

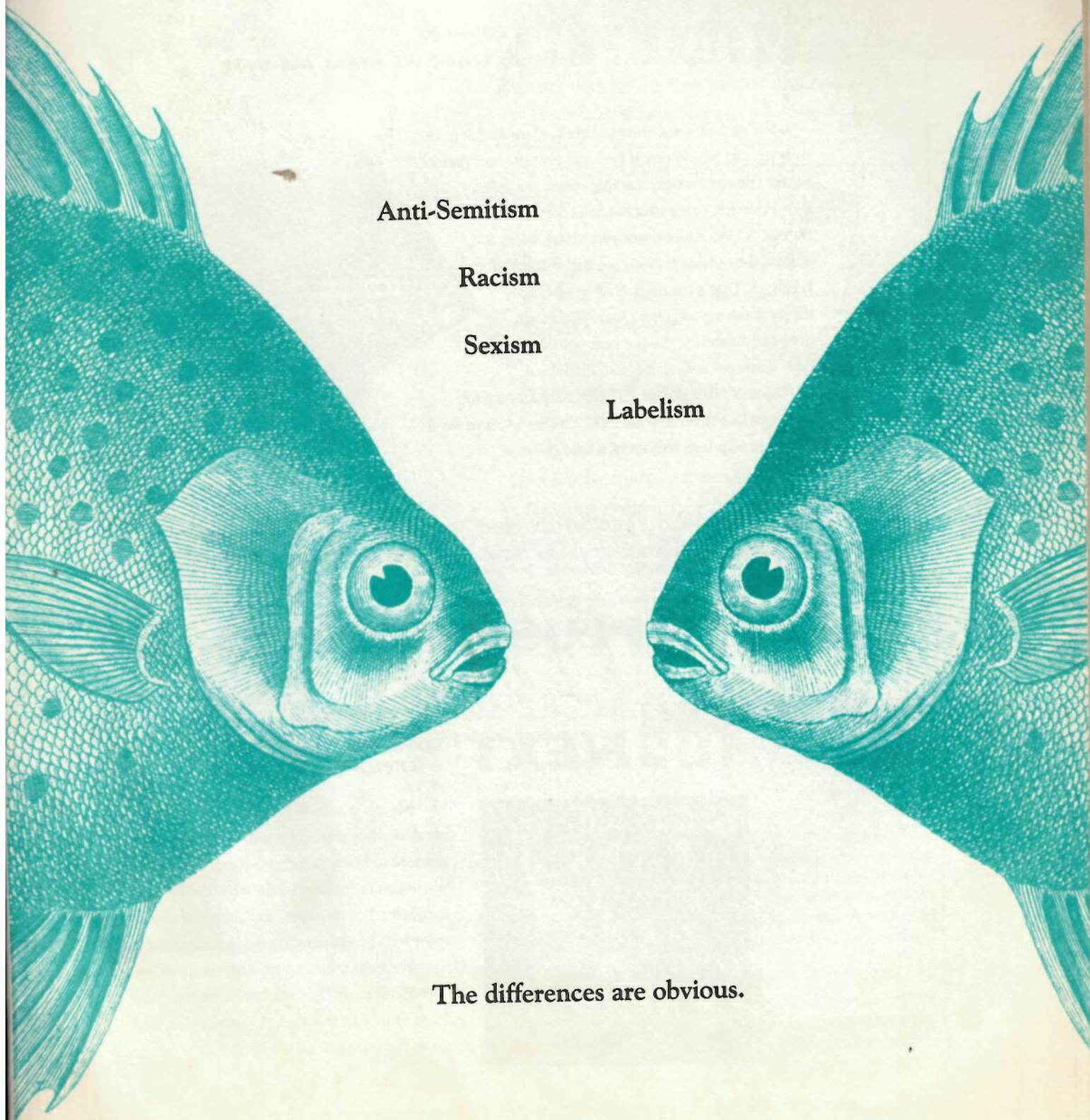
Anti-Semitism

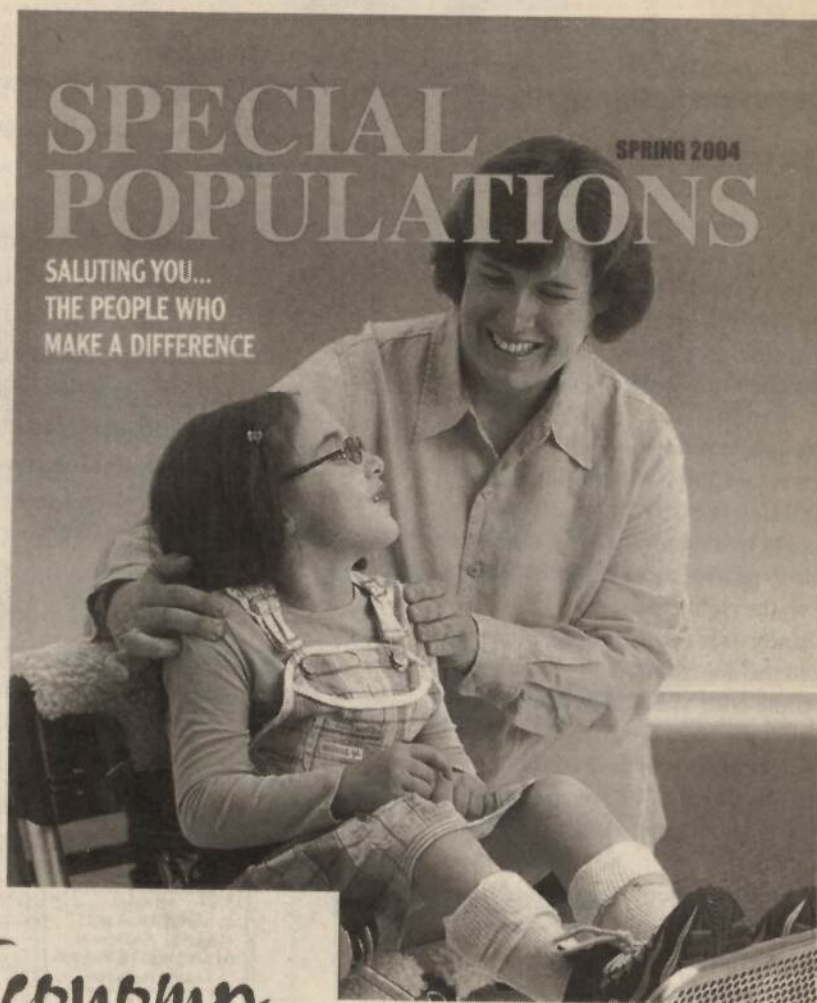
Racism

Sexism

Labelism

The differences are obvious.





The Economy of Good Works

by John McKnight

Our ADA swept in on a tide of justice for all. Earlier, in 1977, the author warned of a powerful countercurrent: the historic shift to a servicing economy.

In a service economy, the sum of your
deficiencies contributes to the
Gross National Product

We Americans like to think of ourselves as the people whose hard work makes the world work. We are the people, in Carl Sandburg's terms, who make the steel, stack the wheat, and butcher the hogs. We produce the things that really count: automobiles, computers, grain, steel.

That image is not the reality. Most of us are salespeople, managers, teachers, bankers, therapists, legal professionals, custodians, consultants, motel keepers, medical professionals, soldiers, counsellors, auto mechanics, and government employees.

Where once we produced those things that count, today we import them. The majority of American workers derive their income from the production of those soft things called services. [Writing in 1977, the author cited an economist who foresaw that ninety percent of employed Americans would be servers by the year 2000. The expert was correct.]

The shift to a work force that produces services rather than goods is the culmination of a historic ideal and the fulfillment of an ancient dream: the liberation from hard work in order to do good works.

We are finally free to devote ourselves to the good works of caring, curing and developing — work that serves rather than sweats. Freed

of the physical labor that diminished human potential, we have created a serving society.

There is, however, a hidden dilemma in the growth of our services. In order to provide universal work by serving each other, we will need more clients who need help, or clients who need more help.

Full employment in a serving society depends upon a supply of people who are understood as lacking, disabled, deficient — somehow short of the ideal. To develop a serving economy we depend upon more crooked teeth, family disarray, collapsing automobiles, psychic malaise, educa-

tional failure, litigious conflict and underdeveloped human potential.

A society of fully employed servers needs more people in need. Our economic growth depends upon our capacity to identify more deficiency.

The growing deficiency market is now measured as a major national benefit. Our Gross National Product in increasingly a counting of the productivity gained from services purporting to deal with our growing deficiencies.

Consider your own value in a serving economy should you die of cancer next year. If you have a long, fully treated, "quality care" death, its value could appear within next



Residents at Sunrise Assisted Living homes can relax in a comfortable setting, top, or work on motor skills, like Lena Clore, 89, above.

In exchange for our incapacities,
we are offered Utopia.

year's Gross National Product as \$250,000 [prices in effect when this article was written]. There are very few people who can be that productive in one year, or several years.

Consider all of your valuable deficiencies. There are the deficiencies that you perceive, and there are those you have been taught by your servers to perceive. And there are deficiencies you don't know you have but that professional servers can identify.

In a serving economy, the sum of all those deficiencies becomes your human value. In an economy that counts the good works called service, you become the nation's most valuable commodity if you are sufficiently deficient.

A service economy needs people in need. This need for need helps to explain the three basic categories that have come to define American lives. We are educated. We work. We retire.

Each year, the number of people who are educated and retired expands. They are the majority of the "deficient" people who are said to depend on the service of those who work.

The reality may be that working people depend upon an increased supply of the young and the old in order to work. This may explain why we extend the number of years of education required to secure a job and encourage early retirement.

Increasingly, a serving society depends upon people who can be defined as problems rather than as productive participants. The young, the old, and the labeled have become the raw material of a serving economy.

Ours is an economy fueled more by deficiency than by oil. We depend less on the Arabs than on commercialized deficiency, paid care, professionalized service and the allied managers, consultants,

planners and experts that a serving economy demands.

A good works economy creates a nation of clients. Fewer and fewer people can be called citizens — people who do good work. On the other hand, a democratic society requires citizens rather than clients — people who are competent rather than deficient.

A democracy is the sum of the good work of citizens with the capacity to solve problems.

A served society is the sum of the deficiency that enables people to be clients.

If we are unable to free ourselves from the ideology of service, we will die of our dependence on deficiency. A nation of clients cannot conceive of a democratic possibility, much less act in behalf of the common good. A nation of clients will accept the central premise of serving systems: "I will be better because my servers know better." This premise, embedded in any culture, is the basic foundation for totalitarian rule.

If there is to be a democratic American future, it will require us to reject the humanistic vision of a nation of clients consuming the good works of a serving economy.

A nation of citizens doing good work must recognize the limits of its capacity. We live in a world of limits. Our capacity to solve problems is limited. We will always have pain. We will always die.

The grand illusion of the serving society is to deny these limits. While the service system feeds on the purported deficiencies of its clients, its propaganda insists that serving systems will ultimately break through the limits of pain and death and deliver us the freedom to be whole.

There is, however,
another possibility.

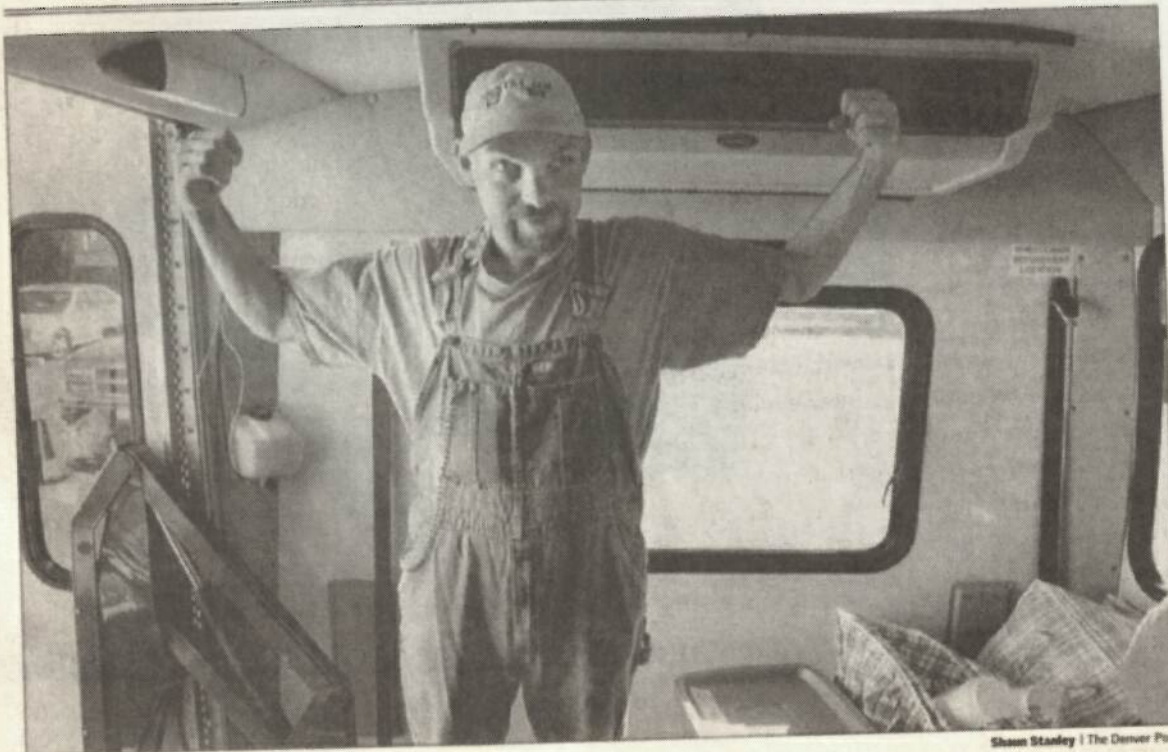
That grand illusion — of a future where good works will finally make anything possible, offers a Faustian deal. In exchange for our incapacity, we are offered Utopia.

There is, however, another possibility. That possibility is individual empowerment. It arises among citizens who solve problems within the limits of their capacity. It vitalizes communities of mutual support and obligation. It springs from creating tools that make rather than control. It is the possibility of justice and equity.

A democratic society must reject the utopian promise of incapacitated clienthood and consumerism. Our democratic possibility depends upon citizens who believe in their capacities and acknowledge their limits.

If we are to persevere, we will know that citizens are the soul of our democracies, that citizens are people with all the wondrous possibilities of failing to be God. ♦

You are here.



Shawn Stanley | The Denver Post

Brain-injured adults find help, and a home, at residential program in Mesa County