08/explaining-hollywood-how-to-become-a-composer-for-film-and-tv](http://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2022-11-08/explaining-hollywood-how-to-become-a-composer-for-film-and-tv)
- ***BBC***, "Lachi: The visually impaired musician changing disability culture," July 2022; <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0cflxwj>
- Teen Vogue, "Grammys 2023 Red Carpet Fashion: All the Celebrity Outfits & Looks," February 2023; <https://www.teenvogue.com/gallery/grammys-2023-red-carpet-fashion-looks>
- ***Forbes***, "How The Grammys Got Accessibility Right, And What They Could Have Done Better – An Interview With Lachi," April 2022; [www.forbes.com/sites/keelycatwells/2022/04/07/compliance-is-bare-minimum-what-the-grammys-could-have-done-betteran-interview-with-lachi](http://www.forbes.com/sites/keelycatwells/2022/04/07/compliance-is-bare-minimum-what-the-grammys-could-have-done-betteran-interview-with-lachi)
- ***Shoutout LA***, "Meet Lachi | Recording Artist & Founder/President of RAMPD," August 2022; <https://shoutoutla.com/meet-lachi-recording-artist-founder-president-of-rampd/>

- *Essence*, “This Black, Blind Musician Left Her Corporate Job When She Uncovered Inequity. Here’s Why She Wants More Women To Speak Up For Themselves,” July 2021; [www.essence.com/news/money-career/lachi-wants-more-women-to-speak-up-for-themselves-workplace/](http://www.essence.com/news/money-career/lachi-wants-more-women-to-speak-up-for-themselves-workplace/)
- *UKF*, “We Need to Talk About Lachi,” July 2022; [ukf.com/words/we-need-to-talk-about-lachi/34005](http://ukf.com/words/we-need-to-talk-about-lachi/34005)
- *New York Times*, “A New Coalition Amplifies Disability Culture in the Music Industry,” January 2022; [www.nytimes.com/2022/01/20/arts/music/rampd-disability-culture-music-industry.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/20/arts/music/rampd-disability-culture-music-industry.html)
- *Billboard*, “Music Professionals With Disabilities Have New Champion in Advocacy Organization RAMPD,” January 2022, [www.billboard.com/business/business-news/rampd-music-disability-advocacy-launch-1235021234/](http://www.billboard.com/business/business-news/rampd-music-disability-advocacy-launch-1235021234/)
- *Variety*, “Divinity Roxx, Lachi, More Win at Wavy Awards for ‘Historically Excluded Talent’,” October 2021; [variety.com/2021/music/news/divinity-roxx-lachi-wavy-awards-historically-excluded-talent-1235097033/](http://variety.com/2021/music/news/divinity-roxx-lachi-wavy-awards-historically-excluded-talent-1235097033/)
- *PBS*, “American Masters—Renegades Pilot: Kitty O’Neil,” July 2021; <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/renegades-pilot-kitty-oneil/18248/>

## **Awards**

- 2023 Adage Leading Women Honoree
- 2023 New York Carolina Club Honoree for Outstanding Contribution to the Arts
- 100 Women to KNOW Power List Honoree
- 2023 EDDIE Award for ‘Creative Entrepreneur’
- 2023 Music Business Association ‘Agent of Change’ Award (for RAMPD)
- 2022 Supporter of the Year by The Nora Project, promoting inclusive classrooms
- NYC Nightlife United award, Social Justice category, for founding RAMPD
- 2022 Diversability D30 Disability Impact List, Community Leadership

- 2022 UN Zero Project Award

## **Speaking & Appearances**

I'm a Recording Academy New York Chapter Board Governor, elected in 2022. So I have a platform to make myself heard, and I use it to—ahem, *assertively*—infiltrate pop culture with my message of inclusion, accessibility and Disability culture. As part of the push to make *Disability is an Identity* a success, I plan to step up both the frequency of my speaking and performing appearances and the intensity of their messaging, in keeping with my message that “we’re done asking nicely” about bringing creators and artists with disabilities into the mainstream.

I enjoy consistent engagements for music and/or disability/DEI audiences. Often, these are corporate events or disability community events, as well as events related to the Grammys. I’m represented by Collective Speakers, and my speaking topics include:

- Disability Culture 101
- Beyond Compliance: Practices to Incorporate Belonging
- Defining Disability Identity
- Infiltrating Pop Culture with Disability Narratives
- Disability & Intersectional Communities
- A Day In The Life
- What the Heck is Self Description

## **Recent Appearances**

- 11/8/21: Folk Alliance Festival—spoke on a Fireside Chat, November 8, 2021: <https://folk.org/fai-joins-disability-culture-online-fireside-chat/>
- 12/2/21: The Kennedy Center—I appeared on the Millennium Stage: <https://www.kennedy-center.org/whats-on/millennium-stage/2021/december/lachi/>

- 3/22: SXSW—Performed an acoustic set and spoke on a panel discussing access: <https://schedule.sxsw.com/2022/events/MS54178>
- 6/18/22: Lincoln Center—I gave a keynote on disability visibility and justice: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rg\\_whj0f1wM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rg_whj0f1wM)
- 7/11/22: National Independent Venue Association conference—spoke on panel “Achieving Equity through Programming”
- 9/17/22 —Art installation of music video “Bad Choices” at *Up Until Now* in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, featuring deaf, blind, and deafblind talent: [https://www.instagram.com/reel/CixxDw5JA\\_/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/reel/CixxDw5JA_/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PeaWG5c0Myo>
- 9/22 /22—Performance at the Bazelon Center’s 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary gala – <http://www.bazelon.org/get-involved-events/>
- 9/28/22—Invited to the White House to celebrate 32 years of the Americans With Disabilities Act with President Biden: [https://www.linkedin.com/posts/lachi\\_disability-whitehouse-presidentbiden-activity-6981243842456907776-by8W](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/lachi_disability-whitehouse-presidentbiden-activity-6981243842456907776-by8W)
- 10/6/22—Lead a Grammys District Advocacy Day summit with Congressman Jerry Nadler (D-NY): [https://www.linkedin.com/posts/lachi\\_disctrictadvocate-music-musicindustry-activity-6983887536855150592-SsBP](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/lachi_disctrictadvocate-music-musicindustry-activity-6983887536855150592-SsBP)
- 10/11/22—Appeared on the Disability Matters podcast with disability employment advocate Joyce Bender: <https://www.voiceamerica.com/episode/139699/lachi-recording-artist-and-disability-rights-advocate>
- 10/18/22—Reddit Ask Me Anything (AMA): [https://www.reddit.com/r/MakeupAddiction/comments/y7i2fs/my\\_so\\_is\\_blind\\_and\\_i\\_do\\_her\\_makeup\\_she\\_is\\_an/](https://www.reddit.com/r/MakeupAddiction/comments/y7i2fs/my_so_is_blind_and_i_do_her_makeup_she_is_an/)
- 10/19/22—Participated in an ADE (Amsterdam Dance Event) panel on inclusion and accessibility for people with disabilities: <https://www.amsterdam-dance-event.nl/en/program/2022/electronic-music-industry-the-vip-experience/1774191/>
- 10/21/22—My song “Go” remix released – <https://youtu.be/zvEv5R-FzwI>

- 10/25/22—Dance Concert at Central Pennsylvania’s Disability Pride Festival –  
<https://paddc.org/event/disability-pride-central-pa>
- 10/31/22—Keynote and performance at Amazon internal DEI event for more than 4,000 Amazon employees worldwide:  
[https://www.linkedin.com/posts/lachi\\_ndeam-4di-bodypositive-activity-6993354018315984896-b4rO](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/lachi_ndeam-4di-bodypositive-activity-6993354018315984896-b4rO)
- 11/4/22—Netflix x RAMPD composer symposium with more than 30 RAMPD professional members and Netflix decision makers, a collaborative effort to develop more disabled composers and songwriters for TV and film:  
[https://www.linkedin.com/posts/lachi\\_musicindustry-panel-roundtable-activity-6991514029148008448-zvih](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/lachi_musicindustry-panel-roundtable-activity-6991514029148008448-zvih)
- 11/11/22—Fireside chat at Google’s 9<sup>th</sup> Annual Accessibility and Disability Inclusion Week: <https://thevaluable500.com/member/google>
- 11/17/22—Keynote and performance at TD Bank’s annual disability summit, for about 20,000 TDBank employees worldwide:  
[https://www.linkedin.com/posts/lachi\\_disability-womenchangemakers-activity-6999113658098225153-wKSq](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/lachi_disability-womenchangemakers-activity-6999113658098225153-wKSq)
- 1/28/2023—Keynote at Youth Celebrate Diversity, for over 80 Colorado High schools: <https://ycdiversity.org/programs/ycd-colorado/colorado-youth-diversity-conference/>
- 2/5/2023—Interview on GRAMMYs Live Red Carpet, also aired on Entertainment Tonight and Billboard Music live streams –  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CoWdq5jgiwH/>
- 4/20/2023 - Keynote at CNBC Global Headquarters -  
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/lachi/recent-activity/all/>
- 5/17/2023 - DEI Workshop at GRAMMYs New York Chapter Open House -  
<https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7067204196827033601/>
- 6/12/2023 - American Association of Independent Music - Indie Week Summit - Inclusion panel - [https://www.instagram.com/p/CteyEgDvc\\_N/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CteyEgDvc_N/)

- Corporate keynotes, panels and programs on accessibility and disability identity, including:
  - Target
  - NBC/Universal
  - Amazon
  - Google
  - Netflix
  - Heinz.org
  - SONY Pictures
  - BMI
  - Adweek
  - National Endowment for the Arts

Find information about my speaking at <https://collectivespeakers.com/speakers/lachi>.

## **Influencers**

One of my major assets in getting the word out about *I Identify as Blind* (and the movement behind it) will be the influencers who have gotten behind my advocacy. These influencer contacts include:

- Disability activist influencers such as:
  - Haben Girma, Emily Ladau, Tatiana A Lee, Wawa Snipe, Joyce Bender, Leroy F Moore Jr., Andraea Lavant, Deigo Mariscal
- Influencers from the “identity pride” community:
  - RJ Mitte – (from *Breaking Bad*)
  - Kiera Allen – (*Run*, on Hulu)
  - Jim LaBrecht (Director of *Crip Camp*)
  - Cat Cohen (comedian)

- Raven (*The Circle*, on Netflix)
- Yvie Oddly (drag star)
- Nicholas McCarthy (renowned pianist)
- Mandy Harvey (deaf singer)
- Social media influencers such as:
  - Crutches & Spice, Sinead Burke, Two Blind Brothers, Lucy Edwards, Danielle Perez, Tiffany Yu, Keely Cat Wells
- Political connections such as:
  - Day Al Muhammad (The White House), Michael Schweinsburg (The 504 Democratic Club), The New York City Mayor's office
- Music industry board members and leadership from organizations such as:
  - The Recording Academy, BMI, SONY Pictures Entertainment, Netflix TV Music, Folk Alliance, Women In Music, Music Managers Forum

## **Organizational Allies**

Another crucial part of book promotion will be mobilizing my many organizational allies to put their messaging muscle behind the project. I currently have close relationships with a broad range of organizations, most notably in the disability advocacy space. They include:

- **Disability:IN**—Works with 400+ companies to achieve disability inclusion and equality, including 3M, Adobe, Amazon, Best Buy, ESPN, Gap, Google, Intel, Marriott, Pfizer, Sony, and Starbucks.
- **The Grammys/ Recording Academy**—Professional organization with more than 15,000 members.
- **Women In Music**—Women in Music is a 501(c) 3 non-profit organization committed to advancing equality, visibility and opportunities for women in the Music Industry

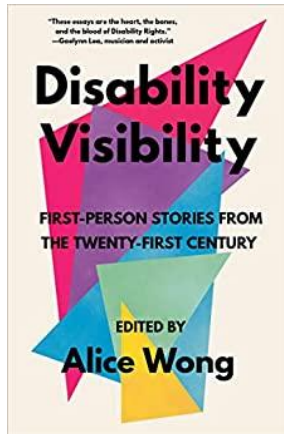


- **RAMPD**—A global network of professional Recording Artists and Music Professionals with Disabilities amplifying disability culture and inclusion in the music industry.
- **CTalent/Whalar**—Talent agency for disabled talent.
- **The Nora Project**—Nonprofit promoting disability inclusion in classrooms.
- **Access Living**—Nonprofit amplifying independent living in Chicago and surrounding areas
- **Art Beyond Sight**—Nonprofit that works to bring art to those with all kinds of disabilities.
- **2Gether International**—Supports high-growth, high-impact startups led by people with disabilities.
- **Respectability**—RespectAbility is a nonprofit working to make media, politics and the workplace more inclusive of people with disabilities.
- **Reelabilities**—ReelAbilities is an Oscars-reporting international Film Festival celebrating disability in front of and behind the camera.
- **Cerebral Palsy Foundation**—The Cerebral Palsy Foundation is dedicated to transforming lives for people with cerebral palsy today through research, innovation, and collaboration.
- **Remarkable**—Incubation and investment in high-impact disabled-led startups.

## **F. Email**

I have a list with 4K dedicated newsletter recipients that goes out 1-2 times per month with an open rate of 28-35%.

## Comparable Titles



*Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century*

Edited by Alice Wong

Knopf Doubleday, 2020

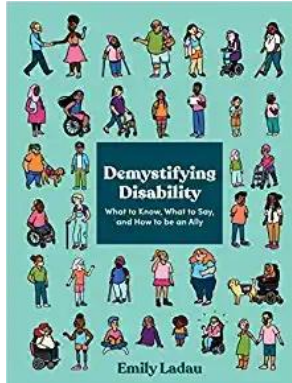
**#49 on the ABA IndieBound Paperback Nonfiction list.**

Disability rights activist Alice Wong brings tough conversations to the forefront of society with this anthology. It sheds light on the experience of life as an individual with disabilities, as told by various authors with these life experiences. Some disabilities are visible, others less obvious, but all are underrepresented in media and popular culture. Alice brings together essays, blog posts, manifestos, eulogies, Congressional testimonies and more to give readers a glimpse into the complexity of the disabled experience, highlighting the passions, talents, and everyday lives of our community.

### **How *I Identify as Blind* builds on this book**

My book is not an anthology. While Alice drew a picture of a broad community in all its depth, I've taken the next step: giving the wider world an instruction manual for *connecting with* and *working with* that community on its terms, not ableist terms. *I Identify as Blind* is confrontational, combative, uncompromising. It says, "These are the

new rules and realities, and if you want our help in saving this world, you'll make every effort to abide by them.”



***Demystifying Disability: What to Know, What to Say, and How to Be an Ally***

**Emily Ladau**

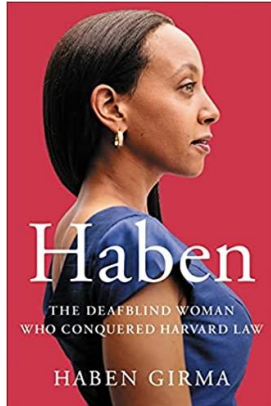
**Ten Speed Press, 2021**

**#44 on the ABA IndieBound Paperback Nonfiction list**

Emily’s book (yes, I know her, too) is an indispensable guide to how to think, talk, and ask about disability, and how to treat people with disabilities like human beings without succumbing to ableism. It is basically “how to be an ally 101” and has resonated with readers hungry for this guidance.

***How I Identify as Blind* builds on this book**

*I Identify as Blind* makes a wonderful complement to Emily’s book. While her book focuses largely on behavior, language, and how to be an ally, my book goes to the next level, presenting a no-holds-barred manifesto about why disability is an identity, the ways people with disabilities are just like everyone else in many ways, and the qualities of adaptability, resilience and innovation that make us extraordinary.



### ***Haben: The Deafblind Woman Who Conquered Harvard Law***

**Haben Girma**

**Twelve (Hachette), 2019**

**#24 on the Publishers Weekly Hardcover Nonfiction list**

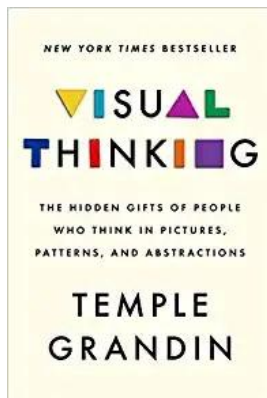
An Eritrean girl is born with limited hearing and vision and is told both senses will only worsen until she is both deaf and blind. Hopeless, right? Not for Haben, whom I know. Her book is an extraordinary chronicle of the ingenuity and determination that is possible when disabled people refuse to let themselves be victims of ableism. “Society frames people with disabilities as incapable of contributing,” she tells readers.

According to Haben, a disability is not a barrier. As an adult she developed a text-to-braille communication system to connect the blind. Well before that, at her high school, Skyline, she decides to be a part of “BuildOn,” a school club that sends students to Africa to build schools. It was hard work, but she found she could do it, whether she was building a latrine using a pickaxe, helping to build a schoolhouse in Mali, West Africa, or graduating from Harvard Law School and counseling president Obama.

#### ***How I Identify as Blind* builds on this book**

Haben’s story is one of personal triumph and an illustration of the problems with society’s definition of disability. While my book features much of my personal biography and highlights the trials I have overcome (trials that every person with a disability can relate to), *I Identify as Blind* is not a memoir; it is a manifesto; a Declaration of Independence but also of *interdependence*. We need each other, people with disabilities

and people without, I argue. This book is an instruction manual for understanding the vital role people with disabilities play in a fast-changing world and the assets we bring to the table, as well as a playbook for anyone looking for recognition and acceptance of their own unique identity.



***Visual Thinking: The Hidden Gifts of People Who Think in Pictures, Patterns, and Abstractions***

**Temple Grandin**

**Riverhead, 2022**

**#7 on the New York Times Hardcover Nonfiction list.**

Temple's book, like everything she does, is brilliant. But it's the tone that makes it extraordinary. It's celebratory! Her writing and ideas celebrate the cognitive differences of the neurodiverse, from synesthesia to high-speed mathematical processing to pattern recognition. We are all, she asserts, magical and gifted in our own ways. Her book is generous and detailed and hopeful.

***How I Identify as Blind* builds on this book**

My book is as generous, detailed, and hopeful while holding the non-disabled world to a higher standard. I pursue the same line of thinking that Temple does, only with a broader canvas, looking at the extraordinary accomplishments of people with sensory and mobility problems as well as the neurodivergent—as artists, musicians, political leaders, writers, inventors and so much more. That observation, that people with disabilities are

capable of wonders, springboards to the heart of my book and will draw in the same readers who love Temple's work.

At the same time, warm feels aren't the *raison d'être* of *I Identity As Blind*. My book is also about confronting the shame that many people with disabilities are made to feel, as well as the existential fear we provoke in so many able-bodied individuals. At its core are powerful, universal questions: "What is identity? What does it mean to belong to a culture? Can we overcome fear and prejudice to see each other as equals?"

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# Annotated Chapter Outline

## **Introduction: I Identify as Blind**

“You’re either blind or not blind. You can’t *identify* as blind.” Welp, I do. Disability Identity means holding a positive sense of self, and feelings of connection to, or solidarity with, the disability community. Claiming a disabled identity is different than just “having” a disability.

The Introduction tracks the origin of this potent and controversial phrase and sets up the book: A manifesto for understanding and engaging with the lived experience of disability intended to promote interdependence. The goal is to shake both groups awake: people without disabilities who think disability isn’t relevant to their futures, and people with disabilities who labor under a burden of shame and isolation. For both, the truth is both more complex and more promising.

## **One: Shame Is No Longer on the Menu**

Everyone has a limitation or something that makes them different. Yet in my experience, no other marginalized group of people is made to feel shame at the affront of its own existence like people with disabilities are. It’s the weight of this societal shame, not our physical or sensory limitations, that crushes us and makes us feel like we don’t belong.

For example, think of assistive devices. For disabled people, these tools help us get around safely, live independently, and generally participate in society. They are simply a part of us. Why, then, are wheelchairs, canes, or hearing aids often perceived as markers for “does not belong” or “less than”? It’s literally the opposite! Disabled people don’t automatically feel shame about the aids that help us engage with life on a daily basis (would someone feel shame for needing a hammer to nail a nail into a wall? No! It’s just a tool); society’s interpretation of these devices is what breeds the shame. That’s messed up. My cane isn’t a symbol of anything for me—it’s a tool I use to navigate my world and, when properly blinged-out, a fashion accessory.



For years, I couldn't figure out why we're expected to feel ashamed of who and what we are. But finally, I understand. When people without disabilities see us, they know instinctively that *we represent their possible future*. Their *likely* future. And they feel the guilt that comes with knowing that they, along with the rest of society, are doing very little to help that likely future. Whether age forces you into a wheelchair or chips away at your ability to see or hear clearly, or brain trauma challenges your ability to think, disability is in the cards for most of us.

In some people, that existential anxiety provokes fear, anger, and aggression. The target? The disabled person who triggers those feelings—or, more likely, all disabled people. Some of those without disabilities shame us, infantilize us, diminish us, or lash out against us—anything to quell their anxieties at our presence, and the larger culture often does the same.

This critical opening chapter lays bare the actual source of the shame that plagues people with disabilities, helps nondisabled folks face the root of the shame they may be projecting on others, and prescribes the cure for both.

## **Two: Most Blind People Can See**

Disability is a *spectrum*. Within disability is a vast, diverse catalog of realities—deafness, blindness, mobility issues, chronic illness, neurodiversity, learning and brain trauma, rare diseases, limb differences and more. Unlike many people believe, disabled people do not all care about the same things, face the same challenges, or advocate for the same causes. We're not monolithic.

This chapter aims to awaken the reader about the spectrum and breadth of what it means to be disabled. Even within each disability category, there is a spectrum:

- Blindness: Totally blind, low partial, high partial, legally blind, low-vision (fun fact: most blind people can see!)

- Deaf: Deaf, profoundly deaf, deafblind, unilaterally deaf (single-sided deafness)...also, most deaf people can hear!
- Mobility: paraplegic, quadriplegic, wheelchair users, ambulatory wheelchair users
- Neurodivergent: Autistic, Asperger's, Attention Deficit

Each way of being disabled has its own spectrum, culture, traditions, histories and ways of being human. One thing we all have in common? Society making assumptions about our disability (if she doesn't have a white cane, clearly she can see just fine; if he stands up out of his wheelchair for a few minutes, it's a MIRACLE!). This chapter breaks the stereotype that ANY disability is one-size-fits-all. Once we understand this, we can meet each individual exactly where they are and bring curiosity, expansion, and nuance to our understanding of the disability experience.

### **Three: We're Not the Problem, We're the Solution**

Why is increasing accessibility seen as a chore or a burden rather than a solution? Why do we get mired in policy, red tape, and the ADA, when accessibility should be the baseline? What many people fail to understand is that accessibility isn't about individual accommodations. It's not "special treatment." It's about planning and building spaces, technology, workplaces, and programs that are easier to access for *everyone*.

Accessibility promotes community and interdependence, which are never bad things. For example, the technology to recognize and respond to voice commands was originally developed to allow blind people to have the same access to computers that other people had. But today, even if you don't have a disability, when you say, "Siri, what's the weather forecast?" you're relying on this same technology to make your day a little easier. We'll talk to Adam Cheyer, the engineer who developed the prototype for Siri, about what his invention has meant to people with and without disabilities.

Making the world more accessible for people with disabilities **doesn't take anything away from people without disabilities**. Accessibility includes everyone.

Also, it's just the smart thing to do. A person might not be disabled now, but if they live to their eighties, there's a good chance they will join the community. Just like folks transition from baby to teenager to adult, folks also transition from sighted to blind, hearing to not, or ambulatory to mobility chair because of things like age, illness, or accident. Making the world more accessible for everyone just makes sense.

Embracing accessibility as an asset instead of being forced to deal with it as a tiresome obligation also gives businesses a competitive edge. Companies who include disability as part of their hiring strategy have a 72% higher productivity rate, and a higher employee retention rate.

Too many organizations do not amplify Disability Culture in their DEI efforts, don't recruit us or promote an accommodating environment for us—and boy, are they missing out! In this chapter, I'll relate some of my own experiences with accessibility, interview *Queer Eye* star, fitness guru and founder of “Disabled But Not Really” Wesley Hamilton, who has become an outspoken critic of the lack of accessibility in places like hotels, and also talk with Jenny Lay-Flurrie, Chief Accessibility Officer for Microsoft, about how accessibility can be an advantage for companies of any size.

#### **Four: Just Say the Damn Word!**

Oh my goodness, do people have a problem with the “D-word.” As uncomfortable as some white people get when trying to choose between Black, African-American, or “person of color,” watching anyone talk *around* the word disabled is even more grueling, and we as a disability community are pretty much over it.

Don't be afraid to say the word! We know what we are! We people with disabilities do not have the same capacity for sensory perception, movement, brain function and the like, and guess what? It's okay. Seriously! Our disabilities don't make us less than people without disabilities, but some seem to think the word “disability” automatically means “lesser.” But avoiding the word is just a form of erasure. It's the

pervasive fear of saying it, of using euphemisms—"handi-capable" (gag) or "differently-abled" (please)—that keep us from discussing real ableist issues.

Refusing to talk about disability openly also encourages "inspiration porn." We become living feel-good stories instead of complex human beings with inner lives. But a disabled person isn't a hero just for leaving the house. My disability is not a superpower; it's a natural human trait. Don't get me wrong—I know I'm amazing. But that's not because I'm "overcoming the challenge" of disability. It's because I'm ME. My disability is just one part of me, like the color of my hair or the sound of my voice. What we want is dignity, autonomy, privacy, independence, and interdependence. We don't actually give a damn about inspiring anyone!

Also, 75% of non-visible disabilities are not disclosed, so not only may that awesome hard-working woman two desks down be part of the community, but you may be too. By failing to engage in open, unselfconscious dialogue about disability, we not only send the message that visible disability is shameful but that people who haven't disclosed should "stay in the closet" instead of living their truth and owning who they are without fear.

In this chapter, I'll talk to Namel Norris, rapper with 4WheelCity, who became a wheelchair user after a gunshot and tours the country advocating for gun reform at his concerts. I'll also share some of my own stories dealing with euphemisms for "disabled" and lay down the new rules for language around disability.

## **Five: We Are Innovators By Instinct**

Every day, disabled people play the game on "hard." Every day we face hurdles just getting to school or work; innovation, adaptation, and resilience are woven into nearly everything we do. In one example, two secret lovers in 19th-century Italy, the sighted Pellegrino Turri and the blind Countess Carolina Fantoni da Fivizzano, struggled to find a way to send each other love letters in that pre-Braille age. Their solution was to create one of the first typewriters, which allowed the countess to touch type without sight and to

read Turri's typed messages by feeling the letters imprinted in the paper. In another, Vint Cerf, one of the fathers of the Internet, helped develop the first commercial email service because he was hearing impaired and had trouble communicating by phone.

We're innovators because we have to be! Innovation is in our DNA. As a result, we have evolved resourcefulness and strengths that make us powerful contributors and community members—yet this power goes largely untapped by society.

At a time when change is constant and disruptive—climate change, pandemics, toxic nationalism, war, the perils of artificial intelligence—the world needs what Disability Culture brings to the table. Historically, those born different from the pack were the ones who escaped predation and extinction-level calamity and drove the species forward. Whose side do you want to be on? Normal guy, or escape extinction-level calamity guy?

Take my own story of the morning I woke up truly blind for the first time, and how I navigated the streets of Manhattan alone in order to get help. I had no choice but to think on my feet and use the resources I had available to me—people I knew hung out in certain parts of the city, police officers, store clerks—to build an on-the-fly web of assistance to help me navigate a real-time crisis. Multiply that ingenuity by tens of millions and you'll grasp the innovative potential of the disabled community.

## **Six: Disability Means Sex & Drugs & Rock & Roll**

There's this perception that people with disabilities are like China dolls or like the elves from *The Lord of the Rings*: sexless, passionless, with no earthly desires. This is obviously not true. I can tell you from a lifetime of experience that Disability Culture is dripping with as much lust, sensuality, thirst for pleasure, and penchant for escapism as much as any other culture. We love sex (once, after hearing that people with disabilities don't enjoy sex, I told an audience, "If disabled people don't love sex, I must not be disabled!"), even if some of our disabilities might make *having* sex look different than

what you'd expect. We also love good food, good wine, fine fabrics (God knows I do), travel, and all manner of luxuries and hedonism.

Apurupa Vatsalya is a neurodivergent, “neuroqueer” certified sexuality educator who focuses on making information about sex accessible and intersectional. As she explains, “Sensory issues may result in a person being averse to things that trigger their senses, such as light, sound, touch, taste, or smell. These can make sexual experiences challenging for them.” Vatsalya also writes a lot about masturbation—a LOT. She’s one of the leading voices in helping the world recognize that people with disabilities crave pleasure just as much as anyone else.

This also means that people with disabilities are an overlooked category of consumers: *we want to be marketed to!* We’re sick of being an afterthought in consumer culture. When was the last time you saw a hot girl using a wheelchair in a beer commercial, or a hot blind guy modeling fashion in a magazine? Market to us, manipulate us into buying luxury goods we don’t need! Invite us to the cool consumer party!

In this chapter, we’ll explore why disability has been rendered invisible to Madison Avenue and Wall Street; talk with Victoria Petrock, an analyst who specializes in marketing to the disabled and the economic potential of the community; look at some attempts to market to people with disabilities by brands like Marriott and the blowback they’ve generated; and assess the massive economic impact of people with disabilities (Hint: it’s \$21 billion in annual discretionary income, just in the U.S.).

One condition if you want to tap some of that untapped wealth: Work with us to make your products accessible. I’m talking sex toys for women with mobility differences, wine labels designed for low vision (so I can feel snooty just like anyone else), and so on. It’s time to integrate disability into the hedonistic play date. We have billions to spend!

## **Seven: Meet Us at the Intersection**

Intersectionality is the acknowledgement that everyone has their own unique experiences of discrimination and oppression and we must consider everything and anything that can marginalize people – gender, race, class, sexual orientation. This is already a complex idea, and even more so when you throw disability into the mix.

Disability is unique in that it can intersect with ANY other identity at ANY time. And one's experience of disability is shaped by the rest of their identity—gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status and so on—with each of these uniquely impacting a disabled individual's lived experiences, access to spaces, relationship to isolation, and vulnerability to discrimination and prejudice. A cisgender white man with a prosthetic limb has a completely different life experience than a queer Black woman with a prosthetic limb. While they both might need assistance getting up the steps to enter the party, it's far less likely the queer Black female will have gotten an invite.

Honoring disability as a rich identity and gaining understanding of how it intersects with a person's other identities will breed interdependence within the disability community and beyond.

I'm intersectionality personified. I'm a woman. I'm blind. I'm a child of Nigerian immigrants. My sexual identity is also quite fluid. In this important chapter, I'll talk about some of my own experiences with the reality of intersectional bigotry—specifically, the discrimination and harassment I endured while working for the Army Corps of Engineers. Yes, before I was a loud, proud glam queen I was a desk jockey! Actually, I loved it, but I was mistreated because of my race, my gender, and my visual impairment until I was forced to resign. Truly, intersectional bigotry at its finest.

For this chapter, I will speak with Columbia University professor Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, American civil rights advocate and a leading scholar of critical race theory who first coined the term *intersectionality* in 1989. More importantly, I will explore the question of how we are—whether we have a disability or not—recognizing

and honoring Intersecting Identities in our daily lives. In our words, our actions, and how we show up, how can we properly value the true lived experience of the people around us whose intersections may be vastly different than ours, even if we share the same disability?

## **Eight: We Will Have Disability Justice**

*Ableism* refers to bias, prejudice, and discrimination against people with disabilities. It hinges on the idea that people with disabilities have lesser intrinsic value than people without disabilities. As you might expect, this belief has a powerful impact on how fair and just our society is, both to people with disabilities and those without.

The idea of *disability justice* was introduced in 2005 by the Disability Justice Collective. People think disability justice means being inclusive, or disability rights, or accessibility. *No*. Disability justice has a distinct definition. Disability justice is a movement that scrutinizes ableism as the root of other forms of oppression, including oppression based on race, class, and gender.

In disability justice, disability is not considered to be defined in “white terms, or male terms, or straight terms.” The movement holds the position that ableism makes other forms of prejudice possible and that systems of oppression are intertwined. Ableism compels people to think of all types of physical or mental differences—which could include anything from skin color to being transgender to having a chronic illness—as making a person “less than,” and therefore less worthy of equal opportunity...even disposable.

In this chapter, I explain the true meaning of disability justice. I’ll talk about my own quest for justice, honor justice advocates who’ve left us like Judy Heumann and Stacey Park Milbern, and talk to pioneers of the concept like Patty Berne and Mia Min’us. I’ll interview one of my heroes: Haben Girma, human rights lawyer and the first deafblind person to graduate from Harvard Law School. We’ll go deep about ableism, disability justice, “trauma porn,” disability law, allyship, and the power of community.



Most importantly, I'll make the case why justice for people with disabilities should be given equal weight to justice for people of color, women, LGBTQ individuals, or any other group.

### **Nine: Nothing Without Us**

Disability has a vast culture, with a rich history and talented pioneers and artists. So why then are so many of our stories told and represented by nondisabled writers, journalists, and Hollywood power players? Until very recently it was nearly impossible to find a blind character played by a blind actor. This is not only unbalanced representation and inauthentic—it's erasure. Only 3.1% of lead roles are disabled characters, and only about 10% of those are cast with an actor with a disability.

We'd run director Blake Edwards out of town today for his offensive Asian character played by Mickey Rooney in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Should we hold performers like Daniel Day-Lewis, who played disabled artist Christy Brown in *My Left Foot*, or the directors of *Rain Man*, who cast Dustin Hoffman instead of an actor on the autism spectrum, accountable for "cripping up?" I argue that we should. For every Marlee Matlin playing a deaf pollster on *The West Wing* or deaf actress Lauren Ridloff playing a superhero in Marvel's *The Eternals*, there are a hundred disabled roles that go to nondisabled actors who portray disability tropes, NOT disabled reality.

True, accurate, authentic stories depicting disability need to be highlighted in media, TV, film, books and music, and we should be the ones to write, tell and portray them. We need to see more disabled characters naturally integrated into storytelling. Because we are an important part of society, even if it doesn't always feel that way.

And beyond the lead roles, disabled people should be behind the camera, below the line, in the sound studio, running the studio, negotiating the book, film, and record deals, and signing the checks. I'll speak about my own experience in the music industry and talk to disabled journalist Serge Kovalski—who has arthrogryposis, a congenital condition affecting the joints, and was famously mocked by Donald Trump in 2016—and

actor, writer, and activist Ryan O’Connell, who is gay and has cerebral palsy, about their experiences in media and entertainment and how things need to change.

### **Ten: With a Little Help From My Friends**

Living with a disability in an ableist world is enough of a challenge. We don’t need sabotage within the disabled community, making things even harder. We have enough obstacles and systemic silos already. Despite this, I’ve seen and experienced a shocking amount of *scarcity thinking* within the disability community. Whenever someone tries to rise above or step out to chase success, they’re accused of betraying some unwritten code that says, “There’s a limited amount of success available to us, and you’re hogging it!” But where is it written that people with disabilities are condemned to linger in the shadows, grasping for the few opportunities that pop up?

It’s not written anywhere. We can be our own worst enemies, crabs dragging down the braver crabs who try to climb out of the bucket. Or we can help each other climb. There are as many opportunities as there are ideas, and it all starts with an abundance mindset. An abundance mindset opens up our doors to each other, allowing us to compound our ingenuity, problem solving skills, and creativity. We must come together as a community to force change through our will, our charisma, our persistence, our language, and by provocations like this book.

In addition, we must form alliances with people without disabilities—alliances based on respect, equity, love, and the acknowledgement that we really are all in this together. Accessibility for some is accessibility for all. Disability justice fosters greater diversity, tolerance, and understanding. When we unite, we can solve problems affecting everyone and become a more compassionate society in the bargain.

This final chapter focuses on interdependence. I’ll call out disability culprits who have set up shop in the bucket of crabs, talk about the damage we do to ourselves, lay down the law about the specific changes we must make within our own community if the

culture is to transform the way we need it to, and talk about how the nondisabled community can become part of the solution.

# Sample Material

## **Four: We Are Innovators by Instinct**

*People with disabilities as the next stage in evolution?*

*When it comes to innovation, resourcefulness, resilience, and adaptability, hell yes.*

The rejection letter from NYU Steinhardt wasn't going to keep me from going to NYU Steinhardt. I signed up for a non-matriculating class, packed my bags, and moved to New York City anyway...because, of course I would.

But (and this will come as a surprise to exactly no one who wasn't me at the time) New York City is not North Carolina. The pace was over-the-top. Everyone spoke fast. Everyone moved fast. There didn't seem to be an "Off" switch. Everyone constantly screamed, shoved and honked at one another—not because they were rude, I think, but to be heard over the combined noise of traffic, construction, and a million other bombastic conversations taking place at the same time. I had no frame of reference, and no one to show me the ropes. Contrary to some portrayals, New York didn't seem hostile or malevolent, just indifferent, with a slight preference towards chaos. If I was going to make it here, I was going to have to figure out how on my own, and fast.

Acclimating to the train systems would take me a while. If you're new to the New York City subways and can't see the maps or signage, things can get overwhelming. Every day, I woke up to numerous problems to be solved, with no assistance, in a new environment. I suspect, like some sort of anti-Grinch, that my brain grew three sizes in those first years from heavy use.

But I'm not unique. Every day, people with disabilities do precisely what I did: innovate and problem solve to get by in a world tailored for those with unimpaired mobility and the full array of senses. We improvise ways—often on the fly—to discern the content of signs, board trains, manage a treadmill or bench press rack at the gym, and do all the things that people without disabilities take for granted. Our improvisational game should leave the cast of *Who's Line Is It Anyway?* in awe.

I encountered plenty of colorful experiences in learning to navigate the Big Apple. One particular one stands out. When coming home from my evening class at NYU, I would take a late night "R" train. If you're not an expert on the city's subways, this is the line running from Forest Hills in Queens to Bay Ridge in Brooklyn. I got on the train at 8th street, ready for the half hour or so ride back to my Queens apartment. Sitting on the quiet train, I held my iPhone very close to my face—touching my nose really—which was what I had to do to read any of my MP3 titles. This was when the iPhone first came out, so we didn't yet have these behemoth phones that Jack and Rose would have both fit on when the *Titanic* went down. I scrolled through my favorite downloads thinking, *How much smaller can these letters even get? Can people with good eyes actually read this?*

At some point, the pressure shifted and I noticed a man standing, holding onto the pole right in front of me. I waited a beat before peering up for a second and realized that the train car was relatively empty around us, so why couldn't this guy find somewhere else to stand? Yes, cynical dear reader, you're way ahead of me. I focused my blurred vision on this man, and studied him until my brain filled in that he had his penis out—and it was just inches from my face!

The true horror of realization did not hit me until I looked down and saw flecks of something on my jeans. My eyes must have gone about a foot wide because while I was still frozen in shock, the man turned on his heel and darted away.

What should I have done? Ring the bell? Find a transit cop and tell him that some strange dude just exposed himself in my face? After the petrification of indecision let up, I simply rose from my seat and got off at the subsequent stop. In that moment, all the hustling commuters, their children, the street vendors, the cars on the road, they all

seemed to run at a heightened frame-rate, fast-forwarding around me as I slowly pulled myself to take steps, breathe, and reorient my violated pride. I was stunned into a sort of passivity. I had been sexually assaulted.

But this was the old Lachi. I didn't yet have the fire to go after the guy, and make it my week's mission to completely burn his next six months to ten years, which I would have done today, without hesitation. A couple of years ago, some random jerk swatted me on the butt while I was walking down by Penn Station. I turned around, caught up to him, jumped on his back and beat him repeatedly with the sharp end of my purse buckle, so much so that he was easily the victim in that situation. I wasn't that Lachi, not yet.

But on that dreary "R" train night, I just went home. Oh, and it was Valentine's Day. Happy Valentine's Day to me! I told no one of my experience, not even my partner Arthur, but took the rest of the semester off to thicken up my skin. If I was going to learn to manage life in New York, especially as a blind Black woman, I had to do it myself. I had to be resilient, because what other choice did I have?

### **Thou Shalt Not Curl Into a Ball on the Floor**

In *The Oxford Handbook of Rehabilitation Psychology*, University of Sydney Medical School professor Ashley Craig defines resilience for people with disabilities as "a process involving a person maintaining stable psychological, social, and physical functioning when adjusting to the effects of a physical disability and subsequent impairment." That sounds about right. While there have been peer-reviewed studies showing that people with disabilities who have higher levels of resistance enjoy a better quality of life, the halls of academia aren't exactly buzzing with researchers looking to find out if being disabled makes you more resilient. So you'll mostly have to trust my experience and the experiences of the disabled people I know.

The simple fact is that for people with disabilities, having anything more than a stunted life confined to our safe, cloistered spaces and assistive devices means we *have* to

be resourceful. Society gives us few options. Writing in *Forbes*, disabled writer Andrew Pulrang nails this reality:

*Disabled resilience is real. But it's also widely misunderstood. People tend to assume that the most significant hardships we endure are our actual disabilities — physical, sensory, intellectual, or mental. Disabilities can be hard to live with in and of themselves. But it's the way we are treated by others — the social aspects of being disabled — that tend to be the most consistently and deeply wearing... Our resilience is by far the most sorely tested not by being disabled, but by ableism — in the form of persistent inaccessibility, denial of accommodations, discrimination, inequality, and for some, abuse. The word "resilience" suggests enduring hardships that are unavoidable and nobody's fault. For much of what disabled people "suffer," that's not the case.*

There has been some research into the value of adapting for the mental health of people with disabilities. One study from 2004 looked at middle-aged and older adults who had suffered a loss of vision, and it found that disabled people with strong *accommodative coping*—a stress-management strategy in which a person adjusts his or her preferences and thinking to the constraints of the situation at hand—had better mental health, especially when it came to depression. But I think some of the best evidence for the resilience of people with disabilities comes from the most traumatic event of recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic.

It shouldn't be surprising that as difficult as it was for non-disabled people to endure the world going into hibernation for eighteen months, it was even more gut-wrenching for disabled people. We were already isolated from society because of our differences, yet there we were, trapped in our apartments and houses, unable to enjoy even the most basic social exchange with co-workers or classmates, or even grocery store cashiers and waiters. Plus, even before COVID, students with disabilities already faced

severe inequities in the American educational system—lack of accommodation, presumptions that they were somehow “damaged,” low levels of recruitment for post-college jobs, and of course, the ignorance of the working world. Enforced solitude just added insult to injury.

But a study from the University of Kansas found that when faced with the inequities of remote education, disabled students relied on their own strengths, resilience and self-determination more than the average student. That’s gratifying, but also surprising, because people with disabilities depend on the sensory cues that are abundant in a classroom environment, cues that probably don’t even show up on the radar of students without disabilities.

Imagine that you’re a blind or deaf student in a crowded classroom, trying to take in the day’s lesson. You’re getting information from an array of sources that are both nontraditional and unintentional: crosstalk from other students, notes from a friend who sits next to you, equations drawn on a white board, and on and on. Now, imagine that ripped away and being stuck in your fourth-floor walk-up, just you, your beagle, your houseplants, and endless group Zoom calls and Slack chats. That rich pool of sensory data is history. Or suppose you use a wheelchair. On campus, you spent some of your time getting from class to class, interacting with people you knew and getting exercise. Now you sit, in one spot, all day. That’s a recipe for social and emotional atrophy.

That’s why it’s such an eye-opener that students with disabilities handled remote learning with more aplomb than their non-disabled counterparts. But it’s true. KU researchers asked more than twenty disabled students ranging from age 11-17 about how they coped with school and social environments during the pandemic. Well, the disabled students kicked ass. They admitted that they experienced difficulties with remote learning, quarantining and social distancing, and missed in-person social interactions with teachers and classmates, but they also talked about how they drew on their personal resilience and self-determination to navigate those challenges.

Of course they did! People with disabilities are accustomed to being self-reliant and adapting to adverse environments, so the students quickly made the physical and



behavioral changes they needed to succeed. They found ways to stay in contact with their teachers to ask questions, get technical support and complete assignments. They found ways to interact with their peers through things like social media and video chats. The researchers reported that the disabled students also seemed more self-aware and more willing to talk with their teachers about their individual learning needs. That's amazing, especially when you compare it to all the grim stats we've been hearing about increased depression and anxiety in school-age kids in general since the pandemic.

The irony is that many students and professionals with disabilities had been asking for years for remote work and school accommodations, insisting that people with disabilities would be more productive, not less, if they weren't forced to endure arduous daily commutes made worse by hit-or-miss accessibility. Those pleas fell on deaf ears, no pun intended. It took a global pandemic that affected the non-disabled for us to finally be heard. Guess what? Businesses kept doing business and high schools kept graduating seniors, despite the disruption of holding meetings and classes on Zoom. Now, remote work is just as valued as in-person work, and the way we work has been changed forever...just as we knew it would. We've always been innovators.

When a situation goes south, people with disabilities are quicker to make mental adjustments, problem solve, and adapt to the new reality than the non-disabled—*because we have no choice*. Our disabilities give us a daily mandate:

*Thou shalt accept adversity as it's happening and adapt to it.*

Having a disability in an ableist world is like driving on a dangerous, narrow highway in a remote country; we have no margin for error. Steer too far left and it's a thousand-foot drop into poverty and self-pity; steer too far right and you trigger a rockslide of discrimination. That tends to keep us pretty focused. We can't afford to panic or go all deer-in-the-headlights when faced with a challenge. We also can't afford to rage against the machine or shake our fists at every thoughtless jerk who failed to put a ramp

at the entrance to our bank. We have to figure it out and keep moving or we won't make it to work or class.

## **We Don't Just Endure, We Innovate**

But what makes people with disabilities unique isn't just our ability to withstand adversity. That's nothing to make light of, and I'm grateful for it, but it also implies, just a little, that we're the victims of forces beyond our control, and baby, we're nobody's victims. Because if there's one thing people with disabilities are brilliant at, it's innovating—both in the moment, and over years of planning, design, and development.

Do you enjoy audiobooks? Thank blind people. They were introduced in the 1930s as Talking Books, an alternative for people who couldn't read Braille. As Dr. Joshua Miele, Ph.D, a blind adaptive technology designer and winner of a 2021 MacArthur “genius” grant, says, “Disability drives innovation. It's undeniable.” Miele's work is all about creating effective, affordable solutions to everyday problems blind people face, particularly when it comes to accessing digital information.

For example, tactile maps—maps that can be read by touch—are difficult to find, especially when more and more signage is displayed on flat-panel LCD screens. Miele developed a software called Tactile Maps Automated Production (TMAP) which generates tactile street maps of any location that can be printed with at-home Braille embossers. He wasn't done, either. He designed a set of tactile maps for every station of San Francisco area's Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) rail system, even making it compatible with an audio smart pen, allowing blind travelers to virtually explore and plan their route through the BART system.

Accessibility is Miele's crusade. His YouDescribe platform combines crowd-sourced audio descriptions of YouTube videos with an interface that synchronizes the descriptive audio with the video source to give people with visual impairments access to video content. In his current work at Amazon, one of his many projects is a “Show and Tell” feature on camera-enabled Alexa devices that can identify pantry and food items.

If people with disabilities had our own country, the phrase “Necessity is the mother of invention” would be on our money. We’re innovative because we have to be. What a sighted person or a person with complete mobility can do without thinking about it—walk into a kitchen pantry, flip on the light, locate something on a high shelf, reach up, grab it, and walk out—is an ordeal for many of us. Just getting that box of ramen or that can of black beans takes planning and engineering that would make the folks at the Jet Propulsion Labs blush. But we want to be able to navigate the day-to-day world with the same ease as people without disabilities do. We want to enjoy life, to savor it, without constant stress. We *deserve* that. We’re innovative because it’s the only chance we have to live better...and because nobody seems to be innovating on our behalf.

Imagine what we could do as a society if that adaptive, problem-solving mentality was applied to life on a daily basis, to serve everyone, not just people with disabilities. If we just brought the sense of urgency disabled people feel in finding solutions to our daily challenges to the world of technology, life-changing inventions could be prototyped, tested, and released to the public in one year, not ten. We would reallocate resources to solve real problems—education access, public safety, mental health—and improve people’s lives, instead of coming up with a new video game or the next Airbnb clone.

Innovating the way people with disabilities do would remove the complacency and self-congratulation and replace it with something a hundred times more powerful: Purpose. That would change...my God, it would change everything.

## **Rude Awakening**

Miele’s work is an example of disabled innovation and adaptation taking place over years. For the in-the-moment kind, go back with me to an otherwise ordinary morning in New York City.

You could say I’d had my classic introduction to New York with the man on the “R” train incident, but that was just the beginning. My real rude awakening came when I started looking for a job. While I’d made some strides in my music pursuits, I hadn’t built

up significant momentum quite yet; I was busy trying to figure out who I was and what I wanted from my life. In the meantime, I needed to eat and pay rent. So, job search.

Again, the bracing callousness of New York was like cold water in the face. Nobody's here to hold your hand. If you get your ass kicked, no one steps in to help you. But then, if you kick someone else's ass, no one butts in to stop you. It's a place where you have to grow up quickly—to accept that if you don't advocate for yourself, if you don't speak up and speak out, you'll be passed over for someone who will. Multiply that by ten hundred if you're female. Black. Blind.

My job search began at the Juan Valdez coffee shop on 57th Street not far from Central Park. (Juan Valdez was the fictional spokesperson for Colombian coffee back in the 2000s.) I went to the store, sat down for an interview and was upfront about my vision. I said, "I'm low vision, but it's no problem. I'd just need a little extra help." They sent me an email a few days later informing me that I didn't get the job, so I moved on. But Arthur told me months later that he'd found out from a friend who'd worked there, that the people who interviewed me didn't hire me due to my vision loss. This angered the hell out of me. That's a discrimination suit. Maybe if I hadn't disclosed my low vision (you're not legally required to tell an employer you have a disability), I could've landed that job. Eight dollars an hour was decent money back then. I learned my lesson: never again would I disclose my vision loss at a job interview.

Next came Jamba Juice. I didn't disclose and I got the job, and guess what? I couldn't see what the hell was going on! I only ended up working there for a week, because I couldn't see and I couldn't tell anybody that I couldn't see. Welcome to the rock and the hard place that people with disabilities face in the job market. We're often seen as either damaged goods or an extra expense because the employer will have to accommodate our disability. We're damned if we disclose and damned if we don't.

I wound up working for the old Borders bookstore chain which ended up going pretty decently. As a book shelper, I could hold the spines super close to figure out where everything went. And no, the irony of someone with low vision working in a bookstore was not lost on me.

Eventually, I went to work for the New York district of the Army Corps of Engineers. I really loved that job, but it provides a whole set of different lessons about operating in non-disabled culture with a disability, so I'll get into detail on that gig later. What matters right now is that in 2016, after I'd left the Corps, I went to sleep one night in my apartment in New York and woke up completely blind. It was as though I had opened my eyes deep underwater. I could perceive light and dark, but I couldn't make out anything else. I just lay there and thought, *Okay, alright, so this is it. I guess it's finally happening.*

It might sound unbelievable how relatively calm I was. Most people, if they woke up suddenly unable to see, would have a seismic panic attack. But I had never known a time when I didn't have issues with my vision. I was born with a condition called coloboma, which is caused by underdevelopment in the fetus. For me, that meant a lazy eye and poor vision, but not total vision loss—at least, not right away. The lazy eye was bad enough, because my younger self was picked on mercilessly in school for its polar deviations. Fortunately, I was able to have corrective surgery on my eye in my teens which made things better. But knowing my eyesight would gradually diminish over the years, I adapted along with it.

One example came when I was in fifth grade. I was one of the fastest runners in my school, and when we had a sports tournament, I was assigned to the track and field team. But the track was really complicated—it was almost a maze—with lots of zigzags and turns. When I got to the starting line, the adrenaline rush hit me, and when the starting gun went off—BAM! I was gone, way ahead of everybody. The trouble was, because of my vision loss, at every turn I had to slow down and let the runner behind me take the lead so I could follow her. Otherwise, I couldn't tell which way the track turned! Then, as soon as I knew where I was going, I would kick it back into high gear and soar past that girl back into first place. The trouble was, right at the end, the track made a weird turn, so I had to let the second-place runner pass me again, and there wasn't time to catch up. I had to settle for second place.

Instead of asking for an accommodation for my vision loss, I used this tactic throughout my brief but glorious track and field career, which often landed me in second place when I had the speed to take the gold. Today, if I were still competing, I would ask unapologetically, because today, I don't ever settle for second.

Around 2015, I was told that my vision diagnosis was worse than my doctors had thought when I was younger. Eventually, I would lose my vision completely. So I already knew what was coming, and I really was that matter-of-fact about it. As I've said, part of my thought was, *It's finally happening*. It was going to happen sometime. This was that sometime. Now I had to figure out what to do next.

I found my phone, called Arthur at work, and said something like, "Hey there, everything okay at work? Yeah, so I woke up blind. What should I do?" Those probably weren't the exact words I used, but whatever I said was going to be like something from an absurdist off-Broadway play, given the circumstances. Arthur, bless him, immediately took care of filling that all-important freak-out void, because he freaked the hell out in exactly the way you would expect. In fact, I had to calm *him* down. He told me to go immediately to the eye clinic down on 14th Street, and I laughed. We lived on 99th Street. I hung up. Nothing he could say was going to help at that moment.

Arthur was right. I needed medical attention. But how was I going to get from my apartment to the hospital? I had never used Uber, and now I couldn't even see to download the app. I didn't even have a cane back then. Somehow, I had to get down four floors to the street without breaking my neck, and then navigate eighty-five blocks of the biggest, baddest city in the world...blind. Though by now, I'd started building a solid career as a vocalist, I wasn't big, bad, fearless, say-anything Lachi yet. This moment was my origin story. That morning, when I woke up blind, was my radioactive spider bite.

### **Blind in Manhattan**

Time to get moving. Somehow, I made my way down my four flights of stairs and found myself outside on the street. In the daylight I could see a little better, like I was wearing blurry goggles. I could make out colors and moving shapes, but nothing more than that.

On the street, I was using a railing outside my building to go along, but I knew that was going to end eventually. So I started using my Manhattan know-how. I had lived in the city for eight years, and I knew the environment in detail. The playground to my left brought sounds of children and young mothers. There was always this group of Latino guys on the corner near my building who would whistle at any woman who walked by, expecting to be ignored. But that day one of the guys came on really strong, and he said to me, “Hey girl, where you going? Let me walk you. Can I get your number?”

No woman ever responds to this because it’s intrusive and creepy. But I had bigger fish to fry, so I said, “Yes, walk me to the bodega on the corner!” I’m sure this guy had no id, because no woman had ever said yes to his offer, but he did it. He walked me across the street to the corner store that I knew was right by the train station. As we walked, I made conversation, asking him what he did. He laughed and said, “I really just hang on that corner.”

We entered the store, and I asked the clerk for a kombucha. It was quite the time-consuming hassle figuring out which card was my debit card. Then my new friend walked me out of the bodega, and I talked to him about whatever I could think of so he’d open my kombucha. “You need to shake it,” he said, and proceeded to shake it fervently. He then handed it to me asking me for my number, and I gave him a series of ten random digits, which got rid of him. Thank you, sketchy escort!

I knew the direction of the train station, and I managed to get down the stairwell. The Metro card felt different from all my other cards, thinner. Now underground, I felt my way through the turnstile and onto the platform. The train approached, the doors opened, and I stepped in. I found a seat and sighed. Part One of Lachi’s Perilous Blind Journey was over.

Then I tried to open my fervently shaken kombucha. If you don’t drink kombucha, there’s a way you have to hold it—slightly sideways and lining up the bubbles—so that it doesn’t violently erupt and spurt everywhere. Because I wasn’t able to see, I yanked the lid with no measure of precision, and slimy tapioca projectile-vomited all over my white shirt. I was now wearing a thick green glob of kombucha from head to toe. As I sat there

stunned and thinking, *Welp, this may as well happen,* " this adorable little girl walked over with one thin napkin, handed it to me, and said, "Here you go, ma'am." I accepted the kind gesture with grace. There was nothing I could really do with it. This mess was way beyond the ability of one thin napkin to handle. I sat there, covered in green goo, looking like The Blob, as the train headed south. No one else on the train uttered a word. They were probably all thinking, *Boy, I'm glad that's not me.*

Thank God for the audio announcements of New York subway stops. It's how I knew I was at the 14th Street station. Dripping head to toe with kombucha, I got off the train, stood on the platform, and took a deep breath. Then reality set in. I'm blind. I looked ridiculous. I'm at an unfamiliar station. Time to raise my thin napkin in surrender and ask for help.

I found my way to a stairwell leading to the street. As soon as I became visible to the outside world, two transit workers came over and asked, "Is everything okay?" Well, shit, I'm not proud. I kept telling myself that eventually, I would get my sight back. That was why I was doing this, right? I would make it to the hospital and the doctors would help me and I would be able to see again. If I'm going to get to where I need to go, I'll need to use the tools around me, even if those tools are helpful transit workers. I told them what was happening, and I said, "Can you guys get me to the nearest Strawberry?"

Strawberry is a now-defunct, much lamented women's clothing store chain that used to be all over New York, and I knew there was a location near that train stop. These wonderful transit workers walked me to the store and dropped me off. I went in, and Strawberry employees came running over from all over the store—some to find out what was wrong, but most to keep me from going any further than the entrance, because I was dripping kombucha with every step. I was desperate to get out of my squishy, ruined clothing, so I picked the closest shirt off the rack, handed someone cash, said, "Keep the change," and proceeded to change clothes right there on the store floor in front of the large see-through doors. (Modesty is for sighted girls not covered head to waist in frothy green tea.)



Now I was rolling. Back outside, one of my transit workers, who'd stuck around to bear witness, hailed me a cab and the cabbie took me the last few blocks to the clinic. By this time, Arthur was on his lunch break, so he ran over to sit with me in the waiting room. I told him how I'd gotten there from the apartment, and after a few minutes, he calmed down enough to really take in the situation. He looked at the shirt I was wearing and asked, "If you couldn't see, how did you pick out the perfect shirt?" Apparently, the shirt read, "Even on my worst day, I'm still killing it." I think that was the universe telling me that starting today, I was gonna be a different kind of Lachi.

### **The Astronaut Effect**

So that's that story. The denouement is that when I finally saw the doctor, he told me that I had something called *keratoconus*, which is when your cornea — the clear, dome-shaped front of your eyeball — thins and starts to bulge outward into a cone shape. That causes blurred vision and sensitivity to light and glare. I also learned that I have this condition called corneal hydrops, which is a complication of keratoconus. Basically, it means your cornea takes on a football shape and eventually "pops." (I'll pause for a second here to let you be totally grossed out.) That was what happened to me that morning. My corneas had become football shaped and popped, and there was fluid all over my eyes, which was why I had felt like I was seeing underwater.

I got eye drops and medication, and slowly my cornea returned to its former shape. But this problem wasn't going away. It was part of my life now. The doctor told me that while the condition might not flare up like that again, slowly, eventually, my corneas would return to that shape and probably stay that way. That was when I started recognizing that one day in the future, there will come a time when I will have no vision at all. That's something I deal with every day.

Does my story of getting from 99th Street to 14th Street seem underwhelming? Were you expecting me to be dodging rogue taxicabs or running from street criminals, maybe solving a murder on the way? Sorry to disappoint you, but from my perspective

there was more than enough drama on that day. Even though I had experienced low vision for my entire life, that was the first time I had been unable to perceive *anything*—no faces, no letters, no signs, nothing. And I had awoken alone. As a Black woman. In New York City. You try it.

But the key part of that story isn't my odyssey through the streets of Midtown and Lower Manhattan; it's my mental and emotional state when I woke up and couldn't see. I was relatively nonplussed, reasonably chill. I had been dealing with the reality of limited vision since I was a child, and I knew my eyesight was likely to get worse, so this development wasn't all that surprising. If I had been a fully sighted person and awakened one morning out of the blue unable to see (sort of like the guy in the Franz Kafka story, only not a cockroach), I assure you I would have had the same reaction as anyone else: collapsing into a screaming, sobbing, hyperventilating lump on the floor.

The fact that I didn't is the linchpin of this chapter and this Rule. People with disabilities aren't necessarily fearless, and we're not all swaggering badasses. Remember, I was a very different Lachi back then, more passive and self-deprecating. What we are, out of pure necessity, is masters of the psychological process known as *habituation*—or, as I like to call it, the Astronaut Effect.

Let me break it down for you. When any one of us, disabled or otherwise, confronts a stressful situation or a crisis, stress hormones immediately flood our bodies, provoking our “fight, flight, or freeze” response. One of the many side effects of this is that our ability to think clearly and make rational decisions is impaired. Whether the crisis is a traffic stop, a raging fight with a significant other or a hurricane, the effect is the same: panic prevents us from doing what we need to adapt and survive. I'd also argue that this effect hits harder if you're someone who has a peaceful, uneventful, relatively easy life, because you're completely unprepared for the shock of something traumatic happening. Maybe that's why so many suburbanites say they're afraid to travel into the heart of the nearby big city, or why some people go back to the same vacation destination year after year: Even the prospect of dealing with the unexpected makes them uneasy.

But if you have a disability, every day comes with a fifty-fifty chance of the unexpected, from something as simple as a jerk without a placard taking the last handicapped parking space to something as dangerous as a live show with lighting effects that set off your photosensitive epilepsy. People with disabilities can face crisis situations in getting to work, safely navigating auditoriums and lecture halls, using ATMs...I could go on for pages. Not to mention we have to deal with stigma and stereotyping from the non-disabled world. We're *habituated* to stress and crisis.

The reason I call this the Astronaut Effect is that when some of the original Mercury and Apollo astronauts from the space program of the 1960s and 1970s were interviewed about their training, they said something that fascinates me. They said that because they had gone through so much training and so many simulations related to launching into space, dealing with G-forces, re-entry into the atmosphere and all that other "Right Stuff" stuff, the real thing was almost, well, mundane. *Mundane*. Sitting on top of a bomb, about to be catapulted off the Earth at about six thousand miles per hour, plunging back into the atmosphere as a human fireball...those things became mundane. That's intense.

But really, it's not. See, the astronauts were exposed to those high-stress conditions so often that they stopped reacting to them the way you and I would and stayed cool. They were able to make rational decisions and improvise if necessary. That's the same process that plays out in the life of a person with a disability. We face so many obstacles throughout our lives—most of them imposed on us by a non-disabled culture that would rather forget we exist and certainly doesn't want to pay to make life easier for us—that we regard our daily challenges—getting around a college or work campus in the snow and ice for a person with cerebral palsy, for example, or for a deaf person, attending a lecture that doesn't provide an American Sign Language interpreter—the same way you might regard your car being low on gas.

We just deal with it. We adapt. We find a way. We have to, because if we don't, we won't be able to earn a living, get a college degree, do the work of our choice, attend concerts and sporting events, travel...live our lives. People with disabilities are

resourceful, creative problem solvers by default, because years of repetition, of addressing the same accessibility problem or quashing the same thoughtless stereotype have conditioned us to shrug when we run into those situations again. We're hard to overwhelm.

That doesn't mean we don't hit "overwhelm," because we do. It just takes a lot more than the average non-disabled person. Ask anyone with a disability what really stresses them out and odds are, it won't be the lack of assistive reading devices or ramps so badly pitched that walking up them requires crampons and climbing ropes. It will be the ignorant comments, the idiots who ask, "Why do you need a chair if you can stand?", the workplace colleagues who resent us for "taking a job from someone deserving" when we were the person best qualified for the damned job in the first place. The stares. That's what gets us screaming into a pillow at the end of the day.

## **The Eye of the Storm**

Otherwise, we're the masters of adjusting on the fly, speaking up about a slight or an injustice, and bouncing back after a crushing reversal. That's why we're so valuable in a world where disruptive change has become not the exception but the norm. You think your company has the chops to pivot in the face of a Superstorm Sandy-type event that knocks out power for the entire Eastern Seaboard? I guarantee you that when your non-disabled staff is running around in circles, your handful of disabled workers will be calming saying, "Okay, this is a thing, let's bring in some backup generators and call to book a block of hotel rooms for people who can't get home." That's what we do. We roll with it. We find a way.

That's what engineer and serial inventor Dr. Rory Cooper does. A wheelchair-dependent former Paralympian and Army veteran, he's the founder and director of the Human Engineering Research Labs (HERL) at the University of Pittsburgh, which is also a part of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs as the [Center for Wheelchairs and Assistive Robotics Engineering](#). Dr. Cooper has developed a huge range of innovations,

from ergonomic push rims (which reduce upper extremity pain and injury for wheelchair users) to home automation and prosthetics. He's also a big advocate for the power that innovations for disabled folks have to make a difference in the lives of everyone.

“Take my van,” he says. “In the past, I would have had to modify it, but now most of the assistive aids I need are in place because today nearly everyone wants the convenience of opening doors at the push of a button. The mainstreaming of assistive technologies is a huge opportunity to create a more inclusive environment, and it's important for people with disabilities to create and influence these new technologies.”

As for me, when COVID shut down the world, I had figure out how to adapt as a recording artist. Before the plague, I had been as consistent as the sunrise about releasing new tracks. I had my routine *down*: rent studio time in downtown or Midtown, live on corner pizza and bodega beer, and lay down and mix beats for release on the major platforms, from YouTube to Spotify. I was the demo release goddess.

Then, shutdown. Suddenly, it was me, myself, and I in my home studio, with nobody to run for snacks or help me see a screen display. So I innovated. I reconfigured my mic and preamp setup. I created a menu of easy-to-use pre-sets, templates, and automations. I brought in speech-to-text software, screen magnifiers, and screen readers to help me see. I rewired my room to be an ideal space for listening, and I tweaked the footprint of my entire workspace to be accessible and accommodating. I stopped falling on my ass or knocking things over, and I didn't have to ask a sighted person to point me to the bathroom. Best of all, with this new efficiency, I was writing, recording and producing faster than practically all my peers.

As the world of work morphs into something different, as climate change and novel viruses challenge us, who better to figure out ways to adapt and keep moving than people for whom adaptation and forward motion are second nature? We're black belts at getting up after being knocked down and not letting that stop us.

