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## Saying Yes to Disability

Julia Watts Belser  
with Devorah Greenstein

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A Plain Language Piece  
from

***Loving Our Own Bones:  
Disability Wisdom and the Spiritual Subversiveness of  
Knowing Ourselves Whole***

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# Saying Yes to Disability

## People Ask the Wrong Questions

After synagogue one day, a visitor asked me, “What’s wrong with you?” She looked from my face to my wheels. “I have a disability,” I said. I looked straight back at her, until she looked away. The woman didn’t mean to insult me. But she looked at my wheelchair and thought I was broken.

So many people treat disability as a problem. They think that disability is something that needs to be fixed. Like the woman in the synagogue, they want to know my story. They ask what my doctor says. They want to know if I will ever walk again.

People often ask me these kinds of questions, because I am a wheelchair user. They want to know things that are personal. They want to hear stories that are private. But I don’t want to answer questions like that from strangers.

None of us should have to.

## Disability is About Ableism

I want to tell you a different kind of story. It’s not about symptoms, treatment, and cure. It’s a story about how the world is inaccessible, about barriers and wrong ideas that say some people are better than others. (To learn more, read the section, [“We Live in an Ableist World”](#))

I want to talk about power. I want to talk about all the ways people treat some bodies and minds as “normal,” and label others as “not normal” or “broken.” I want to talk about the way some of us get shut out of public space. We get shoved into care homes. We get locked up in prisons. We get discarded.

I want to talk about how hard it is to find an affordable apartment that is wheelchair accessible. I want to talk about how it feels when strangers on the street tell me they'll pray for me. This is a story about ableism. It's a story about violence. It's a story about harm that cuts against body, spirit, and bone.

## **Disability is Also a Story About Joy**

Disability isn't just a story about barriers and harm. It's also a story about finding community and loving my own life.

When I was in college, I made my first disabled friends. I had been disabled all my life, but my disability had just changed in a big way. I started using an electric mobility scooter. Soon after, I got my first wheelchair. I took my first disability studies class. I learned about so many accessibility problems at my university. I found new words to explain the problems disabled people face. I became friends with disability activists and artists, and it changed my life.

I claimed my freedom.

I had always been awkward on feet. But I learned to love the whirl of wheels. I realized how much I love my life, my body, and my wheelchair. I began to embrace disability, instead of wishing I was ordinary.

## **We Live in an Ableist World**

Ableism shapes the way people think and the way people act. It is a system of discrimination, when someone gets treated unfairly by society because of who they are, in ways that take away their rights.

Examples of ableism are when people:

- pay disabled people less money for our work
- do not want to rent an apartment to disabled people
- refuse to let disabled people make our own decisions
- think that disabled people are worth less than nondisabled people

Ableism creates an inaccessible world, with barriers that keep disabled people from having full access to the community.

Examples of barriers are when people:

- build buildings without an elevator
- buy chairs that only fit thin people
- expect everyone to finish their work quickly
- force everyone to sit still for a long time

We live in an ableist world. Most people look down on disabled people. They think disabled people are weak, dependent, and needy. People use those words like they are a bad thing.

I don't think disabled people are weak. Sometimes we are not as strong as nondisabled people. But that doesn't mean we aren't worthy of love. Sometimes we need help. But we deserve to have the help we need. We deserve to have helpers who respect us and who listen to us.

## **Disability is an Ordinary Part of Life**

Most people try to “look past” disability. They pretend not to see it. They do not bring it up in polite talk. But I reject that. I want people to see my disability. I am not ashamed to be disabled. My disability is an important part of who I am.

Disability names something deep and true about my own self and soul. Disability is an ordinary fact of life.

Sometimes my disability is painful. Sometimes it frustrates me. But there are also parts of disability that fill my heart with joy. There are wonderful things about being disabled, little secret things that non-disabled people never know. If you want to know who I am, you’ve got to know my disability. It is a core part of who I am.

## **Learning to Say Yes to Disability**

I was born with cerebral palsy. When I walked as a child, I walked with a limp. Everyone wanted to fix it. They wanted to teach me how to “walk right.” I tried to do what they asked. I stretched my stiff heel cord. I practiced walking heel before toe, heel before toe. Again and again. I did my exercises every night. But I also remember this: I remember listening to the way I walked. I remember hearing my footsteps, a sound that no one else made. My walk was special. It was purely my own.

I remember loving the sound of my own step.

I felt that love in my soul. It was the first time I understood that I could love something about myself that other people didn’t like. I said yes to myself. I said yes to disability. I said yes to all of who I am.

## About Plain Language

### What is Plain Language?

Plain language is a way of writing. We use shorter sentences and simpler words. Plain language makes things easier to read. We organize things carefully and we use headings.

Plain language helps some disabled people who have a hard time reading. But plain language writing helps lots of other people too.

Plain language is an important part of accessibility. It often gets left out when people talk about disability access. But access is not just about having a ramp into the building. It is not just about sign language interpreters. Plain language makes it easier for more people to have access to written ideas and information.

### Who Writes in Plain Language?

Self-advocates have been using plain language for a long time. They are writing plain language pieces about disability rights. Their work helps other people learn how to be advocates. There is also a federal law that says government information has to use plain language.

But few disability books today are written in plain language. The idea of writing in plain language is still new to many people, including many disabled people.

### Why Did We Write These Pieces?

We wrote these pieces because of our own commitment to access. We have been writing about disability and disability health in plain language for many years. We have also spent years reading work by self-advocates. In 2020, Alice Wong and Sara Luterman created a plain language version of Alice Wong's book, *Disability Visibility*.

The plain language version of Alice Wong’s book excited us to work on a plain language project from a new book, *Loving Our Own Bones*, by Julia Watts Belser. We cannot translate the whole book into plain language. So we are creating plain language versions about a few important topics from the book. We think these are a good start. And we plan to write more plain language pieces based on the book.

## **Thank You**

We would like to say thank you to Alice Wong, Cal Montgomery, Reid Caplan, and Sara Luterman, who helped shape our ideas about how to write these plain language pieces.

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## **About the Authors**

**Julia Watts Belser** (she/her) is a scholar, rabbi, and activist. She is a professor of Jewish Studies at Georgetown University. She helps lead Georgetown’s Disability Studies Program. She has been an activist for disability and gender justice for a long time. One of her books is called the *Health Handbook for Women with Disabilities*. It is written in plain language. Julia loves wheelchair hiking, gardening, and spending time in nature. You can learn more about Julia at [www.juliawattsbelser.com](http://www.juliawattsbelser.com).

**Devorah Greenstein** (she/her) is a retired academic, developmental psychologist, and Unitarian Universalist minister. Her disability-related work and activism span many decades. She has been writing plain language resources for people with disabilities and their families for more than 30 years.



## **Credits**

This piece is adapted from Julia Watts Belser, *Loving Our Own Bones: Disability Wisdom and the Spiritual Subversiveness of Knowing Ourselves Whole*. (Beacon Press, 2023). We are grateful to Beacon Press for permission to create plain language excerpts from the book. For more information about the book, visit [www.juliawattsbelser.com](http://www.juliawattsbelser.com).

Most of this piece is drawn from Chapter 1 and Chapter 4.