

Are We Universally Accessible?

Worship service presented on July 31, 2011 by Stephanie Dorman
at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbia, Missouri

The topic for this service came to me last winter as we prepared for our annual pledge drive and our first membership class without Reverend Bill. One of the books I was studying used the phrase “universal access” as a descriptor for a healthy congregation. The phrase struck a chord with me. First, I appreciated the word play of “universal accessibility” with “Unitarian Universalist.” Second, I noticed the connections with our church friend Janet Groat’s use of “universal design” elements to make her parents’ home more accessible to those with physical restrictions. And finally, I picked up on “universal access” as a way to talk about all those things we need to consider to help make our church home a true sanctuary for spiritual seekers, a safe haven for those who may need “a lot of room” in church.

I believe “Are We Universally Accessible?” is a huge question. It translates into this: are we doing everything we can to ensure that each person walking through our doors can understand and participate with dignity as fully as possible in the life of this place? For example,

- Can a newcomer find the bathroom without having to ask for help?
- Will a guest intuitively know how to sing the rounds of "Rise Up O Flame" during Sunday worship?
- Is the language we use understandable to someone with a smaller vocabulary?
- Is there a way for a member experiencing financial hardship to share that information without embarrassment during the annual canvass?
- Is our church facility completely accessible to people with disabilities?

As the next academic year progresses, I hope we will have conversations about all these questions. For today, however, we’ve chosen to focus in on one element: universal accessibility for those of us with disabilities.

At a cottage meeting this summer, our church friend Howard Hutton described how, as mostly liberal people, we seem to have so many more sins than more conservatives. There are many more things to mess up, or do wrong. In our service today, our intention is not to point out sins or to try to make anyone feel bad or guilty for doing something “wrong.” Instead our goal is to raise consciousness and to hopefully have a little fun along the way.

The news in pop culture brought me a little surprise this week. It turns out I have a connection with a certain glamorous reality tv starlet known for her perfectly rounded tushie. Apparently Kim Kardashian and I share the same skin disease, psoriasis. In case you’re interested, comedian Jon Lovitz and singer LeAnn Rimes also have it, along with a few other people here in our congregation.

During the summer of 1992, when I was 20 years old, I was a counselor at Camp Mudd, a day camp held just north of town. We took the kids swimming twice a week. I started noticing redness along my hair-line, and my scalp was itchy. I just figured the pool chemicals were

drying out my scalp, and it would eventually go away. But the itchiness and the redness continued into the fall semester of my junior year at MU, and then I started getting small, red, scaly spots on my arms. But I was going to school full time and working three part-time jobs, so there was no time to worry about spots.

Then at Thanksgiving time, when we drove to my Grandparents' home in central Kansas, we spun out on an icy bridge. I remember pushing in on the brake really hard, even though I was on the passenger side. For weeks afterward, I had pain in my right knee and ankle, but I attributed it to our little adventure.

The pain and the itching became overwhelming. I dropped out of my classes mid-spring. I didn't leave our apartment for six weeks that summer because I was afraid of the pain of climbing the steps. Finally my husband, Larry, got me to a doctor, and in addition to the psoriasis, I learned that I had psoriatic arthritis. The diseases are related; about 10% of those with psoriasis develop psoriatic arthritis. People can have mild to severe symptoms; left untreated, I'm on the severe end of the spectrum.

Currently I go to Ellis Fischel Cancer Center every two months for an IV-infusion of a drug called Remicade that helps both diseases, although you can still see their signs – my elbows and hands. I have sausage fingers & toes – arthritis mutilans. It makes it so that you can't really tell which way I'm meaning to point (due to the deformity in my joints). I used to tell my sixth graders someone was having a little fun with me – all my fingers are affected except one (my right middle finger).

So why am I telling you all these personal details? The most basic reason is because this church is my sanctuary, and many of you have made me feel welcome and safe enough to share that level of information. I think that's essential – it's you, the people of this church, who have made me feel welcome. Of course I would be deeply grateful if there was an elevator so I could get to choir practice a little easier, but accessibility starts with people, with acceptance, kindness, and a willingness to listen, to learn, and to make changes. I think we have these qualities in spades.

Our community has already been listening, and I see the evidence in all kinds of places. Chairs and other items that used to block access are no longer stored on the ramp to the stage. People are consistently using the microphone during the services, making it easier for those with hearing difficulties. Folks are introducing themselves during Joys and Concerns, helping our newcomers, our Caring Ministry members, and our friends with short term memory concerns. Our Order of Service often has the more affirming notation, "Please rise in body and spirit as you are able" versus "Please stand." And on our church grounds, two additional parking spaces closer to the building have been designated as parking for the disabled.

Is there more we can do to be more universally accessible? Well, sure. Easy ones are:

1. Sit on the east end of the sanctuary if you can to allow more seating a shorter distance from the doors for those with walking difficulties.
2. If you can, sit in the center to allow aisle seating for those who need knee space or room for walking assistance devices like canes and walkers.
3. Before and after worship services, consider visiting in the sanctuary so people can move freely through the greeting area.
4. If you can, offer to get coffee or a plate of food during potlucks for someone who cannot easily stand in line for an extended period of time.

5. If you see me sitting alone, please pull up a chair. I'd love to chat, but it could be that I'm not moving well that day.

Here are some questions to think about:

1. How could we make it easier to access the Memorial Garden?
2. How can we include everyone in outdoor events, like Down by the Riverside and the Winter Solstice bonfire?
3. Is it possible to have a parallel event to the New Year's Day Hike or neighborhood holiday caroling to invite more participation in those rituals?

And this is my exciting dream for our church's future – a capital campaign for Universal Accessibility – which could look like projection screens to help with vision issues, listening devices and a sound system update for those with hearing concerns, improving the ramp on the outside east entrance and the playground for accessibility, and the big one – installing an elevator! We're almost done with the mortgage from the building expansion, so I think we can do this in the next 3-5 years.

One of the things that appeals to me about Universal Accessibility is its potential crossover with our principles and values. At its core is recognizing the inherent worth and dignity of all beings. Plus measures like projecting our hymns and orders of service cut down on waste paper, honoring our commitment to the green sanctuary ideal.

Over time I've noticed that sensitivity to people's needs in one dimension creates positive change and growth in other areas. That's the core of Universal Accessibility – it's not just for those of us with disabilities. It can widen our welcome for all.

Amen. So may it be.