From Commodification to Community: Lessons and Confessions

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In the United States we are part of an entrepreneurial culture that loves to commodify. This trend remains a major barrier in our ability to form genuine community.[1] Commodification can be defined as, "the process of converting human, social, or cultural value into market value, applied to goods, services, ideas, and other forms and products of human creativity that do not initially possess a market value."[2] What the definition subtly alludes to is our country's historic pattern of commodifying people through all forms of marginalization be it color, race, creed, age, gender, religion, or ability. Because we commodify one another we move farther apart and farther away from the concept of community.

One sector of our society that has frequently been commodified throughout our history is that of the disabled. Because other avenues of integration into society have often been closed to them, disabled people have been denied opportunities, exploited, and conveniently ignored. Judith Heumann, the late disability activist, and John Wodatch wrote:

> People with disabilities are the largest minority group in the United States, but for the most part, we remain invisible. We represent about 20 percent of the population. We live in every state and in every community; we are members of all social and racial and ethnic classes; we are present in most families. But we are still often subject to the same unthinking responses to emerging problems that ignore the needs, issues,

1 Other countries commodify people as well. This article is primarily written for the temporarily-abled United States Christian audience.

2 "Commodification." Riches Resources, November 27, 2014, https://resources.riches-project.eu/glossary/commodification.

> or concerns of disabled persons. In most cases, we remain an afterthought.[3]

The many ways our culture commodifies the disabled are also often invisible to the beneficiaries for whom those structural systems were designed, but certainly not invisible to those living with disabilities! Reading about the amazing legacy of advocacy pioneers such as Judy Heumann has caused me to reflect on my own complicity. Disabled persons have deeply shaped me and continue to impact my life. Yet for the most part, I have failed to see how important the aspect of disability as part of the personhood of these individuals and groups has been to me and to my sense of community. I don't believe I am alone in this. As someone on the journey of discovery, I share how I am beginning to recognize my participation in the commodification of the disabled in the following three areas: entertainment, social segregation, and the misuse of Christian ministry.

Commodifying the Disabled as Entertainment

In Maslow's hierarchy of human needs, entertainment is not listed.[4] However, through watching others we reinforce our personal sense of belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Through the process of being entertained we achieve a sense that these higher needs are being addressed at least temporarily. Disabled people have been used in this way in the entertainment industry for generations. The legacy of commodification of the disabled to fascinate and entertain has a long and shameful history in the United States and elsewhere. Paralleling the Age of Industrialization, society's ever-present need for diversion became an economic industry of its own and remains so today. Between 1840 and 1940, physically disabled persons were commodified into objects in what disability justice scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson, calls "the culture of American freak shows."

> Physically disabled bodies that qualified as prodigies—the conjoined twins, the spectacularly deformed, the hirsute, the horned, the gigantic, and the scaled—were always presented by priests, greedy or desperate parents, agents, philosophers,

[3] Judith Heumann and John Wodatch, "We're 20 Percent of America, and We're Still Invisible," *New York Times*, July 26, 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/07/26/opinion/Americans-with-disabilities-act.html.

[4] Elizabeth Hopper, "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs," *Thought Co*., Feb 24, 2020, https://www.thoughtco.com/maslows-hierarchy-of-needs-4582571 .

> scientists, showmen, and doctors. Consequently, the concerns and careers of these mediators determined the narratives and the fates of these unique people. Indeed, extraordinary bodies have been so compelling—so valuable—as bodies throughout human history that whether they were alive or dead had little consequence. If live exhibition was enhanced by animation and performance, the display of a dead prodigy embalmed as a spectacle, pickled as a specimen, or textualized as an anatomical drawing derived from dissection was equally profitable, and often more readable and manipulable. Freaks and prodigies were solely bodies, without the humanity social structures confer upon more ordinary people.[5]

Stripped of their humanity, the disabled were displayed as "other than" in order to establish social standards of beauty, gender, and civilization.[6] Disabled bodies, living and dead, became commodities that held cultural fascination and market value. Any concept that these objectified people were part of our community was removed to reinforce "our" sense of belonging to a so-called "normative" society.

As scientific inquiry, medical advances, and legislative control began to debunk the myths of the prodigies, and uncover the inhuman treatment of the disabled, freak shows began to lose their appeal.[7] Most would consider such demeaning exploitations as tasteless and repulsive today. The legacy, however, remains. Physical determinants were used as justification for familiar concepts still very much in use, such as "race," "ethnicity," and "disability."[8] At the same time as the demise of the American freak show, US culture found other ways to commodify those living with differences to entertain the masses and still make money. Several examples can be found in the world of sports, music, and live theater; for this discussion I focus on the screen sector of the entertainment industry, namely film and television.

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5 Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 56–57.

6 Thomson, 55–56.

7 I would like to say that Christian influence impacted the demise of the freak show in America in the same way that history tells us that the early church brought an end to dehumanizing gladiatorial entertainment, but I have failed to find that in my research. If early Christians were anything like we are today, my suspicion is that most Christians of that era who went to fairs, exhibitions, or the theater would have bought tickets to freak shows along with everyone else.

8 Thomson, 61.

Characters on the screen who demonstrate their victory in, over, or through some physical, intellectual, or social disability strike that familiar chord of self-actualization. To some degree, everyone can identify with feelings of unacceptance for who we are. When the struggling disabled protagonist achieves affirmation (cue great applause), our cultural preoccupation with personal recognition is satiated, at least momentarily. It becomes our story, and tickets sell. Disabled heroes in the entertainment world do this well for us through three popular tropes: the magicure, the sacrificed savior, and the super savant.

The "magicure" relies upon the marketable metaphor that superpowers sell. Popular culture teaches us we all have at least one superpower—we just have to find it! In film, some of our favorite disabled heroes demonstrate this discovery through the magicure. Sometimes the disability disappears with the magicure such as in the case of the disqualified underweight asthmatic youth with high blood pressure who with one injection of Super Soldier Serum becomes the brawny Captain America. In other cases, the magicure brings on the superpower *because* of the disability such as in the development of Daredevil,[9] who when blinded by radioactive ooze, acquires a sixth sense that empowers him to learn ninjitsu and fight crime. In the magicure meme, the superpower is what gives the disabled person identity and status but with it comes a host of other internal crises which add to the appeal of the hero who still shows his or her human side.

The theme of the magicure for the disabled to entertain us is not new. Earlier versions of such acts of miraculous interventions were often portrayed as against the will of God and brought about horrific results such as that created by Dr. Frankenstein.[10] Was his "monster" disabled or simply a commodification of the damning results when we try to play God? What about the case of the failed attempts of Dr. Jekyll to use his magicure tincture to control his evil side, better known as Mr. Hyde?[11] Was his failure a frightening revelation that all of us have disabilities we wish to disguise, but the process of doing so can only bring us disaster?

Modern interpretations forsook such menacing theological meanderings in the magicure. In the bright light of modernity, we were assured that no matter the disability, "we have the technology, we can rebuild him" and

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9 The character of Daredevil was produced by Marvel Television in association with ABC Studios in 2015.

10 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: Or the Modern Prometheus* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2018) First published 1818.

11 Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Kingsport: Readers Library Classics, 2022) First published 1886.

thus produced the Six Million Dollar Man. Shortly thereafter, creative screenwriters re-enacted creation and brought along his Eve in the form of the Bionic Woman whom he marries in the final season.[12] Note that in this case, the two magically cured are conveniently paired off together, carefully commodified to avoid suggesting that normative community would accept an integrated couple wherein one member is disabled and the other is not.

Following closely on the heels of the magicure are the "sacrificed saviors," a popular facet of North American films. Disabled protagonists initially introduced by their struggles with society, ultimately fulfill their destiny through some heroic act that saves others (without, unhappily, saving themselves). Kevin "Freak" Dillon in the 1998 film *The Mighty* is a popular example in which his heroic acts finally result in his personal fulfillment and (sadly) his death.[13] Following market trends that same year (an indication of how commodification can be organized by the industry), a similar motif was popularized in the movie *Simon Birch*, based on the John Irving novel *A Prayer for Owen Meany*:

> Simon Birch: Does God have a plan for us?
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> Rev. Russell: I like to think he does.
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> Simon Birch: Me too. I think God made me the way I am for a reason.
>
> Rev. Russell: Well, I'm glad that, um, that your faith, uh, helps you deal with your, um...you know, your, your condition.
>
> Simon Birch: That's not what I mean. I think I'm God's instrument—that he's gonna use me to carry out his plan.[14]

In the end, the disabled person often makes the ultimate sacrifice for a greater cause, thus fulfilling his or her final destiny. In film, the most popular of these tropes follows the formula: disabled character = savior

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12 "Bionic Ever After." *The Bionic Wiki*. https://bionic.fandom.com/wiki/Bionic_Ever_After%3F#:~:text=First%20broadcast%20in%201994%2C%20Bionic,Steve%20Austin%20and%20Jaime%20Sommers.

13 *The Mighty*, directed by Peter Chelsom, Miramax Films, 1998.

14 *Simon Birch*, directed by Mark Steven Johnson, Hollywood Pictures, 1998.

= death.[15] The savior in this case does not resurrect, and the resulting impact of the heroic act by the disabled on formative community is reduced to warm and pleasant memories. Since the disabled is no more, we can move on with life as it should normally be.

From the unattainable magicure and the dying savior motif, screenwriters and producers have commodified disability in another creative way that I label "the super savant." This superpower actually requires that bodily and social disabilities remain evident, but the intellect amazes everyone. Note the plethora of screen characters on the autism spectrum where demonstrations of "savant" ability saves the situation, often at the cost of being commodified. In the movie *Rain Man*[16] the self-centered younger brother, Charlie Babbitt (Tom Cruise), comes to recognize his own inner failings when he meets his autistic savant brother, Raymond (Dustin Hoffman), after using him for selfish purposes.[17] Similarly, true stories such as the biographical film *Temple Grandin*[18] amaze and inspire, while at the same time making plenty of money for their producers. For six seasons of *The Good Doctor*, Freddie Highmore has played the role of an autistic surgeon who could visualize the pages of every medical textbook he ever read, thereby bringing about timely interventions.[19] More recently, Netflix is streaming the Korean production *Extraordinary Attorney Wu* where the talented Park Eun-Bin plays an autistic savant lawyer who similarly flips through law manuals in her head, able to recall what no one else can to win the case, but with growing self-awareness of her limitations (and the help of whales!)[20] Audiences have shown appreciation for the portrayal of Christ's disciple Matthew (Paras Patel) in the biblical series called *The Chosen*. Matthew is shown as a character with Asberger's Syndrome and a savant with

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15 Katrina Arndt, Julia M. White, and Andrea Chervenak, "'Gotta Go Now': Rethinking the Use of The Mighty and Simon Birch in the Middle School Classroom," *Autism and the Concept of Neurodiversity*, 30 no. 1 (2010). https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/1014/1227.

16 *Rain Man*, directed by Barry Levinson, MGM/UA Communications Co., 1988.

17 Raymond doesn't die in the film but is institutionalized in the end after "saving" his now-redeemed brother. While the relationship with his brother improves, he never integrates into the community.

18 *Temple Grandin*, directed by Mick Jackson. Ruby Films, Gerson Saines Production, 2010.

19 *The Good Doctor* (TV), directed by David Shore, Shore Z Productions, 2017–present.

20 *Extraordinary Attorney Wu*, directed by Lee Joo-Ho, KT Studio Genie, 2022.

numerical ability.[21] Even with these extraordinary demonstrations of savant superpowers, all the above demonstrate their ongoing struggle as disabled people to become part of their communities in meaningful ways. Acceptance and a sense of belonging for these characters remain elusive.

Moving from acting to employment, the film industry increasingly features people with disabilities in roles portraying someone with their actual condition. Disabled actors who embody various challenges are now taking roles that previously the temporarily able-bodied used to play. These portrayals include all aspects of humanity including addictions, athleticism, aspirations, sexuality, emotional stability, economic insight and struggle, intellectual prowess, and even murderous intent. Many include a character with Down Syndrome: of recent note are Daniel Laurie (*Call the Midwife*, 2017 to present), Zack Gottsagen (*Peanut Butter Falcon*, 2019), and Academy Award winner James Martin (*An Irish Goodbye*, 2023).[22] Jordan Walker Ross, an actor with cerebral palsy and severe scoliosis, was cast as Little James in The Chosen. The writers interpreted this character as a disciple with a severe limp that Jesus intentionally does not heal.[23] In another entertainment industry, Victoria's Secret hired Sofía Jirau as their first model with Down Syndrome in 2022.[24]

Entertainment is a potent shaper of cultural worldview. Most Americans today will remember movie lyrics word for word but have difficulty remembering what they have read. Film shapes our stereotypes and the way we view one another as "community" or as "other." Educators and disability activists Katrina Arndt, Julia M. White, and Andrea Chervenak write:

> Regardless of the accuracy of its portrayal of disability characteristics, film functions as a major information source on the nature of disabilities….Since audiences are consumers of movies, not only are the representations in these movies reflections of societal values, but they are also "politically

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21 Kevin Keating, "Matthew in The Chosen (Adapting Biblical Characters)," *The Bible Artist*, June 6, 2020. https://www.thebibleartist.com/post/matthew-in-the-chosen-adapting-bible-characters .

22 "Oscars 2023: An Irish Goodbye wins best short film Oscar," *BBC News*, March 13, 2023. https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-64903140.

23 Jordan Walker Ross, "What's Your Limp?" https://www.jordanwalkerross.com/.

24 Deepa Shivaram, "Victoria's Secret features its first model with Down syndrome," *NPR National*, February 17, 2022. https://www.npr.org/2022/02/17/1081444040/victoria-secret-down-syndrome-model .

> charged commodities that movie makers are asking audiences to buy." Thus, audiences not only buy the tickets to watch the film, they may also buy the representations and the values associated with them.[25]

For much of its history, the entertainment world's commodification of people living with disabilities has not shaped our culture into a more compassionate community but rather continues to contribute to the fact that this is the largest marginalized group in the world. One in four people in the world live with some kind of disability. A very small minority of them will get a call from Hollywood—much less a job with living wages—despite equivalent education.[26]

I personally enjoy a good redemptive story, but I also recognize that portrayals of people with disabilities by the entertainment industry do primarily that: entertain me. Any feelings of enlightenment and cohesive unity are temporary and unreal. Watching films together lends a sense of existential *communitas* as if the struggle on the screen is mine. We feel we have experienced this struggle together and exit feeling empowered, successful, and affirmed. Watching a show about a disabled hero can be a liminal experience, but its impact is far from transformative. It may reinforce or re-engender certain positive emotions, but those will soon pass. M. Scott Peck labels this pseudo-community, only the first step in the more arduous journey toward true community building.[27] Entertainment is not wrong. The danger lies in a false sense of having achieved oneness or (to use the *mujerista* term) "kin-dom"[28] when we have merely mollified our minds to think that we have been through it together and we're good now. Those brief voyeuristic moments might make us feel better about ourselves and our society, but entertainment fails to inspire tangible action, like a dedication to advocacy or a growing desire to reach out and learn from the disabled we actually meet, such

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[25] Arndt, White, and Chervenak, "Gotta Go Now."

[26] Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Persons with a Disability: Labor Force Characteristics–2022," *News Release*, February 23, 2023. Also refer to Andrea Dobynes Wagner's story as told by Deborah Jian Lee, "My Disability Is My Superpower. If Only Employers Could See It That Way," *Elle*, June 24, 2021. https://www.elle.com/life-love/a36688889/my-disability-is-my-superpower-if-only-employers-could-see-it-that-way/.

[27] M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987) p. 86.

[28] Cuban-American theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz (1943-2012) popularized this term in her work. *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

that we can build community together. Without realizing it, we have bought into a certain level of commodification.

Commodifying the Disabled through Segregation

Fear can also cause us to commodify and reinforce our tendency to otherize the disabled. Fear is one way of filling the gap produced by ignorance. This was certainly the case in my growing years. Physical characteristics, mental abilities, communication levels—actually, anything different from what we know—can be frightening, causing us to question our personal level of "normalcy." This brings to mind a vivid childhood memory.

The back corner of the field behind Richmond Street Elementary School where I attended primary grades was fenced off with high security gates. Behind the chain link fence rose a dark building with bars on the windows and heavy doors, with a small yard that faced our field. We knew it only as "The Retard School." Occasionally some child was let out into the fenced yard, usually alone, arms and hands folded protectively around the body or head, swaying, uttering unintelligible sounds. We on the other side would stare transfixed. To us that fence divided "us" from "them." They were not people, they were a commodity, a human zoo exhibit we didn't have to pay for. Whenever our recesses coincided, we would peer into their cages and yell in order to get some reaction from the other side. I can still hear the groans and cries they made and how we laughed. That is, until the recess monitor spotted us and, furiously blowing her whistle, demanded we get away from that fence. The memory of one groaning boy swaying back and forth with a long string of snot swinging from his nose like a pendulum, sickens and haunts me still.[29]

I remember once when our ball went over the fence to the other side. I might even have been the one that caused it to happen. That morning their small yard was empty, but no one dared retrieve it. Kickball was over. We all knew that once we were on the wrong side of that fence there would be no escape, and the thought was terrifying. We didn't even want to touch a ball that had been over "there" for fear that something unimaginable would spread among us and we would become like "them."

> Disability is around us more that we are willing to recognize or notice, and those of us who are temporarily able bodied

[29] That site is now a paved parking lot on the corner of Virginia and Palm Avenue. I could find no record of when the facility was demolished, sometime after we moved away.

> may hold anxieties about the possibilities of disablement, of themselves or someone close to them. What we fear we stigmatize, stereotype, and avoid.[30]

The physical segregation that fenced us from each other at Richmond Street School reinforced our ignorance and fear. As a result, what we projected on "them" began to infect us as well. Like chickens in the pen, we pecked at any little forms of difference among ourselves (who were all white). We commodified each other in the cruel ways that children can contrive. Taunting and vicious teasing spread so much among us that Marie, a very quiet girl who wore a hearing device in my third-grade class, was often a target of verbal abuse.

However, I will never forget the day when our teacher, Mrs. Porter, asked Marie to come up to the front of the class. She had obviously been prepared beforehand because she walked up smiling! After a brief introduction by Mrs. Porter, Marie shockingly but discreetly unbuttoned the blouse she wore over her T-shirt. She then proceeded to show us how the battery pack strapped to her chest worked and what it did for her hearing. This was long before we knew what a Bionic Woman was, but from then on, we viewed Marie differently. In that brave act she demythologized our stereotypes and destroyed our fears. It explained why she spoke the way she did. Carrying a battery pack around sounded cool and it explained a lot of things, including why Marie did not go swimming with us. After that, she was "in." It took a sensitive teacher to recognize what we really needed to resolve our commodification of Marie: Mrs. Porter helped us to create a relationship and build community. Thank God for the Mrs. Porters of the world.

I wonder what would have changed in the shaping of our young minds if the school officials had ever taken us on a tour inside what we called the "Retard School" and we met the children and got to know them as people? What unacknowledged fears, prejudices, and biases that we carry in adulthood could have been prevented in our formative years? I also wonder who thought it a good idea to originally place this program for children with disabilities behind a chain link fence next to a playing field where other kids would be curiously peering in?

Most of the fences we build to separate ourselves from "others" are not as easy to deconstruct as chain link fencing. Commodification may not always lead to commercial exploitation, but when we commodify people, we destroy not only the humanity of "them" but also our own. We deny

[30] Arndt, White, and Chervenak, "Gotta Go Now."

the reality of our common bonds; community becomes impossible. This is the one of the most subtle results of human segregation of all the types perpetuated by our dominant cultural narrative. Most of our methods of commodification are invisible to us because we have been enculturated not to see them. As American anthropologist and cross-cultural researcher Edward T. Hall states, "Cultures hide more than they reveal."[31] Only when we step outside of our narrow definitions of "normative" can we start to see what all of us are missing when we commodify and segregate from one another. The words of W.E.B. Du Bois apply here; "The greatest human development is going to take place under experiences of widest individual contact."[32] It is only through intentional, trusting, and committed interactions that we destroy stereotypes and get over our fears of one another.

Christian Commodification of the Disabled

As followers of Christ, we are repulsed by these examples of commodifying the disabled. Christians should recognize and reject marginalization of fellow human beings in all forms, whether from the entertainment industry or the secular social structures in which we live. Unfortunately, we too can commodify the disabled in subtle ways. This commodification is not typically to monetize; rather, to do what Christians are commanded to do—love. However, love that is imposed is not loving; it is an imposition even if we label it "ministry." I was reminded of this when, as an eager doctoral student studying mission strategy, I was corrected by my mentor. Reviewing a particular part of my research proposal, he caught a phrase I had included which mentioned "reaching the target audience." In his no-nonsense voice Dr. Sögaard kindly reprimanded me, "No one wants to be a target."

Without careful consideration, our words become our actions. Well-intentioned Christians can manipulate people for their own purposes using a biblical mandate to "reach" other people with the good news. Sharing who we are in Christ and giving testimony to what God has done in our personal lives is important when the opportunities arise, but "targeting" people to provide prayer or preaching when it is not

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31 Edward T. Hall, *The Silent Language* (New York: Doubleday & Co, 1959), 53.
32 David Levering Lewis ed., *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 558.

requested is another form of the messiah complex.[33] Far too often this type of commodification is done by Christians toward those who live with disabilities, whether they be fellow believers or not. When Christians no longer see individuals as a sister, brother, or fellow human being, but as a target for "ministry," they commodify the disabled.

This victimization takes place in the form of unsolicited spiritual "help." David Husby, former director of Covenant World Relief and Development, used a phrase following the disastrous earthquake in Haiti, saying that country didn't want any more SUVs (spontaneous uninvited volunteers). People with good intentions arrived in the aftermath, but their expectation of care and appreciation was detrimental and unwanted. In a similar way, many who live with outward manifestations of some physical impairment—visual, auditory, mobile, or other—have shared with me their painful experience of an encounter with an SUV Christian (spontaneous uninvited visitation). This visitor is usually a total stranger who, without asking, may not simply offer to pray but will actually intercede on the spot for divine healing. Amy Kenny describes this painful process in detail in her book, *My Body Is not a Prayer Request*.[34] Some Christians may insist further upon transporting the individual to a healing service. Yet when the expected cure fails to appear, the individual is often further victimized (commodified) by her lack of faith. The treatment could not possibly have been inadequate since people were praying to God, for God's sake! Therefore, it must have been the disabled person's fault, another victim of commodification by a Christian SUV.

In my family's story, the sudden onslaught of Parkinson's in our mother at age forty-four stirred up an evangelical flurry of prayer services, trips to healing conferences, medical treatments, and eventually, experimental brain surgery at UCLA. The miraculous results of the latter lasted all of two weeks. After several rounds of these futile efforts, our mother refused further treatment and learned to live as a whole person in ways that amazed and frustrated me as I continued to encourage her to pursue other cures. Finally, after countless futile entreaties to ward off well-meaning but insensitive Christians like me, Mom created a small brochure that she would hand to people, entitled "Pointers and Helps in the Ministry of Suffering." That small pamphlet, her personal collection of favorite tips, book titles, scripture, and quotations gave her a sense of agency that we

[33] As the saying goes, the only difference between God and you is that God doesn't think he's you.

[34] Amy Kenny, *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request: Disability Justice in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2022).

all needed to understand. Even more impactful was how she lived with this progressively disabling condition for twenty-two years. As she wrote, "But for God…a lonely, separate realm. With God…a time for growing, experiencing, and sharing God's peace." The brochure never stemmed the tide of those of us who prayed for her healing, but recognizing what had happened in her heart changed the way we prayed. With that small act she refused to be commodified.

There is a great moment in the movie *The Big Kahuna*, when senior lubricant salesman Phil Cooper (Danny DeVito) addresses the rookie salesman after his failed attempt to snag a major client at a convention because he was witnessing about Jesus instead.

> You preaching Jesus is no different than Larry or anybody else preaching lubricants. It doesn't matter whether you're selling Jesus or Buddha or civil rights or "How to Make Money in Real Estate with No Money Down." That doesn't make you a human being; it makes you a marketing rep. If you want to talk to somebody honestly, as a human being, ask him about his kids. Find out what his dreams are—just to find out, for no other reason. Because as soon as you lay your hands on a conversation to steer it, it's not a conversation anymore; it's a pitch. And you're not a human being; you're a marketing rep.[35]

There is a place for prayer and sharing. Even more important than what we do for others is first remembering that all people are made in God's image. Physical ability, intellectual challenges or any other condition does not change that. Disabilities do not turn "normal" people into a commodity to be fixed. Unsolicited prayer can be a demeaning form of commodification masked as ministry.

Ultimately, Christ followers have an abiding hope that resurrection will (and must) include the entirety of our being, including our body (Rom 8:23; Phil 3:20–21). A simplistic theology that in heaven the "soul survives whatever the state of body or brain, and that all the wrongs of this world will be put right in the next"[36] fails to acknowledge the complexities involved in many cases of those living with disabilities. Prayer for the healing of bodily issues and diseases, such as cancer, which can be eliminated without eliminating the person is entirely different

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35 *The Big Kahuna*, directed by John Swanbeck, Lionsgate Films, 2000.

36 Frances Young, *Face to Face: A Narrative Essay in the Theology of Suffering* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 59–60.

from those cases, such as Down Syndrome, wherein, "To eliminate the disability means to eliminate the subject."[37] Amos Yong expands on this theme theologically from his own life experience with a Down sibling.

> For Paul, resurrection is neither resuscitation (which preserves continuity) nor re-creation (which severs identity); rather, since "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor 15:50), Paul teaches a resurrection of the body that preserves but also transforms personal identity.[38]

A rethinking of the biblical doctrine of resurrection hope that includes a resurrected identity retaining the personal characteristics of the disabled is long overdue. We know that Christ's resurrected body continues to bear the marks of his physical suffering which some refer to as God's disability.[39] Pertinent to our topic, it is precisely an erroneous belief of the total disappearance of any traces of disability in heaven that propels such unsolicited "ministry" resulting in the commodification of the disabled in a "Christian" way.

The point of the practice of prayer in the present is not that we order God's activity in the world or in our bodies but that we align ourselves with our vocational identity in Christ in the here and now. Jesus never commodified others. The timing and the agenda of life is not ours to arrange; instead, we must seek to recognize that the initiatives of redemption are already at work in our world, our cultures, even in our bodies and minds. Disabilities of all types do not dismiss God's ability and do not change the way God sees us as embodied people. We pray to be better aligned with God's purposes to bring the "kin-dom" community here and now.

Demanding divine healing over the minds, bodies, and lives of others puts the practitioner in a dangerous posture of assumed authority over God. Spirit-led supplication is something else entirely. We are commanded to pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests (Eph 6:18). Scripture assures us that when we don't know what to pray, the promised Advocate will be present.

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37 Stanley Hauerwas, "Marginalizing the 'Retarded.'" in *The Deprived, the Disabled, and the Fullness of Life*, Flavian Dougherty, ed. (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1984), 69.

38 Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 272. I encourage readers to delve deeper into this critical theological rethinking by reviewing this text.

39 Refer to Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994).

> In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God (Rom 8:26–27).

Prayer of this type is not manipulation; it is not self-serving. It may not be fulfilling either, from a human perspective. Rather, it means placing ourselves and those for whom prayer may be offered into the hands of the Creator once again, recognizing that a higher authority holds greater wisdom, power, and love towards us than we can express toward ourselves or one another.

No one wants to be a target or a commodity to be used for human purposes, however economically viable, normative, or missional that may appear. We may (and should!) request prayer from one another, but let us remember to give dignity to disabled people whose bodies are also temples of God. Loving our neighbor as ourselves means respecting one another in love, seeing those who embody difference as also carrying the imago Dei with the same diverse uniqueness found in all of us.

Moving from Commodity to Community

It is only through committed relationships that we can build real community. Rather than suggesting solutions, I close this article with an acknowledgment of those impactful individuals who, through their disabilities, have shaped me. These are the bold ones who noted my commodification of them, were willing to speak to me about it, and forgive. They have corrected and inspired me. For Mike and Bonnie Conrad, a godly and independent vision-impaired couple who during my teenage years of angst would patiently ask me what I was so concerned about. For Mrs. Dieglemann who, from her bedside, radiated the peace of Christ for so many years. For the developmentally disabled men and women of the Kainos Home and Training Center in Redwood City with whom I had the privilege of working together in the garden; they taught me so much about beauty, acceptance, and love. For the Rev. Dr. John Weborg who freely integrated his post-polio experience into his theological teaching and ministry. For my student and now Covenant pastor Tyler Menssen, born with Goldenhar Syndrome, who wrote in his thesis, "All of us are intended to live together in community under the grace of God and that grace not only allows us to be friends with one another in spite of our

differences, it is a grace so strong that it can propel chronically shamed [disabled] people to become agents of grace themselves."[40] For Mom, who when Parkinson's finally masked her dimpled smile, yet insisted we sing "It Is Well with My Soul." For the young woman sitting next to me on my last flight who explained her condition of constant pain, and delicately warned me that the ordinary takeoff and landing would negatively impact her hypermobility. And especially for my friend and former colleague Dr. Michael J. Walker who inspired me to write this article from the heart.

Many thanks to all of you and many others. You are part of my life. I wish the blessing of people like you in the lives of those who have not yet had the privilege of a genuine friendship with a disabled person, not as commodity but as community. If you are reading this and personally have not found how disabled people are enriching your life, you may be suffering from the devastating effects of commodification. Don't cut yourself off from what God is doing in the world through people you would not normally notice. Sometimes, people with disabilities are the agents of grace you need.

[40] Tyler Menssen, "From Shame to Community: Restoration in the Midst of Chronic Shame," Unpublished thesis manuscript (Chicago: North Park Theological Seminary, 2015), 83.