

Disability or Different Ability?  
Sunday, June 30, 2024  
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists  
Summerfield, FL  
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County  
Eustis, FL  
Rev. Cynthia A. Snavely

Elyn R. Saks, associate dean and Orrin B. Evans Professor of Law, Psychology, and Psychiatry and the Behavioral Sciences at the University of Southern California Gould Law School, an expert in mental health law, and who lives with schizophrenia herself and has written about her experience with the illness in her autobiography, *The Center Cannot Hold*, has said, “No one would ever say that someone with a broken arm or a broken leg is less than a whole person, but people say that or imply that all the time about people with mental illness.”

Jenny Morris in her book, *Pride Against Prejudice: Transforming Attitudes to Disability* writes, “One night I was being lifted into bed by two care attendants when I noticed my shoes were still on. When I said, ‘Could you take my shoes off?’ the care assistant said, ‘Say ‘please’ I don’t know whether the humiliation and anger I felt at saying ‘please’ was worth the benefit of having my shoes taken off.”

Irving Kenneth Zola in *Missing Pieces: A Chronicle of Living with a Disability* writes, “No one, at least in our society, likes a complainer! But it is a reality, my reality, and as such I record it. Chairs without arms to push myself up from: unpadded seats which all too quickly produce sores; showers and toilets without handrails to maintain my balance; surfaces too slippery to walk on; staircases without banisters to help hoist myself; buildings without ramps, making ascent exhausting if not dangerous; every curbstone a precipice; car, plane and theater seats too cramped for my braced leg; and trousers too narrow for my leg brace to pass through. With such trivia is my life plagued.”

From Jenny Morris again, “I used to believe I owed an explanation to whomever demanded one. I’ve heard ‘mind if I ask you a stupid/personal question?’ from therapists, housewives, gas jockeys, sales clerks, joggers, bartenders, ad infinitum. I detest it. It hurts. I feel like an object of curiosity, not a woman.”

Jen Salamone, who won this year’s EqualAccess sermon contest, says, “I am disabled and proud. It is not my differences with which I struggle but the barriers imposed upon me by an inaccessible society; a society that was not built for me, that openly communicates ‘you don’t belong.’”

Equal Access with two Us in Equal is “Unitarian Universalists living with disabilities, our families, friends, and allies coming together for a common purpose:

“To enable the full engagement of people with disabilities in Unitarian Universalist communities and the broader society.

They say, “Our work includes:

- Raising awareness, empowering change, and promoting a framework for advocacy grounded in our Unitarian Universalist faith;
- Providing resources to help Unitarian Universalist communities become barrier-free and inclusive;
- Incorporating the gifts of ministry offered by people with disabilities into the faith community;
- Enabling Unitarian Universalist congregations to understand and minister to the spiritual and personal needs of people with disabilities, their families, and friends;
- Collaborating with other Unitarian Universalist organizations and the Unitarian Universalist Association to counter oppression.”

One of the first things we can do as Unitarian Universalists is examine ourselves and our own congregations to see if we are being less than welcoming and affirming and then working to negate stigma and fully incorporate all into the beloved community of our congregations. That is a beginning, not an end. We also should commit to being advocates in the wider society. And when we make a mistake, which we will, we can apologize and learn.

Last week at General Assembly a team had prepared an introduction to their work which was a written PowerPoint presentation with music behind it. Someone in the chat wrote, “I’m legally blind. Is anything happening now?” The team apologized and committed to providing a voiceover.

My sister has MS. Her biggest complaint is fatigue, yet she volunteers for multiple church and veterans’ organizations. She went to a first meeting for a state disabled veterans’ organization only to find the meetings were held on the second floor of a building with no elevator. That was not a problem for her personally, but she quickly pointed out how inappropriate a venue for the organization this was, and she got the venue changed.

Recently I picked up and moved a chair at an event because tables were set too close for a person using a rollator to get through.

Sometimes though mistakes cannot be fixed.

In 2022 PBS began a news piece like this, “One summer night, Misty Castillo stepped out of her house in Salem, Oregon, called 911 and asked for the police, saying her son was mentally ill, was assaulting her and her husband and had a knife.

“He’s drunk and he’s high and he’s mentally ill,” Castillo told the emergency dispatcher, emphasizing again her son’s mental condition. Less than five minutes later, a police officer burst into the house and shot Arcadio Castillo III dead as he stood, his mother said later, ‘frozen like a deer in headlights.’

“He didn’t try to calm him down. He just came in and immediately shot my son,’ Castillo said.”

The article contains another story, “Matt Jones was apparently suffering from a severe manic episode while standing on a highway with a handgun. Police were everywhere, sirens wailing. The scene on July 6 in the community of Bradley was captured by a bystander on video. One officer took a shot and then others opened fire, killing Jones in a hail of bullets.

“The 36-year-old had been unable to get his medication refilled and was experiencing delusions and hallucinations, his fiancée, Dreamer Marquis, said.

“‘He desperately wanted help,’ Marquis said. ‘He knew that he needed the medication in order to live a normal life because he knew that he would have manic episodes that would get him in trouble.’

“Advocates for people with mental illness say it’s clear they face greater risk of a police encounter resulting in their death,” [How some encounters between police and people with mental illness can turn tragic | PBS News.](#)

Calling police, who may not be trained to handle a mental health crisis, may not be the best response to a person in a mental health crisis, but too often it is the only option. Many are working to move some community funds into mental health services that might prevent such tragedies as those of the deaths of Castillo and Jones.

Our society stigmatizes and even punishes people with mental health disabilities. Most are not going to be killed but too many are on our streets, in our jails, or unable to find or to keep work.

Some among us have been claiming Unitarian Universalism has become too identitarian. No Black Lives Matter, All Lives Matter. No UUA General Assembly resolution “Embracing Transgender, Nonbinary, Intersex and Gender Diverse People is a Fundamental Expression of UU Religious Values” singling out one group. Let’s not single out any group. But as TriUU’s Black Lives Matter sign says, All Lives Won’t Matter till Black Lives Matter. The same can be said about Trans, nonbinary, intersex and gender diverse people, and the same can be said for people with disabilities.

Remember the quote from Jen Salamone, “It is not my differences with which I struggle but the barriers imposed upon me by an inaccessible society; a society that was not built for me, that openly communicates ‘you don’t belong.’”

We create communities. We create societies made for white, straight, cis, able-bodied people that communicate to too many, “You don’t belong.”

So let’s rethink the way we build these communities, this society. Let’s work at creating spaces that communicate to more and more people. “You belong.” “We have considered your needs.” “We welcome you.”

Dr. Rebekah Taussig, writer and teacher, author of *Sitting Pretty: The View From My Ordinary Resilient Disabled Body*, says, “It’s so [easy] to see the one disabled person and say, ‘She needs

*a cure so she can fit into our world!’ It’s much less common, much harder to recognize, ‘We need to change our world to fit more people.’”*

One final story from UU minister Elea Kemler. She begins with a quote. "Fear's pronoun is singular: I've got to watch out for me and mine. Love's pronoun is plural: we're in this together, and together we can grow things that will blossom even in a time of drought."

—Kathleen McTigue

“My son, Caleb, and I went to Starbucks on a recent Saturday morning. We often do this as a prelude to the weekly grocery shopping. It sweetens the deal, which is important, as he is about to be 14 and on the autism spectrum. Both of these factors contribute to his resistance to what in the autism world we call ‘non-preferred activities.’ Caleb is really tall for his age, 6’4” and still growing. This is a factor because he is big and often gets in people’s way without realizing. He is also a sweet, sensitive kid, which is not a factor, except that I am his mother.

“Caleb was standing by the counter waiting for his Frappuccino (decaf—we don’t want to stunt his growth) and blocking the path of a young dad trying to herd three small children. The dad said to Caleb, ‘Could you get your head out of the clouds and get out of the way.’ It was not horrible, just frustrated and a little unkind, something a person says when they think other people's kids are being rude. Something a person says when they haven’t learned there are disabilities you can't immediately see.

“Fortunately, Caleb remained oblivious but I walked over to the dad and said to him quietly, ‘He's on the autism spectrum. He doesn't know where his body is in space or when he’s in someone's way.’ I did not add, though I wanted to, ‘You may not realize this yet, but I promise you that someday your children will also need the kindness of strangers.’

“Soon it will be Caleb’s decision whether or not to explain himself. But as he gets older and bigger (and bigger), my fear gets bigger too. I fear he will be met with more judgment and less understanding. He is so easily hurt; I fear the meanness. The dad nodded. He did not say anything but I thought maybe he took it in, a little bit.

“We ended up sitting at the counter next to another young dad and his daughter. That dad told Caleb in great detail about the Clover coffee machine they now have at Starbucks and how it works and why the coffee it makes is better. They talked about pistons and forced hot water for a long time. ‘Thank you,’ I told him, when Caleb got up to go to the bathroom. ‘My son is on the spectrum too,’ he said. We smiled at each other and I remembered again that we are never alone, even when fear tells us we are. I remembered again that I choose to trust in kindness. I choose to believe that my child will not be alone either.

## **Prayer**

“God, who holds us all in love: the children and the tired fathers and all who are afraid, let us remember again that love’s pronoun is plural. We are in this together. We will not be left alone.”

May we be among those who leave no one alone.