

## What is Inclusion?

Shafik Abu-Tahir

In 1955 the story of a brave and tired woman named Rosa Parks was put in front of this country's awareness. They say this woman had gotten tired, in fact, historically tired of being denied equality. She wanted to be included in society in a full way, something which was denied people labeled as "black" people! So Rosa Parks sat down on a bus in a section reserved for "white" people. When Rosa was told to go the "her place" at the back of the bus, she refused to move, was arrested, and history was challenged and changed. All of this happened because Rosa Parks was tired, historically tired of being excluded. She had sat down and thereby stood up for inclusion!

Another powerful cry for "inclusion" is being heard today. This new cry is being raised by people with **unrecognized abilities**, (the so-called "disabled"). Many people whose abilities are regularly denied or ignored feel that society is not honoring the right to participate in society in a full way. Part of the call is for better accessibility, such as more wheelchair ramps, more signs and materials in braille, community living, etc. The Americans with Disabilities Act represents an attempt to hear the "inclusion" cry. However, much more needs to be done including a search for an acceptable definition and practice of inclusion.

Across this country a definition of inclusion is offered. It is generally accepted that "Inclusion" means inviting those who have been historically locked out to "come in". This well-intentioned meaning must be strengthened. A weakness of this definition is evident. Who has the authority or right to "invite" others in? And how did the "inviters" get in? Finally, who is doing the excluding?

It is time we both recognize and accept that we are all born "in"! No one has the right to invite others in! It definitely becomes our responsibility as a society to remove all barriers which uphold exclusion since none of us have the authority to "invite" others "in"! So what is inclusion? Inclusion is recognizing our universal "oneness" and interdependence. Inclusion is recognizing that we are "one" even though we are not the "same". The act of inclusion means fighting against exclusion and all of the social diseases exclusion gives birth to - i.e. racism, sexism, handicapism, etc. Fighting for inclusion also involves assuring that all support systems are available to those who need such support. Providing and maintaining support systems is a civic responsibility, not a favor. We were all born "in". Society will immediately improve at the point we honor this truth!!

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