

Jan Thompson



## Two of my favorite quotes are...

“What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others”. Nelson Mandela and

“It is in your hands, to make a better world for all who live in it.” Author not known.

As a young child, I was very afraid of anyone who had or appeared to have an intellectual disability. I would avoid them at all costs and run from them if I saw one coming my way. Later, as young adult coming out of college with a degree in Social Work, I still had a fear of this population. I began looking for a job. I read an ad in the South Bend Tribune that said, “if you like helping people, this is the job for you”. Since I truly loved helping people, I contacted the number listed to set up an interview. I was told to come to a house to meet the director of the agency for the interview. When I arrived at this big brick house, there was only the director. During the interview, I was informed of all of the duties and responsibilities for the job. I was told that I was there to help people who could not take care of themselves. I was hired on the spot.

My first day on the job, I caught the bus, got off at where I thought was the location. But it was a facility. I was allowed to call the house to say, I got off the bus at the wrong location. I called the house where I was and the staff who answered the phone asked me “where are you?”. I gave her the location and she said, “we’ll come and get you”. I thought that was very nice. So I waited, not knowing who she referred to when she said, “we’ll come get you”. Well, I soon found out. She pulled up in a big, gray van, rolled the window down and asked, “are you Jan?”. I said to her “I am Jan”.

Before I got in, I noticed through the window that the van seemed to have at least six men who all had very visible disabilities. I heard several of them making what seemed to me to be unusual sounds and faces and hand movements. I immediately became afraid. It was then that I realized the people with whom I would be working were people with intellectual disabilities. Horrified, I got into the front passenger’s side, fastened my seatbelt, and began contemplating how I would back out of this job. My body was stiff with fear for about 5 minutes. I tried to act normal as the staff who was driving talked so calmly about the guys in the back. I don’t know if she noticed my stiffness and inability to focus till on her conversation. Then about 15 minutes into the ride, I began to listen more to the staff as she discussed each of the men in an attempt to introduce them to me. She spoke about them in a way that made me began to see them as they really were: their personality, their humanness, their innocence. I loosened my grip from the car door handle, my breathing began to flow more normally and a sense of peace and calmness came over me like the stillness after a fierce thunderstorm.

Thirty years later, not only did I stay with that job, I am honored to say that I still work with this population. The people that I once feared have become my world and love has replaced fear. This is my calling and ministry.

I firmly believe that every time you are in the presence of a person with disabilities, the interaction with them should leave them feeling like they matter in this world and that they matter to you.

What you say to them. How you look at them. The tone in which you speak to them. How you choose to pay attention to them as opposed to ignoring them.

All these things matter.

I believe in a higher power who is concerned about how we treat others; and certainly, when it comes to vulnerable people who can't protect themselves. In the Christian religion, we are taught whatever you do to vulnerable people, you are doing it to the Lord. So, show compassion. Christianity, my grandmother and my mother taught me well.

Although so much of the Bible and other sources of wisdom guide me in my daily life, the two wise statements I mentioned earlier are powerful and if taken to heart by every man and woman, in the words of the famous 1980's song would ring true. "*What a Beautiful World This Would Be*".

Ian Thompson, Director of Operations