

Drive-By Criticism: Handicapped Parking & Relapsing-Remitting MS



I pulled into one of the several, empty handicapped parking spaces after seeing that none of the unmarked spaces were available. This particular lot was, by my estimation, the best place to park on the university campus for me to preserve my dearth of energy.

I would be teaching two classes located on the opposite ends of the campus. I'd have a 10-minute break in between - a break that would not long enough for me to get from one building to the other in time. Once inside the second building, I would have to strip off layers of clothing due to the intense heat and humidity inside the room, which trigger my MS-related heat sensitivity. Following the three-plus hours of instruction, I would walk back across campus to my car and gird myself for a more than one-hour commute home in gridlock city traffic.

When I'm deciding where to park when I'm at work, I do so strategically. I need to factor in all the elements of the day that are going to chip away at my limited reserve of energy. I need to be able to have enough fuel in my tank to be at my very best in front of my classes and to be able to make it home safely afterward in road rage-inducing congestion.

That's why my neurologist last year recommended that I obtain a handicapped placard to use at school and in situations where I may need it, like on days when the hot weather literally makes me sick, or on days where my energy is likely going to be strained, leaving me with jelly-like legs, overall physical weakness, difficulties concentrating, and serious fatigue. I use the placard selectively - defensively, really - because, to the outside world, I look fine.

Making my way through the world with my damaged brain and spinal cord is more difficult than one may think just by glancing at me.

Early in the fall semester, on a humid and hot day, I chose to park in one of the several, open handicapped spots close to a building in which I was teaching my first class. I slung my legs out of the car, gathered my bags and slowly began to walk, hoping the anti-nausea medication I'd taken would prevent me from getting sick in the quad.

That's when an older gentleman stopped his sedan and shouted, "Ma'am! Ma'am!"

I turned to see if he was speaking to me. He was.

"Do you know that that's a HANDICAPPED spot you parked in?"

"Yes!" I snapped back.

This is what I'd always worried about. This is the kind of confrontation I didn't want to have. This is why I printed out the National MS Society logo on a white piece of paper, wrote "I have MS" on it, and slide it onto my dashboard whenever I use the handicapped placard.

I didn't wait to see or hear his response. I kept walking toward the building.

Hours later, when I returned, I saw the man again, making his way down the sidewalk while using arm crutches. He frowned at me and shook his head in disapproval as I collapsed into the front seat of my car and prayed I'd be able to focus sufficiently to make it safely home, a place where I'd collapse into my bed, done for the night by 7 p.m.

It was this very short exchange, this judgment, that ran through my mind the next time I thought about using a handicapped spot next to the same academic building. It was the look of disgust directed at me that made my stomach clench with nervousness. It was a reaction that made me feel as though I was doing something wrong, taking something from someone.

If only that man understood that I want nothing more than to NOT have to use that space. I would love to be able to park on the top floor of the parking garage a block away, the one with the sets of steep stairs that need to be climbed, and to have it be just another part of my day. I would love to get home from work, in any kind of weather, and still have the energy to work late into the night as I used to be able to do. I would love not to have to think strategically about where and how to spend my limited energy.

But these exchanges in parking lots aren't designed for those who are thoughtful and empathetic. They're drive-by hits of shame, reprimands that don't leave much room for explanation and nuance.