

Sermon

It is August and July's Disability Pride Month has passed but we can be allied to disabled people all the time, and as UU's we have a long history of acceptance and inclusivity, as in the previous reading and that committee. As in our work with the Side With Love campaign, the process to remove 'standing with' as a recognition of how words and metaphor have power. I love the idea that mine is a prophetic body. I have two disabling conditions, and mostly invisible disabilities. My disabilities are forms of neurodivergence, which means my brain is structurally different and my whole neurotype is impacted. You literally can not separate my disability from me, it is in my very foundation, the way I think, feel, and move.

I'm Autistic. Maybe you are thinking...she doesn't look Autistic. And that is probably since you have been sold a picture of autism over time: young white boy, obsessed with trains, or his adult version, a man now, a "Big Bang's" Sheldon Cooper, still obsessed with trains, into science, repetitive and restricted behaviors. That has long been the picture by the medical establishment, untrustworthy advocates organizations looking for a cure or hoping to eradicate it, struggling parents, exhausted teachers, and the media.

But autism is embodied in as many ways as folks have bodies. There is even a common presentation known as "atypical", one I fit well, which often shows up in women, femme, and non-binary folks. This is not common knowledge. It is difficult to learn the nuances of a community when even through respected institutions, like the medical establishment, we are so profoundly misunderstood. I did not even integrate this understanding of myself until a few years ago when I self diagnosed, and about three weeks ago when I received an official diagnosis.

Autism is a brain difference that is basic and fundamental to who we are. This means that Autism is an important part of who we are and the way we are in the world. Autistic people develop differently to non-autistic people. Autistic people think, move, interact, sense and process differently to what people might expect. We also have more qualities and characteristics in common with other Autistic people than with non-autistic people. Each person is different, but Autistic people will be different to non-autistic people in the way we:

- Socialise and communicate, including the way we connect, make and understand friendships and relationships, and use speech and body language
- Think and process, including the way we see patterns and connections, imagine and play, experience and express our senses, emotions and executive functioning, and in the way our brains develop

These differences can look different for children and adults.

Autistic adults are likely to be non-traditional communicators, both in expressing themselves and in receiving and interpreting communication. These differences in the way Autistic adults socialize and communicate are not "good" or "bad" – they are just Autistic ways of being in the world and interacting with it and other people. Autistic adults do not lack "social skills": they may lack non-autistic social skills, and may display organic, Autistic social skills instead.

All oppression is linked to the idea of a perfect human body, a white able bodied man, straight, well off, straight sized, Christian. And anything that deviates from that normal, that perfect, is by default inferior, less than. But that's the wrong way to look at it, the norm is asymmetry, is deviance, is diversity. There are more differences within groups than there are between. Meaning when we look for example, at the groups of women and men there is more diversity within that group of women-queer, BIPOC, trans- more variety and definitions of womanhood, then there are between the groups of men and women. But we treat "woman" as a monolith, and like men and women are so different they could come from different planets. No. The baseline is difference; normal is just somewhere on the bell curve.

At its worst ableism leads to death, like with Elijah. But there is also rejection, social isolation, being othered, treated as less than, underestimated, thought to be deceitful, or incapable. You are othered, you are seen as scary, as a threat, as difficult. And they respond to that with violence. They over medicate and under support.

That drug ketamine, used on Elijah. Ketamine saved my life. It brought back cognition, curiosity, and creativity I had lost. The same thing that saved me, killed him. I have another disability, treatment resistant depression, and that is what truly debilitated me. I've been depressed since adolescence, anxious as a child, but I never knew depression could get so bad. At its worst my sickness kept me out of work for a year and a half. I lost seventy pounds, I couldn't eat but lived on meal replacement shakes just to get enough calories in my body to take my pills. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't talk or read. I couldn't think the way I think. I had no special interests or curiosity or creativity or love or connection. But Beloved community was always there for me. I have been embraced by Unitarian Universalism in deed and principles. My faith has been my sense of belonging, my connection to others. And I think of my faith, of my faith journey, as a journey towards understanding deeply the disservice societies obsession with a hierarchy of human worth is, and instead, that at our foundation we are all inherently worthy and dignified and we need do nothing to earn that: not through labor, not through capitalism, not through inspiration. And I often think the experience of being on ketamine, when my body is still and my mind doing mental gymnastics, that I don't feel altered but instead like I am seeing something just beneath the surface. That something is being revealed rather than distorted. I feel in a liminal space between life and death, beyond the veil and like I can see the whole of the universe and how deeply connected we are.

Disability is a part of the rich tapestry of human diversity, and something that nearly all of us will experience at some point in our lives. It's also a significant identity that defines how we experience the world. Yet people with disabilities have been marginalized and misunderstood for generations. All disabilities and their intersecting identities should be acknowledged, valued, and respected, and one way to do that is during Disability Pride Month.

Disability Pride Month is celebrated every July and is an opportunity to honor the history, achievements, experiences, and struggles of the disability community. Why July? It marks the anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, landmark legislation that broke down

barriers to inclusion in society. But barriers still exist, which is why we need to honor every kind of disability, the people who identify with them, and the wide range of supports they need to thrive. According to the CDC, 27 percent of the US population has some kind of disability — that's one in four people. Most people will experience being disabled at some point in their lives, whether temporarily or permanently. In other words, disability pride and improving accessibility should matter to everyone. We need to unapologetically normalize disability, the people who experience and identify with it, and the wide range of supports they need to thrive.

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.” But I belong in UU, I belong in Beloved community. This is a love letter to UU, and to you all, who have accepted me and embraced me and given me the opportunity to shine. Now I ask this of you:

Teach others how to be Beloved community. How to interrupt in word and action microaggressions, those small every day slights that lets folks know they, and people like them, are less than. Teach how to not exclude, and go beyond and teach them how to include, to embrace. In our closing hymn we will hear the words: to be loved you need to be known. This has been my opportunity to be known a little deeper. You invited me into your sanctuary but also into your worship, your committees, your community. Even zoom is an accessibility practice, allowing me to participate, also allowing me to lead from a script and passion which is how I can connect. You helped me sing, literally. Help others to find their voice by speaking up when they can’t. Keep leading with curiosity, with kindness, with love. I’m going to play our closing hymn and then open it up to congregational reflections.