

Everyone Welcome

by Jessy James LaFleur

Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the most perfect person in your world?
Who corresponds to your ideas and fits into your sizes,
which body is the most flawless and which mind is the smartest?
Who learns the fastest and who's totally efficient,
who's the best to adapt and stays within your limits?

Mirror, mirror on the wall, tell me, who's the fairest of them all?
How many people live in this country, who do not meet your expectations,
and who, *no matter how hard they try*, aren't entitled to a social life?

When I look at myself in the mirror, I see a capable, non-disabled person,
because hardly anything prevents me from participating in this world.
A world build for an exclusive able-bodied community, like me.
And that's a huge privilege, a privilege we often don't even see,
because anyone who has never had to deal with the topic of disability,
usually has the wrong image of people that don't "function" properly,
like we would talk about functioning machines...

...isn't that funny? No! It's not!

Because how does this society honestly reacts, when seeing someone with a handicap?

Afraid, pitying, threatened?

How do you address the person behind the social mirror's reflection of imperfection?

How do you 'shake hands' when greeting someone with no arms?

How do you behave, when meeting someone with trisomy

How do you speak, when someone is not able to hear

How many people, who have fallen between the cracks in the mirror fall into your circle of friends?

In what small way are you working towards an inclusive society?

How are we trying to redefine the word "ability"?

Ability means: Being able to participate - everywhere, with everyone...

...and not just in the real world.

I'm talking about the online universe, where we all come together whenever there's time.

A universe that magically opens **up** when turning **on** the Wifi.

Where we share pictures of us wearing our happiest smile.

adding meaningful captions to impress our followers and friends.

*We wake up each morning and the first thing we do, is to open our social networks
or check out the news, because we want to stay connected.*

*We demand fast broadband and user-friendly webpages, but the word "user" doesn't apply to
every person.*

I guess that the biggest problem with "Online" is that we just can't see it.

Online is something that comes out of that cute little box with the blinking lights,

*Online is something that we expect to find in every single place and we're fast annoyed,
when **EDGE** shows up instead of **5G plus**,*

*Online is something that happily exists, and it seems that we need it more like the **oxygen we
breathe, which means that Internet has become a basic need.***

We are happily browsing, but never asking, why people with disabilities use the Internet and
related technologies at levels well below the rest of the population.

And the main reason for that is not a lack of interest or education,

it's because the Internet is not using its potential to enhance the lives of every single person.

By moving more education, employment, communication, entertainment and civic participation entirely online, we create even more barriers and the web threatens to make people with disabilities even more into second-class citizens.

*Remember how powerless you feel in online-meetings, when having to ask
"hello, hello, can you hear me?"*

The heads on screen keep shaking, your hands start sweating, it just won't work, you give up and leave that meeting because you've been "ZOOMed"-out.

...and that's how billions of people feel on a daily basis, inferior to the rest of the crowd.

Technology has become a new type of discrimination, provoking unemployment and social exclusion, depriving many of essential resources.

The fact that we don't have to think about all that, makes it called digital privilege.

Another privilege, that we haven't earned, we just decided how the online world turns.

But people with disabilities need accessibility to be included as equal members of the society.

And that is exactly what inclusion means to me;

That everyone naturally belongs and that nobody is left out.

Inclusion means that there is a world, where we can belong - together.

And a world is not determined by us for others, but by everyone for themselves.

Inclusion is improvable, because **improvable** contains the words **improve** and **able**.

And we are **ABLE** to **IMPROVE** society, online and offline, in order to enable **EVERYONE** to lead a dignified and self-determined life.

We believe that disability is the individual's problem.

And so we focus entirely on deficiencies, instead of seeing possibilities, as if the person across from us is unable to contribute new points of view.

But we need those views in order to make a change,

which means that we, the abled-bodied people are the only ones to blame.

Because we don't reflect ourselves enough,

we have only ever known our very own reflection in the mirror, I suppose.

Mirror, mirror on the wall, who defines disability in this world, well...let me guess, certainly not the disabled people.

And behind this purely medical definition there is always the message:

"You are not okay the way you are!"

And do we ever question what this statement means for disabled children, who are hardly ever offered any other reflection of themselves from an early age.

It would be so easy to say that they just do things differently.

It would be so easy to give support that is tailored to their needs.

It would be so easy to make them believe in their own capabilities,

but everything they see on TV or social media teaches them:

You are not okay the way you are, because "disability" isn't the standard!

So how are they supposed to feel present, when positiv role models are totally absent?

No one is born handicapped; People become handicapped by society:

Because even a barrier-free environment does not protect against exclusion,

or why do we call it a special school, when it could simply be called a school?

Why don't we dismantle structures, so people don't have to adapt to our rules?

As long as disabled people are made to feel like second-class people,

social inclusion hasn't been achieved yet!

And inclusion is not a goal, inclusion is a process,

in which we need to become aware of how easy it is for some of us to receive degrees

or to use the internet and how little diversity there is in our circle of friends.

It is a questioning of the mirror on the wall.

Because people wouldn't be called disabled if we would enable them all.

We, the "abled-bodied-perfectionists" have shaped the word "normal" which is disparaging to people who are perfect in their own way!

Worth isn't measured or determined by anyone,

and that's what inclusion means to me: *"Everything for everyone, because everyone is welcome!"*