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## **Disabled, Not Broken: Thinking Differently About Healing Stories**

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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# Disabled, Not Broken: Thinking About Healing Stories

## Healing Stories Can Hurt

People often look at my wheelchair and decide that I need healing. I'm at the grocery store reaching for the frozen peas, when a lady wants to know if she can pray that I will walk again. I'm with my mother at a concert, and a young man comes up to us. He wants to put his hand on my legs and pray for healing.

Both of these people think they're being kind. But I don't want their pity. I don't want them to feel sorry for me. I want to say: "Keep your hands off my body. Keep your prayers to yourself."

I don't think my disability needs to be fixed. I love this body as she is, right here and now, with no regrets. No miracles necessary.

We live in a world that links disability to the hope of healing. It doesn't matter if we are religious or not. Most of us have met people who want to heal us. Most of us know people who think our disability means that we're broken.

Healing is complicated. There are some parts of my disability that I don't like. Sometimes I wish they would be different. Sometimes I wish I was different. But I don't think my disability is a bad thing. And I don't like it when people look at me and think my life is terrible.

For some people, the promise of healing feels like hope. But healing stories often hurt disabled people. They make people think that:

- our bodies are broken.
- we need fixing.
- we are not good enough.

- we are always suffering.
- we are waiting around for a cure.

Some people use healing against us. They wonder why we haven't been cured yet. Some people think that if we haven't been healed, it's because we don't have faith.

Disabled people each have our own story about what we want. Some disabled folks would say yes to a cure in a heartbeat. Some of us would turn it down.

I don't know what is in your heart. I don't judge what you want or what you dream.

But I want us to be careful with healing stories. I want us to recognize how they can hurt. I want us to learn to tell stories where we don't focus on healing disabled people. I want us to tell stories where we work to heal the world.

## **I Don't Want a Future Without Disabled People**

In the Christian Bible, Jesus heals many sick and disabled people. These stories have become an important part of our culture. Even people who are not Christian know these healing stories.

Healing stories are not as common in Judaism. But the Jewish Bible also tells stories that imagine a future without disabled people. These stories make me angry and sad.

Let me tell you one of those stories.

The prophet Isaiah tells us a promise from God. One day, we will live in a better world. We will live in a world where anything is possible. Miracles will be all around us. The land itself will heal. In this new world, there will be hope for the most hopeless people.

To make that promise, Isaiah uses disabled people as examples.

When God makes this new world, Isaiah says there will be no more disabled people. We will all be cured. We will all be healed.

This is what Isaiah says:

Then the eyes of the blind will be opened so that they can see,  
And the ears of the deaf will be opened so that they can hear.  
People who cannot walk will dance like deer  
And people who cannot speak will sing and shout with joy.  
(Isaiah 35:5-6)

In these verses, Isaiah uses disabled people to show how the new world will be better.

When blind people can finally see? When Deaf people can finally hear? That's when Isaiah says we'll know that God has kept the promise.

Isaiah thinks that disability is a sad and sorry life. Blindness? It's all bad. Deafness? What a shame! People who can't walk are tragic. People who can't speak are lonely. But God will take our disabilities away. Then we will all be happy at last.

Isaiah wants these words to bring us hope. He makes this promise to lift our hearts.

But I say no to Isaiah's promise.

Disability is part of who I am. It shapes my friendships. It shapes my politics. It shapes the way I see the world. The way I move. The way I think. The way I feel.

To erase all that? That's not the future I want.

But Isaiah doesn't know the truth of my own heart. I don't want to jump like a deer. I already dance with my wheelchair.

Isaiah's dream is not my own.

## **I Want a Future Where Disabled People Belong**

I don't want a future without disability. I want us to promise ourselves a future where disabled people belong.

Isaiah says that God wants to make a better future by getting rid of disability.

But another prophet in the Bible promises a different kind of future. The prophet Jeremiah says that God will make sure that disabled people are welcome.

This is Jeremiah's story:

Jeremiah's people have been forced to leave their homes. They have been forced to leave their land. They are separated from each other. They are far from their families. They are far from home.

Jeremiah promises that God will bring them back together. God will make it possible for everyone to return.

This is what Jeremiah says:

People who are blind  
People who cannot walk  
People who are pregnant and about to give birth.  
All the people will come back...  
I will lead them on a smooth road  
where they will not stumble.  
(Jeremiah 31:8-9)

In Jeremiah's promise, God welcomes all the people back. God welcomes people with wheelchairs and walkers. God welcomes people who limp and people who walk slowly.

This is a future for all of us.

God promises to lead the people on a smooth road. I like to think of that smooth road as God's gift of access. God makes a pathway. God makes a ramp. God makes a road that is easy for everyone.

God offers all of us a way back home.

## **We Should Not Have to Wait for a Future World**

Isaiah and Jeremiah both tell stories about the future. But we have to ask ourselves: What kind of future do we want?

A teacher in religious school was talking to a Deaf student. She said, "One day, in the world to come, you'll be able to hear." But the Deaf student answered, "No. In the world to come, God will sign."

This is a powerful answer. The Deaf student knows the problem isn't Deafness. The problem is that most people don't know how to sign.

The Deaf student knows that God will meet our access needs.

But what about the world we live in now?

I don't want to wait for the world to come. I want our world right now to meet our access needs. I want us to welcome people who sign and spell and use communication devices. I want our world to respect nonspeaking people now.

I want a world where it doesn't take years to get a new wheelchair. Where no one has to spend their whole disabled lives with broken equipment. Where none of us have to fight with Medicaid. Where all of us get the access that we need.

These are the problems I want us to fix.

Healing stories focus on fixing disabled people's bodies or minds. But those stories hide the biggest problems disabled people face: Unfair systems. Discrimination.

Injustice. Because these stories mistake what is broken, they leave ableism in place.

Instead of trying to fix disabled people, I want us to fix the world we live in. I want us to build a world right now where disabled people belong.

## **Healing Is Not the Same as Cure**

Healing stories make us think that disabled people are the problem. They make us think that we need to fix our bodies or control our minds. They focus on cure.

Many people use the word “cure” and the word “healing” as if the two words mean the same thing. They don’t.

Cure means no more symptoms.

Healing can mean many other things. Healing doesn’t insist on fixing our disabilities. It doesn’t have to happen in a doctor’s office.

Sometimes healing happens in a moment. Sometimes it takes a long time. But healing can happen for all of us.

When our hearts are hurting, healing can help us feel whole.

Healing can happen when we start saying yes to ourselves. It can happen when we love our bodies and minds, just like they are.

Healing can happen when we find friends. It can happen when someone listens to us. Healing can happen when we realize we don’t need to be ashamed of disability. It can happen when we learn to feel proud of who we are.



# 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**

**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 2 and Chapter 8.

The Bible verses in this piece are translated by Julia Watts Belser, in consultation with the Easy Read Version. The first two lines from Isaiah 35 follow the Easy Read Version.

The story about the Deaf child in religious school is told by Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig. It is published in the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 10, no. 2 (Fall 1994), as part of a Roundtable on “Women with Disabilities: A Challenge to Feminist Theology.”