

I was thirty-six back in 1990 when I started dating my partner Katrinca. As a bisexual, I had passed for straight all those years, but suddenly life was different. I was coming out to my family and friends -- and to my school age children. For the first time in my life I was afraid to hold hands in public. As a middle-aged baby dyke, I had taken on a social stigma.

Katrinca suggested that I attend a meeting for newly out lesbians at the Pacific Center. When I arrived, I was relieved to see that I was by no means the oldest. And the group facilitator said something interesting: She said that, unlike any other oppressed group, gays and lesbians grow up in families that do not share their stigma, so that gay and lesbian youth are isolated in a unique way. This sounded wrong to me but I could not put my finger on it. When I got back to my car -- or rather my wheelchair accessible van -- it dawned on me that my own son, Jon, who has cerebral palsy, was growing up in an able-bodied family that could not experience the life he was living. And during the part of each week that she spent at her dad's house, my daughter Diana was a plump girl growing up in a thin family.

This story reminds me that some forms of oppression are more visible to us than others. Usually it's the ways we ourselves are oppressed that we see most clearly. For example: Most gay and lesbian people probably have no idea that if my son Jon decided to marry, he'd need to have a commitment ceremony and not a legal wedding. A person with a disability who chooses to legally marry loses all his or her benefits, including attendant care and health care. The law assumes that if Jon marries, his spouse will become his 24-hour attendant AND hold down a job with health benefits. If two people with disabilities marry each other, they BOTH lose their benefits.

Perhaps more than at any time in history, we are forming diverse families, each with its own web of privileges and stigmas. Katrinca and I have four children, and among the six of us we are straight, gay, Asian, Caucasian, temporarily able-bodied, disabled, fat, and thin. We even have one Republican. When we decided on an interracial adoption for our fourth child, a very nice counselor warned us that our family might get stared at. We explained that if being stared at could kill you, we'd be long gone.

And one of the things we have learned is that when one child or one parent faces particular challenges, the whole family can grow and change in unpredictable ways.

In the last few months, I've had the chance to get to know a family that was transformed when one family member acquired a disability. Verne and Zona Roberts raised their four sons across the bay, in Burlingame. Verne was a railroad man and felt very strongly that Zona should be a homemaker. Their oldest son, Ed, was a natural leader with a big voice. After organizing all the neighborhood kids in games over the years, it was no surprise that Ed became captain of the middle school baseball team. The year was 1953. One summer day Ed and his best friend went to a baseball game that was a benefit for the March of Dimes, even though Ed didn't like being around polio survivors. That evening Ed didn't feel well. By morning Zona had called in the doctor, who took Ed to the hospital and put him in an iron lung. Against all odds, Ed survived a serious bout of polio. He returned from rehab two years later, able to move the muscles in his face and one of his fingers. He could swallow air for a few hours each day in order to leave his iron lung. But in those days before power wheelchairs with respirators, Ed depended very much on his family for survival.

When Ed got home from rehab, the family had taken the dinner table out of the dining room to make way for his iron lung. Ed became the center of their family life. Verne, a man's man who had never bathed any of the boys as babies, lifted Ed out of his iron lung every night and carried him gently to the bathtub. Zona, who had kept her doubts about being a housewife to herself, became a mother lion. She convinced Ed to overcome his shame about

his appearance -- his internalized ablism, -- and go back to school. Several years later the high school denied Ed his diploma because he could not pass driver's ed or PE. Zona organized a media blitz and school board confrontation that taught Ed never to back down from a just cause.

When the State Department of Rehab declined funding for Ed to attend UC Berkeley because they judged him "unemployable," Ed went to Berkeley anyway and became the first significantly disabled student to live on campus. He helped design the UC Berkeley Disabled Students Program and worked for the university as an advisor on access. During graduate school, Ed played poker to win the money to start the Center for Independent Living. While he was running CIL, Ed was tapped by Governor Jerry Brown to run the Department of Rehab -- the agency that had judged him unemployable. Against all the predictions of professionals, Ed learned to operate a power chair, married and fathered a son. And then when the Carter Administration refused to implement a law prohibiting discrimination against people with disabilities, Ed led a massive sit-in: Wheelchair riders crawled up the steps of inaccessible Federal buildings and refused to leave. After twenty-one days, the administration admitted defeat and implemented the law.

Ed had learned a lot from his mom, and his mom had learned a lot from him. Zona eventually followed Ed to Berkeley and became a therapist. She specialized in working with families with a disabled family member. And last year at age 88, Zona put on a hard hat and dug the ceremonial first shovel of dirt for the new Ed Roberts Campus on Shattuck Avenue in Berkeley.

In June I met with Zona and with Ed's two surviving brothers, Ron and Mark. Reflecting on how Ed accomplished what he did, his brother Ron said, "What did he have going for him? He had us. We had each other. A family that never gave up."

We all need each other, and we need each other's stories. Stories of the special challenges we face, of how we overcame, sometimes just by surviving. You know that story about the six people in the dark room with the elephant, where one says an elephant is like a wall, and another says it's like a rope, and another says a tree trunk? Just as everyone understands a piece of the truth, everyone understands something about oppression, and we all need to share what we know.

Live Oak is a new congregation with the chance to define ourselves in a new way. When we think about social justice, when we think about how we want to fight oppression, let's be the little church that thinks big. Let us challenge ourselves to remember the diversity of diversities. When we imagine who we want at our welcome table, let us make room for the whole gender rainbow. And let's set out place cards in writing and in Braille. Let us welcome people with all different body types, people with all different skin colors, people who have a lot of money and people who don't. People who are young and old.

And let's pull a couple of chairs away and make room to roll right up to the welcome table!