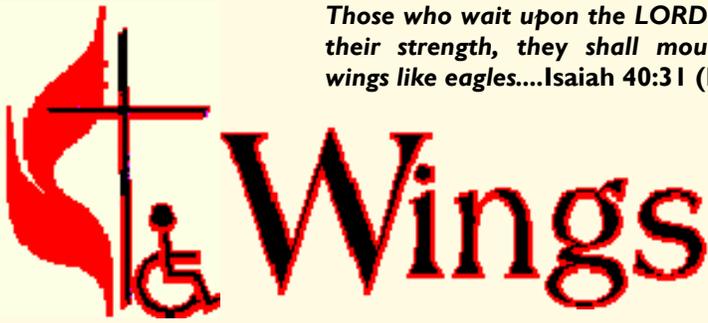


Those who wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles....Isaiah 40:31 (NRSV)



A FAITHLETTER FOR UNITED METHODISTS WITH
DISABILITIES AND THOSE WHO CARE ABOUT THEM
Spring 2008 — Vol. 18 Issue 4 No. 72



FROM WHERE I SIT: I'M OK, YOU'RE OK, EVERYBODY'S OK

By Jo D'Archangelis

Many years ago, a self-help book entitled *I'm OK, You're OK* came out. I never read it myself, but I understand it was about developing self-esteem by rejecting the negative messages one receives from family, society, and even from oneself. Exactly how the book advocated doing this, I don't know. But, in my opinion, a very good way is to associate with people who have successfully dealt with the same issues you're trying to deal with.

In 1990, I first attended an annual camping retreat for people with disabilities sponsored by the California-Pacific Conference of the United Methodist Church. A couple of years later, I was introduced to Mariposa Ministry, an informal peer counseling group of young adults with physical disabilities. Although I was no longer a *young* adult at the time and felt I knew how to handle my disability pretty well, my experience with both these ministries taught me, or confirmed for me in more vivid terms, some important truths about being disabled.

The most fundamental truth I learned was: Being disabled is okay. Having a disability in our society is such a stigma

that one of the first things parents tell their disabled child, or we who are disabled tell ourselves, is: "You are just like everybody else." And in many respects this is true: We *are* like everybody else. We have the same need to love and be loved; to be respected; to develop as much as possible whatever physical, mental, social, and spiritual potential we have.

But in one significant respect we are *not* like everybody else: we have a disability. And, whether we like it or not, having a disability profoundly impacts our lives and the lives of those who love us. Yet many of us spend large amounts of energy and time trying to disguise our disabilities. We deny that they exist or that they matter. We leave our wheelchairs outside the door and struggle into church on legs that barely support us. Are we too proud or too ashamed to acknowledge our disabilities? Is there something inherently wrong about having a disability, or does having one somehow turn us into burdensome alien creatures?

The fact is, disabilities make us *different*; they do not make us inferior or weak in character or less human than

non-disabled people. If civil rights movements have taught us anything at all, it is that differences, whether our own or other people's, are not to be shunned or disguised or denied. Rather they are to be accepted—accepted not only by society but also, more importantly, by ourselves.

My own disability has always been too noticeable for me to try to pretend it didn't exist. But from knowing over the years people who have dealt openly and positively with their disabilities, I have learned to be more "out there" about mine—to be more ready to ask for help and to accept it graciously, and to be less self-conscious about displaying my physical limitations, and, yes, physical deformities, in front of others.

Most amazingly, I can even sometimes feel a bit ticked off when people treat me as though I were *not* disabled, e.g., when someone invites me to their home and is apparently oblivious to the fact that 20 steps to the front door might present a problem for me.

I have always been an avid supporter of mainstreaming and integrating disabled people into non-disabled society. Disability ghettos only foster a *we-they* attitude that benefits no one. On the other hand, I believe that disabled people—especially disabled children and youth—should be encouraged to form bonds with the disability community. Here they will find friendship, support, mentoring, role models (or, if you will, "roll models"), and, ultimately, self-acceptance. And they will be able to say to the world at large, as I do: "I am disabled and I am okay."

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ACCESS-ABILITY: GIVING YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES TO FLOURISH

By Heather Horiuchi

Will Gathro, who has cerebral palsy, is carried by a group of friends during a weeklong camp at Crooked Creek Ranch in Fraser, Colo. Youth with and without disabilities engage in horseback riding, Frisbee golf, hiking, fishing and other activities at the camp, owned by Young Life, a national evangelical outreach organization.

Diagnosed with cerebral palsy as an infant, Will Gathro spent most of his teenage years at home with his parents. "I didn't have any friends that would invite me anywhere," wrote Gathro, who speaks with the help of a computer. "I played Nintendo and watched

TV all by myself."

That changed when he joined Young Life Capernaum Partnership—a nationwide Christian ministry for teenagers with disabilities. The ministry, says Will's mother, Kathy Gathro, has been a social lifeline because "they see our kids for the abilities they have, not the disabilities they have."

The program, which empowers disabled teens to get out of their homes and live a full life, is just one example of how, after years of neglect, churches and religious nonprofits are beginning to meet the needs of people with "special needs."

Will Gathro, now 20, has been a

part of the Arlington, Va., Capernaum Partnership for four years, and has emerged as a group leader since his years of isolation. The organization, a subsidiary of Young Life, gives disabled teens and young adults an outlet for socializing, as well as a place to hear a weekly gospel message.

Capernaum Partnership is named after the place described in the Bible's second chapter of Mark, where Jesus heals a paralytic who is lowered to him through a roof by four friends. Kathy Gathro praised the ministry for aiding "the integration of the social and spiritual development" in her son's life. "They're a model for the whole church," she said.

Every day barriers of architecture, communication and attitude exclude people with disabilities from living out their faith and fully participating in their congregation. As a result, their spiritual needs are not being met, said Ginny Thornburgh, vice president and director of the Washington-based National Organization on Disability's religion and disability program. "Many congregations think [having] a ramp is enough to qualify them as being accessible to persons with disability." However, "Getting a person with a disability to church is not enough"....

While ensuring accessibility to people with disabilities remains challenging, advocates say it is worth the effort. "Giving people the opportunity to flourish," is what it is all about, said Kathy Gathro.... This summer, instead of playing video games by himself, Will Gathro plans to attend Lake Champion camp in New York, as a worker. With the help of a "buddy" who is without a disability, the pair will run the camp's go-cart activities.

Excerpted from "Access-Ability: Giving Members The Opportunity To Flourish," Religion News Service; originally published in the *Salt Lake Tribune*.



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HEART OF THE MATTER: WAITING FOR THE CALL

By Barbara Chaapel

Editor's Note: The following is an excerpt from an article about Princeton Theological Seminary's October 2004 conference on theological education and people with disabilities, "Making Room At The Table," which was attended by over 50 people from 10 U. S. seminaries (see Winter 2008 issue).

Another major issue the conference addressed was vocation. Robin Lostetter, associate pastor of Point Pleasant Presbyterian Church in New Jersey, describes herself as having "mobility issues" and told of a time that someone said to her "What have we here, a little cripple?"

"I hauled off and kicked him in the shins," she said. "That's pretty much been my style. I got tired of people saying things like: 'Oh, we had another handicap here this morning.'

"I learned while I was studying at Rochester Divinity School that people just didn't get it, so I became an educator for them. I had a friend at Princeton, and I tried to help her see the problems on the Princeton campus. Like offering people a class in Stuart Hall via a closed circuit TV but not realizing they couldn't get up the stairs to the building." (She had kudos, though, for Erdman Hall's accessible entranceway and bathrooms.)

Lostetter was not so direct, though, when it came to looking for a call. "I didn't tell the search committee I was disabled during the phone interview," she explained, "and I didn't list my disability on my PIF [job dossier]. You need to let people get to know you first, so they won't shut the door immediately."

Theo Cornish, a 1995 PTS graduate now working in the Theological Book Agency, appreciated her advice. He began looking for a call to ministry in January [of 2004] and hopes to work at a church or on a presbytery staff in the area of redevelopment or youth ministry. He has MS but doesn't want to say that right up front.

"I want them to get to know me first, to establish a relationship, and then I'll

tell them that I'm a person dealing with MS. I may not be able to do some things because my energy level gets low. But God uses everything and everyone, and I believe there is a place I will be called to. I'm waiting to see what it is, and I'll be ready."

Jeremy Funk graduated from Princeton in 2004 and is back home in Wheaton, Illinois, looking for a call. He has cerebral palsy, low vision, and some hearing loss. "I was educating others as soon as I got to Princeton," he says. "I needed note-takers, and longer times on tests. I needed to schedule a mobility instructor every

week, so PTS hired a student friend to help me. I learned to describe to people that getting from Point A to Point B was different than getting from Point B to Point A.

"Friendship is so important. There are classmates who wanted to help, yet some created too much of a dependency. I needed interdependence. Friendship is solidarity more than helping."

One way Funk expresses his feelings is through poetry. He has an M.A. in English and loves to write. He will teach freshman writing this fall at Wheaton College while he looks for a call in ministry.

A member of the Mennonite Church, he is considering doing CPE and becoming a chaplain. Another possibility is working through Young Life's Capernaum Project, which ministers to young people with disabilities.* "I would love to be a sort of spiritual companion to

(HEART continued on page 4)

*See "Access-Ability..." on p. 2 of this issue.



DID YOU KNOW IT SAYS IN THE UMC BOOK OF DISCIPLINE...?!?

General Responsibilities of the Conference Board of Discipleship

(c) To foster and promote camping experiences for persons with disabilities, including camps specifically designed for persons with disabilities, and the participation of persons with disabilities, when feasible, in camps sponsored by the district and conference.

(d) To provide training for clergy and laity in ministries with persons with disabilities, including the areas of the Sunday school, camps and retreats, and the development.

From *Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2004*, ¶628.1

Responsibilities of the Conference Board of Global Ministries

(18) To develop strategies in response to critical community issues, with special attention to the needs of ethnic and language groups, people with disabilities, people in transitional relationships, and those living under repressive systems....

(36) To make available program and other resources to local churches to help ensure physical accessibility of church buildings.

From *Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2004*, ¶630.b

(HEART continued from page 3)

 kids," he said. "If I could get a kid through high school having a better time than I had, that would really use my gifts and experience."

From "Heart Of The Matter" (Aug. 3, 2005), National Organization On Disability website (www.nod.org/religion).



PRAYING FROM THE HEART

By Tim Gilmer

SPECIAL ED SESTINA

By Jeremy Henry Funk

Fog smears this November morning.
I tramp toward the orange school bus
idling in the driveway. A woman
in a tight blouse shifts in the driver's seat. Mom hands
me my brown-bagged lunch, kisses my cheek.
The driver stretches a hairy arm to slam the door.
I slide into a seat near the door.
Ripples crease the driver's neck. This morning
a girl whimpers, hugs a teddy bear to her cheek.
A boy murmurs the Dukes of Hazard theme. The bus
reeks of diapers and sweat. The driver's hands
turn on the radio, then grip the wheel. The woman
plays Billy Joel and Boy George. The woman
sags in her seat. I rub my eyes. The door
opens for crutches, canes, for spastic legs & hands.
Finally, Ginsburg sparkles big & brown in morning.
My legs quiver. I nearly slip stepping off the bus.
Drizzle. Exhaust. Dampness presses my cheeks.
Therapy right away. The receptionist checks
her clipboard and smiles. Jeannie's the only woman
at Ginsburg with orange hair. Therapy smells like the bus:
Ammonia and sweat. White everywhere. Gold door
knobs gleam, turn, then click. Chris grins: "Good Morning."
Her Hawaiian-brown face smiles. Her therapist hands
pull my legs, squeeze my knees. Hard hands.
My back aches. Now my side. My cheek
rubs cold linoleum. Each schoolday morning
Chris wrings my legs. During this work, women
murmur. Phones purr. My green star-sticker gleams on a door
chart. But the prize dims on yellow paper. All day 'till the bus.
Classmates bend low and rigid over round tables, busy
practicing cursive. Mrs. Jones gives me a pencil, hands
over a sheet of r's. Recess next. We march outdoors
to swing and slide and play on chalked
blacktop. I watch the fat woman
on duty who never smiles in the morning.
Noon comes. Many hands make paper sacks crackle. Lunches open
like doors.
Ginsburg roasts big and brown as morning ends. The afternoon bus
driver woman says she smokes. I smell only sweat & diapers. Tears tickle
my cheeks.

Spring 1995; revised Summer 1999 [title supplied by editor].

Recently I've been wondering why—
with all the talk of stem cells and
cures and walking again—I don't
care if my feet never touch the ground
again.

I haven't always felt this way. In the
first couple of weeks following the plane
crash that paralyzed me, I prayed that I
was trapped in a bad dream and asked
God to wake me up. When the night-
mare refused to dissolve, I began pray-
ing to be miraculously healed. When I
reached the five-year post-injury mile-
stone still the same, I made plans to
travel halfway across the globe to find a
partial "cure" in, of all places, Yugosla-
via. When I reached the ten-year mark
and nothing had changed, I tried bio-
feedback, hoping it would restore some
of my muscles. When that didn't hap-
pen, I stopped praying for tomorrow
and started living for today.

Twenty-one years post-injury, when
my daughter arrived, my priorities in-
stantly changed. A gift, a precious life,
had been given to my wife and me. My
prayers took a new direction, no longer
about me. Twenty-one more years
passed in the blink of an eye until this
month—July 11, 2007, my 42nd anniver-
sary as a wheelchair user.

After 42 years of sitting, here is the
list of things that are now more impor-
tant to me than walking again: my rela-
tionship with my wife; my relationship
with my daughter; my faith in God; my
friend Carol's life-and-death need for a
liver transplant; whether Jesse and Nick,
the neighbor "boys," return safely from
war; whether famine will one day disap-
pear from the earth; whether I will
draw my last breath in a nursing home.
This is the stuff my prayers are made of
now.

When I pray, I try not to ask for ma-
(PRAYING continued on page 5)



WHY DO BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE?: A COMMENTARY

By Richard Daggett

Editor's Note: This is the fourth part of a five-part series adapted from an oral presentation given by Daggett in 1994. It is based on Daggett's own experiences as a person with a severe disability and on his review of Harold Kushner's book, *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*.

PART FOUR: ACTS OF NATURE

If we can't bring ourselves to believe that God makes terrible things happen, that they are his will, then what is the alternative?

Let's consider this proposition: The laws of nature can't tell a good person from a bad person. A brick falls off a building and, if you are underneath it at that moment, you will be hit on the head. You cross a busy street at rush hour and there is a good possibility of your being struck by a car—even if you are a good person, and even if you have a good reason for crossing the street. If you go into a house where there is a contagious disease, you run the risk of contracting that disease, whether you are a good person or a bad person. It makes no difference if you are there as a doctor or a burglar.

Being a post-polio survivor in a wheelchair, I talk to a lot of people about disability and other health-related issues. Sometimes I hear people ask, "Why me?", and, although I seldom say it, I think, "Why not you? Is anyone so special that he or she is immune from life's problems?"

Fires, floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, etc.—the insurance companies call these events "acts of God." Harold Kushner thinks this is close to blasphemy. These are not acts of God; they are acts of nature, a blind amoral nature that is not able to distinguish between one person and another.

Now I do believe that God created the world. I have to believe it—it is so complex and so wondrous! And it works. I remember a scene in a movie a

few years ago. Although I can't tell you the name of the movie or even who played in it, I remember a group of children sitting around trying to figure out why something had happened. Each child had a different explanation, but most of their explanations had something to do with ghosts or supernatural events. After a few moments, a small but precocious boy dismissed these explanations. He said that what had happened couldn't have happened because of "unnatural" events. If it did happen that way, then nature wouldn't work, and nature just had to work.

Kushner believes, as I do, that God created the world. But when he created it, he withheld one key ingredient from nature, an ingredient he only gave to us: the ability to differentiate between good and bad. People have that capacity; falling rocks, speeding bullets, and disease germs don't. If a crook goes into a store at night to rob it and shoots an innocent bystander, don't blame God, blame the crook.

On the other hand, I don't believe God created the world, gave it a push, and then retired. I believe that God is at work in the world today as God has always been, i.e., working through individual human beings. God has given us the ability to transcend even the worst tragedies. He has also given us a world where the laws of nature apply regularly and consistently. As long as we don't mess it up, we'll have air to breathe, the sun will rise, and gravity will remain constant.

(PART FIVE: MIRACLES will appear in the Summer 2008 issue of *Wings*.)

(PRAYING continued from page 4)



terial goods or miracles. No Mercedes-Benz, no money, no retribution, no please let me walk again. I try to pray as Jesus instructed his followers to pray 2,000 years ago: I don't pray for a military defeat of our enemies. I pray that those who would strap on explosives and kill innocent men, women, and children will experience a life-altering change of heart. I pray that warriors all over the world will lay down their arms and thank God for life, such as it may be.

And life, for me, is good. I have found that being dependent upon ball bearings rather than joints is a good trade. Both wear out, but ball bearings are cheaper, easier to replace, pain-free.

If I were a young man or woman, I would feel differently about walking. My heart goes out to them. It is not an easy life for any of us, but for those who long for a future that may not come, it is especially difficult. Yet, there are so many opportunities in life that do not depend upon walking. So many possibilities.

So I pray for a grateful heart for those who dream of walking again, for myself, my loved ones, friends, enemies. I pray that humility will pierce the armor of pride and arrogance wherever it hardens hearts. I pray that mothers and fathers all over the world will learn to love not only their children but the children of all nations.

Walking again? For me, maybe someday, in another world.

Gilmer is editor of the disability life-style magazine, *New Mobility*.

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BUILDING CHARACTER By Heidi VanderSlikke

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance....—James 1:23 (NRSV)

When my son was quite young, we discovered that although he was bright, he struggled in school. Because of learning disabilities, he often came home with

a headache. I hated the thought of forcing him to do his homework after supper. However, the two of us hunched over his books, working until our shoulders were stiff with tension and fatigue.

When we reached that point, we went outside and played catch for a while or walked to the back of the

farm. We would toss stones into the creek and talk about anything but school. Each night before James went to sleep, he recited the words of James 1:2-3. Then we prayed together, asking God to help us overcome our problems and to find joy even in tough times.

James finished high school, and today he's in college. His difficult first years in school built a special bond between us. We learned to tackle challenges by depending on God for the ability to persevere, and we experienced joy in relying on God's strength. God used life's struggles to develop our faith and to build our character.

From *The Upper Room* (July/Aug 2005).

The world is full of suffering,
but it is also full of
overcoming it.
— Helen Keller —

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