

Disability and the image of God. Spring 2004 - Encountering the disabled God

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I RECENTLY READ AN ARTICLE ENTITLED “DISABILITY FOR THE RELIGIOUS” IN THE DISABILITY RAG – AN AMERICAN MAGAZINE PRIMARILY FOR DISABILITY RIGHTS ACTIVISTS.

The article implied that religion offers no relevant answers to the query, “What is disability?” According to the author the following answers are available: disability is (a) a punishment; (b) a test of faith; (c) the sins of the fathers visited upon the children; (d) an act of God; or (e) all of the above. If these were the only choices, I would have to agree that religion has no relevant answers.

Christianity has often been cited as the source of destructive stereotypes about people with disabilities.¹ In countering these views, the challenge for people of faith is (i) to acknowledge our complicity with the inhumane views and treatment related to people with disabilities and, (ii) to uncover this hidden history and to make it available for contemporary reflection.

As a person with a disability, I could not accept the traditional answers given to my query, “What is disability?” Since I have a congenital disability, I have had opportunities to hear and experience many of these so-called answers. They included: “You are special in God’s eyes, that’s why you were given this painful disability”, which didn’t seem logical. Or “Don’t worry about your pain and suffering now, in heaven you will be made whole.” Again, having been disabled from birth, I came to believe that in heaven I would be absolutely unknown to myself and perhaps to God. My disability has taught me who I am and who God is. What would it mean to be without this knowledge? I was told that God gave me a disability to develop my character. But at age six or seven, I was convinced that I had enough character now to last a lifetime. My family visited faith healers with me in tow. I was never healed. People asked about my hidden sins, but they must have been so well hidden that even I misplaced them. The theology that I heard was inadequate to my experience.

However, in my teen years, I became actively involved in the disability rights movement – the worldwide movement that has sought basic human rights for the now approximately 650-million persons with disabilities worldwide. Within the movement I came to understand why we people with disabilities have such depreciated views of ourselves and why so many of us are lacking in genuine convictions of personal worth. I began to see the “problem” not within my body, but with the societies that have made us outcasts, and viewed and treated us in demeaning and exclusionary ways. In America, I was among those who organised sit-ins to

achieve access to public transport, to seek access to public facilities, and to promote human and civil rights legislation. I became passionately committed to the view that society must be changed in order for our full value as human beings to be acknowledged.

While the disability rights movement and activism addressed my experience, it didn't always respond to my more spiritual and theological questions about the meaning of my disability. For a long time, I experienced a significant rift between my participation in the movement and my Christian faith. The movement offered me opportunities to work for change that I thought were unavailable in Christianity, but my faith gave a spiritual fulfilment that I found elusive elsewhere. Within the Church, other people with disabilities were often uninterested in political and activist matters. In the rights movement, fellow participants saw religion as damaging or at least irrelevant to their work.

Although I began to answer my own question of the meaning of my disability by articulating God's call for justice for the marginalised, thus including people with disabilities, I felt spiritually estranged from God. However, the return path towards intimacy with God began to be cleared as I read a passage from the Gospel of Luke, after an encounter with several other people with disabilities. The setting was the Shepard Centre, the local rehabilitation hospital for people with spinal cord and traumatic brain injuries. I had been asked by the facility's chaplain to lead a Bible study with several residents. One afternoon, after a long and frustrating day, I shared with the group my own doubts about God's care for me. I asked them if they could tell me how they would know if God was with them and understood their experience. There was a long silence, then an African-American young man said, "If God was in a sip/puff maybe he would understand."² We talked about the image for a while and concluded.

Several weeks later, I was reading Luke 24.36–39. It is set within the account of Jesus' death and resurrection, but the focus of this passage is really on his followers who are anxious and depressed. The passage reads: "While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them ... They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, 'Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see.' " It wasn't God in a sip/puff, but here was the resurrected Christ making good on the promise that God would be with us, embodied, as we are – disabled and divine. Reading this passage, I came to realise that here was a part of my hidden history as a Christian. The foundation of Christian theology is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet seldom is the resurrected Christ recognised as a deity whose hands, feet, and side bear the marks of profound physical impairment. The resurrected Christ of Christian tradition is a disabled God. This disabled God understood the experience of those in my Shepard Center Bible study, as well as my own, and called for justice not from the distant reaches of principle but by virtue of God's incarnation and ultimate knowledge of human contingency. Christian theology, insofar as it is an incarnational theology, has a calling to stand by contingency, mortality and the concreteness of creation and suffering.

This encounter with the disabled God was the source of the liberatory theology of disability that I have written about in *The Disabled God*,³ which calls both for justice and the recovery of vital Christian symbols and rituals. In promoting this vision, we also counter the prevailing sentiment that the religious practices and history of the able-bodied constitute the only relevant spiritual pulse and narrative, and that whatever is outside this ambit is of little, if any, significance.

What is the outcome of a life-changing encounter with the disabled God? Such an encounter

highlights the need for justice people with disabilities and the temporarily able-bodied. What is justice? Justice and just action are primarily virtues and practices of full participation, of persons deliberating about particular visions of human flourishing and working together to remove barriers in their institutions and relations so that they embody reciprocity and mutual appreciation of difference.

Justice is first about just listening, listening for the claims for justice made in the process of everyday life. This means attending to the ways in which everyday talk (and sometimes commonly accepted silence) makes claims about justice. They are not theories to be explicated or fully developed agendas to be followed; they are instead calls, pleas, or claims upon some people by others. Personal and social reflection on the demands of justice begins in heeding a call rather than in asserting and mastering a state of affairs. The call to be just is always situated in concrete social and congregational practices. Encounter must begin with listening, hearing the calls for justice expressed by people with disabilities who are among us.

Encountering the disabled God then makes possible thoroughgoing re-analysis of the connection between the myth of bodily perfection and the theological lengths to which we are willing to go in order to protect it. If Christ resurrected still participated fully in the experience of human life – including mysteriously the experience of impairment – we must be scandalised by our theological tendencies to perpetuate the myth of bodily perfection in our defence of heavenly (or, indeed, earthly) perfection. The disabled God nails the lie in our belief in a paradise in which we are “released” from the truth of worldly and bodily existence. That which God has called good, and in which God has participated through the incarnation, cannot be simply viewed as a temporary “evil” which we repudiate in order to participate in the promised fullness of life.

Furthermore, a theology that examines our own complicity in the theological justification of the myth of bodily perfection allows us to interrogate our own rage at mortality. The truth of mortality is threaded in our bones and genes and yet we, who are categorised as “unhealthy”, find it hard to love God and ourselves. We would be a god. We rage within at God or at ourselves. We constantly kick against the limits of being human. We devise inhuman schedules, inhumane expectations of others and ourselves, and inhumane needs of wealth and success. Stress-induced impairment will soon be among the leading causes of disability in the Western world, as we work our bodies beyond God-given limits. Affecting men and women in their thirties to fifties, stress-induced disabilities, like repetitive strain injury, stroke, and heart attack, teach us that we have yet to hear God’s call to be fully human, which means accepting our mortal limits. It is worth noting that our limits are neither constant nor uniform. Yet in the practice of ordinary faithfulness to our call to be human and to be for the others, we must learn to love our mortality as God does.

Finally, we must develop a risky imagination as a result of encountering the disabled God. Being at risk is the fundamental experience of human life. It is our birthright. The theological use we make of this is up to us. We can cultivate a risky imagination which understands that as we seek to address the meaning of disability and chronic illness we may find new ways of being in the world. Moving towards change is risky. But staying where we have been is deadly. Hopelessness takes no risk; it’s what we have been taught. The will to practice hope in the context of our own lives, our spiritual homes and in the world is risky. We have no assurance that our efforts will be repaid, our lamentations heard, our joys celebrated, our pain revered. We do not know that justice will be done and yet we must practice hope and work for justice. This is hope as a spiritual discipline.

Theologically, people with disabilities have tried most, if not all, of the well-trodden theological paths in responding to our queries about the meaning of disability. We have found most treacherous and inaccessible. We are unsatisfied and willing to risk new imaginings, new symbols and renewed efforts to uncover our hidden history. We put the question to others who care: Are you willing to risk understanding God more fully as you move toward full participation of people with disabilities and the chronically ill in your midst and beyond? Will we together develop a risky theological imagination that asks what is God's vision of human flourishing not just for some but for all, not just for able-bodied but the disabled, not just for those in the Western world but for the whole world?

People with disabilities can enable Christian communities to rethink the meaning of difference in our midst. Our presence reminds everyone that the boundaries of group difference are ambiguous and shifting, without clear borders. Individuals who are currently able-bodied have a greater than 50 per cent chance of becoming physically disabled, either temporarily or permanently. Ours is a minority you can join involuntarily, without warning, at any time. This risk can produce creativity and openness to what God will do.

For some, simply encountering the disabled God is risky. But, I believe that this encounter can open the possibility for conceiving the ways that God is already acting in the world, and for developing new and better imaginings. The Church needs to take risks to see justice enacted. I am convinced that if we look carefully and critically at our Christian tradition, we can uncover bits of a hidden history and perhaps more importantly find guide markers that can take us to a further place along the path towards human flourishing. If we risk encountering the disabled God, we may apprehend with greater clarity the fullness of God in the distinctiveness and diversity we see around us.

The time is now for justice and vision for the faith that includes just listening with people with disabilities and with chronic illness. We are called forth to risk the bread of life and eschew the crumbs. Only then can we articulate the implications of a theology of full participation.

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1 For example, the introduction to a collection of essays by mostly Canadian women with disabilities includes this statement: "Many people, including the disabled, still believe the traditional myths about the disabled. Some of these negative attitudes have their origins in ancient religious beliefs that regarded the disabled as devil possessed, or as corporeal manifestations of family guilt."

2 A sip/puff is a head mounted accessory used to actuate a two position switch by a simple sip or puff.

3 Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberation Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994)