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What Do We Each Believe? Talking About Religion and Disability

Julia Watts Belser
with Devorah Greenstein

A Plain Language Piece
from

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

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What Do We Each Believe?

Talking About Religion and Disability

Religion Can Help Us Say Yes to Ourselves

People ask me how I started feeling good about being disabled. They want to know how not to feel ashamed.

There are many different ways we can learn to say yes to disability and to our full selves. The disability activist Laura Hershey wrote a poem that talks about this important feeling. The poem is called, “You Get Proud by Practicing.”

This is how her poem ends:

“Remember, you weren’t the one
Who made you ashamed,
But you are the one
Who can make you proud . . .
You get proud by practicing.”

Religion can be one way that disabled people learn to say yes ourselves. Some religious ideas can help disabled people feel proud of who we are. But other religious ideas can make us feel ashamed.

I want us to say yes to the parts of religion that help us. And I want us to say *no* to the parts that hurt us. I also want us to understand religious ideas from a disability point of view.

We need a way to speak more gently about religion. So many of us have been told there is only one religious truth. Any other way is wrong.

I want to talk about religion in a different way. I want us to be curious and playful. I want us to seek out new ideas and possibilities. I don't want us to just accept difference. I want us to embrace it.

Feeling Spiritual

Some people have a religion that is very important to them. Some people do not have a religion, but they have a deep spirituality. You don't have to be religious to feel spiritual.

You can feel spiritual even if you do not think there is a God.

Think of a time you felt a sense of wonder or awe. Or a time when you felt connected to something larger than just you. Maybe it's the feeling you have after a new baby is born. Or when you're sitting at the ocean, listening to the sound of the waves. Maybe it's the way you feel when you look up at the stars.

That's what I mean when I talk about spirituality. This feeling of wonder helps connect us with a sense of the sacred.

I don't know how you feel the sacred in your life. I don't know if you even give a name to that feeling of wonder and connection.

If you and I were sitting and talking about spirituality, I wouldn't start by asking you about the Bible. I wouldn't start by asking you about God. I'd invite you to tell me the stories of your own heart.

We Can Find New Ways of Thinking About God

Some people don't like the word God. Sometimes religion or religious people have hurt us or made us feel ashamed. You may want to use different words to think about God. Or you may not have words at all.

When someone talks about God, do you have a picture in your mind? Some people grow up thinking of God as an old white man with a beard who sits on a throne. They imagine God as a father who gets mad at us when we don't do what God wants.

That's not how I think about God.

I did not grow up in a religious family. My family did not go to church. We did not go to synagogue. We did not talk about God.

But I have always had spiritual feelings. As a child, I felt the sacred in trees and in stones. I liked to spend time by myself, listening to the breath of the world.

One summer day, I was watching the sunset. The sky was slowly turning gold. The sun and the wind felt gentle on my skin. I felt the sacred in my body. I felt God as She: age-old, alive, female, and whole.

That moment is the center of my story.

I have spent years studying religion. I am a rabbi, a Jewish spiritual teacher. I am a professor at a university. I teach religion and disability. I spend a lot of my time reading and talking about the Bible and the Jewish sacred texts of Torah and Talmud.

But I always come back to that moment. I come back to the sacred that I know in my own bones.

Some people are surprised to think that God could be She. Or that God could be disabled. Or Black. Or Brown. Or Fat. Or Queer. Some people have been told there is only one right way to think about God.

I don't believe that is true.

God is bigger than our words. God is more than our ideas. We cannot wrap our minds around God. God is not really He or She or They or It. God is beyond all that.

But here and now? We live in a world where the body matters. We live in a world where the idea of God the Father has been used to hate, not to love. We live in a world where some bodies are seen as the opposite of God.

I want us to think about God in other ways.

Let me tell you why. If we imagine God as a powerful white man, it makes it easy to think that white men should always be in charge. It makes us think that what they say is always right.

When we change the way we think about God, we are saying that other kinds of bodies are also sacred. We remind ourselves that women are sacred. That queer people are sacred. That disabled people are sacred. We are saying that our bodies are good. That we are whole.

How Do We Read the Bible?

A Jewish story teaches that God is like a mirror. The mirror never changes. But each person who looks into it sees a different face.

The Bible is also like a mirror. Many people are inspired by the Bible's words. But people understand those words in very different ways.

When we read a Bible story, we need to think about more than just the words on the page. We have to think about how to interpret the words. What the text means is shaped by the choices we make when we read.

What words do we call attention to?

What verses do we choose to think about?

What parts of the text do we ignore?

The Bible is an age-old text. We can look back in history to ask what a Bible verse meant in ancient days. We can trace the way a verse has changed its meaning over time. Or we can read it and ask how it speaks to our own lives today. We can ask how it speaks to our own hopes and dreams.

For some readers, the Bible is a book of clear answers. But for me, it has always been a book of deep questions.

Some people read the Bible to learn how to act or what to believe. But this is not what I do. When I read the Bible's stories, I find many people who do not make good choices. Sometimes the people in the Bible do not do what I think is right.

People in the Bible make mistakes. They get angry. Or they treat each other badly. When I read those stories, it helps me to remember that we are all human. We all make mistakes. And we can all learn and grow and change.

The Bible Can Help Us Say Yes to Ourselves

The Bible tells us that all people are created b'tselem Elohim (Genesis 1:27). Those are Hebrew words that mean "created in the image of God." Many religious communities use this verse as a way to teach that disabled people are sacred. We are people with dignity. We are worthy of love. Our lives matter.

The Bible also teaches that it is important to work for justice. Another verse says: “You must always work for justice. Justice!” (Deuteronomy 16:20). Jewish communities use this verse to teach that all of us should work to make the world better. We call this idea *tikkun olam*, which means “repairing the world.”

Many Bible verses also teach good things about disability. Leviticus 19:14 says: “You must not insult anyone who is deaf. You must not do anything to make a blind person fall.”

The Bible also tells us to care for orphans, widows, and strangers. It teaches that all of us have a duty to defend disabled people’s rights and to make sure that we are protected from harm.

“Learn to do good. Treat people fairly. Punish those who hurt others. Speak up for the widows and orphans.” (Isaiah 1:17)

“You must make sure that foreigners and orphans are treated fairly.”
(Deuteronomy 24:17)

The Bible knows that some people are more at risk. These verses want us all to make sure that at-risk people will thrive.

But the Bible Can Also Be Used to Hurt People

Some Bible verses teach wrong ideas about disability. Some stories in the Bible upset me. Others feel like a slap to the face.

Sometimes people try to ignore those harmful verses. It can be scary to look closely at verses that hurt us, especially if we think the Bible is always right.

But I want us to look closely. I don’t want us to turn away. I want us to claim the right to say no to the verses that hurt us.

Jewish tradition teaches that there are many ways to read the Bible. We do not always have to agree with what the Bible says. We can ask questions. We can talk back. We can argue with the text and still honor it as sacred.

Reading the Bible as Disabled People

Talking back to the text is important to me. It is important to me as a woman and as a queer person. It is also important to me as a disabled person.

For most of history, Bible stories have been written and told by nondisabled people. Even when a Bible story is about a disabled person, it has been written from a nondisabled point of view. Most religious leaders are not disabled. We rarely get to hear Bible stories told in disabled people's voices.

I want us to read the Bible as disabled people. When we read the Bible as disabled people, we find new ideas in sacred texts. We honor our own stories. We treat our own lives as sacred. We recognize that disabled people have wisdom that matters.

Rabbi Ruti Regan says it this way: "The Bible taught me that all people are made *b'tselem Elohim*, in the image of God. But it was disability communities that showed me what that means."

As disabled people, we know how to fight for our lives, even in a world that often ignores us. We make community. We support each other. We take care of each another. Our love and our care are sacred acts.

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

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About the Authors

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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.

Most of this piece is drawn from Chapter 2. Laura Hershey's poem appears in Chapter 3.

Beacon Press is grateful for permission to reprint an excerpt from Laura Hershey's poem "You Get Proud By Practicing," *In the Way: ADAPT Poems* (Denver: Dragonfly Press, 1992). Go to www.laurahershey.com to read more of Laura Hershey's work.

Rabbi Ruti Regan's teaching appears in Chapter 1. It is from her remarks at the White House summit meeting on Jewish Disability Awareness and Inclusion, February 18, 2016.

The Jewish teaching, "God is like a mirror," is drawn from Rabbi Harold Kushner, *When Children Ask About God: A Guide for Parents Who Don't Always Have All the Answers* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971, rep. 1989), 26.

Most of the Bible verses in this piece follow the Easy Read Version (ERV). Leviticus 19:14 follows the ERV, except that we say "insult" rather than "curse." Deuteronomy 16:20 has been translated by Julia Watts Belser.