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1981, Year of the Handicapped

There was a time when, in every part of the world, disabled individuals, when not exposed or abandoned by their parents or guardians, were treated by society as an object of entertainment. Like animals trained to dance and perform certain tricks before the public, men and women who suffered from physical or mental deformities were exhibited and exploited as sources of amusement for those who could pay them a few coins. The blind, the deaf and dumb, the feeble-minded, the deformed and other disabled groups, rarely had the chance to receive an education or to learn a profession by which they could earn a living.

It was the Declaration of the Rights of man and the United Nations Charter (1959) that induced the change in people's attitude toward the disabled. Moved by pragmatic as well as by humanitarian reasons, social leaders and educators agreed on the necessity of rehabilitating the disabled and helping them to become useful members of society. The most outstanding success achieved by promoters of this new trend was the world-known American, Helen Keller, who, in spite of her three-fold infirmity, (blind, deaf and dumb from birth), was able to obtain higher education, to write books, give lectures and lead a happy life until the advanced age of ninety. Her Egyptian contemporary, the blind scholar Taha Hussein, though less disabled than she was, exemplifies another important success in the field of rehabilitation. Arab history gives the names of two blind men who, in the Abbasid period, succeeded in achieving immortal greatness in poetry and erudition: Bashshār ibn Burd and Abu'Ala'a al-Ma'arri.

If history gives the names of only a few handicapped individuals who were able to defy public opinion and attain self-realization, world leadership in our days is trying to make self-realization possible for every disabled individual. The large number of handicapped produced by frequent wars has made this step imperative, mass media have been mobilized, the creation of rehabilitation centers has been everywhere encouraged and financed by national and international organizations. The Year of the Handicapped, which occurs in 1981, will be another incentive for spreading awareness regarding the general problem of the disabled and, particularly, for effecting a change in people's attitude toward them. Respect for human dignity, recognition of the other person's rights, regardless of his appearance, color, age, sex, race or rank, is the primary requirement of civic education and the first mark of development.

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