

Why Using the Word “Retard” is Retarding Progress

by Tim O’Donoghue in *Millennials, Values*, July 2012

1 My younger brother Aidan started high school
2 this year, and unlike his male predecessors, he loves
3 it. He has friends, he’s involved, and he loves his
4 teachers. Aidan has been anxiously waiting for this
5 juncture of his life for years, which was probably
6 fueled by all those Nick-at-Nite TV shows.
7 (Unfortunately, high school isn’t quite Drake and
8 Josh or that pre-pregnancy Jamie Lynn Spears
9 show.) Aidan wasn’t the only anxious one though.
10 All those years Aidan spent in excitement, I spent in
11 fear. I spent my freshman year in the same halls as
12 Aidan, overwhelmed by the sheer size of the school.
13 The whole social thing just wasn’t for me. My
14 friend Ben likes to tell me it’s a confidence thing
15 and I think he’s right. Round two was different
16 though — Aidan is a completely different
17 competitor. Still, I had no confidence. I had no
18 confidence that his peers would treat him with the
19 respect that he deserves, or even worse, simply as
20 an equal. Aidan has Down Syndrome, and it can be
21 hard to see past that label.

22 I’m going to take a minute and diverge from
23 Aidan’s story. I need to rationalize my fear. My
24 entire life I’ve played witness to the continuous
25 (and usually subconscious) relegation of people
26 with disabilities. It’s an unfortunate habit passed
27 down by our parents, and spread among millennials.
28 It’s as simple as saying “Wasn’t that class
29 retarded?” I bet if Aidan hadn’t been a part of my
30 life, or had been born without Down Syndrome, I’d
31 be throwing the term *retarded* around like a
32 baseball. So when I hear “retarded,” is my first
33 reaction, “Hey you! You’re systemically oppressing
34 persons with cognitive disabilities through your
35 language!”? Of course not, because I don’t think
36 most people realize that that is what they’re doing.
37 It’s a word that has become so ingrained in our
38 vocabulary that we think it’s disassociated with
39 its roots.

40 Often, when I ask someone not to say retarded,
41 they’ll come back and say that it just means
42 “stupid,” or “it’s a medical term!” or “I didn’t use it
43 in that context.” To put it gently, any response in

44 the negative simply shows ignorance. Stupid? Well,
45 that’s simply not the definition of “retarded.” Use
46 the word *stupid*. Medical term? Not anymore. The
47 term “retard” has been removed from both
48 government and medical texts. You used it out of
49 context? That works. If I were to use a racial slur
50 out of context, that’d be ok too, right? “But there’s a
51 history attached to racial slurs!” There’s a history
52 attached to people of disabilities, too. People with
53 disabilities were for all intents and purposes denied
54 education until, funnily enough, the U.S. Supreme
55 Court decided *Brown vs. Board of Education in*
56 *1954*. This was only the beginning. It was not until
57 the early 1970s that true strides were made for
58 persons with disabilities.

59 And it’s not only the classroom that has held
60 back disabled individuals. People with disabilities
61 were subject to Nazi eugenics and murdered en
62 masse. This wasn’t the first instance of eugenics in
63 the history of persons with disabilities. Before that,
64 Americans practiced their own eugenics on people
65 with disabilities, and frequently isolated and
66 institutionalized anyone who looked or acted
67 differently.

68 So, back to Aidan. Aidan loves public school,
69 and I attest much of that to his peers that I feared so
70 much. Aidan, through his vivacious, charismatic,
71 and loving nature, has surrounded himself with an
72 amazing group of friends. He joined the track and
73 wrestling team, was in a school play, read a poem at
74 the poetry slam, and sang “Soul Man” at the school
75 talent show, fedora and all (big props to his Best
76 Buddy Andrew on that one — someone needed to
77 be John Belushi, and it sure wasn’t me). All of this
78 is to say that we’re getting there, but we haven’t
79 gotten there yet. The “r” word is still commonplace
80 in our vocabulary. Like I said, Aidan is a happy kid.
81 But if you say “retard,” or mention his disability, he
82 goes straight to thumb sucking. His life-long sign
83 for “I’m uncomfortable.” What does that tell you? It
84 has to stop. “Retard” is retarding our progress
85 towards true acceptance. Spread the word to end
86 the word.