

Hi everyone. My name is Zac. I'm a 38-year-old white male with long brown hair, and today I'm wearing a dark gray T-shirt and I'm seated in a gray and black manual wheelchair. I'd like to start my talk tonight with a quote from Julia Watts Belser. This is from her book, *Loving Our Own Bones*.

"Before we go further, let me say a few words about how I use the term disability. I claim disability as a vital part of my own identity, as a meaningful way of naming and celebrating the intricate unfolding of my own skin and soul. Such a choice is surely a minority position in this world, living in a profoundly ableist culture. In a world where disability still serves as a seemingly natural marker of inferiority, claiming disability as a significant dimension of self remains profoundly counter-cultural. We're often taught to look past disability, to not bring it up in polite conversation, but I reject both of those approaches. I want you to see my disability." End quote.

It's July, and that means it's Disability pride month again last year. I gave a talk on how our Dharma practice can support disability pride. I'd like to continue with that theme this year because there's so many ways to tie the two together. If you're interested in hearing my talk from last year, you can find it on my website. I'd like to start by telling a little of my own story for context. I also think sharing our story is one way of expressing pride. To make a 38 year story very short. I was born with a genetic condition called Neurofibromatosis Type 1. This is caused multiple issues throughout my life. Most predominantly, my right tibia is bowed. This caused it to break about six times between the ages of 2 and 11. I attended my first day of kindergarten in a cast that went up past my knee.

Nearly 10 years ago, I started developing serious neurological symptoms. It took four and a half years to be diagnosed with a rare form of Multiple Sclerosis, called Primary Progressive MS. I have been a full-time wheelchair user for the past five years and have many complications from MS. Disability has been a challenging experience, and it's only recently that I've begun to consider alternative ways of thinking.

So I do not say what I'm going to talk about tonight lightly or mean to encourage toxic positivity. This work is not easy and I'm constantly relearning it and continually working with it. What I'm hoping to impart is the idea that sometimes, even for just a moment. We can relate to our disabilities in a different way.

To recap last year's talk a bit. Disability Pride celebrates the value of Disability and Disabled people. It is a pushback on the mainstream narrative that Disability is a wholly bad thing and an experience to be pitied and avoided. Disability advocate, Harriet McBride Johnson said, "When bigotry is a dominant view, it sounds like self-evident truth."

This is exactly why we must push back against these dominant views, but we're not simply celebrating the fact that we are Disabled. This life has a lot of difficult aspects, and we're not ignoring them. We are celebrating the joy and the grief, the accomplishments and the struggles, the isolation and the community that are all part of the Disabled experience.

It's a real exercise in Both/And. Pride is self validation. In a world where our existence is not the default, although we are not the default in America, one in four people have a disability that's over 70 million people. We are the largest group of marginalized people. And yet there's still so much that non-disabled people don't know about us.

The fullness of our experience is something worth celebrating. Personally, while adding a lot of hardship and difficulty to my life, disability has also taught me a lot about compassion, patience, joy, and community. Disability Pride Month is celebrated in July to commemorate the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act on July 26th, 1990. Thirty-five years later, the

ADA leaves a lot to be desired, but it was a huge step forward. At the time, very few laws protected Disabled People or provided access to us. I think it's important to openly discuss that although the ADA was a huge achievement, it could be a lot better. Much like Disability Pride, this recognizes the Both/And of our experience.

Countless people fought very hard for the ADA's passage, and yet those fights must continue to ensure that we strive for equity. Sadly, in this current political climate, we must not only fight for more rights, but to maintain those that we've already achieved.

Last year, my talk focused on how intention and practice are two core parts of cultivating Disability Pride. This year I'd like to focus on how learning to love yourself is a powerful part of Disability Pride.

Loving yourself can be a difficult thing. There's a lot of misconceptions about what it means. I don't see it as some unconditional state that's always on. When we love another person, we still see their imperfections. There are days where we are annoyed with them or they let us down. Loving everything about ourselves and believing we're perfect is not genuine self-love. Sometimes it's being with the hard bits and acknowledging that hard bits are part of being human, rather than cutting ourselves down for them. The attitude I'm trying to cultivate towards myself, is that I'm generally a good person who's trying my best. This leaves room for bad days as well as growth. Self-love is a journey, not a destination. It's something I'm always working on. This is an intentional practice that requires constant refreshing and restarting. We're not aiming for perfection, just practice.

It's taken me a long time to realize, loving myself doesn't mean that I have to love the experience of my body. It means loving the person who's living the experience of my body. The goal is to respond to our struggles and suffering as if someone we cared for deeply was experiencing the same. Learning to love ourselves may seem daunting at first, especially if our default way of relating to ourselves is with harshness.

It's more manageable if you break it down into smaller steps. I think first is to learn self-kindness, so that's what I'll be focusing on for the remainder of my talk.

Wise Speech is a really important factor in self-kindness. We often talk to ourselves in really cruel ways. No one can hear this inner dialogue, and we may not even register it if we've been doing it for much of our lives. And while some of this can be tied into internalized ableism, capitalism and western culture, the Buddha himself is quoted as saying, "Whatever an enemy might do to an enemy or a foe to a foe. The ill directed mind can do to you even worse." So it's not exactly a recent phenomenon for humans to criticize ourselves.

Loving ourselves requires that we change our internal dialogue. Awareness is a great first step in shifting how we talk to ourselves. Just notice what you say to yourself when you're struggling. These habits are so ingrained in us that sometimes we don't even notice them unless we're paying attention.

It's important not to use this as a reason to add more arrows to our pain. When you notice you're being unkind to yourself, just notice it. If you'd like, you can gently correct yourself, but remember to do so nonjudgmentally. I try and meet this harsh inner critic with the energy of a parent teaching their child to be kind to others. Firm, but compassionate.

For example, I might say, "Hey, that wasn't very nice! Let's try saying that another way." I try and validate that I'm scared or angry while asserting that it isn't a reason to turn on myself. I think it's important to acknowledge that you're having a hard time. Equanimity is not about pushing away your experience or being indifferent to it.

All humans live with stories. Some of these stories are about humanity or how the world works. But we also tell stories about ourselves. Some of these stories can be helpful. And others can be incredibly hurtful. A huge amount of stories are fear-based. When we start telling ourselves one of these stories, it can easily lead to papanca, which roughly translates to "mental proliferation".

This is when one thought leads to a cascade of others. For example, the thought "I'm not worthy" can lead to being bombarded with memories of all the times you've felt unworthy in life. One thing that can be useful when we recognize that we're caught in papanca is to take a step backward and ask ourselves, what story am I believing right now?

This inquiry can allow us to examine our rumination and see ourselves being caught. Sometimes, when I'm struggling with an aspect of my disability and telling myself a story about it, I find it helpful to examine if that story applies to disabled people as a whole. For example. Instead of labeling my story, "I'm too much because I need help, I try, "Disabled People are too much because we need help". When phrased this way, I immediately see the fallacy of this statement and the personal story loses some potency.

While it may seem counterintuitive. One aspect of disability pride is being able to hold space for the difficulty in your life. Equanimity means taking in the entirety of our experience and allowing it to be just as it is. Be gentle with yourself when you're in pain. Be gentle with yourself when you need extra help from others. It's so easy to get caught in difficult feelings around these things, but this is a part of our experience, pleasant or not. Fighting against. It compounds our suffering when working with difficulty in our lives.

It's important to keep in mind our Window of Tolerance. The Window of Tolerance is a middle path between overwhelm, also called hyper arousal, and avoidance, also called hypo arousal. Signs of hyper arousal include anxiety, overwhelm, difficulty relaxing, and hypervigilance. Signs of hypo arousal include feeling lethargic, a lack of concentration, disinterest, and emotional numbness. The Window of Tolerance is a space between these two extremes. When you're engaged yet at ease, a little of a good thing can go a long way. And stretching ourselves too far can be counterproductive. The Window of Tolerance helps us recognize when we're outside our comfort zone.

You should start these practices when navigating manageable levels of difficulty. These techniques are not likely to succeed when you try them during 10 out of 10 suffering. You can always come back and try later when you're feeling more regulated or you've practiced the skill several times.

While, things like self-kindness are very important, it's equally important to remember the interdependence that exists not only in all of humanity, but also in the disability community. In disability studies, we discuss disability through different models. These are different lenses that society views disability through. There are many different models of Disability. Broadly, some of the original models view disability as being an individual problem that we need to navigate alone. This trains us to turn our suffering about our experience inward instead of viewing it as a societal issue. At times, many of us have felt that our disability means that we don't belong, that we are different, weird or undesirable.

One facet of disability pride is finding community where we do belong. There are millions of other people like us. We may not have met them yet, but leaning into calming humanity and sharing our struggles with friends who experience similar ones is healing. Belonging is a crucial aspect of the human experience.

I can't understate the importance that making connections with other Disabled People has had on my own life. Finding awesome people who live with some of the things I do makes me feel not so alone. Of course, that includes this wonderful group, where we not only shared disability, but a potent way of navigating it.

Interestingly, I gain appreciation for myself by connecting with others who have similar life situations. When I meet someone I like who lives with things that I have shame about in my own life, it normalizes the taboo. I realize that if I appreciate a person and what they go through doesn't detract from that, why don't I deserve the same respect from myself?

The last teaching I want to weave in is, Ehipassiko, which translates to come and see for yourself. I can only tell you what is right for me. Just because I'm teaching does not mean you're obligated to take me at my word. Try out Disability Pride, you might hate it. It also might change your life. Neither is wrong or better than the other, we're all individuals. There are very few universal truths. Ehipassiko applies to anything you learn in our sangha, it not only encourages skepticism, but to discover how a tool can be adapted to your own life. This gives it deeper meaning we are all our own best teacher.

I'd like to close with a poem. This poem is by Nayyirah Waheed, and the poem title is Three.

and I said to my body. softly.

'i want to be your friend.'

it took a long breath.

and replied

'i have been waiting my

whole life for this.'

Thank you everyone.