



Culture & Person-Centered Practices – Sara Liss: Insular Identities

SPEAKER(S)

Sara Liss

Hi, my name is Sara Liss.

I am a Jewish, autistic; otherwise, multiply disabled, queer, non-binary person.

When you are the person at an intersection of multiple oppressed identities, you tend to be wary of outsiders to your group - not just outsiders to one or two of your identities - but generally, to all of them. Because even with communities with welcoming arms to people like you - even the disability community, even with the LGBT community, even with the Jewish community. And those, they are really welcoming to people, they want people to spend time in them, get to know them even if you're not a part of them. They really want you to understand what it's like to be one of them. But they don't always welcome all of you. They might welcome part of you.

It's hard to have a developmental disability or a psych disability; and even worse both be at risk of institutionalization when you know that people with physical disabilities aren't always going to back you up even if they protest their own institutionalization. Because you might have the "wrong" kind of disability and that makes you wary. That makes you insular. My identities are very meaningful to me. They reflect how I see the world - not always in ways that people outside of them would anticipate.

For instance, as a Jewish person, I really don't have an internal concept of grace as most Americans would understand it. Judaism has a structure in which forgiveness, not only is required from God, but of the person or people you harmed. You aren't owed forgiveness. You have to work to repair the damage you did. Even when you've repaired some of the damage you've done to the person you harmed directly; that doesn't salvage the harm that you have cast upon their children and their children's children because the effects will last. You can't undo the past.

So, in that sense, it might sometimes seem like I am much less willing to let things go from a service provider who's made errors in the past, if just because they're sorry for them. That's not going to cut it. I need to see proof of improvement. I need not only to see you trying to understand, but doing better, because if you're not doing better, that's not a commitment.

It means that when I'm considering things like fasting, for religious reasons, whatever my health prognosis is, whatever my doctors are saying, that stuff is between me and my doctors and my rabbis, my personal doctors - the people who are specifically treating me for specific conditions.



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That does not mean my aides, that does not mean other types of service providers. It's within the remit of a specific group of people who I trust for that specific reason. And sometimes I may want to talk about it, but I'm not necessarily going to trust a stranger or even people I know really well with those things. I don't have faith that all people are safe to share all parts of me with. And there are sometimes when they're things that are really important to me and my practices and my life that are going to conflict with what you see from me. And I'm not going to be willing to share all of them because that's not safe for me.

It's not necessarily that I feel like I'm not safe with you specifically. My fellow disabled people, with whatever marginalized identities they have as well - they do or don't - they're not going to give you all the faith that you expect by virtue of just saying that you're here to help us. We have reasons to doubt that. We have reasons to doubt that your version of help is the kind of help that we need or help as we understand it. And that's not necessarily an insult to you.

That's not something that you should take personally.

When you're a member of so many marginalized groups, the thing is that we can say with certainty, yeah, you don't understand everything about us because there's no way you could. And you need to be conscious of that.