

**THE TROUBLE WITH NORMAL: WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES A THEOLOGY OF DISABILITY MAKE? Paper presented to the Oxford Institute of Methodist Studies. August 2013. Reverend Dr Mary Caygill, Christchurch, New Zealand.**

*In order to be truthful  
We must do more than speak the truth.  
We must also hear truth.  
We must also receive truth.  
We must also act upon truth.  
We must also search for truth.  
The difficult truth,  
within us and around us.  
We must devote ourselves to truth.  
Otherwise we are dishonest  
and our lives are mistaken.  
God grant us the strength and the courage  
to be truthful.*

Michael Leunig.

This presentation is a work in progress; an exploration in the seeking of truth - truth and truths which emanate from reflections of our embodied living experiences along with a creative searching and living into theological understandings of God, humanity and the created world outside the exclusive and invalidating frame of both the terms and referent states of "normal" and "disability".

This practical theological exploration draws understanding and insight from the offerings of art and poetry which is an offering of a close friend Rhonda who lives with the bodily experiences of a cluster of disabilities which have become as a 'frame' through which her life has more often than not been perceived and related to. This provides the first step of the critical reflective process beginning with lived experience. The critical engagement with sources from the Christian tradition and social sciences forms the second and major portion of the paper where I particularly seek to engage in an ongoing intentional conversation between feminist, disability and queer theological frameworks.

These offerings seek to offer a contribution to the ongoing task of articulating a liberatory theological anthropology beyond the constricting and life-denying frame of 'normal'.

In my parish office currently within my temporary church home in Christchurch sitting within a particular alcove on one of the bookshelves is a significant symbols, created by Rhonda, following a significant conference which we both attended, held in Wellington, New Zealand in 2003 entitled "Through the Whirlwind". This was a significant gathering of people from Australia and New Zealand many of whom live with the effects of varying physical and mental impairments, who gathered together

in order to express for themselves their own theological and spiritual expressions of faith, articulated out of and through the materiality of their own embodiment.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The proceedings from this Conference have been published in a publication from the Uniting Church in Australia entitled, "*Through the Whirlwind.*" The importance of this conference was that in its planning and programming, most of the input came from individuals living with disability. The contents include the addresses of the three keynote speakers and 22 reports from Workshops.

In the centre stands this cross - named as "The Disproportionate Cross".



As Rhonda describes to me; "the cross expresses for me something of my emerging Christology. The two different sized pieces of wood and the deliberate crooked angle reflect and encompass the body of difference within the whole body of Christ. It is deliberately disproportionate – not a straight up and down cross with seeming perfect dimensions – it deliberately represent difference, represents the power imbalances, the varying disjunctions which Rhonda experiences as part of her daily bodily living.

Most disabled people don't have power – but they are whole – there is beauty in who they are – they don't have to be anything other than they are. Looking at this cross makes people think, makes people ask of my own embodied experience and my living journey to speak out who and what my Christ is.

The small glass tiles around the side are grouted with black paint which runs on to the cross. Black is the colour normally used for framing, as it stands out against any other colour. The glass tiles – some are missing – missing to create difference.

The tile stuck on the front of the cross – this indicates that I am whole in Christ – but different and I can be different in Christ. People often want to fix and feel uncomfortable around this cross.

The following poem written by me adds to the narrated faming of the cross.

### **Frames**

Okay if you fit  
the model of good  
brain integration  
your skills are useful  
valued by pay  
not half pie  
fighting justifying.

Just to hang in  
with something no one knows about  
or how to fix.  
no level of care fits the mould  
the community things one does  
falling apart from lack of funding.

expected to fix  
no place for people  
like me in the community

who don't fit the mould. <sup>2</sup>

My personal life journey is one marked by the constant need to navigate my way around the ideology of "normal", never measuring up to people's perceived norms. Much of this navigating I do through my writings of poetry and creating different art forms. This assists my travels along the path of very black spaces and my coming out the other end embracing faith as a way of maintaining a sense of purpose and well-being.

Creating art allows me to feel textures and mediums of paper,, clay and pencils as well as tissue paper, torn paper which allows me to express myself with no definition of right or wrong or being compared with other people's art but a statement of my own style which is okay. The quiet voice of faith has allowed me to focus on art projects for example when feeling disassociated from my body I made a mosaic butterfly, starting with the process of smashing plated in a controlled way at Vincent's art workshop. This activity is good for the soul. Once the pieces are assembled glued and grouted out of the mess comes a beautiful butterfly. This project helped to change my mood and helped me to feel more connected to my



body."

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<sup>2</sup> This poem comes from a significant collection of poems written by Rhonda which to date have been edited but await publication.

Rhonda's evocative words erupting out of the context of her narrated materiality illustrate powerfully something of the implications of the hegemony of normalcy – of being trapped within the framing of normality. They bring also the stark challenge to derive and live out of radically different ways of human corporeality – of being flesh - ways which will be more fully representative of the expansive, nomadic, multivariate body of God.

The creation and fixing of a hegemonic frame of normality, has been derived as part and parcel of the package of imperial colonial discourse, resulting in a colonization of those bodies considered to be marginal in any form, or in that distinctive language of colonialism, 'degenerate'.<sup>3</sup>

Now such a frame in the context of a post-capitalist age is further "framed" both by the latest "redemptive" notions erupting out of the burgeoning industries and sciences of biotechnology fed by global economies, that in themselves feed into the mega industry of health. Such industries succeed in creating and marketing as theologian Sharon Betcher states, a "globally media/ted idealism" – a state in which the ideal becomes normative and therefore "normal."<sup>4</sup> . It is in Western culture, Betcher further states where, "disability names the abject refus/al of industrial capitalism (that is, disability as "unemployability, " as deficit of "labor power"), which has now become aesthetic, consumer capitalism."<sup>5</sup>

Given the implication of Christianity in its legacy of casting the disabled subject in the role of 'religious other' it becomes critical that there is an critically engaged hermeneutics of suspicion around the particularity of those theological constructs which continue to feed this hegemony of the norm.

Pivotal to the ongoing maintenance of this frame of 'normality' and its hegemonic power is that at its core along with the term and category of "disability" they are innately a binary categories, and as such are a fixer of set boundaries. As feminist liberation body theologian Lisa Isherwood describes:

...dualism is a device lurking in the midst of an incarnational religion that has objectified us and made us aliens in our own skin....

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<sup>3</sup> See Lennard Davis in *Enforcing Normalcy. Disability, Deafness and the Body*, Chapters 1&2. (London. New York. Verso. 1995) and Betcher, Sharon, *Monstrosities, Miracles and Mission in PostColonial Theologies. Divinity and Empire* (eds). Keller, Nausner & Rivers (St Louis, Missouri. Chalice Press. 2004. 79-100)

<sup>4</sup> Betcher, Sharon (2004) *Monstrosities, Miracles and Mission. Religion and the Politics of Disablement* in Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner & Mayra Rivera (Eds). *Postcolonial theologies. Divinity and empire*. St Louis. Chalice Press. 81

<sup>5</sup> See Sharon Betcher. (2010). *Becoming Flesh Of My Flesh: Feminist and Disability Theologies on the Edge of Posthumanist Discourse. Journal of Feminist Theology*.26:2 107-139, 109

That kind of split thinking allows us to distance ourselves, and our God, from all we do not feel comfortable with and to set in place systems that oppress and marginalize 'others'. This way of viewing the world creates a large number of 'others' and allows many perceived ills to be heaped upon them.<sup>6</sup>

And so normality continues to 'reign' and operate in 'Lordlike' hegemonic manner, establishing who in their varying corporeal form is to be considered as 'other' to the fixed binary norm. The result being as Sharon Betcher states that, "(r)ather than blessing corporeal flourishing in all its multiple forms, even when it limps, wheels and winces, even progressive, liberal theologies focused on "Jesus as Healer" might be included under what theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid would designate as "decency theologies."<sup>7</sup>

For "decency theologies" read, all those theological symbolic expressions which are binary in nature which "succeed" in deciphering bodies into the status quo of the "norm", whether that be the norm of gender, heteronormativity, or the normativity which undergirds the construction of disability itself.

The radical shift espoused by the late Queer Feminist Liberation Theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid of engaging in the construction of "indecent theology" whereby there is a "lifting up of the skirts" of all symbolic theological constructions and theologians themselves is required in order to expose all undergirding binary fixed categorical assumptions of "normality".

It is to engage critically in acts of "queering" – acts of deliberately "transgressing" - 'queering'; moving across fixed boundaries in the creative, passionate and embodied exercise of resignifying the body.

As Queer theologian Robert Goss helpfully outlines, "(t)ransgression destroys traditional boundaries or undermines established paradigms by revealing their fragility and instability. It challenges modes of regulating discourse: Who is canonically allowed to speak? Who is allowed entry? Who is denied access? Who can speak for me?"<sup>8</sup>

Jione Havea, Pacific Biblical Scholar, speaks of one of the central goals of queer theory - that theory and way of being and seeing which has arisen out of the margins of sexuality, but which can be used in a more general sense; "as seeking to disrupt modernist notions of fixity by exposing how the "natural" and "normal" are constructions, thereby vulnerable to history and politics, and therefore to change. In other words, queer theory is in the business of *querying* taken for granted societal

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<sup>6</sup> Isherwood, Lisa. (2004). The Embodiment of Feminist Liberation Theology. The Spiralling of Incarnation. *Journal of Feminist Theology*. 12.2. 147.

<sup>7</sup> Betcher, *Monstrosities, Miracles and Mission*, 84.

<sup>8</sup> Goss, Robert. (2002). *Queering Christ. Beyond Jesus Acted Up*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press. 229.

pillars (or is you prefer psychoanalytical language, social phalluses), and as a consequence denaturalizes or de-essentializes formerly stable identities."<sup>9</sup>

From a Foucauldian perspective – resistance to an overgirding ‘master’ narrative is not simply to engage in a rebellious action of negation but rather to engage in a process of creation. To give embodied voice and action and be “driven by the imagination of alternative possibilities and hopes. Transgression is essential to the hermeneutical development of queer theologies and queer hybrid theologies.”<sup>10</sup>

The starting point for such queering constructions and resultant transformative actions is the body – our bodies - the stuff of incarnation, in all our differing material forms – it is as Isherwood speaks of being, “the rebellious body, the body ‘as is’ before theology starts to draw demonic and divine inscriptions upon it.”<sup>11</sup> It is the body both as primary context and at the same time as hermeneutical circle. But let me add, it is to the body as 'flesh' whereby a liberating hermeneutic provides the focal text. It is here more likely than not that a shared agenda may well be further and creatively explored by both feminist, queer and disability theologies may intersect.

Sharon Betcher in an essay celebrating the work of feminist and disability theologian Nancy Eiesland who died in March 2009, suggests that, "from a disability perspective , thinking from the flesh challenges the naturalization or normalization of the body and thereby the sociocultural and economic value of ability."<sup>12</sup> Whereas *body* can invite the hallucinatory delusion of wholeness, and thus the temptation to believe in agential mastery and control, *flesh*, suggests Betcher reflects our, "exposure, our vulnerability to one another."<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, "Flesh, the dynamic and fluid physics of embodiment, cannot as easily as the body submit to transcendental metaphysics, to the logic of the one. Flesh suggests that the capaciousness of a life resembles a teacup crackled with then thousand veins."<sup>14</sup>

In the words of Isherwood and Althaus-Reid; “Theology that has incarnation at its heart is queer indeed....that the divine immersed itself in flesh, and that flesh is not divine is queer theology at its peak. There can be sanitization here....it is not the genetically modified, metaphysical Son of God that declares the divine-human conjunction, but the screaming baby amidst the cow shit and the fleas, covered in

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<sup>9</sup> Havea, Jione. "Queering the Church. It's About Time." Society of Biblical Literature, 2011. See also his chapter entitled, "Lazarus Troubles" in *bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*. (Society of Biblical Literature Semeia Studies)

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>11</sup> See Lisa Isherwood (ed.), (2004). *Sex and Body Politics: Issues for Feminist Theologies*. In *The Good News of the Body: Sexual Theology and Feminism*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press. Pp20-34.

<sup>12</sup> Sharon Betcher. *Becoming Flesh Of My Flesh: Feminist and Disability Theologies on the Edge of Posthumanist Discourse*. 108

<sup>13</sup> op cit

<sup>14</sup> op cit

birthing blood and received into the uncertain arms of his child/mother, who declares salvation for all.”<sup>15</sup>

Taking incarnation as is – as Isherwood suggests – “Christ without Metaphysics – Queer Indeed”,<sup>16</sup> enables us to see in the Jesus narrative our own multivariate material as transgressive and creative sites of revelation. In this way the flesh is enabled to become *Word*, not the other way round as it has been passed down to us where “The Word becomes flesh”.

It is such transgressive action which moves towards the disruption of those tendencies which are obsessed with the fixing of categories and assigning varying bodily forms and variants into imperialist neo-colonial “zones of degeneracy.”<sup>17</sup> Thus ‘Christ’ is enlarged beyond all the encompassing heteronormative economies of the church, which include that of disabled subjective economies.

The piercing/transgressing of categories/frames in order to open up alternative spaces of discourse and action can be likened to what Musa Dube, Post-Colonial Feminist Biblical scholar refers to as *Semoya* space.<sup>18</sup>

Such an openness and intentionality of space is indispensable for those seeking to give authority to the materiality of their own bodies, and thus ‘talk back’ to the colonial categorizations of ‘degenerate’, ‘normal’ ‘abnormal’ ‘disabled’, ‘in need of redemption’ by the latest commercial and neo-colonial biotechnological ‘saviours.’

Such movements of necessity are in themselves counter-hegemonic and as such bring about an engagement of what theologian Eleazar Fernandez evocatively defines as a, “conspiracy”, that is, following the words’ root meaning, to “breathe together.” So, to conspire together is to share breath: share life-affirming ways of thinking, dwelling and acting. The term “companion” [*cum + panis* (bread)] compliments the term “conspiracy”. The conspirators are companions sharing the life-giving breath as well as the nourishing bread of the journey.”<sup>19</sup>

Both engaged actions of conspiracy and companionship are, claims Fernandez, “epistemologically and politically necessary: They are necessary because it is only through frail instrumentality of another that we can be liberated from the regimes of truth that we create, and necessary because it is only through conspiracy

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<sup>15</sup> Isherwood, Lisa & Marcella Althaus-Reid. (eds). (2004). Introduction: Queering Theology, Thinking Theology and Queer Theory. In *The Sexual Theologian: Essays on God, Sex and Politics*. London. New York: T & T Clark. 7.

<sup>16</sup> Isherwood, Lisa. The Embodiment of Feminist Liberation Theology. 143.

<sup>17</sup> See Sharon Betcher. Monstrosities and Miracles and Mission. 79-99.

<sup>18</sup> Dube, Musa. W. (2000). Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible. St Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press. 116.

<sup>19</sup> Fernandez, Eleazar S. (2004). *Reimagining the Human. Theological Anthropology in Response to Systemic Evil*. St Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press. 27.

and companionship that we gain the power to dismantle and construct alternative ways of thinking and dwelling."<sup>20</sup>

In drawing this exploration to a suitable resting place, as a work in progress, this commitment to continue the task of dismantling and constructing new liberative ways of being human together in community is nothing less than the ongoing work of social holiness.

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<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, 27.