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Commentary: Valuing life, whether disabled or not

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STEVE INSKEEP, host:

When able-bodied people talk about people with disabilities, they're often talking about limitations. Commentator Ben Mattlin sees the world differently.

BEN MATTLIN:

A few years ago a friend of mine died unexpectedly at 39. We both used motorized wheelchairs and needed assistance with tasks such as washing, dressing and eating, but his disability came from a motorcycle accident 14 years earlier. Mine is from birth, the result of a congenital neuromuscular condition. So I'm used to being quadriplegic. He wasn't. He would sometimes ask, with startling frankness, 'How do you do it? How do you manage?' I never knew how to answer.

One morning my friend's attendant found him dead with a smile on his face, were told, at the packed memorial service. A young minister explained that he'd been, quote, "a free spirit, trapped in an unresponsive body. Now that spirit is truly free." We were told he'd gone to a place where he could walk again. His dad added 'Walk? He's probably playing basketball in the nude.' The words stung. Mourners need to believe their loved one has gone to a better place. Yet what was the message here? Death sets you free and cures disability? Was he better off dead than disabled? I realize I'm biased. I have never ridden a motorcycle or done half the other physical things my friend used to love, but I do know one can live a pretty full life with a disability.

Indeed, some people find life after disability more intense, more deeply appreciated than it was before. My lifelong experience, with disability, has made me a creative problem-solver, and, ironically, perhaps, a diehard optimist, if only because I've had to be. It's taught me a great deal about patience, tolerance and flexibility. My disability is part of who I am. Why couldn't my

friend's family value the disabled man he'd become? How limited is this vision of life, and of the afterlife? Are there no wheelchairs in heaven? I'm not buying it. For me, if there is a heaven, it's not a place where I'll be able to walk. It's a place where it doesn't matter if you can't.

INSKEEP: Ben Mattlin--He's a writer in Los Angeles.

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