# Notes for Naomi Jacobs’ talk on 'Access and Justice: Disabled Pagan Activism'

Good afternoon all! My name is Naomi Jacobs. I also sometimes go by the name of Leithin Cluan in a druid context. I am a druid, a member of the British Druid Order and the Druid Network. I have been a disability rights activist for something like 19 years (I had to get a calculator out to work that one out). And I live with a number of conditions, including one that causes pain, fatigue and mobility difficulties, and also Asperger’s Syndrome (which is why I talk so fast, for which I apologise - I’m trying to stay slowed down!) I get around by using a genius little mobility scooter, that folds up so I can take it on aeroplanes and other exciting things. I am a PhD researcher, researching disability and religion, mostly focusing on Christianity, but in the future I would really like to expand into looking at disability in other religious and spiritual paths including Paganism. I define myself as a disabled person and a member of the LGBT community. Today I want to talk to you about the themes of accessibility and justice in my disability work, and how that relates to my spiritual path, as a modern druid and a polytheist. And maybe give some advice to other Pagans who are disabled or have health conditions about accessing the community and its events, if I can.

So let me start by telling you about my Pagan background. I started to get involved in the Pagan community only about five years ago, although I had been on a sort of undefined pantheistic spiritual path for a while before that. Before that I was a practicing Christian. Today I call myself a Gaelic polytheist - this means I primarily follow the Irish gods, and like most polytheists, I consider the gods to be very real, to be individuals, and to be all different - which doesn’t make me *very* different from most Pagans, but does mean that a lot of rituals that call on a generic goddess and god don’t really fit my way of relating to the gods. So, a lot of my practice is solitary. But I’m very involved with the community, especially with other druids, and I’m involved in a little OBOD group here where I live in London. I can’t go very often, because of disability, but that’s something we are working on as a group - to try and make it easier for people to be involved who are disabled or have health problems.

I got involved in Paganism because I was looking for a way of being spiritual, where I could value my body the way it was. As a Christian, I was taught that there is a spiritual world and there is a material world, and the material world was often represented as bad, and our bodies as being affected by sin, and that we need to be healed. But I found that alien from what I observed in nature. In the natural world, there is so much diversity. And I didn’t want to be angry at my body anymore, or to treat like it wasn’t a part of me. I wanted to respect and love it as the life-sustaining, soul-housing, unique and wonderful thing that it is. It’s not bad! It’s me - it’s all me. And while it may be frustrating at times, it’s only trying to help me. When I am in pain or tired, I need to learn to listen to my body and give it what it needs - which is often rest, and sometimes is medication developed by talented scientists learning from the wisdom of plants, or maybe it needs a session of very light yoga, or a massage, or more water, or a relaxing cup of tea. When I see my body, not as this alien thing that’s trying to bring me down, but as part of ME, I learn that I am all one entity, in which the blessed light of life lives. My body is an incredible thing. And so what if it’s not the same as other people’s? I didn’t create the standards of normalcy that society imposes on us today. I didn’t say: we must all be a size 12, or that we all had to be able to walk for miles, or that we all had to be healthy enough to work 60 hours a week. And actually, a lot of those ideas are really harmful for EVERYONE. I want to communicate to everyone that diversity is good. That their individual diversity is good, and that diversity in a community is really important. If we only have the non-disabled people taking part in a community like the Pagan community, what wisdom and truth and creativity are we missing out on? What wonderful people are we never getting to meet, because they can’t get to the event, or because the event isn’t accessible enough for them?

Which brings me to disability and Paganism. Sunday was the 45th anniversary of the Pagan Federation, and I was asked to go along to do a polytheistic offering as part of the ritual. I asked the polytheist community in the UK for a list of deities that they honour, and attempted to name them, all with epithets. The people running the event were \*wonderful\*. They decided to plan it for good disability access. They held it in a venue that was mostly wheelchair accessible, with all the talks taking place in one fully accessible room. The talks have been recorded and will hopefully be shared with the people watching this online festival. The ritual was held in a garden that I was able to get into via a step-free access route, and I took part in a way that was comfortable for me, so that I could stay in one place on my mobility scooter seat when I needed to. And Robin, who organised the event, spent an entire afternoon looking for a local wheelchair accessible and step-free pub so that disabled Pagans could take part in the festivities afterwards. (Thank you so much, Robin!) I was in pain afterwards, as I often am after an event like this - but because I had communicated my needs and talked in a lot of detail with the organisers, who were willing to talk to me about my needs in detail, I felt normal - I hate that word, but sometimes you do have this experience when you’re able to do everything that everyone else around you can do, because of great access, and it just feels normal! And that’s very rare, for disabled Pagans.

And this is the difference between that event, and many of the moots and events that I try to get to. People running Pagan events don’t always take disability into account. Most moots are held in venues above pubs, which rarely have lifts. That means that many people with fatigue conditions, pain conditions or who use wheelchairs aren’t able to go. Pagan festivals don’t often think about disability, so they don’t have hearing aid loops when they use amplification for their talks, for example, and they don’t think about having reduced price tickets for people who have to bring carers. They might not allow dogs, so that blind people with guide dogs can’t come, or they might not have thought about having quiet rooms - vital for people with anxiety, autism, social disabilities, and so many other things. They might not have any facilities for storing medication, e.g. for diabetic people. And many other issues get forgotten.

Now, in order to interpret this situation, I want to tell you about something called the social model of disability. [Slide attached]

So with the social model of disability in mind, the focus is on the way that society disadvantages people with health problems or impairments. That doesn’t mean that we don’t take the medical conditions themselves seriously. Some people will always have pain, always have depression, always have heart conditions, etc. BUT a community - like the Pagan community - can ease the burden of these things by not putting up additional barriers that we also have to negotiate, alongside living with disability already. There’s no hierarchy of disability - using a wheelchair is not somehow more ‘serious’ than having an invisible condition - it’s just that each of those things bring different challenges. It’s up to the people who run moots, events and festivals to think about how to include us. They need to be thinking about accessibility from the beginning, rather than adding it on as an optional extra.

But my way of thinking about disability doesn’t end with the social model. Because I’m a polytheist who is dedicated to a goddess of *justice*, as well as chaos and wildness. And as a Gaelic polytheist, \*honour\* and \*hospitality\* are virtues that I take really seriously. I want to be part of a Pagan community that acts *honourably* towards disabled people and is *hospitable* towards them, and strives for *justice* for them. I do a lot of work to help groups get to that point - I give advice, and free disability equality training to non-profit organisations, and so on. I am always, always happy to help groups be more inclusive of disabled people. But they have to do the work of responding to that call for inclusion. I believe that if you run moots or events for the \*whole community\*, you have a responsibility to ensure that the groups really are *inclusive* of the whole community. Including the people with mobility impairments, and mental health difficulties, and autism, and social anxiety, and hearing and sight impairments, and post-traumatic stress conditions, and others. That’s not an easy task. But the Pagan community is fortunate to have lots of us who are willing to advise and help, including wonderful people like Debi, who is running this amazing festival which is accessible to a lot of people. The community needs to *use* people like us, and make a real commitment to *including* a diverse range of people - disabled people, and people from minority ethnic groups, and people who have gender identities that are more diverse than the ‘norm’, and so on. So I’m talking to the leaders and organisers of the Pagan community when I say: we are here to help you include us. Please take us up on that offer. Please create a Pagan community that has room for all types of people, and that is committed to *justice* for all types of people.

And to disabled Pagans I say: this is a highly diverse community. We have people with invisible and visible impairments, and we have people with long-term health conditions, and sensory impairments, If we work together, we can show the rest of the world several things. 1, that they are only temporarily non-disabled, because one day, if we live long enough, all of us will be disabled. 2, that we matter, and that they want us in this community, because they are seriously missing out if we’re not there. 3, that life is so much better and more interesting with diversity in it. Don’t hate your body, or your mind. It’s part of you. I know how irritating bodies and minds can be, but don’t blame yourself for the exclusion you experience. There is no dualism in Paganism. There’s no situation of a body we reject and a soul we embrace. We embrace the whole of ourselves, connected to everything in the universe as we are. We are sacred. We are beautiful. We are worth bothering with.