

Hidden Disabilities
A sermon by Rev. Frieda Gillespie
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Hidden disabilities are those that are not readily apparent. Maybe what also isn't apparent is that everyone is going to be disabled for some of your life, whether in a very short term duration as in the case of an accident where your injuries are repaired readily, or in a longer term where, aging, diseases like arthritis, the side effects of drugs, or more serious accidents might cause long term damage to our bodies. You and I are going to acquire a disability sometime. This needn't be a tragedy if we take the point of view that we are going to make the best of what we can do.

Judith Snow, a woman who can move only her thumb (which she uses to drive her wheelchair), travels the world speaking about the giftedness of people with disabilities. In her book, "What's Really Worth Doing and How to Do It: A Book for People Who Love Someone Labeled Disabled (Possibly Yourself)", she offers inspiring insight into what it means to be different and also have gifts. Snow says that the common use of the word gifted connotes extraordinary abilities but that gifted has a broader and more ancient meaning. She writes, "Everyone has gifts—countless ordinary and extraordinary gifts. A gift is anything that one is or has or does that create an opportunity for a meaningful interaction with at least one other person. Gifts are the fundamental characteristics of our human life and community. There are two gifts that all people have and that every other gift depends on. The first is presence. Since you are here, you are embodying the possibility of a meaningful interaction with someone else. . . Secondly, you are different from everyone else—in countless ways. Difference is required to make meaning possible. . . This means that human interaction arises from presence and difference. . . "

She goes on to illustrate, "Walking is a gift. It offers the possibility of meaningful interaction. Not walking is also a gift—also creating the possibility of meaningful interaction. Speaking is a gift. Not speaking is also a gift. It is a different gift. Seeing and not seeing, hearing and being deaf, behaving in ways people expect and disturbing others . . . all gifts. They are different with different potentials but all gifts arising from difference. All gifts add to the mosaic of the potential available community."

I can just imagine those signs that designate special parking, instead of handicapped, saying "other gifted." It has only been in my lifetime, perhaps the last 45 years that people have recognized the gifts that children and adults with Down's syndrome have. I remember as a teenager meeting a woman and her daughter who had Down's in the early 70's. She seemed to be exhausted all the time, but she was not willing to institutionalize her daughter as so many people used to do. It was so common for children and adults to be put into institutions that for a parent to not do that, was strikingly remarkable. Now, many if not most parents of Down's syndrome children keep them home or send them to school where there are special needs programs for them or ways they can join the mainstream. Much more is known about their potential to learn and participate in mainstream life.

In our journey through life, we don't expect to become disabled especially when we are changed suddenly. This happened to me a couple of years ago. If you've never had cancer, you may not know that the drugs that are used to get rid of cancer cells have some serious side effects, some of which won't show up for years after treatments are through and the cancer is effectively destroyed. I was told all about those side effects before I started treatments. Really that is a moot point because the only choice about whether to take chemotherapy drugs or not, is whether you want to live or not. The side effects are just something to deal with after the treatments have been successful. At least that is the way I thought about it. I wasn't at all happy with filling my body with poisons, but I hoped it would be alright. During the time I was receiving treatments it was discovered that I was allergic to one of the drugs. It had damaged a place on my heart and on my lungs. The oncologist removed it from my treatment and I had no further reactions but the damage seems to be permanent. Five years after my cancer was eliminated and the treatments were finished, I began to notice problems with my brain function. I was having problems with my memory that were alarming. I called my Oncologist and my Primary Care Doctor and they conferred with each other. They decided to refer me to a Neurologist that specialized in the brain. She did a number of tests and discovered a pattern of damage to the white matter in my brain. White matter, as opposed to Grey matter is the site of memory and receptive language rather than cognitive reasoning. It turns out that another of the drugs I was given and in very large doses was one that was known to cause these changes in the brain. In fact, the changes they observed on my brain scans were similar to all such patterns in people that had been given large doses of this drug. So, it was pretty definitive. "It won't get any worse that's the good news. The bad news is that it won't get any better" the neurologist told me. It is the way it is. The new normal as they say.

There is a benefit to having this disability: namely it has slowed me down. I can no longer have instantaneous responses to questions or multitask. I have to wait to retrieve information that is there in my brain, but takes more time to respond to a question even one like 'where am I going?' It is reassuring to me that the answer does appear if I wait long enough.

I have a friend that I haven't known for long. She tells people that she is a slow thinker and that she will need time to process and articulate what she wants to say in tough situations. She and I had been asked to give some difficult feedback to another friend. She took time to write out what she had to say and then she prayed about it. After which she revised it. When she delivered the feedback, she did it in a very thoughtful, gentle and compassionate way making it infinitely more possible for the other person to hear it. I was quite impressed. I would like to be more like her and perhaps I will be, given this condition. In our culture, we tend to value speed and quick wit, which is how television scripts are written, but there is much to be said about the deeper, longer thought. We don't like to wait on anyone. It is not considered a good thing to admit to a disability that slows down our processing speed. But it can be refreshing to hear someone acknowledge such a thing and an encouragement to others who have this as well.

There are many kinds of hidden disabilities. It is worth a long thought about how a disability might teach us something new. Especially with those disabilities that aren't readily obvious to others, we may have to learn to speak about it and eventually to use it to develop new abilities.

My stepson, Ben, has autism and it's only apparent in the perhaps odd way he might phrase something, take something very literally or the way he says things that typical people might think but not share out loud. His tendency to catastrophize anything and everything can be very annoying, but his good qualities far outweigh those things. I think he would be the first to say, that he has benefited from his autism. He has met people that he wouldn't have met through groups like, Thrive, or Special Olympics if he didn't have autism. One typical story of Ben is that while playing basketball in Special Olympics he will hand the opposing player the ball so they can try again if they miss the basket the first time. When my daughter and I met Ben he had one or two friends. My daughter who has her own disabilities met Ben on a Special Ed bus they shared. They used to love to sit in the back and sing country western songs together. I'm quite sure that my daughter, Tealeesha, opened up the possibilities of a social life to Ben. Now, 15 years later he has more friends than anyone I know. Ben has learned to talk to people and they enjoy his honesty and friendliness. I asked Ben if he had a story of how his autism had been a benefit to him. He agreed that his strongest abilities have come from being autistic. For example, he has almost a photographic memory for roads. Even in places that are new to him. He also has perfect pitch and loves to sing and play piano. He has no stage fright.

After the 2016 elections there was such grief among the people at his church. When the Music Director started playing 'Halleluia' by Leonard Cohen as a postlude, Ben got up, went to the front of the chancel and began singing the song in such a heart-felt way that everyone was moved to tears. It was not planned, he just did it. It gave them an outlet for what they were feeling.

Ben has come to every church where I've served as minister and sung. He knows a lot of great songs now. Perhaps we can arrange for him to come here. He has offered. We'll see.

What we think of as a loss, a tragedy, an embarrassment, a weakness, doesn't have to only be those things, or maybe not those things at all. But perhaps these disabilities, contain hidden abilities and especially new abilities. Definitely new joys.

One of the songs that Ben has sung at a church I served roughly has the lines, "I'm glad I didn't know how this would go. I could have missed the pain, but I wouldn't have wanted to miss the dance"

The last example I'd like to share, although there are many is that of Greta Thunberg. She is a remarkable young Swedish woman who at age 11 started a strike to bring attention to climate change. She sat, at first by herself outside City Hall with a sign that I think said, "Striking for climate change" It was in Swedish. She sat there for three weeks, one day a week before anyone joined her, but gradually they did. Over time she was able to bring powerful people to think about the dangers to our planet of global warming. You are probably aware that over 3 million people took place in the Climate strike Friday. She didn't do it alone, there are lots of young people leading awareness marches, but she wasn't afraid to try. Greta has Asperger's Syndrome, a kind of high functioning autism. Her mother says her diagnosis is her superpower because it allows her to speak freely without any concern for other people's opinions of her. In one article about her a journalist said she speaks with an almost biblical style, harkening back to the prophets of old. She doesn't sugarcoat the truth that our planet and we are going die if we don't pay attention to global warming and act. She has spoken all over the world to many world leaders and says things that clearly indicate her lack of faith in adults. "I know you won't do

anything about this” She is very clear that this is a matter of life and death. It also ties into many other social ills and she speaks about jobs that can be created by efforts to combat climate change. The more I hear about her, the more I love her.

So don't despair if you find yourself disabled at some time in your life. Our disabilities can be our superpowers leading us to many new experiences and abilities we never thought we'd have.

May it be so.