

Disability Wisdom

September 22, 2024

Rev. Dr. Judith E. Wright

Julia Watts Belser was the guest speaker for the Ware Lecture at this year's UU General Assembly.

The Ware lecture, is one of our faith's most prestigious lectures.

Her speech was powerful and impactful,

and was really a sermon, hidden within the form of a lecture,

based on Julia's life as a person of disability.

She is a rabbi, a scholar, and spiritual teacher

who works at the intersection of disability studies,

queer feminist Jewish ethics, and environmental justice.

I will be showing her lecture following Coffee Hour today in the Alliance room.

Her Ware lecture made me more aware of places inside me

where I use my relatively healthy body

as a norm upon which I size up everyone else's body –.

Mainly, I believe I do this unconsciously, unaware of the negative impact

my thinking may have on a person whose body is quite different from mine.

I suspect that many of us do this, as well,

and so, I am bringing this to you this morning,
sharing a beginning glimpse at the relationship between disability
and what is termed ableism.

Since this lecture I have read her book *Loving Our Bones:
Disability wisdom and the spiritual subversiveness of knowing
ourselves whole*.

She writes that ableism is a complex set of power structures
that privileges certain bodies or minds as “normal”
while designating others as “abnormal.

By ableism I mean a whole host of systems, practices, and policies
that stigmatize disability and deny disabled people access, agency,
resources and self-determination.¹

Let’s look at two chapters in “Loving Our Bones,” -
two chapters about Moses, as a disabled prophet.
These two chapters will help us better understand
the relationship between ableism and disability.

And, to better understand these two chapters,
let’s first look at this morning’s scripture.

From our scripture this morning from the book of Deuteronomy,

¹ Julia Watts Belser. *Loving Our Bones*. Kindle, p. 38

the fifth book of the Torah,
we find the speeches of Moses to the Israelites.
Chapter 34 is the final chapter of Deuteronomy,
containing the blessings of Moses, before his death on Mount Nebo.
The picture on our Order of Worship shows Moses
looking longingly at the Promise Land, the land he will never enter.
He is blessing the Israelites to continue on without him.
Who was Moses? Or perhaps who is Moses?
Today the teachings of Moses are fundamental to Judaism,
regardless of whether or not he was an actual historical figure.
Today the majority of biblical scholars concur that Moses is actually
a composite of several different traditions.²

The name Moshe or Moses has a meaning of “being drawn out,”
and, as legend says, Pharoah’s daughter rescued him
from the Nile River in Egypt, and gave him this name
because she “drew him out of the water.”³

Such a motif is found in earlier ancient stories,
such as the sage of Sargon I, founder of the Akkadian empire.
Legend says that the infant Sargon was placed “in a box made of
reeds,

² Jeani Pierre Isbouts, *The History and Archaeology of the Bible*, The Great Courses, Course Guide, p. 29.

³ Ibid

smeared with tar and cast on the river to escape his enemies.”

Archaeologist and historian Jean Pierre Isbouts,

**instructor for our current Great Course on the History and
Archaeology of the Bible,**

**teaches that in ancient times such a literary parallel with the story of
Moses was intentional, to show how the birth of great leaders is
ordained by the divine, and Moses is no exception.**

**We learn from the biblical stories that Moses had a speech
impediment.**

**We first read of his impediment in the book of Exodus,
where the Israelite people are enslaved in Egypt, at the mercy
of an oppressive Pharaoh.**

Moses is called by God to speak directly to Pharaoh.

Moses is filled with doubt that he can fulfill God's wishes:

In the book of Exodus we find a description of Moses's anxieties:

But Moses said to the Lord,

Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words,

Either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant,

I am slow of speech and slow of tongue. (Exodus, 4:10).

Moses is a very reluctant prophet.

In Exodus 4: 13 he says: *“please, O Lord, make someone else your agent.”*

Moses does not want to take the job.

Many of us know this moment, when we are asked to do something that we believe someone else would be better equipped to do.

God’s response to Moses is one of anger,

reaffirming that Moses is the one God has chosen for this task.

Julia Watts Belser, advocate for the disabled,

writes in her book *“Loving Our Bones”* that someday

when reading this scripture, she wanted God to say

*“I know the world is harsh. I know that some people will mock you and others will disdain you. I know that many of them will not heed your words. But I need you. I choose you. You’re the one I’m going to send.”*⁴

Yet on other days Julia is *“bolstered by the honesty of God’s frustration,,*

by the fact that Moses’s disability isn’t fashioned

*into an opt-out clause on spiritual responsibility.”*⁵

At God’s suggestion, Moses tells Aaron, his brother, the words that God has given directly to Moses.

Aaron understands, as his brother, what Moses is saying and relays Moses’s and thus, God’s messages to the Israelites.

⁴ Julia Watts Belser, *Loving Our Bones*, Kindle ed., p. 76,

⁵ Ibid.

Julia Belser finds God, in this scene, dependent upon both Moses and Aaron, to accomplish the things God wants done.

She rejects the ancient concept that God can do anything God wishes.

While she feels the presence of the divine *“like a live wild current running through this world,*

intimately intertwined with flesh and blood and stone,”

she asserts that God needs humans to fulfill God’s plans.

With some humor Julia Belser states that God has a staffing problem: She says:

“God has the perennial problem of having to arrange and marshal a factitious bunch of humans

to undertake the work that God wants to accomplish in this world.

Good help is hard to find,

and the people God selects aren’t always reliable.

Sometimes they don’t always execute the job in the precise ways God desires.

*Sometimes they don’t show up. Sometimes they turn God down.”*⁶

Relating God’s frustration to the frustrations of a person who is disabled,

⁶ Julia Watt Belser, p. 78.

Belser writes that this is an experience that many disabled people know.

**-having to rely on others to accomplish physical tasks,
such as getting out of bed or moving furniture.**

-Disabled folks are forced to learn skills in how to ask for help from others.

Belser describes developing such skills as “the nature of God’s power.”

In Numbers 20:11 we find a very frustrated and irritable God who chastises Moses for striking a rock for water, as God had asked him to do.

God tells Moses he will not enter into the Promised Land because of this action.

Why? Moses was not supposed to strike the rock, but to speak to it instead.

God’s irritation and anger remind Belser

of the many times she has had to give up control as a disabled person.

Confined to a wheelchair with cerebral palsy,

Julia identifies with a God whose wishes are unfulfilled:

-when people trying to help her put things too high on a shelf,

-or someone arranges heavy flowerpots on her balcony;

-or some else has to buy her groceries for her.

She states that while it’s often good enough,

it's not how she would have done these things.

Julia Watts Belser is also clear that some disabled people may be buoyed by spiritual and religious stories that connect their disability with a religious meaning or sense of spiritual call. She celebrates that for such a person.

Yet she does not believe that everything “happens for a reason.”

She views such scripting of one's religious beliefs onto a disabled person's life

as “hijacking” their life story, using it for someone else's ends.

Saying things such as “It's God's will,” or “it's part of a divine plan,” for example.

She advocates instead for holding

“disability as part and parcel of this life,

an ordinary fact, just one more element of what it means to be human.

Like any part of our experience, disability

can be a rich source of spiritual insight, and understanding

But those spiritual implications aren't predetermined.

The meaning that disability brings to one's life is complex and multifaceted, as deep as bone.”

Moses claimed his place before his people as a person with a speech disability.

He learned, over time, to speak slowly, and simpler.

For Julia Watts Belser,

when Moses says the lines of blessing in Deuteronomy,

she hears him *stutter throughout the long, beautiful recitation of his own life story.*

She hears him claim his space.

She hears him stutter without flinching and without shame.

For forty years Moses led his people through the desert.

The journey wasn't easy. People asked Moses for a thousand things, and at times the people were difficult and rebellious.

In spite of all that he did, in the end, Moses is told by God that he cannot enter the Promised Land.

While within the Jewish tradition there have been many explanations for why Moses cannot enter into the Promise Land,

such as he should have spoken to the rock, rather than strike it for water,

Julia Watts Belser does not buy any of the explanations given.

For her, the human impulse to look for an explanation is a powerful assumption, such as "Moses must have done something wrong to justify such a bitter fate."

Julia is suspicious of finding any explanation for the question of why Moses couldn't enter the Promised Land.

She writes: "*Disability has taught me to be suspicious of this impulse.*"

As a disabled person, I feel the force of this question in other people's gaze, In their insatiable interest.

Grown men stop me on the street to ask:

What happened to you?

Grocery checkers want to know, Why do you use a wheelchair?

I am buying shoes, and the clerk asks, How long have you been like this?

Waiting for the bus one sunny afternoon, a woman lays it plain:

What's wrong with you?

There's something about disability that makes perfect strangers suddenly

think themselves entitled to the intimate story of a life.”⁷

Why can't Moses enter into the Promised Land?

Julia Watts Belser comes to believe that there is no reason, no answer to this question.

“Moses simply cannot enter the Promised Land,” not because of any wrongdoing.

But for me, it looks simply because his time in this life has run out.

Moses pleaded with God for 515 times to let him continue on with his people.

The truth is that almost all of his original followers have died, and he is now leading the children of those who originally fled from Egypt.

⁷ Julia Watts Belser, p. 93

It is not his destiny to lead them into Canaan.

Joshua will be their new leader.

Those of us in our elder years can empathize with Moses' longing to continue on, in spite of our knowing that our time on earth is limited.

Belser uses this image of Moses not being able to cross over to acknowledge the many ways that people with disabilities are not able to do things that the abled among us can.

She writes of how such loss is dangerous territory for the disabled:

Instead of being swallowed up by able folks' sympathies,

Belser acknowledges her pain arising from:

– the many lands she cannot enter because of the losses in her life,

And at the same time, she wants to hold onto the beauty of her life.

**And instead of prayers for her losses, she wants a call to action
(Sounds very UU!)**

Action that helps the disabled live more fully the lives they have been given.

I recently read that one quarter of Americans are disabled.

This includes people with visible disabilities as well as hidden disabilities.

We have within our congregation people both visible and with hidden disabilities .

**Hidden disabilities include those of us
who are suffering from long term illnesses,**

such as Covid 19, cancer, Lyme Disease,
and other immune compromised illnesses.

Importantly, our UU General Assembly passed
an Action of Immediate Witness this June
that calls for centering love amidst the on-going impact of Covid 19.
This action of Immediate Witness calls upon us
as UUs to, among other things:

- continuing the shift to mask-affirming culture
-
- openness to experimenting with different community-created
gathering approaches to maximize access for all,
-
- centering the needs of higher-risk,
disabled, and otherwise COVID-cautious people in the
decision-making processes

In our Parish Committee retreat in August, we discussed
creating a masking policy for the coming congregational year.

The Parish Committee is in the process of creating such a masking
policy,

and welcomes, of course, hearing from any of you about such a
policy.

I have been impacted by reading *Loving Our Bones*,
and hearing Julia Watts Belser's Ware lecture.

It is my hope that many of you will read her book or attend the viewing today in the Alliance room after Coffee hour.

Disability wisdom is a justice issue.

For all of us, those who are disabled and those who are abled.

May we as a loving congregation find ways to be as inclusive as we can of those who are disabled among us.

Peace and Love to you.

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