**Fighting disability with creativity**

Dr Naazir Mahmood

Tuesday, Aug 15, 2023

Without differences in our abilities, the world would have been a bland sphere in the universe. Some people have more pizzazz than others, and one such person is Zahid Abdullah who according to him can perform all tasks with his “eyes wide shut”.

He learnt the art of living without sight some 20 years ago. Even before that, his sight was declining steadily, and his gradual sight loss was a painful process as he knew that soon he would be a different person altogether. Till he lost the capacity to see in his early 30s. To live his life without the power to see was a challenge that he took head on, and his story is worth telling for all those who can see but lack the vision to transform their lives in the face of adversity.

Zahid is a master learner; he quickly adapted to the new realities that enriched his other senses. He could hear and smell much better and his taste developed beyond simple culinary delights; he acquired a taste for creative arts, music, and of course drama in life; he had also studied a drama course as a student and teacher of English Language and Literature at the post-graduate level. With his partial sight he completed his first Master’s degree at a public university and acquired another from a private university after he had lost his sight.

Zahid was not an only child of his parents; he had eight siblings and one can imagine the plight of a boy growing up with declining sight in such a large crowd. Ultimately, he managed to raise his three daughters and proved that a sightless father may be an even more caring parent.

Throughout his life he has fought against access barriers and advocated for a better physical and social environment for people living with disabilities. He believes that an inaccessible environment renders people disabled, not the impairment itself.

Disability rights are not the only area he is working in. The right to information has become his lifelong passion, and he has delivered some remarkable instructions to relevant departments as the information commissioner. He is also a researcher, resource person and trainer who teaches how to improve productivity to his colleagues and learners in a friendly manner.

He has authored books and has become an objective commentator on human contradictions that he reflects in his writings. ‘The Wise Man’ was his second book that attracted the attention of readers in 2015. It was a collection of stories that he wrote in a humorous manner.

But here we are more interested in his first and third books. ‘Disabled society’ (2012) was his first ground-breaking book that deals with the challenges and problems people living with disabilities face in a society such as Pakistan. Its contents ranged from strategies to cope with disabilities and the misplaced concept of ‘divine justice’ and ‘majoritarian dictatorship’ that marginalizes a differently abled minority. The book also discusses the lack of ethical behaviour in medical professionals, a majority of whom need better training and capacity development in dealing with differently abled people.

Zahid has written ‘Disabled society’ with an insight that comes with a life of constant challenges and obstacles that hinder the path to a successful career. He has specifically focused on gender issues that are normally ignored in discussions about people with disabilities. One of the most significant contributions the book makes is on the front of information access. It argues that society itself blocks building barriers so that only a privileged few enjoys access to information and uses it for their benefits. Any information about the rights of the disabled is not easily available to those who may benefit from it.

The book is unique in that it includes four research papers on people with disabilities and the electoral process. The papers also deal with the gender divide that is even more harmful for women with disabilities; perhaps it is the first-ever research paper in Pakistan that so comprehensively covered the topic.

Girls and women with disabilities face extraordinary discrimination and misbehaviour, especially in universities. In a society where campus officers and university teachers indulge in immoral and unethical practices of blackmailing students, one can imagine how vulnerable disabled female students are.

Now something about Zahid’s latest book ‘Honour Among Judges and Other Tales of Justice’. This is a marvellous collection of stories and revolves around a group of lawyers who gather at a restaurant in April 2021 when the government lifted the lockdown it imposed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The 15 lawyers gather on a rooftop of a popular restaurant near Heera Mandi in Lahore and narrate their stories. The women of the red-light area have a specific significance as the writer mentions in his prologue:

“They have been shunned and condemned by some, but loved and patronized by most. The last one to condemn them was a cartoonish general who had a permanent smile plastered on his face, though it was never reflected in his cold eyes. When he closed down the Heera Mandi in the 1980s, these girls spread across many different parts of Lahore.”

The story tells that these lawyers were regular customers of the particular restaurant but the pandemic intervened and they could not meet as long as the lockdown lasted. Now they regroup – minus the two who succumbed to the virus –and share their tales.

There is a lawyer who claims to ‘punish evil and reward virtue’, coupled with a judge who has ‘sad roomy eyes’. There is one law practitioner who brews his own wine and always has Plan B ready for all eventualities. Another lawyer nicknamed the Decoupler deals with divorce cases. Then there are lawyers in their 70s, with plenty of experiences to share.

There is a female lawyer with ‘well-earned bragging rights’ to claim that she had never taken a single case before a judge and yet had the most successful practice in the city. Not far behind is the story of a public prosecutor famous for his “dogged pursuit of criminals”. Then there is “Wiley Wali” with a dubious reputation of hiring judges to seek justice for his clients.

There are also fake intellectuals and conspiracy theorists brooding over some latest theories doing rounds. A lawyer from tribal areas has his tale to share with the audience which he keeps in rapt attention.

But the motley will be incomplete unless Zahid drops in two American lawyers visiting Lahore on the invitation of the Punjab Bar Council. The narrator of the entire event is a 22-year old rookie lawyer who is also a social-media sensation. She recounts the stories that are amusing and entertaining. The book is a gem and tells stories that are rare, as not many lawyers share their experiences – apart from the ones who have been justifying constitutional mutilations. She had a chance invitation to attend the gathering of old friends and ended up collecting the stories that form the book.

This is a highly recommended book and Zahid has weaved the tales in an absorbing fabric. With his consistently productive and successful personal and professional lives, he has become a source of inspiration for many. Having taught and trained hundreds of students – both with and without sight – his creative output in the last 10 years or so has been impressive, deserving accolades for what he has been doing persistently for enriching our society.

The writer holds a PhD from the University of Birmingham, UK. He tweets @NaazirMahmood and can be reached at:

mnazir1964@yahoo.co.uk