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# ANNA HOWARD SHAW CENTER

## NEWSLETTER

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FALL 1991

VOLUME 8 NUMBER 1



### **Fall Retreat Aims to Build Bridges**

A wonderfully representative group of women faculty, staff, students, and spouses participated in the annual fall all-women's retreat September 20-21.

Entitled "Around the Table and Across the Lines" (the programmatical theme for this coming Shaw year), the retreat focused on our similarities, our differences, and our connections. Sharing Shaw lore and using the imagery of village women going to the well, we celebrated ways in which the Center has been a life-giving well for many diverse women at the School of Theology. We also envisioned how we can continue to be resources for one another.

During the year we will continue to gather around the table and dare to cross our lines of differences, as women with ethnic and cultural differences, as women and men, as individuals with different sexual preferences—in whatever ways that tend to separate us. The round table in the Shaw Center has been the site of many barrier breaking conversations. With God's grace, we hope to share this experience through diverse programs, for the sake of a stronger community of solidarity. The following article is a step toward honoring our differences.

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### **Singing Without a Voice: Using Disability Images in the Language of Public Worship**

*Valerie C. Jones Stiteler is founder and director of the chaplaincy program for the Protestant Guild for the Blind and a candidate for the Doctor of Theology degree at BUSTH.*

Several years ago, I was invited to present two workshops at a clergywomen's retreat. Since

these workshops were not related to issues of disability, I was not representing the disabled community in a formal capacity, but rather participating in the retreat as a woman who happens to be blind.

When I enter a new community there are often mixed reactions to my blindness. My guiding cane is the most obvious signal of my disability, but not everyone understands what the cane means. This lack of understanding often draws varying responses of curiosity and discomfort from both women and men. My experience at this event was a common one. I was greeted cordially by the other women. Initially, however, I was not identified to the entire community as a woman with a disability.

The retreat proceeded at a comfortable level for me until we gathered at table for the first meal. One of the worship facilitators suggested we sing the hymn "Amazing Grace" to the tune of "Joy to the World" as the meal blessing. The phrase "was blind, but now I see" was thus repeated five times. I found the hymn to be offensive and my wounding was evident to the song leader and at least a few of the other women sitting near me.

The song leader rushed over to me and said: "Oh Valerie, I am so sorry! I have blind people in my parish, and I would never deliberately say anything to hurt them. Besides, the blindness in the hymn is a spiritual blindness and we all are spiritually blind."

I told her, frankly, that I did not accept that. Sounding even more distressed, she offered to apologize to me in front of the entire group at the plenary session which was to follow the meal. At first I refused because I was afraid of being further victimized, but she was so adamant that I finally consented.

Her apology was heartfelt, and there were nods of affirmation from the rest of the group. She intended to honor my presence in the community of women and also to acknowledge that words do hurt. Unfortunately, her good intentions had a powerful negative effect.

Her apology identified me publicly both as a woman with a disability and as a victim. Several of the women treated me differently from that moment onward. They asked intrusive questions on matters such as my personal hygiene, and some assumed a care-giving role in the manner of a mother caring for a child.

The most painful aspect of the community's lack of understanding was the way in which language was used in both the keynote lectures and in worship. All of the speakers were very careful not to use sexist or racist language in their conversations. Pride and solidarity was expressed for women and people of color who struggle against oppression.

Unfortunately, the retreat speakers used terms of disability to describe their own experience of oppression. They used words like blindness, deafness, and lameness to accuse the oppressors of alienating and marginalizing certain groups of people. "Darkness" was compared to sin, while words such as "vision," "wholeness," and "light" were used to describe the inclusiveness that these women aspired to in their ministries.

The final, crushing blow came for me at the closing eucharist. The homilist for the liturgy was the very same woman who had apologized to me so sincerely. She proceeded to use able-bodied language all the way through her sermon. Even the closing song of praise (which was meant to be a hymn of tender praise for womanhood) was riddled with able-bodied language. It was a very painful and difficult retreat for me.

My story illustrates how often negative images of disability are used by people in liturgical language, even those who are sensitive to issues of gender and racial inclusiveness. Words such as "deaf," "blind," "lame," "crippled," "defective," "broken," "deformed," "misshapen," "disfigured," and "grotesque" are used in public worship in ways that invalidate the body experiences of

persons with disabilities. Their indiscriminate use in worship often reinforces prejudice towards us and precipitates our exclusion from the worshipping community.

These images of disability are most often used to illustrate ways in which the Body of Christ (i.e., the worshipping community) has lost its sense of wholeness. Even though many theological traditions no longer claim there is a direct relationship to sin and illness or disability, this attitude is presented so often in liturgy that it is obvious many people still think there is some kind of cause and effect relationship between salvation and physical conditions.

I believe this comes directly out of the understanding that the worshipping assembly is both the spiritual and physical Body of Christ. Since body images form the basis for much of Christian liturgical language, using certain bodily conditions to image theological concepts would be expected.

Persons with disabilities often have a relationship to their bodies different from those who are thought to be "able-bodied." Being "able-bodied" means that a woman or man has a socially defined realm of body experience and can function within a prescribed norm of social behavior. This generally means that a person can be completely independent and can function as an autonomous being. In short, an "able-bodied" person is whole and perfect.

Able-bodied language suggests that, in order to participate fully in public worship, the individual has to embody the same wholistic image that is being proclaimed theologically from the pulpit. This leaves persons with disabilities little chance to participate in the salvific actions of the liturgy as part of the worshipping community.

Disability language commonly occurs in prayers of confession. This happens because there is a scriptural link between disability and sin. Sinfulness is portrayed as corruption of the flesh in terms such as "deafness" and "blindness." These are frequent metaphors for the inability of humans to be present to the Word of God.

One example of how this happens is the change the editors of the Lutheran Book of Worship

made in the third verse of the hymn, "Holy, Holy, Holy." The phrase, "though the eye of sinful man" was adapted to read, "though the eye made blind by sin." The change was made in an effort to be more gender inclusive. The effect was to associate blindness with sinfulness in a very direct way.

I was shocked when the retreat facilitator said to me, "we are all spiritually blind." She used an image of physical blindness to make the theological statement that we are all unable to "see" spiritually. This use of theological metaphor is what keeps many persons with disabilities away from public worship. Few persons with disabilities like to be told that their body experience is correlated to sinning.

By using disability language in this way, persons with disabilities experience liturgical language as reinforcing the social stigma surrounding body experiences of disability. The comparison of physical wholeness with spiritual wholeness reduces the social and theological understanding of salvation to achieving some level of physical wellness or perfection. Confronted by this type of metaphorical language, persons with disabilities have no choice but to remain "lost."

The only time images of disability are used positively in worship is when a story is being told about someone with a disability who performed some miraculous feat or had some kind of spiritual awareness which was missed by the able-bodied people present in the story. These accounts do two things to people with disabilities. They encourage the person to deny or devalue their body experience. They also distance the person from the worshipping community, either by claiming the person has a greater access to spiritual truth or by claiming the person has no need for participation in the worshipping community. I suspect the use of these tales in the liturgy comes directly out of the tradition of the healing stories in the Bible.

Some attempts have been made linguistically to address the issues of disability language in liturgy. However, little work has been done on the theological implications of these changes. An example of this is changing the phrase, "was blind, but now I see" to "was bound, but now am free." This change resolves the issue of linking

blindness with sinfulness, but it raises other theological issues. To say "I am bound, but now I am free" relates mobility disabilities to sin. It also connects prisoners to sin as well. The theological paradigm remains the same.

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human experience and should not be  
judged by theological categories.*

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As long as images of body disability are used negatively, they are in danger of defining all persons with disabilities as sinners by virtue of our body experiences. Since few of the disabled are achieving the socially accepted norm of the able-bodied at this time, we stand little chance of participating fully in worship or of receiving the salvation offered to all humans. Disability is part of human experience and should not be judged by theological categories.

Addressing issues of inclusiveness regarding persons with disabilities in liturgical language is no small task. It requires careful examination of how body images are being used and a willingness to determine what theological statements develop from such use. Go through a prepared liturgy. Notice where the disability terms are used, and how they are grouped. You may find a large number in prayers, particularly in prayers of confession.

Another way to learn what attitudes are prevalent in the use of disability terms is to compose prayers that use these images in positive ways. I did a workshop on these issues where I simply said, "I have blindness and you do not." This reversal of the line, "I have sight and you do not," allowed us to explore how attitudes regarding disability are translated into theological categories.

To identify theological motifs regarding disability, try doing a bible study on the woman with the issue of blood (Mark 5:21-43). Start the bible study by establishing that the woman's issue of blood was a disability and then discuss

how she used her disability to gain access to Jesus and to her own healing.

Having considered the woman's use of her disability as positive and as agent of her salvation, you may find other passages in which you can begin to re-interpret some of the disability images found in the scriptures. Many of the images in the Bible are negative, but some of the passages about disabled and sick people have been inappropriately interpreted because of the social stigma surrounding disabilities.

Engaging persons with disabilities in dialogue about the use of language in your worshipping community is critical to learning how your worship is portraying various forms of embodiment. You may not think there are

disabled people in your congregation, but that may be a function of how your community is defining disability. There are probably many people present with hidden disabilities.

By attending to how your worshipping community uses disability terms in its liturgy, your community may come to a deeper understanding of what it means to be human. I hope each of you will also embrace a deeper relationship with your own body and discover it is possible to praise God by singing without a voice, praying without hands, and celebrating the glory of God with your ever-changing body.

*For more information contact Valerie at 617/859-1704.*

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Alma Lee Carpenter—Anna Howard Shaw Birthday Party and two copies of *Story of a Pioneer*

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The Shaw Center is entirely responsible for raising its annual operating budget. Gifts from individuals and grants enable our programming, our library, our newsletter, scholarships, and other opportunities for ministry. We are deeply grateful for these contributions and for your continued support that make our work possible. *Margaret Wiborg*

## Congratulations

Congratulations to Dr. Katheryn Pfisterer Darr on the publication of her first book, *Far More Precious than Jewels: Perspectives on Biblical Women*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991). The book, published in September, draws on insights from modern critical biblical specialists, rabbinical interpreters, and feminist scholars. Kathe's chapters on Ruth and Hagar had earlier lives as part of the Shaw Center's 1986 and 1988 Women Studies Series, respectively.

## ANNA HOWARD SHAW CENTER

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*Volume 8, Number 1*

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## Upcoming Events:

**January 17-18, 1992:** Anti-Racism Training for White Women, with Nancy Richardson. An exploration of methods of addressing issues of racism and white identity among white women. For more information, contact the Women's Theological Center at 617/277-1330.

**February 9, 1992:** Celebration of Anna's birthday and recognition of the Anna Howard Shaw window as a United Methodist Historic Site.

**February 21-22, 1992:** "An Exploration of Spirituality and Sexuality through the Lens of Race and Class," Carter Heyward and Donna Bivens.

**March 19-20, 1992:** Women and the Word; Women Preaching: Power for Transformation. Leadership includes Bishop Susan M. Morrison, Bishop Barbara C. Harris and Dr. Diana Eck.

## Editor's Note:

With this issue, June Goudey, Anna Howard Shaw Scholar, assumes editorial responsibilities. Our thanks to Kristy Klein Barclay, former editor, for her excellent work throughout the last year. On October 31, 1991, Kristy gave birth to her first child, Leo Bayless Barclay. Congratulations to Kristy, her husband, Bill, and to Leo!