



# Disability and stereotypes: beyond accessibility

## “Disability is a natural part of the human experience.”

There have *always* been people with disabilities in the world, and *there always will be*. Like gender and ethnicity, disability is simply one of the many natural characteristics of being human. One in five Americans is a person with a disability. Some are born with disabilities; others acquire disabilities through accidents, illness, or the aging process. Many folks who do not presently have a disability will have one in the future (especially if we live long enough). How can disability *not* be natural?

*from “Disability is Natural!” by Kathie Snow*

## What’s the opposite of understanding disability as natural?

Society has given us cultural stereotypes that we use when we think about disability. We see everything associated with disability as negative, as bad. We say that:

“She *suffers* from a disability.”

“He’s a hero who *struggles* against his limitations.”

## What do we notice first when we see a person?

Do we notice their clothes, their car, their ability to dance the tango? When it’s a person with a visible disability, the disability is almost always what we notice first. And then we stop noticing anything else. Often, when we meet a person with a visible disability, we can’t see anything positive – all we see through our cultural stereotypes is limitation, we don’t see a complex, whole, ordinary person!

Each one of us thinks of ourselves as a complex person—we are parents, professionals, musicians, multi-taskers, cooks and computer nerds, all bundled into one great and complex human being! But we see a person with a disability as one-dimensional – disabled! The language we use—impairment, limitation, disability, blind, deaf and dumb, victim, sufferer, courageous, heroic—frames the way we think about a person.

## When we see a person who is:

Disabled  
Overweight  
Blind  
Deaf  
Sitting in a wheelchair  
Sitting in a wheelchair

## Do we assume they are?

Needy  
Lazy  
Incapable  
Unintelligent  
Brave – a hero!  
Pitiful – a victim!



## **People with disabilities are whole, complex, and like the rest of us – ordinary people**

Disability is just an ordinary, natural part of our world. We live in a society where anything associated with disability is denied; so we don't see positive images of people with disabilities in the media, and many of us don't have opportunities to socialize with people who have disabilities. So everything about disability can seem very unnatural. Disability is "normal" – maybe not "typical", but "normal" – and natural, and just part of a person's identity.

The fact is that disability, while an important part of a person's identity, is not the entirety of a person's identity. People with disabilities lead complex, whole, fulfilling lives as:

- √ parents and children
- √ partners and lovers
- √ employers and employees
- √ students and teachers
- √ scientists and doctors
- √ Unitarian Universalists
- √ and yes, as ministers!

## **What might happen if a minister is a person with a disability?**

Each minister brings personal gifts and skills of ministry, and a minister with a disability is neither a better, nor a worse minister than a person without a disability. Insights gained from our individual life experiences shape each of us. As a minister living with a disability, these insights include, but are certainly not limited to disability-related issues.

A minister with a disability:

- does not require special care
- does not only preach about disability
- has enough stamina to do the job, and do it well
- may be the perfect minister for your congregation!

Don't let cultural stereotypes get in the way. We are Unitarian Universalists who want our faith community to be welcoming to all people. Living our faith means being open to new ideas – including calling a minister with a disability.

## **Resources to help us understand that disability is a natural part of the human experience**

Stereotypes of Disability, chapter 6 in *Disabled We Stand*, (1981) Sutherland, A.T.  
<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/archiveuk/Sutherland/CHAPTER6.pdf>

"Disability is Natural!", "People First Language", "A New Way of Thinking"  
in Katie Snow's website: <http://www.disabilityisnatural.com>

Disability is a Natural Characteristic of Life on [wheelchairnet.org](http://www.wheelchairnet.org):  
[http://www.wheelchairnet.org/WCN\\_living/Dics/Disabilityis.html](http://www.wheelchairnet.org/WCN_living/Dics/Disabilityis.html)