

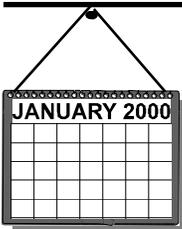


Those who wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles.... Isaiah 40:31

Wings

A FAITHLETTER FOR, BY AND ABOUT UNITED METHODISTS WITH DISABILITIES

Winter 2000 — Vol. 10 Issue 3 No. 39



FROM WHERE I SIT By Jo D'Archangelis

I can't decide if people pay too much attention to the calendar or not enough. As I write this, it is exactly two weeks to the beginning of the New Year—the New Century, the New Millennium, Y2K, the End of Days, or the Onset of Armageddon (take your pick).

Some people are hunkering down in mountain cabins expecting to survive wars and riots and revolutions. Millennialist cults are gathering in Jerusalem to await (or perhaps to hurry along) the end of the present world and the Second Coming of Christ, all the while scaring the bejeebers out of Israeli authorities. Even mainline pastors are preaching ominously about the "signs" of the "end times"—as though humankind had not always been plagued by wars, famine, floods, and earthquakes.

The media are bombarding us with lists of the "biggest" this or the "greatest" that of this decade, century, or millennium. We are being cajoled into buying "millennium" perfume and "millennium" hamburgers. Millennial super-fests and entertainment extravaganzas are being planned—although it appears that most people will be staying close to home on New Year's Eve.

The irony is that—according to our Western, Christian calendar—the year 2000 is not the *beginning* of a new millennium (century, decade) but instead the *ending* of the current millennium (century, decade) and those who predicate their predictions and plans on the basis of an impending millennium are in fact one year ahead of themselves.

However, one dare not confuse the millennialists of whatever stripe with the facts. Media hoopla, commercial

interests, plus religious and political ideologies have all combined to delude us into thinking that the year 2000 has some great significance when, in reality, only the possibility of computer glitches due to shortsighted programmers who

For me God is not a God of grim, apocalyptic inevitability. Rather he is a constantly surprising God with infinite tricks up his cosmic sleeves....

couldn't see beyond "99" to "00" merits any valid attention.

When I was a child, I once calculated how old I would be in the year 2000. The result was impossible to fathom. When you're very young, you can't believe you're ever going to be *that* old.

Later, when I was about 13, I read an article in *Life* magazine which reported that children diagnosed with my neuro-muscular condition usually died by the age of 13. Needless to say, I became a bit upset. When my grandmother asked me why I was crying, I told her about the article. She told me to stop crying, that I wasn't going to be dying anytime soon. I figured my grandmother knew more

about me than *Life* did and so I stopped crying.

I found out still later that the doctors who had originally diagnosed my condition had indeed informed my parents that I probably wouldn't live to see adolescence. Fortunately, my family didn't take their prognostications seriously (as it turned out, the doctors had mis-diagnosed me anyway), and I was not burdened as a child by the "knowledge" of my imminent demise.

I did continue through adulthood though with the at least subconscious thought that my life was eventually going to be cut short, possibly before I reached the age of 30. Then 40. Then 50. Now I admit to being somewhat surprised at my own survivability and am looking forward with cautious confidence and the grace of God to my 60th birthday in the year 2000.

(I've also been re-assured that my PC will "most probably" flop over into the year 2000 with its files and systems intact which is why I've had copies made of them—you know, just in case.)

Calendars really are nothing more than arbitrary constructs based on a little math and a little astronomy and on historical events which

may be meaningful to one culture but not to another.

I cannot believe that God is in any sense bound by humanly-contrived calendars and dates and what we choose to regard (or disregard) as beginnings or endings or millennia or centuries or years or months or days. For me God is not a God of grim, apocalyptic inevitability. Rather he is a constantly surprising God with infinite tricks up his cosmic sleeves, one who takes great delight in confounding our expectations.

My hope is that by the time this is being read, each of us has been able to flop over into the year 2000 with our capacity to be faked out by God intact.

IF WE BELIEVE that we have no future, then it will surely be so. If we speak of our infirmities as a sentence of death, then our words will become reality. But so too, if we believe in our own value, plan for our own future, and accomplish some of those things which are important to us, then our lives will be full and happy and rewarding. Living with AIDS is no different from living without AIDS—unless we make it so. It doesn't matter how much time any of us have. It only matters what we do with it. There are no guarantees for anyone—for we are all part of the human condition.

— Craig W. McHenry —

From *That All May Worship: An Interfaith Welcome to People With Disabilities*, Ann Rose Davie and Ginny Thornburgh, copyright (c) 1992 by the National Organization on Disability [Washington D.C.]



ENCOUNTER

By Kenneth Tittle



We meet on life's path.
 "I am so sorry," you say.
 I always know and still
 I always ask, "Why greet me so?"
 "I am so sad for you because
 You have no arms."

Then I am glad for you
 That you have hands and arms,
 That knobs turn easily and
 Keys work in their locks,
 That so little separates like and
 want
 From reach and take and hold.
 Push and pull are both alike for you.
 You can hold people at arm's
 length;
 No one need touch you or draw
 close.

For me, nothing is
 So easy as to be thoughtless.
 I know not every door
 Is worth the opening.
 I have learned to persevere
 At the lock I need to loose.
 Taking something up
 Means letting something go,
 And I value what I need
 So much more than what I want.

Life daily challenges me.
 I treasure and nourish
 God's priceless gifts—

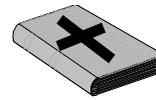
Courage, creativity and patience
 Dedication and laughter
 Faith
 Love.

Unable to deny my need for
 others,
 I must be open to be helped,
 To be touched, even to be hurt,
 To trust in him who is
 The ground of all our trust.

Some with a good arm might
 Curse the stub and crippled hand
 That mean so much to me.
 So do many in their plenty
 Miss the abounding grace of life,
 Mistaking blessings for afflictions,
 Rejecting what is different
 And denying the value
 Of small things and brokenness.

We meet on life's path.
 You go your way;
 As God leads I must go mine.
 I have no wish to trade with you.
 If you would not pity me
 I could open doors for you
 Toward a richer life.
 I am so sorry
 You are sad
 I have no arms,
 And I don't know how
 To reach out to you.

Mariposa: August, 1995



WINDOW OF WHOLENESS: FRANK JONES

By Howard Clinebell

His name was Frank Jones. His body had been grotesquely deformed by rheumatoid arthritis during his boyhood. In his midyears, when I knew him, he had to be lifted into the wheelchair where he spent most of his waking hours. Because of the arthritis, he could open his mouth only enough to get a graham cracker between his teeth. Yet, in spite of his terrible physical disability, Frank was one of the most whole individuals I have ever known! His life-affirming attitudes, spiritual aliveness, and loving relationships with others were incredibly healing.

When we first met, my response to Frank's terribly deformed body was repugnance. But as I grew to know him as a person, this initial response was replaced by respect and affection for a person of great caring and spiritual depth. When I felt discouraged about myself and my work, as a struggling young adult, I often went to see Frank. His clear perspectives and very gentle confrontations brought healing to me.

When I was about to leave that community, I went to tell him my sad good-bye. I arrived at his home to find him holding a much-used book in his misshapen hands, ready to give it to me. It was a modern translation of the New Testament. I told him that, though I deeply appreciated his wanting me to have it, I couldn't accept what obviously was one of his favorite books. He insisted that I take it as a small token of his thanks for our friendship and all that I had given him. Seldom in my life have I been so deeply moved as when Frank handed me his precious gift. That battered book from a remarkable friend is one of the most cherished gifts I have ever received.

As I think of Frank I'm aware that he used his miserable physical brokenness as an opportunity for developing spiritual depth and interpersonal, loving wholeness. His body was terribly crippled but his mind and spirit were incredibly whole. Frank was a "wounded healer," a wonderful channel for the healing love of the divine Spirit, for me and countless others. By who he was, Frank helped me learn that wholeness is not the absence of brokenness in your body but what you choose to do with it.

From *Well Being*, copyright ©1992 by Howard Clinebell [Harper: San Francisco]



A non-official, non-profit quarterly newsletter published for, by and about United Methodist adults with disabling conditions

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 Jo D' Archangelis

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“DON'T YOU WANT TO BE HEALED?”

By Nancy Groth Blasdel

The following is abridged and adapted from a lay sermon delivered on Lay Witness Sunday, October 18, 1998, at Foundry United Methodist Church, Washington D.C.

A man accosted me not so long ago at McDonald's. "Don't you want to be healed?" he asked, or rather demanded. I have this shtick down pretty well as I have a lifelong physical disability, cerebral palsy, probably the result of oxygen deprivation in utero or during birth.

Encounters like this in whatever form are shorthand for an entire life's journey of faith.

Depending on your viewpoint, the shorthand represents either the assumption of the speaker

that faith is missing or unfulfilled or of the listener that faith is misunderstood or misrepresented in action or result.

I, of course, have snappy comebacks for conversations of this sort: "Don't I look like God's image to you?" conveys that I do have a faith journey and that I claim God's image as his Beloved. "I am healed already—this is what it looks like" tends to confuse rather than theologically challenge but seems appropriate when the well-meaners tell me that God wants me to be healed and that what I need is faith, presumably the "right" faith like theirs.

For most of my life these confrontations were damaging as well as offensive. I did not experience healing or God's love. On the contrary, I was driven away from organized religion and from people claiming to represent God's faith without accepting me as God's child the way I was.

The Bible was the most fundamental—pun intended—stumbling block. Other than the Nativity story, all I had ever noticed about the New Testament was that the miracles in the Gospels seemed to revolve around the literal physical healing of disabilities and the only message I got was that "fixing" was a necessary prerequisite for salvation. Many of the same stories equated the presence of disabilities with evidence of sin.

Like many other people with disabilities, I have had to grow in my understanding of Scripture in order to claim an image of God that is consistent with the diversity of human physical bodies, a spectrum of which I know I am a "normal" part. Human bodies as designed by the Creator are

inherently fragile earthen vessels, so imposing any one image of human physical perfection as the "normal" standard is human arrogance.

As with other social justice issues such as slavery and sexual orientation where Scripture has been used and misused, I prefer to check out what Jesus actually said before the interpreters and scholars got into the

middle of it. In John 9:1-3:

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."

This is a fairly provocative point: that our weaknesses and humanness are opportunities for God's works to be revealed and not necessarily by meeting some humanly derived

standard of healing or normality. Indeed, I believe that it is through our displaying faith without being perfect that God's grace, his true work, is revealed.

I thought that John went on to ruin a perfectly good point by reporting that Jesus gave the man his sight. However, the story goes on to depict an argument between Jesus and the Pharisees who complain about healing on the Sabbath and argue that the man wasn't really blind anyway. Jesus uses the opportunity to take the skeptics and self-righteous straight on [vv. 39-41]:

Jesus said, "I came into the world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."

In other words, the real disability is the arrogance that scorns repentance, not physical limitation.

There are other empowering images of disability in the New Testament. I was pleased to learn that St. Paul was apparently a Person With a Disability, with scholars variously attributing his described symptoms to eye trouble, migraine headaches, or depression. I am struck by several passages, but

(HEALED continued on page 4)

THE HOLY DAYS OF THE RELIGIOUS YEAR: SIGNS OF LIBERATION AND ACCESS

The festivals of the religious year show forth new meanings for access and liberation:

In the glory of Easter--the stone rolled away--we see barriers removed. In the wonder of Pentecost the message is heard, understood and seen by all.

In the liberating act of Passover the message is:

"Let My People Go!" and the parting of the Red Sea.

In the joy of Advent God embodies divinity in human form.

Yet for many persons today—blind or deaf or retarded or in wheelchairs Or otherwise disabled and handicapped—the barriers still remain;

The stone is still in place;

The waters are not parted;

The way is not opened;

The words cannot be heard;

The flame of the Spirit's tongues cannot be seen,

The message not understood.

Proclaiming the message in all languages for today means:

Using Braille or larger print for persons with vision-impairments;

Signing, captioning, or special sound systems for the deaf and

persons with hearing-impairments;

Image, color and drama for individuals who are retarded;

Architectural access for those who are aging or have mobility limitations.

Let the stone be rolled away!

Let the glorious message be proclaimed truly, in all languages,

So all may hear and understand!

— Harold Wilke —

Adapted from the newsletter of the Healing Community/Caring Congregation



OUR READERS ON WINGS—

Note: Readers' communications published in Wings are subject to alteration in regard to grammar, spelling, punctuation, clarity, length, and the whims of the editor.

Letter From Texas:

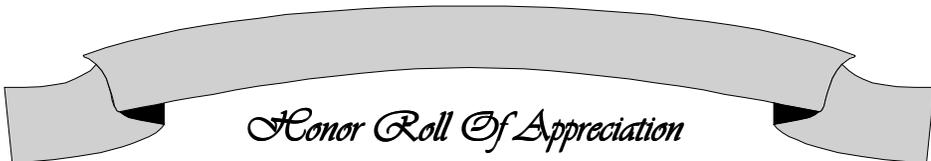
I have a brain injury and a back injury that both result in disability and have drastically altered my ability to meet my...needs to maintain a normal...social life and retirement existence. I think that disabled people do not go to church to be observed or hear hollow statements. Sometimes they go to enjoy the company of like-minded people. At other times they go in hopes of meeting some need in their lives...The brain injury post-rehabilitation literature speaks about the churches providing recreation outings and socialization...opportunities for the return to normal living and such...Perhaps you are doing that out in California [*Not that I know of—Ed.*]. The churches do nothing like that around here, and Texas has no organized, reasonably comprehensive program of support services for brain injury survivors if they are able to function well enough to live outside of an institution....The Lutheran [Church in Sweden] succeeded in implementing their religion in real governmental programs...As diverse as the U.S. has become, this may not be possible. However, the concept has implications for understanding disabled people who are just attempting to live a rewarding life and not be viewed as freaks on display in churches or elsewhere.

— Declines To Give Name

E-mail From California:

Your last *Wings* message [Fall 1999] was oh so true! Seemingly able-bodied people look at disabled people only in terms of how the disabled person's disability would affect the life of the so-called "able-bodied." Unfortunately, we threaten able-bodied persons' sense of immortality and perfection. I had one man (an associate minister no less) tell me that if he had multiple sclerosis he would kill himself. I didn't quite know how to respond to him. I wanted to tell him that I was a person of higher quality than he and therefore could joyfully continue to live in God's grace. So there, Mr....!

— Rev. Dr. Susan Lemly —



Honor Roll Of Appreciation

We thank the following people or organizations whose gifts of time and/or money have made possible the publication and mailing of *Wings*:

Lucille Fleming	Chris Turner	Dulcie Henwood	Marie Losh
Margery Chapman	Linda Ahnell	Marie Morse	Lila Lanham
Ruth Sciumbato	Jill Halley	Rev. Ed Hoffman	Jack Cornell
Rose Heller			

(Continued from page 3)

especially 2 Corinthians 12:8-9:

Three times I appealed to the Lord about this [disability], that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weakness, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

So what do I think about faith and physical healing at this point in my faith journey? I think that for God anything is possible, that people whose faith I know and respect have experienced or witnessed such miracles, and that healing is distinct from and does not require curing.

I have never been genuinely interested in being cured of the physical effects of cerebral palsy. For me the issues surrounding my disabilities were not so much about healing as about ignorance and discrimination. But even these issues are not the ones that dominate my real life, any more than my cerebral palsy defines who I am.

When I first came to Foundry, I wasn't sure what to make of the Wednesday Night Healing Service, complete with the laying on of hands. But in actually experiencing the Healing Service, I came to know its power and inclusiveness in all forms of healing.

As soon as my new wheelchair arrives, I plan to come to the Healing Service to have it consecrated. I figure we hold housewarmings, why not a laying on of hands for an instrument of my life? After all, that's what the church means to me—a place of inclusion in Christian community where we can all express our relationship with God.



*"A Faithletter For United Methodists With Disabilities
and Those Who Care About Them"*

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