

Joni Eareckson Tada on Ableism

1. **Who** is Joni Eareckson Tada and what are her key ideas on ableism?

Joni Eareckson Tada (b. 1949) is an American disability rights advocate, author, and evangelical Christian. In 1967, at the age of 17, she suffered a horrific diving accident that left her paralysed from the shoulders down. She spent several years undergoing physical therapy and occupational therapy designed to provide her with a measure of independence, during which she learned how to draw and paint by mouth. In 1974, Barbara Walters interviewed her on The Today Show, covering her art, disability, and Christian faith; this appearance sparked considerable interest in her story, and she published her autobiographical work, *Joni: An Unforgettable Story*, in 1976. This introduces various ideas about accepting disability, living with disabled people, and Christian faith; among these are some of her thoughts on ableism, which are outlined below. Since the 1970s, Joni Eareckson Tada has increasingly dedicated her life to supporting the disabled and spreading the gospel of Jesus: in 1979, she founded Joni and Friends, which runs the International Disability Center and the Wheels for the World initiative.

Ableism is part of mainstream culture in most societies: most cultures perceive disability only negatively, which means they are intrinsically ableist. The standard that most societies set for self-worth does not include disability, which can erode the self-esteem of disabled people who try to meet this standard.

Ableism is exacerbated by its ability to hide in plain sight: in some cases, ableism is perpetuated because the disabled victims are abused behind closed doors in institutions; in other cases, ableism is perpetuated by displays of awkwardness or ignorance around disabled people, or by open displays of pity.

Ableism is based on incorrect assumptions about quality of life: many people believe that the quality of life of a disabled person is necessarily diminished because of his or her disability; however, disabled people repeatedly demonstrate that they lead lives full of happiness, purpose, and opportunity.

2. **How** do Joni Eareckson Tada's key ideas on ableism work?



Joni Eareckson Tada

Joni Eareckson Tada's key ideas form a strong argument against ableism in all its forms. However, it is not presented as an academic thesis; instead, it is presented as an autobiographical account of her lived experience. In *Joni: An Unforgettable Story*, she reveals the cultural biases of mainstream society, the various ways in which ableism hides in plain sight, and the intellectually lazy assumption that disabled people necessarily lead lower quality lives. What makes it such an enjoyable read is that she achieves all this by example.

Ableism is part of mainstream culture in most societies: Joni Eareckson Tada's first key idea is that ableism is an intrinsic aspect of most cultures. She reflects on this at numerous points in *Joni: An Unforgettable Story*, but most memorably in conversation with her longtime friend and fellow Christian, Steve Estes, who accuses her of undermining her self-esteem by trying to meet society's standard for self-worth. Steve Estes points out that this standard is unachievable, even for athletic and healthy people without disabilities, and that trying to meet it will make her miserable. Instead, Joni Eareckson Tada commits to finding self-worth by trying to meet God's standard for her.

Ableism is exacerbated by its ability to hide in plain sight: Joni Eareckson Tada's second key idea is that ableism is everywhere, and part of the problem is that it is so widely accepted. Of course, this argument is made about other forms of discrimination; however, none appear to persist as brazenly in modern society. This is a contentious claim, and it is never explicitly stated; however, she relays various instances that illustrate this idea. One is a horrific incident in which a nurse at a violently flipped her Stryker frame and badly injured her arm; Joni Eareckson Tada makes clear that she believed this happened because she is disabled and was helpless at the time, and it is difficult to imagine a black person or a woman being treated so violently in a medical setting because of their gender or race. Likewise, she relays an incident where a woman approached her in a shop and poured pity on her because of her disability; it is hard to believe this would happen to a woman or black person today without comment.

Ableism is based on incorrect assumptions about quality of life: this key idea may appear obvious today, but it certainly was not in the 1960s, when Joni Eareckson Tada suffered her life-changing diving accident; nevertheless, some people still accept the intellectually lazy assumption that disabled people necessarily live lower quality lives. Joni Eareckson Tada puts the lie to this, by demonstrating what a rich and fulfilling life she has led herself. Although the first half of *Joni: An Unforgettable Story* is dedicated to her accident, rehabilitation, and struggles with recurring depression and the contemplation of suicide, the second half is considerably more hopeful. It focuses on the strengthening of her faith and the discovery of her purpose: supporting the disabled and spreading the gospel of Jesus. She relays the numerous opportunities this has given her, including her appearance on *The Today Show*, and shows by example that people living with disabilities can find more happiness than those living without them.

3. **Why** are Joni Eareckson Tada's key ideas on ableism important?

They encourage improved treatment of disabled people: Joni Eareckson Tada's key ideas are presented with considerable emotional power, and move people to treat the disabled with greater compassion, dignity, and humanity. She presents ableist behaviour as a problem that must be urgently addressed.

They portray disability as a potential opportunity: at the end of *Joni: An Unforgettable Story*, Joni Eareckson Tada refers to her paralysis as a God-given blessing that prevented her from drifting passively through life. She inspires disabled people to discover the opportunities created by their conditions.



The Today Show: the television show that launched Joni Eareckson Tada's mission.

They are responses resulting from deep reflection: additionally, Joni Eareckson Tada's key ideas are introspective and personal. The argument against ableism that she implicitly articulates throughout *Joni: An Unforgettable Story* is based on experience rather than explicitly grounded in ethical principles. This makes the force of her argument surprisingly powerful, because it is not framed as an academic thesis; instead she shows the consequences of ableism and reveals its unfounded assumptions by doing what they suggest she cannot.

George Thinks

I've already alluded to this, but *Joni: An Unforgettable Story* is an amazing read, because it's such a deep, reflective, and searching exploration of accepting disability and living with the disabled. It will not be for everyone, because it's so intimately interwoven with the story of Joni Eareckson Tada's developing Christian faith; however, it powerfully reveals how challenges can be overcome and purpose can be found, even with a profoundly life-changing disability like paralysis. Above all, this is a story that sticks with you, and serves as a reminder that we should all treat people living with disability with the same humanity that we treat people who aren't. A recurring theme is Joni Eareckson Tada's fervent wish to be included in all the activities of her friends and family, engaged with as an equal, and judged on her merits as a person (rather than a disabled person). This strength of character and stoicism shines through, and makes for a remarkable read.

