Spirituality in the Midst of Disability

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Abstract: According to Centers for Disease Control 2000 statistics, 17% of children under the age of 18 have a developmental disability, affecting not only themselves, but their siblings, parents, and friends as well. Despite the prevalence of developmental disability, the American Psychological Association does not require competence in this area, it is not mentioned in mandatory coursework focusing on diversity, and it often remains an esoteric category that specialized professionals only discuss with each other, at their own narrowly-focused conventions and in their single-minded publications. This is particularly serious in that the intellectual community at Fuller is continually discussing, debating, and postulating psychological and theological metatheories through which to understand the world, few of which make adequate room for the psychological and spiritual lives of those living with developmental disability. A spirituality of disability must allow for unique expressions of faith and salvation not contingent upon the physical demonstrative acts esteemed by tradition – verbally confessing Christ and sins, altar calls, and acts of service – as well as those esteemed by psychology – contribution to community, self-awareness and insight, and proper temporal lobe activity. This paper is a synopsis of my personal process of reconciling my psychological and theological traditions with the experience of my beloved friends with disability, weaving together Attachment Theory, monistic approaches to mind and body, and Trinitarian theology. My end position is one that I feel satisfies my obligation to my disciplines, honors life in its myriad forms, and saves space for the mystery of the Divine.

I was a senior in highschool, and had never really bowled much. I had visions of smoky, dank buildings with low ceilings, dotted with clusters of balding, middle-aged men in matching outfits, marking their scorecards while ordering beer and baskets of chili-cheese fries. Instead, when I walked in with Kate and Diana, the place was abuzz with life and energy – old friends calling to one another across the lanes, young men proudly displaying the new fingertip-less glove that held so much promise, sirens simultaneously seducing and destroying these young men with multiple strikes. This was the spring season of Special Olympics Bowling, and it would quickly become a staple in my Thursday afternoons.

During that year, I became a respite care provider for a family of adopted children with varying traits of developmental disability. Over the next six years, I developed a deep relationship with these children who became young adults, and who eventually bought their own home. My new husband and I spent the first year of our marriage as housemates, supporting these young people to face the challenge of independent living. We left to begin graduate school, but my interests in the field of disability came with me. I have worked for three years as a developmental therapist for children with autism, have selected training sites with opportunities in this area, and have written a dissertation on the effects of caring for a child with autism on marital and parenting satisfaction.

The world of developmental disability continued to intersect with my life until I finally realized it was a calling, and since that point, my young career has been shaped and molded in that direction. However, despite the prevalence of developmental disability, I have experienced little interaction with the topic in general academic settings.

It most often remains a category that specialized professionals discuss with each other, at their own narrowly-focused conventions and in their single-minded publications. There is perhaps a sense of fear or aversion towards working with those with disability – the heartbreak of dreams lost, the unfair roll of the dice that could choose any baby, the embarrassing behavior of a child that has little respect for social convention – and perhaps these fears, the idea that disability could happen to us, compels us to cast it away, as though ignorance could serve as protection.

In my graduate experience at Fuller, although there have been opportunities to discuss disability, as in contexts such as the communities of L'Arche where those with disabilities and those without live side by side, or in courses addressing the nature of altruism and giving to those with needs, the focus has been on gleaning spiritual truths about suffering, community, and compassion rather than on administering appropriate psychological care for the people themselves. While it is not feasible for one institution to address every issue of interest, and these discussions that have been had are valuable, it highlights the prevalent perception that those with disabilities are non-responsive to treatment and are best served by interventions focused on management and appeasement, with the assumption of minimally complex psychological processes. This implication results in a view that those with disabilities are, after all, not a true therapeutic population; ergo, what the psychological community most often provides is training for minimally-educated staff to provide enhanced babysitting and behavioral control. It is an easy task for mental health practitioners to excuse themselves from directly serving those with disability – the range of services involved are specific and narrow, and the majority are never required to learn how. In contrast, I, as a white middle class female from

Northern Minnesota, am accountable for therapeutic competence in serving ethnically, racially, culturally, and sexually diverse populations. I could not so easily turn away a client impacted by these issues simply because I did not understand, have interest in, or specialize in these areas. The process of being stretched to understand others different from myself has been valuable though at times lonely experience, as in matters of disability, there has been no expert to consult, no class to take, and rare conversations in which to partake.

As I have grown in my psychological skills and my theological knowledge, it has been an arduous task to converse between to the two and arrive at a philosophy of disability that not only maintains the integrity of my two disciplines, but accurately represents my dear friends. It has been a season of revelation and humility, surprising myself with my own thoughts and being surprised by the thoughts of others in this regard. This paper will discuss the process of melding my experiences of my friends with disability together with my psychological and theological formal education. I will explore a philosophy of disability, one that dialogues with theories of mind and body, the power of relationality, and the nature of spiritual capacity. What follows is a synopsis of the process of accepting some elements and rejecting others while attempting to understand the common threads between those with which I resonate.

Attachment theory, as first proposed by John Bowlby (1988) is the lens through which I view human interactions. This theory proposes that healthy development hinges on the experience of being securely loved and cared for by others. The child that trusts his mother’s love is able to explore, to grow in confidence, to become more of the child they were meant to be. The child that experiences their caregivers as erratic or untrustworthy becomes either anxious, ever-fearful of abandonment, or lives in a tangled state of push and pull as strong desire and intense fear compete for control.

The injury caused by unmet attachment expectations affects not only the small child new to the world, but oftentimes remains as a scar and sore that continue to affect individuals into adulthood. A history of painful attachment can be particularly devastating to marriages, as old expectations and fears sabotage connections to irreplaceable others, perpetuating the sense of abandonment, loss, and insecurity first felt by that small child. At the core of our beings, we wish to be loved by and to belong to others; those that we can trust to take care of us and that we can care for in return.

In fact, this experiment of relating is integral to forming a sense of self, as an understanding of our identity is impossible to surmise outside of the input of others. We cannot know if we are good if there are not those that show pleasure at our goodness. Likewise, we discover we are bad as our behavior drives others away. This is not to say there cannot be a core identity that is constant, no matter the circumstance. However, that identity, if it is healthy, was most certainly molded by nurturing input from caregivers: mothers, fathers, friends, and therapists that affirmed a person's acceptability and loveliness. Likewise, an unhealthy core self is developed when those responsible for our care renege on their responsibility and form us using hatred, shame, and doubt. We are born with a need for relationship, for feedback on our worth. Our survival depends on it.

My work as a developmental specialist for children with autism has continued in this vein. DIR, an acronym for Developmental, Individual-difference, Relationship-based therapy, holds a unique place in the world of treatments for autism: while the primary interventions and protocols of the past forty years have been overwhelmingly dominated by behavioral perspectives, this modality (one that has been gaining credibility and mainstream acceptance over the past ten years) is instead rooted in the very attachment theory through which I have come to understand the world.

The difference between a behavioral and an attachment-based approach is quite noticeable when comparing prototypical therapy sessions. Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) can be very effective at altering unwanted behavior (such as children leaving their seat in the middle of class), or in encouraging wanted behaviors (such as picking up after themselves or learning better articulation). Therapy sessions are often done with the therapist seated behind the child as they scaffold their attempts to stack blocks or thread beads. The therapist is ever ready with a tangible reinforcement, such as M&Ms or another preferred treat, for good behavior.

The effects of this modality are easily quantifiable, as not only can the therapist maintain accurate records of a child's success on each attempted trial, but the behaviors themselves are very easy to observe – either the child is sitting in their chair, or they are not. Because this method has such concrete outcome measures, it has out-powered others, particularly when government budgets are responsible for providing services. It also echoes that sentiment in the world of developmental disability that what you see emotionally or relationally is what you get, and all you have to work with. A child that cannot obey your command to sit in their seat is not expected to be able to share complicated interpersonal exchanges.

In contrast, a typical session of the DIR model is more akin to deeply-intentional play. The therapist arrives for a session and finds their young friend lying on the floor, focused on his beloved Thomas train, repetitively rolling him back and forth across the carpet. Instead of disrupting this preferred play and coercing them to participate in their agenda, the DIR therapist joins the child on the floor and begins narrating their unspoken experience of this fascinating blue train. The goals of the therapist’s actions are to capitalize on the internal motivation present in the child (in this case, the strong desire to be with Thomas), and then through the use of affect, join and add to the child’s experience. The child is drawn into relationship with the therapist via the world they are able to share: the therapist becomes a collaborator, someone that is tracking with and understands the desires and intentions of the child – a child most often trapped in aloneness. Through these experiences of being known and met where they are, parents and therapists become secure attachment figures that help to grow the child’s capacity for relatedness. As a typically-developing child learns security through sharing the soothing moments of nursing with their mother, sharing the soothing moments of a little blue train can be just as profound.

I have been humbled and moved by what can happen through these interactions. The little boy that I first met as a DIR therapist was primarily nonverbal at almost three years of age, rarely made eye contact, was non-responsive to the presence of his sibling or peers, and only moderately demonstrative to his parents. In these past two years, he has gained a vocabulary of hundreds of words, is incredibly affectionate, and initiates interactions with all of his family members. He is glad to see me when I come to the door and will take my hand to begin our play. He can seek out comfort from his parents and myself when he needs to be soothed, and he ends each session with a spontaneous hug and a kiss. That heartfelt spontaneity, the affect-laden individual choice to love and be in relationship with others, cannot be taught with chocolate candies. Yes, a child can learn to sit or stack blocks, but can they do it for the sheer joy of creating something, for the pleasure it gives father or teacher? Sadly, so many in positions of power over those with disability either don't view this as possible, or as a necessity.

In contrast, Stanley Greenspan (the father of DIR) highlights the crucial nature of these emotional connections:

> "If the process is not begun with an interest in the child's affects and interactions, the child may not become motivated or drawn into truly caring about the caregiver's affective interests or intents. In other words, true empathy begins with a feeling of being cared for and having the experience of someone expressing true emotional interest in one's own feelings…Where the child is simply taught to look at or do what the other person wants, or share in a rote way without true understanding of the needs of the other person, a child may go through the motions. It would still be an empty set of gestures or words, however, rather than true empathy or compassion…Discipline and structure is a necessary part of learning. To the degree, however, it is implemented in the context of truly compassionate relationships that take an interest in the child's natural inclinations, a child is more likely to learn to be understanding, compassionate, considerate, and disciplined (Greenspan, 2005)."

As I grew in my understanding of DIR, I realized that it required I accept a certain philosophy regarding what was possible in the life of a person with disability. It also has firm notions regarding the elements creating lasting change. Birthed out of attachment theory, it supposes the possibility of secure attachment for children living in isolation from those that love them – a re-creation of those critical moments of connection when a child first learns about their lovability.

Concurrent with my development as a therapist for children with autism, I have also continued to develop into a clinical psychologist, a process that also demands I draw some conclusions regarding relationships, change, and growth.

One of the primary decisions I have come to relates to our most fundamental nature: the composition of our bodies and souls. Growing up in a relatively rural environment in Northern Minnesota, the preponderance of theological views, and certainly the ones that I was exposed to, presented humans as very split entities. Fleshy boxes that could not be trusted housed our ethereal minds and souls, as we waited for the day when we could finally be released, freed from the burden of our mortal bodies. Those bodies held sin, and to be with your body was to betray the soul that Christ had won.

This dualistic approach dates as far back as Plato, who, while maintaining a distinct division between mind and body, primarily saw the mind as a vehicle to attain the ultimate goal: the understanding of the transcendental forms (Leahey, 2004). Descartes, in his search to develop a foundational philosophy of the nature of humankind, went within “the thinking man” and concluded that the mind was the essential part of our nature. The thinking ability of humanity was incredibly significant and defining: *Cogito, ergo sum* – I think, therefore I am. Descartes saw this “thinking thing” as a soul, a spiritual substance that existed “wholly without matter, not occupying space and completely separate from the body (Leahey). This was the birth of dualism: the view of the mind and body as two qualitatively unique and independent entities, and it has influenced philosophical, psychological, and spiritual thought for centuries (Polkinghorne, 1999).

However, as influential as this theory has been, it has always struggled to explain the interconnectedness of the two entities. It is undeniable that there is some interaction between mind and body, as our bodies spend most of their time acting out our mental intentions, but how that takes place was not well-attended to in the Cartesian model. Many Cartesian thinkers attributed that connectedness to a form of divine intervention: that God somehow served as the causeway between our intangible mind/spirit and our corporal reality (Polkinghorne, 1999).

In his book, *Looking for Spinoza*, Damasio (2003), a neurobiologist by training, enters into the mind-body debate by weaving a conversation between his observations of the physiological and experiential components of emotion with his research on the 17th century philosopher Spinoza. In his neurobiology, Damasio saw that the physiology of emotion – the actual stimulation and secretion of hormones that then cause neurons to fire and cortical areas to respond – and the subjective experience of emotion were two distinct things, but also saw they were near impossible to arrive at in isolation. The physiological features are always stimulated by what can be referred to as “emotional” content, and the subjective emotional experience always has a physiological root. This awareness led Damasio to pursue a monistic view of the mind-body, holding that there is no distinct boundary between the two, but rather the two are aspects of the same entity; that it is from the proper functioning of the body that the mind is sustained, and is then able to inform and direct the body.

In his 2005 Integration lectures, Warren Brown presented an argument for non-reductive physicalism, a monistic view that, similar to Damasio, is based not only in philosophy, but in neurological fact. He cites much neuropsychological study that is able to locate what were once thought to be proprietary functions of mind and soul – fairness, empathy, and spiritual experience – in collective neural firings. This supports a view of a unified body-soul experience - that all of who we are can be located within our atomic nuts and bolts - but it also raises many curious questions about the distinctiveness of humanity, the nature of what sets us apart as unique creation. Brown asks of his own findings, “If the brain does all of this, what does a soul do that the brain isn’t doing?”

His answer is found in relatedness, namely in the way that humans differ from animals on these three dimensions of relationship:

- In the depth and sophistication of an individual’s ability to relate to others.
- In the state of (and experiences of) being related to by a human community.
- In God’s sovereign choice to be in relationship to humankind.

When I first considered these implications for myself, I was again reminded of attachment theory and the power of relationship to transform my little friend with autism, and was pleased that all of my worlds were hanging together. I had a metanarrative of relationality that could describe what went wrong in both my psychological and theological worlds. We are meant for relationship on a spiritual and psychological level, and isolation can cause death in our psychological, spiritual, and even physical bodies. And in fact, these entities are not necessarily separate.

However, in considering more deeply the emphasis on an individual’s ability to relate to others, I have pause when I consider my community of officially disabled friends. At first glance, it seems feasible for a person with disability to be related to by God, and they certainly have the experience of being cared for by others, but deficits in individual relational capacity are the hallmark of much of disability. A person with even a moderate level of cognitive or developmental delay has a more narrow scope of what we able-bodied see as relational initiative. When this is used as a marker of spirituality, I must wonder what it means to have irrevocably spiritually limited people among us. If our capacity for spirituality is tied to our distinct ability for relatedness, which is strongly correlated with physical and mental integrity, daring implications are made for the very humanness of those that struggle to relate.

As for the role of the community in relating to the disabled, the response is quite variable. There is a portion of the population that expends a great deal of effort to attempt to imagine new possibilities for the disabled (MacIntyre, 1999), and thanks to government legislation, there is a notable sum of money that goes towards programs for those with disability. There are caregivers that, every day, meet even the most basic needs of those that cannot do so for themselves. Have coffee with any parent of a disabled child, and you will be humbled by the imaginative lengths they have gone to inspire, encourage, and heal their child. However, those that care for others with disability are such a small portion of the community at large. There are so many that have remained untouched by, or choose not to touch, those with disability. So then, it appears that even in this dimension, the spirituality of people in an already vulnerable state depends on a community that most often doesn’t know how to respond or looks the other way.

Vanderberg and O’Connor, in their chapter titled “Developmental Psychology and the Death of God (in Slife, Reber, & Richardson, 2005)”, discuss the reconciliation of theology and science, particularly as it interacts with a discipline such as psychology that has an entrenched modern and dualistic approach to human nature (one that views humanity as having a soul/spirit that is quite distinct from body).

They particularly address developmental psychology, that branch of the field that seeks to understand the human process of maturity and social development, using the work of Piaget and his developmental stages as a backdrop. Piaget felt that this kind of development occurred through assimilation and accommodation: as the child has new environmental and relational experiences, their brain must adapt and evolve to incorporate and succeed in an ever-increasingly complex world (Vandenberg & O’Connor in Slife et al, 2005). Piaget felt that adaptation is for purely physical (not spiritual) purposes; that development through these spheres of thought were more Darwinian in their goals in that they allowed for the propagation of more complex and developed societies. The latter stages evolved as the human brain and social network has become more complex.

However, Piaget’s framework does not provide an adequate treatment for those children (and humans) who are unable to progress through all of these stages. If the core goal of development is greater societal participation and a person is developmentally limited, where do they fit into the goals of the human race? If the goal is to reconcile the science and the theology, and the ‘scientific’ or biological aspect of a person is broken, deformed, or otherwise hindered, in a dualist perspective does that leave them free to be purely spiritual? Or, in a monistic view such as Brown’s, does it disqualify them from the same kind of end-product that a non-disabled person might enjoy – that because they are limited scientifically, the spirituality does not count, or rather, exist?

While evolutionary development becomes stymied for the disabled, evolution continues in those around them: "Survival of the fittest" is overpowered by our ability to protect weaker phenotypes, but it is evolution itself that has allowed that protection to occur. As our communities have gotten more complex – reaching and perhaps surpassing Piaget's fourth stage of development – our minds and social understandings have also evolved to allow not only for medical and scientific advancements, but for the promulgation of altruistic and empathic phenotypes. Perhaps, rather than see the presence of the disabled as a genetic weakness, it could be considered a testament to the utility of evolution that less-disabled minds and hearts could grow to care for those in need.

This seems to support non-reductive physicalism's response to the spiritual needs of the disabled. Brown (2005) and Murphy (1997) emphasize the role of the larger body of believers in their relationship trifecta: God relating to us, our relating with the community, and the community relating to us. They have said that, in the case of disability, it is the community that becomes the spirituality of the disabled; supporting what MacIntyre (1999) has said about the economy of care among humankind – that as we move throughout life on the spectrum of disability, we care for those that are less able than ourselves. So, it would seem that evolution supports this responsibility on the part of the less-disabled: that as the less-disabled are given greater intellectual and emotional capacity, they are then equipped and charged with using the tools at hand to encourage life where it would otherwise cease.

If, as non-reduction postulates, the physical, mental, and spiritual spheres of human experience are united and we are on an evolutionary course to grow in ability for complex physiological, mental, and emotional experiences, perhaps evolutionary growth is synonymous to becoming more Christ-like as a human community.

However, while this argument can be logically followed and it coheres with my desire to see the world through relatedness, I still have a sense of ominous caution when attempting to describe boundaries of spirituality for my treasured friends. Theories are not necessarily truth, but rather constructs that help us have conversations. Perspective is hard to maintain when you stand within a particular metatheory; there is never a truly objective place to do this standing, particularly when attempting to comprehensively describe the world. While I can support Brown and Murphy's arguments with evolutionary and experiential evidence, there is still not satisfaction in my soul regarding this conclusion that spirituality for the disabled remains that which is done to them by another, limited, human.

Implications for God's relating with the disabled must also be considered. Coming from Brown's (2005) position, in which God's interaction with creation is conducted on a neuronal level, how are we to understand God's movement towards those whose neurons are disorganized or even absent? To extend himself in salvific relationship to the disabled, God's justness and mercy would have to extend far beyond not only where much of traditional Evangelical theology corrals it, but how Brown seems to have defined it as well. Those with disabilities often cannot profess with their mouths that Christ is Lord. There is no altar call, no sinner's prayer. In Brown's neurologically-won model, the disabled would not be capable of formulating the cognitive processes that allow what brain scans tell us is an experience of God. This must then be an instance where those with disability are unable to experience God in a personal way. While again, this is coherent with theoretical philosophies that can be written down on paper that postulate who and what we are and how everything works or doesn't work, that notion – that idea of permanent isolation from God through no fault of their own for people living with disability – is offensive not only personally, but in light of the character and nature of God that I have personally come to know, and that the Christian tradition holds dear: that of justness, mercy, and love.

Those with disability are often defined by their inability to engage in significant relationships with others; the community is often slow or insufficient in responding; and considering Brown's model, God either does not interact with their subjective experience, or he must break the physicalist rules to do so. While I disagree with the exclusivity of some of these relational claims, I still believe that relationality is a universal thread behind meaning and existence. In this case, God must then either make himself known to the disabled in a manner in which he does for no other human; or those with disability are not ruled by a paradigm where their souls depend on their bodies. There must then be new ideas of salvation.

Instead of creating a philosophy that allows us able-bodied to be benevolent spirit-dispensers for those with what we deem as having less capacity, what would happen if those with disabilities were themselves the ones dispensing spirituality for us? Nancy Eiesland, in *The Disabled God* (1994), reflects poignantly on the hypocritical stance church communities often take on disability. The broken body of Christ is celebrated as powerful, as that through which salvation comes, and we choose to solemnly mark it with frequent Eucharistic ceremonies and celebrate it with the Easter resurrection. However, those with disability in general, and even more disappointingly, the disabled within the church, are often seen as opportunities for charity or pity. Why are their bodies and minds not seen as powerful, seen as triumph over a grave that tried to take them, a world that resists making room for them? Our tradition centers on a theology of brokenness. What a juxtaposition to consider these friends, instead of objects of benevolence, as very images of Christ!

Downey (in Jacobsen, Jacobsen, & Sawatsky, Eds., 2004), in discussing the various paradigms of integrating science with theology, insightfully notices that when scholars refer to integration of science and theology, they are most often referring to a process of finding the intellectual bits of theology and the suggestively theological bits of the discipline at hand, so that they may, after much theorizing, be made to somehow fit together. She notes that although this type of integration may go across denominations, most often it requires that those attempting to integrate must put off tradition and training and become an intense philosopher to be successful. She exposes this for subjectivity, masked as objectivity in the name of thought, reason, and fact. She asks what room there is for the faith traditions that place much less emphasis on reason and deduction, such as the mystic and pietistic branches of the Christian family, as well as other faith traditions. Do they have nothing to say about integration? What is the value that we, those attempting to be Christians trained in a science, place on the mystery of God? Or do we feel that to be credible as scientists, we must have theories that explain all that is possible?

While resorting to the mystery of God should not be used as a capitulation to not have to think very hard, does it not border on hubris to think that we can fully explain God’s behavior and intentions? Is it not good theology to admit we cannot fully know God’s ways?

> As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.
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> John 9:1-7 NRSV

Christ could have spoken of the scientific reasoning behind the man’s blindness, or he could have spoken of sin, but that would have circumvented the higher purpose of the dialogue. He was confronting the monism of the day: in that setting, mind and body were more integrated than the dualistic valley that modern thought has recently come through, but so much so that the spiritual was seen as the cause of deformity. Christ, in his response, made clear that the assumption of the Pharisees missed the mark. While this Hebrew view and that of non-reductive physicalism are both monistic, it appears that as spirit trumped the body in the former, science is now determining spirituality in the latter (e.g. locating spirituality in neurologically-based relational capacity). I feel startled and warned by the comparison, as the Pharasaical position looms near the intellectual assuredness of our profession. It begs humility when considering any metatheories on the nature of spirituality, particularly when it gives less to “the least of these.” Polkinghorne (1998) warns of this when he states, “Perhaps humanity’s desire entirely to understand itself is an attempt to grasp knowledge that is, by its very nature, denied to us. We can understand the physical world because we transcend it through our powers of self-consciousness and rationality…It could be that we can no more understand what it is that we are, than we can pull ourselves off the ground by tugging on our own bootstraps.” (p.56)

We must be wary, in our zeal to be stewards of our mental capacities, to not out-think faith and mystery from having a valid voice. I think it is mysterious that God, in all of his mercy, would continue to allow disability if the disabled were unable to know him in their own right. That feels akin to sentencing “un-reached people groups” to hell, and I am not so sure I could say either of those things with much confidence.

While there is not space in this paper to thoroughly discuss a reshaping of 19th and 20th century theology, in considering the spirituality of my friends with disability, I have visions of the Holy Trinity: Joined in blissful relatedness, spirit, son, and creator are thrilled with not only their uniqueness, but with the unity of purpose and belonging they create together. In his work on Trinitarian theology, Buxton (2001) also celebrates this kind of unity, and through it offers a new image of salvation. He claims that the act of salvation – that movement that opened the way for unlimited connection in relationship and power with the triune God – was sufficiently completed for all-time and for every person at the moment death was defeated through Christ. Salvation has already occurred, what remains is our choice to incorporate it into our lives as belonging to us. When I apply this idea to those born with developmental disability, I begin to have some peace. They were “saved” long before they were created, and it has nothing to do with my limited and fallible ability.

This paper ends where it started by talking about these friends, very real people whom I have known and loved:

I met the Robinson family in highschool, worked with them through college, and my husband and I lived with three of the eight siblings the year before we came to Fuller. Their youngest, Tatiana, lived with my family for a few months when I had just begun highschool, taking a break from her large family of brothers and sisters. After a short stay, she returned home, but during my senior year, we reconnected and I became her companion. We would go for walks, go shopping, go to Special Olympics Bowling – she is an independent soul with lots of opinions, and makes those around her (and herself) laugh with her slightly scandalous take on life. She can be a leader among her friends, and doesn’t hesitate to remind me that her name is *not* Tati. Since graduating highschool, she has moved into her own home and gotten a job at Applebee’s which she loves, perhaps for the chance to socialize as much as for her paycheck.

Her brother Matt is a handsome athlete that loves cars and cell phones, and can out-sing the radio. He is helpful and generous – the year that we lived together, without a word he would bundle himself up to take out the garbage, let the dog out, and shovel the driveway after a Minnesota storm, all before breakfast. He and my husband share the same name, and most of Matt’s athlete friends call him Robs (for Robinson), so he did the same for my Matt. He would burst through the door after work and call up to our apartment, “Hey, Vogty!!!” with such familiarity, you would think we had always lived together. He is unconditionally kind and loving, and will make your worst joke the best thing he has heard all day.

Diana loves country music, and although she is wheelchair-bound, she will dance for hours. She goes to concerts as often as she can, and takes full advantage of front-row wheelchair seating. She may seem shy at first, but she can talk your ear off, particularly if you have any pets. She is a true romantic that is incredibly perceptive and sensitive, and isn’t easy to fool. If she decides she likes you, you have a friend for life.

Kate is a dear soul with an incredible sweet-tooth. She, too, loves to dance and doesn’t need an audience or a partner to have a fantastic time. Her honest joy is irresistible, as she relishes everything that is fun about her life – which includes eating dinner and folding the laundry. She is affectionate and outgoing. Although she has never had a problem saying my name, from the beginning she has given me a nickname: she would often run to greet me with her arms outstretched, calling “Sissy!! Sissy!!” and follow up with a firm kiss.

It wasn’t hard to realize that I belonged with this family, and after six years of sharing life together, they – my friends living with disability – were some of the hardest to leave.

A year later, I met Michael, a cherubic blond two-year old with round blue eyes and rosebud lips, when we crawled up the stairs of a psychologist’s office side by side on our hands and knees. He gave me a moment of eye-contact, but didn’t say a word. Months later, after hours of my exaggerated disasters with Thomas the Tank Engine, Michael exclaimed his own “Oh no!” as Thomas plunged off the track and hit the floor. Two and a half years later, he is a little boy that is able to express many ideas and lots of love. Not long ago, I walked up to his house. He had been sitting at the table, having a snack with his mother, when she told him Ms. Liz was coming. He leapt out of his chair and ran to the door, waving his arms and calling, “Iz!! Iz!!!” When I got inside, he grabbed my hands and we jumped around the room, ecstatic for our chance to be together.

I was recently asked why these friends have moved me so much, why I care so strongly for them, and I was somewhat at a loss. I talked about a sense of calling, a feeling that this was where I was designed to be. But as I thought through my experience with them, I realized that the notion of me being called gave me too much power or choice in this process. As I have thought through my theological education in preparation for this paper, I am reminded of the power of naming: to name the animals, to name your children, to be named by God – the one that does the naming comes from a position of authority. I realized that part of my tie to this community of people is that not only have I *not* been able to name them (Tatiana is *not* Tati), I have allowed *them* to name *me*. When I am with them, I become stripped down and redefined by my most core relational self. I am not the high-achieving graduate student, I am not an intellectual or physical superior. I am Sissy and I am Iz, and I am accountable to those that have named me to love them and serve them and learn from them. I am there to attend to them and, at times, empty myself out for their sake. It is not benevolence, as there is a very real sense that I belong to them and they to me. We are entwined in a dance of relatedness: we are each unique individuals, but together we create something beautiful and spiritual between us. Just as I do not pity the broken Christ but am awed by him, nor do I pity my friends. They tell me to be courageous, to be honest, and to love with abandon.

Their bodies and minds have more limitations than mine does. They aren't able to counsel me or meet my practical needs as other relationships do – our friendship is very one-sided in that regard. But I do not have the courage to say their souls are any less thriving or alive. In fact, I have found God to be fascinated with paradox: Christ was the illegitimate son of a tradesman that nurtured prostitutes, fought for social justice, and prioritized the most weak and vulnerable. It seems ill-informed on our part to assume that spiritual strengths and powers are ever what they seem.

> At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea."
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> Matthew 18:1-6, NRSV

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