

Breaking Down Barriers -- *Rev. Elaine Gehrmann, Karen Brown & Camille Hatton*
Delivered on February 2, 2020 at the UU Church of the Monterey Peninsula

REFLECTION “Barriers” by Karen Brown

Preparing for our service about barriers, I thought about physical challenges first. My stories are pretty trivial, but they sure made me think.

I spent only one day in a wheel chair. I thought the rented wheel chair would solve all my problems and I would feel like a queen. No. With an inexperienced, but strong, and blessedly uncomplaining pusher, I got from car across a fairly flat surface to my destination, but I must have said “excuse me” 50, yes 50, times that day. Even after I made it to the front, though, I still couldn’t see. The displays were almost all too high.

A few times I helped a member of our church who had cancer by taking her for treatments. The facility provided wheel chairs in the lobby. Great! This will be easy, I thought. But there was no magic button for the door. So I had to turn around, back up and butt my way through, as the door pushed against, squashed me and my friend the whole time.

For several months, following my husband’s stroke, I pushed him in a wheel chair. If I didn’t see it in advance, the slightest crack, a bump, the smallest buckling in the surface of a sidewalk or molding on the threshold was a problem. One terrible day, I dumped him on the sidewalk. I cried while trying to remain cheerful as I struggled to get him back into the chair. And stairs! We’d stop at the bottom and gaze up in dismay, tired before we began. Tired of thinking through the limited options. Tired of trying to figure out “where’s the ___ elevator”!. Tired of strategizing how we would scale this mountain, even if it was only two steps. At a time when we needed lots of help, stairs and doors were hinders, huge barriers. And unlike when I pushed a cute little baby in a light stroller, no one came to our aid.

Our topic this morning also made me think about the barriers I’ve experienced regularly, those related to gender. One in particular.

When I was girl, the newspaper ads said “Help Wanted - Male”, “Help Wanted - Female”. The female section advertised beauty operators, nurses, waitresses, secretaries, and sales girls. Sometimes, Mom and I would get dressed up and go downtown to see those sales girls. After an hour or so of shopping, we’d go to the department store restaurant for a snack. The restaurant was filled with other snacking shoppers and secretaries. Then I noticed a secret door to a separate mysterious dining area. Waitresses rushed in with huge trays of full dinners. It looked forbidding, yet attractive, dark, with small lights over each table for secret meetings. Dark paneling and leather. I wanted to peek in further, but Mom warned, “That’s only for men, business men who have special long meals to impress their important guests, men with important work who have to get back to their big desks and important papers.” As I got older, I thought about invading that special place, and wondered what would happen if I did. There was no real barrier, no Southern -style sign even. No lock, merely a door. What kept us out? Something about the way the place looked. Not just separate, but clearly unequal, in fact much better. The way the message was transmitted too - from mother to daughter- making our exclusion seem not

just convenient for men, but part of the way we were shown our place in the world, a place less important. The door was not just to keep us out, but part of a system that was supposed to be logical, to work for everyone. Also it implied shock and a vague but grave punishment that would come if we gave up being ladies who followed the rules.

Today, I'll be thinking about these barriers and others, contemplating how I can hold open doors, giving a hand, smooth the way, and look into secret spaces - as we worship together.

Meditation by Rev. Theresa Ines Soto, from Spilling the Light: Meditations on Hope and Resilience

TO THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE MISTAKEN FREEDOM FOR LIBERATION

To be free, you must embrace
the breadth of your own existence
without apology, even if they try to take
it from you. You must know, not that you
can do whatever you want; you are not
a kudzu vine, eating entire hillsides for
the purpose of feeding your own lush life. You
must know instead, that inside you are entire
Universes—milky blue, magenta, and gold—
expanding. But to actually be free, you must
know and you must fight for the entire
Universes inside of everyone else.
Being free is not a license, but
A promise.

(with thanks to Rev. Leela Sinha)



REFLECTION “Exceptionalism” by Camille Hatton

Good morning everyone. Instead of a reading this morning, I’d like to lift up a term discussed in disability circles with ya’ll; and that is the narrative of exceptionalism. Have you heard of it?

This is the over-representation of someone’s variance to highlight:

You are so different from me

Or

If they can do that, than I can do...

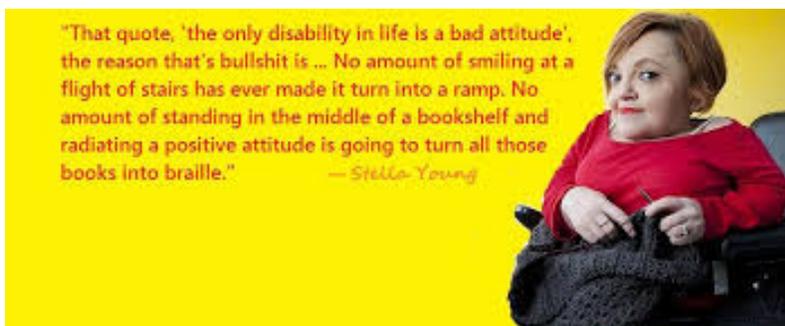
And of the spirit behind the “triumphs of humanity,” including this snapshot of this moment in what would be considered everyday reality for one person, as utterly inconceivable for another.

This poster reads, “the only disability in life is a bad attitude”



Motivational Pistorius

In response to this very popular meme, disability rights advocate Stella Young says, “That quote, ‘the only disability in life is a bad attitude’, the reason that’s b.s. is ... No amount of smiling at a flight of stairs has ever made it turn into a ramp. No amount of standing in the middle of a bookshelf and radiating a positive attitude is going to turn all those books into braille.”



Another example:

I started playing piano at the age of 5. My first piano teacher treated me as special - telling friends and family about my playing ability, showcasing me at various retirement homes and shows she produced. She insisted that I was truly remarkable.

It was only later I found out she told my parents, “don’t expect a whole lot” when I began lessons. Truth be told, she loved teaching the kid with three fingers. She perpetuated the idea that I was somehow, so extraordinary just by virtue that I could ever play, that the quality of my playing and the depth of my understanding did not matter. I studied with her for 6 years. By the end, I couldn’t read music, I couldn’t tell you what a chord was. I couldn’t articulate anything past the idea that people should just be amazed at my sheer musical genius.

This is the narrative of exceptionalism and it was thrust upon me as a young, naive child. It shaped my identity and self worth.

I have since learned that music is really hard, and takes a lot more than being a circus act to make it.

As a person with a physical variance from birth, I don’t experience a sense of loss about my hands. I don’t have some other way of knowing what it feels like to play piano other than the way I do. If this variance had been acquired, then that would potentially be a different story. But it’s not.

So let’s talk frankly for a moment. A little warning: what I am about to say might cut a little close to home for some. If you feel yourself tightening in discomfort, I would simply ask that you return to your breath, stay open minded to the fact that I am simply sharing my experience. All good?

Some of you may know, Lucy, our amazing accompanist, is contracted to take 12 Sundays off a year. This means for 12 Sundays, I or another accompanist will help cover her piano-playing duties. Ok, so I’ve been working here since 2013, and still, without fail, after I play, I have at least one congregant who comes up to me to tell me how emphatically happy they are that I played that morning. Or how they wish their child or grandchild or whomever could have been there to see what an inspiration I am. Or, at its worst “I can’t play that well and I have 10 fingers.”

Well yeah, you think?

By the way, if you’re worried you are that person in this situation or any other interaction, simply ask: did you compliment my work because of the work or because of the shock value that

I surpassed your expectations
due to my physical variance from you,
and this was very important
for you to tell me?

If the latter, then let’s talk about ways to catch those thoughts. Also, let’s talk about releasing any defenses that arise at my critique of your compliment.

It’s not personal.

I want you to imagine who it is you believe you are and how you function in the greater web of life? Have you ever had people challenge this? We all want to be recognized for who we truly are, not measured to the ideas and expectations of what others believe we are. Building actual

relationships with one another is how we create that welcoming space. This cannot happen when people feel they have permissions to extrapolate our stories through their lenses.

Perhaps we already know:

Words matter

Interactions and connections matter.

And as Unitarian Universalists, we have the responsibility to be mindful of this, especially when concerning experiences that are not our own.

Thank you.

SERMON: “Breaking Down Barriers” Rev. Elaine Gehrmann

My mother contracted polio when she was five years old. Much of her left side was paralyzed, and a number of muscles in her left arm and especially her left leg became atrophied. When she was 10, she spent a year in a Shriner’s hospital for Crippled Children, as it was called, where her parents could only visit her for one hour a week, on Sunday afternoons. She grew up in a very small town in northwestern Pennsylvania, and was valedictorian of her high school class, and one of the few to go on to college. When I was young, my mother had several orthopedic surgeries on her leg, which gave her some additional stability, but she walked slowly and with a very noticeable limp for all of her life. It took me quite a while to realize that other people really noticed my mother’s unique way of walking, as I really didn’t as it was all I had known. For me, that was just the way my mother walked, certainly not a very noteworthy nor important aspect of her being... She certainly never wanted any pity, and she wanted to not dwell on her physical limitations but on her possibilities. And she accomplished a great deal in her life, and was admired by many colleagues and friends, for reasons that had nothing to do with her body or way of moving through the world.

Which is not to say that she did not encounter a number of challenges in her moving through the world—but as with others who have disabilities, it was often societal norms that were the most disabling—stairs without handrails, lack of ramps and elevators, uneven walking surfaces, lack of accessible parking, as well as lowered expectations, all of which can be very limiting.

This month our theme is Thresholds. This month our Inclusion Task Force is also focusing on how we might be more inclusive of people with disabilities. How might we make sure that the thresholds into our congregation, which seeks to welcome all, are bridges not barriers, that both our physical structures and our attitudes are not presenting challenges to anyone, but are designed to truly welcome all. Please read your weekly e-news in the coming weeks to read more about our efforts toward greater inclusion and accessibility, we will have short surveys, links to articles and videos, and more!

* * *

When many of us think about disability, we think of the medical model, which focuses on the individual and how close or far away they are from some perceived ideal human norm. Often this model frames people with disabilities as needing to be fixed or cured, or not able to function as full members of society, and seeing differences as defects.

Now, depending on how you define it—it is estimated that 15 -25% percent of U.S. citizens have a disability.

Many of us in this room have something that could be classified as a disability--

We wear corrective lenses, use hearing aids, use canes or walkers or wheelchairs, we have cognitive or psychological conditions, chemical sensitivities, and chronic physical conditions, some of which are not visible to others. These differences do not have to be considered to be defects, and the devices we use to better navigate the world around us can be seen as freeing, rather than confining-- why do we have such a negative connotation around the word ‘crutch’? Why are people said to be ‘wheelchair bound’ when in fact wheelchairs can often provide a great deal of freedom to those who use them?

The language we use often frames our perspective. Writer and activist Eli Clare, talks about the word “disabled”--

“Disabled. The car stalled in the left lane of traffic is disabled. Or alternatively, the broad stairs curving into a public building disable the man in a wheelchair. That word used as a noun (the disabled or people with disabilities), an adjective (disabled people), a verb (the accident disabled her): in all its forms it means “unable,” but where does our inability lie? Are our bodies like stalled cars? Or does disability live in the social and physical environment, in the stairs that have no accompanying ramp? (from *Exile and Pride*, p. 67)

The Unitarian Universalist Association has some resources to help congregations assess and improve their own accessibility-- including a 36 page accessibility audit, covering everything from outside paths to parking to bathrooms, offices, doors, floors, ramps, drinking fountains, worship space, signs, amplification, scents, off-site activities, and more. I tried filling it out, and got discouraged pretty early... we have a long ways to go... if you are not currently using a wheelchair or walker, try to imagine navigating all of our spaces using one... how welcome would you feel? If you do not have a vision or hearing impairment, try to imagine experiencing our worship services or other programming with a visual or auditory disability, how included would you feel?...

And how knowledgeable and accomodating are we of people with less visible disabilities, those of us with cognitive or psychological disabilities, chronic illness, and more?

Did you know that in our last building expansion we built two new bathrooms each with a large accessible stall? But did you know that the toilets in those stalls have their handles on the wrong side of the tank, greatly limiting their accessibility? It took Altaira Hatton, who uses a motorized wheelchair, pointing that out to me just a couple months ago, I had no idea, and no one had ever mentioned it before. And we still haven’t changed it.

* * *

British artist Christopher Samuel recently designed a hotel room, in which the bed is surrounded by a 3ft lip, which you must scramble over every time you want to get in or out. The bathroom door doesn't close because it hits the toilet, meaning there's no privacy. There's a particularly ingenious arrangement for watching TV, the shower gel dispenser is upside down, and other tricks are likely to leave you exasperated if you want to use basic things like the bedside lights, shelf or table.

By making life difficult for visitors, the artist wants to give them a taste of the access problems faced by many disabled people.

He said, "I knew people would find it amusing at first, but in reality when you live that every day it's not funny any more," he says. "It's inconvenient, it's frustrating, it's humiliating at times."

In 2017, Samuel, who uses an electric wheelchair, was forced to live in an inaccessible hotel room as emergency accommodation for three months.

"I was technically made homeless by two local councils, who were arguing over my care costs and access needs," he explains.

"I couldn't move around the room freely. It was very tight. For me to get in the door, I had to go into a little corner, then I had to shut the door behind me and I had to reverse out and navigate around the bed.

"I couldn't sit at the table. I had to sleep in my wheelchair - I couldn't use the bed. I couldn't shut the bathroom door. I couldn't use the toilet. I had to use a bucket. I couldn't wash because there was a shower [which wasn't accessible]."

The hotel room designed by Samuel was commissioned by Unlimited, an arts organisation that supports work by disabled artists...

Samuel hasn't seen his room - because he can't get to it. "I think it's brilliant," he says, breaking into hysterics. "It's perfect, this commission was perfect for me."

(<https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-50670333>)

Angi Englis says, "Having a disability is part of the human experience. If we live long enough, most all of us will experience having a disability at some point in our life. The general public tends to think about people with disabilities as a separate group with "special" needs, who must have things done for them and not seen as part of the universal community. These attitudinal barriers push people to the outer limits of inclusion and participation in our American life.

(<https://medium.com/homeland-security/the-social-construction-of-disability-999114247359>)

Englis explains that in contrast to the medical model, "the social model of disability identifies systemic barriers, negative attitudes and exclusion by society (purposely or inadvertently) which show that society is the main contributory factor in disabling people. While physical, sensory, intellectual, or psychological variations may cause individual limitations, these do not have to lead to disability unless society fails to take account of and include people regardless of their individual differences."

Stella Young says that we've been sold a lie – that disability is a bad thing, and that to live with disability makes you exceptional. She says, it's not a bad thing, and to live with disability doesn't make you exceptional. ...

She says, "Life as a disabled person is actually somewhat difficult. We do overcome some things. But the things we are overcoming are not the things that you think they are. They are not things to do with our bodies. We are more disabled by the society we live in than by our bodies and our diagnoses."

(https://www.ted.com/talks/stella_young_i_m_not_your_inspiration_thank_you_very_much?language=en#t-360868)

As we go forward in our inclusion efforts, I encourage all of us to try to focus on more universal accessibility and design, not focusing on special needs but on providing spaces, physical spaces and psychic spaces, that work for everyone, that allow everyone to fully participate with ease,

that allow all of our differences to be not only accommodated but celebrated. Whether we currently have a disability or not, the environment in which we live, learn, play, work, and meditate, reflect, sing and pray must feel welcoming in all ways in order for everyone to grow and thrive.

As Rev. Theresa Soto says, “inside you are entire Universes—milky blue, magenta, and gold—expanding. But to actually be free, you must know and you must fight for the entire Universes inside of everyone else.”

May we come to better know and fight for the entire universes inside of all of us, and make sure we are living out our aspirations of welcoming all, in ways that truly feel welcoming to all.
Amen.

