

A few years ago, a six-year-old in my congregation asked me why I love God so much, especially since God lets people die. And why do people die? This child had been struggling with feeling dumb. I recognized a deep sense of aloneness and despair. I wondered what I could possibly say to this child to satisfy his need to belong and find hope in the world, when I have these questions myself. Despite answering his questions then, the questions kept plaguing me.

How do we get ideas about what how we should be and what we should be able to do? Whether or not a person has a diagnosed disability, human variation is normal. We are not all good at the same things. I get distracted easily and know a little about a lot of things, constantly impressing my partner who amazes me with her ability to focus on a single topic. The Americans with Disabilities Act, also known as the ADA, was passed only a little more than 30 years ago. It's the reason that public buses are accessible and that many buildings have elevators and ramps. But how much are we paying attention to ableism today? And what is lost when we don't? **(Pause)**

Because I don't personally identify as having a disability, I wanted to share with you a clip from a video of disability rights activist Norman Kunc so that you can hear in his own voice, one of the ideas that has really shaped my thinking. **(show clip)**

[Full link to video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QM6epVgyPFo>, video clip 7:53-11:17. Text of clip here:

“So if you think of the predominant narrative in our society, the pervasive narrative, the pervasive story, which we all get immersed

in, is this idea that people shouldn't be disabled. Now, for example, me. You, knowing me, may be fully committed to inclusive education, disability rights, etc., right? But on another level, on a deeper level, you may work from the presumption that 'Norm is not the way he should have been. Norman should have been born non-disabled. Something happened at birth so now Norman is not the way he should have been.' Now, if you work from that presumption, you're locating the problem in me. Right? So, for example, the way this is explained, if I come up to a set of stairs... you see that set of stairs and my inability to go up and down stairs as a mobility impairment.

Now, you can be, you know, fully in favor of ramps etc. but the belief is that installing that ramp is to accommodate the problem in me. To relocate the problem means we go from the presumption that people should not be disabled into the idea that disability is an inherent part of the human experience. Bodies break down. Accidents happen. This idea that we should be non-disabled throughout our lives is delusional.

Once we see disability as an inherent part of the human experience, then when you see me wheeling up to a set of stairs, my inability to get up those stairs isn't a result of a mobility impairment in me, it's that this building was built on the premise that no one should be disabled. So that ramp, rather than being an accommodation for me, is actually a correction of an architectural error. So, when we see, for example, such a simple example of a ramp, being an architectural correction rather than an accommodation for me, that's a very specific example of relocating the problem."¹]

“Once we see disability as an inherent part of the human experience, then when you see [Norm] wheeling up to a set of stairs, [his] inability to get up those stairs isn't the result of a mobility impairment in [him], it's that [that] building was built on the premise that no one should be disabled.”² I had *never* thought about it this way, despite having heard similar messages

¹ Norman Kunc.

² Norman Kunc, *Norman Kunc - The Right to Be Disabled*.

around racism being the problem of white people. In fact, in that same interview, Kunc speaks about drawing inspiration from Civil Rights activist John McKnight, a white man who had worked to integrate the auto industry in the 1950s and '60s. McKnight said, “revolutions begin when the people who are defined as problems achieve the power to redefine the problem.” “...the Civil Rights Movement really began to get momentum when they were able to re-define the problem from a “Black problem” to a “White problem.” Right? It’s not a problem of black skin, it’s a problem of white prejudice, white privilege...”³ Kunc applies McKnight’s idea to the disability rights movement, naming his “right to be disabled.”

The point about the importance of how we define the problem feels crucial to me. Norman has the “right to be disabled,” even in a world that acts as if disabilities shouldn’t exist.⁴ There is normal human variation in how we enter into the world as well as change throughout the lifespan. While experiences of people with disabilities are rarely taught, there is a long history of forced sterilization and institutionalization, “hiding” people with disabilities from the general public in our country. Not only is human variation natural, but we honor the inherent worth and dignity of all people when we embrace the diversity of bodies and abilities.

From the text of Genesis 1:27 in the Hebrew Bible, Christians, Jews, and Muslims get the notion that humans are made “in the image of God,” (*Hebrew: tzelem elohim; Latin: Imago Dei*). I find this to be a beautiful concept. From this perspective, *all* people of *all* abilities are just as God intended, reflecting the divine. As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of all people and recognize each of us as

³ Norman Kunc.

⁴ Norman Kunc.

sacred. We affirm that every body, every way of being, every way of communicating is worthy, dignified, and sacred. Many famous people have had disabilities, from Harriet Tubman and George Washington Carver to Maya Angelou and Whoopi Goldberg. They would not be who they are to us today without their disabilities, whether or not we're aware of them. On a more dire note, people with disabilities, especially black and brown people, are at a much greater risk of incarceration and dying by police violence⁵ because their behavior is often read as erratic and unpredictable. I recently learned that Emmett Till's disability likely played a role in the prejudice that led to his death.⁶ (**Pause**)

There's an incredible documentary called "Crip Camp" that came out in the last year or two, if you haven't gotten a chance to see it yet. It follows the story of several campers and counselors who attended and/or worked at Camp Jened, a camp for the disabled in New York in the 1970s, galvanizing many of them to go on and mobilize for rights for the disabled. Being able to come together—and both goof off as teenagers as well as discuss the barriers in their lives—enabled many of them to be agents for change, helping win improvements in people's lives, and passing significant legislation like the 504 and ADA.⁷

One of the most moving scenes in the movie for me is a conversation amongst the campers, all of whom were disabled. One of the campers, Nancy Rosenblum, answered a question in a discussion about the campers' experiences with their parents. When the person who elicited the

⁵ "Disability Solidarity."

⁶ Lewis, "Emmett Till & the Pervasive Erasure of Disability In Conversations about White Supremacy & Police Violence."

⁷ Netflix, *CRIP CAMP*.

question wasn't able to understand Nancy's way of speaking, he asked the group if anyone else got what she was saying. A third person was able to reiterate her words and confirm with her that he had accurately repeated her message. Rather than leaving her out, the community found a way to include her. Rather than identifying Nancy as having a problem with speaking clearly, they identified the problem as not being able to understand, and that together, by slowing down and relying on each other, the whole group too could understand what Nancy had to say.⁸

The seventh principle of Unitarian Universalism asks us to consider ourselves as part of an interdependent web of existence. This scene in "Crip Camp," alongside the incredible work of the disability justice movement, is a strong example of interdependence. We can learn to live this value from disability communities that have expertise in interdependence. It's time we take ableism seriously and look closely at the structures we are creating, both in terms of our buildings but also in terms of our social structures. It is one of the main reasons I personally am a part of religious community—because we need each other. People need other people. All of us do. And when we come together, and truly make room for each other's stories, there is so much we can do.

How might we be implicitly lifting up ideas that there is a right or best way for bodies to be? What about our language? Many negative terms like "lame" and "dumb" are left unexamined from their histories of eugenics and ableism. What about our buildings? Can people actually get in? Once they get in, can they use the restroom? Access the changing table? Bring their

⁸ Netflix.

children where they need to go? Fit in the chairs? Hear adequately? What about our attitudes and our trainings? Are people prepared to welcome people with disabilities into this community and support them in being able to show up fully as themselves? What needs to happen to make welcoming more complete? While I *know* that Unitarian Universalists have done some great work on this, there is always more work to be done. Bodies change shape and capability over time—they are not static. We can think about these questions not only because our own circumstances may change some day, but also because of *who we are leaving out of our communities right now*.

As the mantra embraced by the disability rights movement says, “nothing about us without us.” If we want to engage in this work, it is not something we can merely do *on behalf of others* but is a conversation in which we need to include the voices of the disabled. Whether or not those stories are known in this community, I can guarantee you they are here. And when we make room for conversations about people’s experiences with disabilities and with ableism, so much more could be possible. “*The children of Jowonio know—not because they have been told—but because they have lived it.*”

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