



DISABILITY AWARENESS

CULTURAL RESOURCES

Sunday, April 3, 2011

Aundrea Matthews, Guest Cultural Resource Commentator

PhD Student at Rice University and Assistant Project Coordinator of the Houston Enriches Rice Education (H.E.R.E.) Project at Rice, Houston, TX

I. The History Section

Historicity invites us to examine both ourselves and our social conditions. Such examination can foster a notion of morality that makes us responsible for each other. At times this sense of co-responsibility has not been lived out. For example, in America, full recognition of each individual's rights has not always been fully guaranteed, and as a culture we have often failed to meet the needs of disabled persons among us who are vulnerable to discrimination, oppression, neglect, or apathy. Indeed, there remains much work to be accomplished in this area.

Despite these shortcomings, it is possible for human beings to encounter God in their historical, social, and cultural environments, which yield in the apprehension of wisdom. This requires a desire to listen to various human interpretations of all God's creations to spawn greater love and compassion for all men and women. The activity of listening to the historicity of disabled persons allows us to gain a deeper understanding of human possibilities and potentialities, as well as allows us to remain open to correction and self-development.

II. Historical Lessons

Culture is the sum total of all the influences that a people/region has undergone, and that very culture is based on an interdependence of these influences. Culturally, we have often failed to learn from the lessons we have been taught by those who are on the margins of society. This rings true for those who are disabled within our culture. So often their voices are silenced, ignored, forgotten, and/or repressed. It is impossible to respect the influences of disabled persons when you don't even notice them or acknowledge their cultural contributions. The time has come for us to regard all disabled persons as worthy of respect and equal treatment in all areas of life. We can no longer overlook them, and we must teach about the sanctity of disabled persons in order to prompt a shift in attitudes towards people with disabilities.

The influences of disabled people to humanity reveal one inspirational story after another regarding the power of the human spirit. The revelation that the Creator gives to those who have physical and mental challenges makes it possible for them to persevere for a place in life that is equal, just, and respected by all. This historicity tells a story to which we all should listen. For those "who have an ear let them hear, and those with an eye let them see."

In 3500 B.C. in an ancient sacred poem of India, prosthesis was written about. Written in Sanskrit, it recounts the story of a warrior, Queen Vishpla, who lost her leg in battle, was fitted with an iron prosthesis, and returned to battle. In 218 B.C. Marcus Sergius, a Roman general who led his legion against Carthage (presently Tunis), sustained 23 injuries and a right arm amputation. An iron hand was fashioned and he also returned to battle. As a veteran of war, he was denied a chance to be a priest because one needed two normal hands. In 1500 A.D., Girolamo Cardano was the first physician to recognize the ability of deaf persons to reason. In 1616, G. Bonifacio published a treatise that discussed sign language as "the Art of Signs." In 1755, Samuel Heinicke established the first oral school for the deaf in the world in Germany. In 1777, Arnoldi, a German pastor, believed that we should begin to educate deaf persons as early as four years old. In 1790, a man named Pinel in Paris begins to unshackle people with mental illness.

In 1805, the first modern attempt to explain mental disorders occurred. In 1812, Louis Braille, at the age of three, was in an accident that deprived him of his sight, and in 1829 he invented the raised point alphabet that has come to be known as Braille. In 1817, the first permanent school for the deaf opened in Hartford, Connecticut. In 1849, Thomas "Blind Tom" Wiggins was born a slave in Georgia and was autistic. From an early age, he composed and played music, and he toured concert halls in Europe and America as a musical oddity. (See the 2010 Lectionary material for more information on Tom Wiggins.) In 1860, the Braille system was introduced to America and was taught at the St. Louis School for the Blind. During the Civil War, John Wesley Powell lost his arm. Ignoring his father's pleas for him to become a minister, he became

a science professor and explorer. He founded the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of Ethnology to study the record and traditions of Native Americans. In 1872, Alexander G. Bell opened a school for teachers of the deaf in Boston. In 1887, women were admitted to Gallaudet College, originally called the National Deaf-Mute College.

In the 1900s, Dr. Jacob Bolotin was the first congenitally blind man to receive a medical license. In 1903, Harriet Tubman aided the sick and disabled and turned her house into the Harriet Tubman Home for Aged and Indigent People. In 1907, Thomas Gore, who became blind as a child due to two separate accidents, became an Oklahoma Senator. In 1914, the French actress Sarah Bernhardt had her leg amputated; she continued to act and is regarded as France's greatest actress—"The Divine Miss Sarah." In 1921, the American Foundation for the Blind, a non-profit organization, was founded, and they recognized and supported Helen Keller's cause in the United States. In 1935, the League for the Physically Handicapped in New York City protested discrimination by the Workers Progress Administration (WPA). Members participated in sit-ins and eventually generated a couple thousand jobs nationwide. In 1951, Bessie Blount, an African American physical therapist, created a device that allowed amputees to feed themselves.

In 1974, the Disabled Women's Coalition was founded at UC Berkeley by Susan Sygall and Deborah Kaplan. The coalition ran support groups, held disabled women's retreats, and wrote and lectured on women and disability. In the late 1970s, Judi Chamberlin cofounded a group of psychiatric survivors called the Mental Patients Liberation Front to fight for legal rights of psychiatric patients. Also in the 1970s, the Federal Communications Commission authorized closed captions on television sets. In 1977, a group of disabled persons took over the San Francisco offices of the Health, Education, and Welfare Department to protest Secretary Joseph Califano's refusal to sign meaningful regulations. The protest lasted for over a month and is the longest sit-in of a federal building to date. The historic demonstration was a success and the regulations were signed. In the 1980s, the National Disabled Women's Educational Equity Project run by Corbett O'Toole created the first national survey on disability and gender. The organization conducted regional training programs for younger disabled women in Minneapolis, and it held the first national conference on Disabled Women's Educational Equity in Bethesda, Maryland. In 1983, ADAPT, a national disability advocacy group took on the inaccessibility of Greyhound buses across the nation. In 1990, The Secretary of Transportation, Sam Skinner, issued regulations mandating lifts on buses. In 1995, the struggle for the rights of people with disabilities in Southern Africa took a leap forward by electing two women disabled leaders in South Africa and Zimbabwe. The election of Maria Rantho in South Africa and Ronah Moyo in Zimbabwe marked a new beginning in the history of people with disabilities in South Africa. In South Africa, Ms. Rantho represented and spoke for nearly six million people with disabilities, which at that time represented 12 percent of South Africa's entire population. In 1995, the first International Symposium on Issues of Women with Disabilities was held in Beijing, China. In Havana, Cuba, the organization of people with disabilities in Cuba (ACLIFM) held their first international conference on disability rights. In 2001, Erik Weihenmayer was the first blind person to reach the summit of Mount Everest. In 2008, David Alexander Paterson became the first African American governor of New York and is also legally blind.

As we listen to the historicity of disabled persons, we should be inspired to acknowledge the roles that disabled persons have played in our culture, and gain a better understanding of their struggle to overcome the prejudices of American society.

III. Stories and Illustrations

In life, each one of us experiences real consequences and strives to take appropriate measures towards improving ourselves and sometimes our communities. As people search to make meaning of the world around them, they may seek answers from their family, community, culture, and/or faith tradition. So, when I read Exodus 4:11 (which reads: “The LORD said to him, ‘Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the LORD?’”) as well as Luke 14:12-13 (which reads: “Then Jesus said to his host, ‘When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.’”) instantly I began to search the diverse stories and beliefs within African American culture to gain a deeper understanding of these passages.

I found the following story that our enslaved ancestors passed down that might help us gain a deeper understanding of these Scriptures. I was intrigued by this story because as Gayraud Wilmore states, “It is now clear that black religion in North America had roots in Africa and the Caribbean as well as the Great Awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.”¹ Thus, our African religious background might shed some light on these spiritual verses. This story serves in formal and informal ways to help us order and interpret the existence of disabled persons, extend hospitality to those with disabilities, and sustain the good of all God’s creations.

When our enslaved ancestors arrived in America they were not allowed to freely practice their own religion; they had to “disguise” or syncretize their gods with those of the slave owners. The enslaved Yoruba people of West Africa syncretized their creator God (Olodumare) with Jehovah (the Father of Christians) and their messenger spirits known as “orishas” with the various Christian saints or angels. In the United States, Mexico, and the Caribbean, seven of the many orishas were combined into a commonly seen image called “The Seven African Powers.” It is among these “Seven African Powers” that I found the story of Obatala. Obatala is known as “King of the White Cloth,” and within Catholicism is called Our Lady of Mercy, Mary of Ransom, and is also known as Saint Joseph, Saint Anne, and Saint James. In Brazil, he is often identified with Christ the Redeemer (Christo Redenter). There are several stories of Obatala and each is an attempt by our ancestors to explain the creation of disabled persons by God that requires us to be loving, respectful, and just to disabled people.

Obatala, the oldest of the orishas, was granted authority to create humans out of clay. The Lord of human creation on earth, Obatala through the power of the supreme god made human bodies, and God breathed life into them. So, Obatala climbed down the Golden Chain from Heaven and with his red clay or mud created the first human being. Obatala worked hard on creation and one day he decided that he needed to rest a bit. Before he could return to heaven and report to Olodumare, however, his rival Oduduwa (also called Oduwa, Oodua, Odudua, or Eleduwa),

often described as his younger brother, usurped his position. A great feud ensued between the two and Oduduwa and his sons were able to rule without Obatala's consent.

Obatala continued to create many men and women, but he became thirsty. So he started to drink palm wine and became drunk. He continued to create but was in a drunken state, and in that state he created crippled, deaf, blind, and albino creations. Once Obatala was sober, he was horrified at what he had done. So Obatala goes up the Gold Chain to Heaven, and goes before God, and Obatala says that he created new human beings, and asked if he could rule those people he created. Unfortunately, he could not undo what had been done and God punished him for getting drunk while working. God forbade him to drink palm wine while engaged in that most important work. Since that time, those born with deformities and albinos are considered to be children of Obatala and it is forbidden to make fun of them.

This story helps us gain a deeper insight into Luke 14:12-13 because it helps us realize that like Obatala we must be responsible for disabled persons so that God's responsibilities can be fulfilled.

Symbolically, this story tells us that disabled people are cared for and protected by God, which reinforces the Christian principle that we should love and honor all of God's creations. This story also serves as a personal morality message and encourages us to learn that God wants us to help each other transcend the difficulties of life that are beyond our control.

I was glad to know that our ancestors wrestled with the hard questions of life. Quite importantly, this story reinforces our Christian responsibility to celebrate the lives of disabled persons in our culture and to honor their God-given abilities.

IV. Songs That Speak to the Moment

The three stanzas of "I Am That I Am" by Peter Tosh proudly speak to equal rights for disabled persons. The lyrics reinforces the Christian principle of "treating others as you want to be treated."

I Am That I Am

I'm not in this world
to live up to your expectations
neither are you here to live up to mine, yeah

I don't owe no one
No obligation
No I don't mean none
So everything is fine, fine

Chorus

I said I am that I am
I am I am I am

(4x)

Don't underestimate
My ability
Don't definate my character
Don't belittle
My authority
It is time you recognized my quality....²

“Move on Up” by Curtis Mayfield, who was confined to a wheelchair for part of his life, encourages disabled people in particular and everyone in general to keep fighting despite life's challenges. It reinforces the notion of the indomitability of the human spirit.

Move on Up

Hush now child,
and don't you cry
Your folks might understand you
by and by
Move on up
towards your destination
You may find
from time to time
Complications

Bite your lip
and take a trip
Though there may be
wet road ahead
You cannot slip
Just move on up
and peace you will find
Into the steeple
of beautiful people
Where there's only one kind
So keep on pushing
Take nothing less—
not even second best
And do not obey—
you must have your say
You can pass the test

Move on Up!!³

“Do It for Me” by DeAndre Patterson could be the cry of so many disabled people who are forced to live with the daily indignities of trying to live normal lives in a country where the disabled are treated like second- and third-class citizens.

Do It for Me

Lead:

Lord I need to feel your hand
There's a hunger and thirst in the Land
For you to move

Choir:

Do it for me, right away

Lead:

So many people ready to throw in the towel
If you don't move, we won't know how to go on

Choir:

Do it for me, right away

Lead:

Lord I'm desperate, to see a change
Move the clouds together
Send the former and latter rain

Choir:

Do it for me, right away

Lord we need You to move, right away
We don't know what we will do
If you don't move
On our behalf
We've been waiting, for a long time
We're not tired yet, Lord we need You
Do it for me, right away

We've been waiting, for a long time
We're not tired yet, Lord we need You
(repeat)

Do it for me (repeat)

Do it for me, right away.⁴

V. Resources

Technical

1. Disability.gov is the online connection to the federal government's disability-related information and resources. This site connects people to information and resources on

employment, education, housing, transportation, health, benefits, technology, civil rights, community life, and emergency preparedness as they pertain to people with disabilities. The site also contains easy access to state specific resources. This is the “one-stop-shop” for all things disability related connected to the federal government.

2. The IRS Disability Information site (www.irs.gov) contains information about different tax credits and programs provided by the Internal Revenue Service for people with disabilities and businesses who employ the disabled. Most importantly this site highlights the IRS services available to people with disabilities. Those individuals whom the IRS determines are low-income qualify for free tax preparation.

Financial

1. *Practical Money Skills for Life* contains a set of tools and resources to improve financial literacy at home, at work, and/or at school. The site contains practical solutions and resources for teaching people the importance of financial literacy in all settings. Examples of tools includes calculators for monthly budgets, mortgages, saving, and auto loans. Perhaps the best tool the site offers is several “games” to teach financial fitness, including “Financial Football” and Smart Money Quiz Show.” Here is a link for quick access to the games:

<http://www.practicalmoneyskills.com/games/>.

2. The *Equity Newsletter* is a monthly publication created by the “Access to Assets: project of the World Institute on Disability,” a public policy center organized for and by people with disabilities. It includes timely helpful tips and answers to questions about asset-building strategies, federal policy updates, and links to other public and private resources.

VI. Audio Visual Aids

The following YouTube videos showcase remarkable achievements by disabled persons. They also show the power of the human spirit.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aR_P8kInWEE&feature=related

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vUIYmJeggmI&feature=related>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kViBAohA_nI

VII. A Disability Prayer

This cultural resource unit closes with a poem by Tina Yows. It redefines persons who would be normally characterized as disabled. As a result of this prayer we are encouraged to look at disabilities in a new light.

Let us pray for the vision impaired . . . who can only see differences in people, not who people are inside . . .

Let us pray for the speech impaired . . . who can only speak with harsh and hurtful words, instead of kindness and understanding . . .

Let us pray for the emotionally disturbed . . . who cannot seem to care for anyone who is different from themselves, instead of at least trying to love everyone, “different” or not . . .

Let us pray for the hearing impaired . . . who can only hear the unspoken words, instead of listening for what someone is trying to tell them . . .

Please God, help these truly disabled people so that this world can become a better place for ALL of your children.

AMEN!

Notes

1. Wilmore, Gayraud. Black Religion and Black Radicalism. New York, NY: Orbis Books, 1998, p. 36.
2. “I Am That I Am.” By Peter Tosh. Peter Tosh: I Am That I Am. New York, NY: Jad (Koch) Records, 2001.
3. “Move on Up.” By Curtis Mayfield. The Very Best of Curtis Mayfield. New York, NY: Rhino (Warner) Records, 1997.
4. “Do It for Me.” By DeAndre Patterson. DeAndre Patterson. Indianapolis, IN: Tyscot Records, 2004.