

Disability Theology for This Moment

This week I was re-reading a bit from ecotheologian Sallie McFague, who asked: Wouldn't it change everything to think of the world as God's body?

I was reading these words on the hard bathroom floor with a child's elbow digging into my rib, waiting to help another child with their hygiene, just *immersed* in some of the unmentioned parts of enfleshed life.

Wouldn't it change everything to think of the world as God's body?

The world is God's body, dimpled & cracked, fertile & barren, rugged and so soft. The world is God's body, belching undignified magma and emitting sulfurous fumes.

The world is God's body, mountaintops amputated for coal within, deaf and covered in chattering birdsong, blind and blossoming in a million shades of pink, disabled and worth everything.

If the world is God's body, God hurts every day. And this is not tragedy but fact. That every body suffers and finds pleasure. Dances and aches. Lives and dies.

Sometime after my bathroom floor reading, I found myself in a soft chair for meditation, pondering the body of God, and my own body.

How it is trustworthy and traitorous. How I know every inch of flesh, every hair, but also have no idea what may be unfolding beneath my skin.

How I can slow my breath and even my heart, but have no control over a fluttering muscle in the lid of my eye. How every function could cease at any moment.

If God has a body, does God have an unknown end lurking somewhere within? Cancer cells dividing too fast, neurons losing their spark?

If the world is God's body, God is so powerful and so very vulnerable.

We have learned a lot in these last two years about the vulnerability of the body. About our culture's anxiety of the body. About which bodies we treasure or trash, preserve or sacrifice, find worthy or ignore.

In our collective pandemic reckoning with mortality and bodily limitations, with pain and suffering, we in this country have responded together as we often do: alternating denial and obsession, commodification and distraction, romanticization and rejection.

Disabled Americans have been surprised by none of it, even as they have mobilized to advocate for their safety and dignity, even as they have innovated vast networks of collective care and agency, even as they have shared their lifelong experiences of surviving isolation and limitation and lack of access with abled folks who were shocked by the challenges of living a circumscribed life in a world that had heretofore been built for them.

This morning we continue our “theology for this moment” sermon series, exploring different theological frameworks that speak into this moment of global pandemic and the accelerating crisis of climate collapse.

And this morning we particularly learn from the wisdom of Disability Theology, which calls us toward living ever more profoundly, inclusively, fully, and joyfully into the limitations, pain, mortality of our embodied existence and that of the earth.

There are as many manifestations of disability theory and theology as there are ways of being a body in this world. For today’s service I have been particularly moved by the work of disabled theologian Sharon Betcher and her book *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, which proposes that the pursuit of disability justice requires, at its core, a theological shift.

Betcher writes “Where life is lifted, lofted, into the idealistic, material sublime, there — because sorrow will not cease, because pain will not disappear — the body of the disabled will be made to carry the hostility that we feel [toward the contours of our lives].” (196)

Ultimately, she writes, the only way disability justice enters the world is when every person engages for themselves the deeply spiritual work of “bearing the weight of our mortality,” our finitude, and our pain as necessary realities of human experience and earthly truth.

We must all teach our spirits to locate beauty and the value of life *within* that circumscription, within bodily limits and pain and outside of categories of usefulness and wellness.

Until we can do this, we will continue to “other” and project our anxieties upon disabled bodies and create unjust conditions that normalize abled existence, exclude and invisible-ize disabled people, and do violence to disabled lives.

Hatred and exclusion of disability suggests a basic religious & cultural denial of the truth that “to live will involve us in suffering.”

Therefore, we must change our underpinnings. We must do our spiritual work, which Betcher describes as imagining and embodying “that love of life which can cope with suffering, which will find beauty - beyond idealism - in the midst of life.”

Disabled theologians, theorists, artists, and every day folks show the way toward our collective spiritual work simply by: “speaking an exquisitely poignant love for the world from a location that most of modernity has deemed insufferable, unlivable.”

Of course, this is must not be spiritual labor for abled folks to ask of disabled people, nor must it be a demand of disabled folks to be models or gurus for the abled or always happy or overcoming.

Rather it is Betcher’s reminder that profound spiritual authority rests within those whose bodies and lives cannot pretend an absence of pain or challenge or suffering.

Perhaps it is a reminder to all of us, truly, that it is our experience of our bodies’ limits that teaches us the most about what it means to be alive in a beautiful and mortal world.

Indeed, we are seeing on a massive scale in our world the crisis of ignored limits.

The world is God’s body, aching and fracked, bombed and melting, and we have refused to live within the limited abilities of the earth. Now we have made so much more suffering for our refusal to be mortal and small... our incapacity to rest and do less.

And now we turn to a suffering world, and we want to fix it because we cannot accept its suffering. But it was our refusal to be mortal and small that got us into the mess in the first place.

And maybe, we just need to stop and be with our bodies and their limits for a while.

Can you just stop and be with your body’s limits for a while?

Betcher writes that disability justice will require turning our “fearful and therefore zealous energies” away from the goal of eradicating suffering, “**a goal that works against the presence of the disabled,**” toward the “spiritual wisdom of composing ourselves with equanimity before the shifting tectonics of a lifetime.” (197)

She quotes Nietzsche, who wrote that “to affirm life only in the hope of eradicating suffering is not to affirm this life.” (197)

And this is actually the good news of disability theology for us all - the call to find beauty in what disability activist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha calls “adaptive joy” exactly within the circumstances of suffering that inevitably enter every life.

Because there will be so much of it. There is so much suffering. And there is also beauty and joy - not in transcending the muck of life, but right down in it.

This good news of disability theology is decidedly NOT the call to overcome or make meaning of suffering, but rather the call to recognize and celebrate that meaning and beauty is ALREADY THERE in every condition of human life, every single one, even and especially the ones society designates insufferable.

We don't need to do anything to earn or make that beauty and meaning, it is always already there.

Perhaps more than any system we've studied so far, disability theology troubles Unitarian and Universalist historic theologies in interesting and generative ways.

Our Unitarian side inherited a goal of moral perfectibility, alongside capitalist assumptions of productivity as part of perfection.

They believed in salvation by character and our responsibility to constantly do and be better. In fact, this belief that humanity could and should be perfected led to 20th century Unitarians dabbling in eugenics in our pursuit of progress onward and upward forever, in the flesh. A terrible, genocidal legacy.

Universalists believed in universal salvation without any requirement of puritanical self-improvement, but as they came to believe that the only hell was the one we created on this earth, they became obsessed with this-worldly salvation. This evolved to extremes when more Universalists became religious naturalists, agnostic, or atheist. Without God to do the universal saving, the human to-do list became very long.

To use the words of Sharon Betcher again, our fearful and therefore zealous energies were very much directed toward the goal of eradicating suffering. And she reminds us that is a goal *that works against the presence of the disabled*.

To these strands of our history, disability theology speaks a stark truth. We cannot save each other. We must not try to save each other. Salvation involves power imbalance anyway.

Better to love each other, to love each other through radical presence to what is, and freedom of mutual becoming, and great networks of collective care. Better to love each other with faith that our love does indeed change everything.

Betcher writes: “A religion that offers hope to the disabled would have much less to do with promising a future where tears will be no more than with promising the physical space where we, the disabled can limp or wheel up to or lie at the table without encountering the alienating social gaze, because all bodies present have metabolized their own mortality; that is, they have learned to hold the body humbly in mind.” (198)

What does it mean for us, as Unitarian Universalists to be reminded that we are not here to heal or save the world, but simply to love what is mortal.

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How would that shift our climate activism and help us hold our grief? How would that pave the way to disability justice and all kinds of justice - opening a radical and loving presence that insists upon inclusion without requiring our vision of salvation or wholeness?

How would ceasing to pursue the healing or salvation of the world allow us to love it into a thriving that is richly varied, and contextual, and beautiful within the limits of life?

Even, and especially in our pursuit of just and beloved community:

We are not here to heal or save the world but to love what is mortal.

And that will make all the difference.