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## Celebrating Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility

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In the beautiful diversity of humankind, we are invited to celebrate diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. This is especially true when it comes to the holy work of disability and mental health justice. Alice Wong, disability activist and author who died on November 14, at age 51, felt like a friend to me, even though I only knew her through her speaking and writing. Alice destigmatized disability and mental health experiences by talking openly about the real-life impacts of discrimination against people with disabilities, starting with her own stories of growing up as a disabled child in Carmel, Indiana. That's just a few miles north of where I live. She was the kind of person you would meet for coffee and share stories with.

As storytellers, we can help decrease the shame and stigma associated with disabilities and mental health experiences. I appreciated Alice's use of storytelling to open people's hearts and minds to injustices that often feel faraway and too overwhelming to think about. In Alice's powerful memoir, *Year of the Tiger: An Activist's Life*, she says, "I think of storytelling as a chance to know ourselves better, to really question who we are, where we've been, and who we want to be. Each person has an entire universe of stories inside of us. So my question to you all is, what is your story and how do you want to share it with the world? If you aren't ready to share tell your stories to yourself and let it nourish and guide you. Most importantly, your stories should please you and you alone. And when you are ready to share it, it'll be out there with other disabled narratives pushing back at that status quo."



When I share my stories about my family's experiences with chronic and serious brain disabilities, I often ask people to think about their "God stories" about mental health. I invite people to think about where God shows up in the midst of mental health and disabilities. And in exploring this question, we begin to craft our own theologies of mental health and disabilities. Storytelling is how we make sense of our lives and wrestle with God's presence with us.

Disability and mental health experiences are not punishments from God. And no, God does not make us disabled and sick so that we can deepen our faith. The saying, "God doesn't give us more than we can handle" is bad theology. We are wonderfully human and that's why we get disabled and sick. God shows up in the love and care we show to one another.

Alice explored the intersectionality of mental health and disabilities in her writings. She navigated her own personal experiences with mental health and talks about this in her book *Disability Invisibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-first Century*. She writes, "I may not find joy every day. Some days will just be hard, and I will simply exist, and that's okay, too. No one should have to be happy all the time—no one can be, with the ways in which life throws curveballs at us. On those days, it's important not to mourn the lack of joy but to remember how it feels, to remember that to feel at all is one of the greatest gifts we have in life. When that doesn't work, we can remind ourselves that the absence of joy isn't permanent; it's just the way life works sometimes. The reality of disability and joy means accepting that not every day is good but every day has openings for small pockets of joy."

I love this idea of "small pockets of joy." Maybe the joy is so small we can just stick our thumb in the pocket, other days the joy is big enough for our whole hand to rest in our pocket. Yet, claiming joy exists, in some form, is an act of courageous faith.

In this season of lights, imagine lights of joy illuminating the world.

This light still shines, despite the shadows of fear and despair. No person, no president, no government, no horrific act of violence, no, not anything or anyone can dim our light. Our lights shine on.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

The Rev. Sarah Lund serves as the Minister for Disabilities and Mental Health Justice in the National Setting of the United Church of Christ.

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