

The healthiest person I know?

Disability and health

Daniel Rempel

In his book *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ*, Brian Brock makes the claim that his son Adam is “the healthiest person I know.”¹ Brock’s claim is startling and catches his reader off guard. To suggest that his son is the healthiest person he knows is a loaded claim, one that at first read may come across as arrogant and difficult to qualify. But Brock is sure in his claim, albeit for different reasons than we may at first suppose. Adam is the healthiest person Brock knows not because of his ability to avoid illness or injury. Rather, writes Brock, Adam “is the healthiest person I know in the way he reflects and disseminates the claim of the One truly healthy one, the One who lives at the heart of wonder.”² This claim is startling, not only because in it we see Brock attempting to redefine the boundaries of what constitutes a healthy person, but also because Adam has Down syndrome and autism.

Re-examining our definition of health via people like Adam

Brock’s claim that Adam is the healthiest person he knows comes in a chapter in *Wondrously Wounded* titled “Health in a Fallen World.” Herein, we find Brock attempting to redefine conceptions of what health may mean to those claimed as citizens of the kingdom of heaven. To develop a proper understanding of health, he argues, we must first develop a proper understanding of what it means to be a finite creature under God, wrapped up in our sin and fallenness. All people find themselves in a particular reality that must be recognized as we attempt to understand what we mean when we talk about health. Thus, Brock begins his argument by stating that “God’s merciful address *only* comes to people caught up in lies about themselves.”³ The love of God drives deep into Christians’

1 Brian Brock, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 145.

2 Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 145.

3 Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 143. Italics original.

“particularly figured fallen personas.”⁴ Here, Brock makes the staunch claim that our particular situatedness is inherently compromised by sin, and thus our fallen state as sinful human beings confronts our speech about health. As a result, any appropriate Christian conception of health must first begin by wrestling not with our physical ailments but with our spiritual condition.

By beginning his chapter on health by directing his reader to the topic of sin, Brock might be expected to follow a conventional line of thought

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that argues that illness is the result of the fall, that it is one of the curses God places on humanity in Genesis 3. However, this is not the case. For Brock, the main result of the fall was not physical cursedness manifesting as illness or disease but rather separation from God and a distorted view of one’s self. While the topic of sin does not figure overtly in the rest of the chapter, it is important for Brock to locate its influence from the outset,

understanding that sin, not illness, is the challenge that those who want to be healthy need to overcome. Sin is the reality that affects our health, and overcoming sin is what occupies Brock’s way of thinking.

At this point, Brock notes the example of the Jewish theologian Franz Rosenzweig who—despite living with the muscular degenerative disease commonly known as Lou Gehrig’s disease, or ALS—“believed most physically healthy modern people are suffering from a mortal illness. That illness is an incapacity to appreciate and receive their creaturely lives with all their individual peculiarities—including their physical illnesses and incapacities.”⁵ Rosenzweig is clear that—even for someone living with ALS—what is most damaging to a person is not any physical illness or incapacity that may come their way but rather an inability to live “in the heart of wonder.” Wonder is that which draws human beings into deeper engagement with their everyday lives. It is the way Christians perceive the world, seeing all creation as God’s gift to the world. Wonder may thus be the foremost way for Christians to combat our own sinful state and enter life in the kingdom of heaven.

4 Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 143.

5 Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 146.

Wonder is a task manifested properly in everyday life rather than primarily in extravagant circumstances. In an attempt to overcome such impulses for the extravagant, Brock argues that humans have a tendency to attempt to escape our current realities, even when those realities are ones we have been liberated to enjoy. He notes the paradigmatic example of the Israelites complaining in the wilderness only months after being freed from Egypt as “captivity to the idea that satisfaction will be had in being somewhere else.”⁶ Losing their sense of awe toward God’s wondrous work of liberative mercy, the Israelites complain about their current situation, ignoring their situatedness as creatures under God. However, for Brock, the everydayness of life is where God wondrously breaks into our lives. “God breaks in on this situation of inner estrangement by revealing them to be *alongside* human beings, *in* the world, and *with* God.”⁷ Those who are attuned to the closeness of God in the everydayness of life are those who live by the sustenance given by relation to God. It is these people who, Brock argues, recognize health as life with God, *shalom*, and bodily flourishing.

The example of Israel noted above suggests that wonder and liberation are inherently interconnected. If creatures currently find themselves in a

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state limited by sin, and the first step to remove oneself from sin and enter into the kingdom of heaven is the practice of wonder, then to experience freedom is inherently connected to the practice of wonder. To further this claim, Brock suggests that, while creatures were created to be free, freedom “is a relation and nothing else.” This relation is manifested in our turn toward others, toward creaturely reality (our situatedness on earth), and ultimately in relation to God. Freedom is “being-free-for-the-other,” recognizing that the fullness of our being is found in cooperation and dependence. “To be a creature is to be dependent on and to depend on other creatures.” However, such dependence is not arbitrary allyship but comes about by “concretely depending on God’s enlivening Spirit.” Ulti-

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6 Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 152.

7 Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 152. Italics original.

mately, for Brock, our creatureliness, a true vision of the human person, is constituted in our dependence on God and all that God has given as good gifts to those created by God.

Understanding Adam as healthy

The last thing Brock does is to put forth his provocative constructive claim that Adam is the healthiest person he knows. He transitions by posing the following: there is something serious at stake when Christians confess that to be saved is to be liberated to be free creatures. If salvation is being freed in Christ and invited into the kingdom of heaven, and if this freedom is at stake for all people, then disability appears in a remarkably different light. This difference, for Brock, is found *not* in the way he is to welcome his son Adam into life in the kingdom of heaven. Rather, strikingly, Brock narrates that it is *Adam* who welcomes *him* into the kingdom of heaven.

Brock notes four ways in which Adam's witness welcomes others into the kingdom of heaven. First, Adam has an ability to live without worry of the future. Brock notes this as a manifestation of Jesus's command in Matthew 6:24–26 in which Jesus commands his disciples not to worry about their life or how they will survive, for their heavenly Father will provide

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all their needs. Adam's distinct ability to live solely in the present tense witnesses to people molded by a society obsessed with future goals, retirement funds, and hoarding possessions and is a staunch manifestation of life devoted to the everydayness in which wonder takes place.

Second, there is no gap between what Adam says and what he does. Once again, Brock draws on Jesus's words in Matthew 5:36–37 where he commands his disciples to let their yes be yes and

their no be no. Adam "liberates everyone around him from suspiciously watching for signs of hidden motives, for other selves peeking out from behind masks."⁸ Adam is who he is, and he thus lives truthfully in a world that has become far too comfortable with distorting the truth. Thus,

8 Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 163.

Adam may have a particular capacity to confront false narratives that sin thrusts into our lives.

Third, Brock speaks about Adam's heightened level of emotional sensitivity. Adam is attuned to both the highs and the lows of those around him; yet, at the same time, he has a remarkable tendency to position himself in the social space of others. Here Brock notes the way in which Adam

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embodies the apostle Paul's teaching that members ought to have the same care for one another, noting that if one member suffers, all suffer together with it, and if one is honored, all rejoice together (1 Corinthians 12:24-26). He describes Adam as "neither a loner nor an attention seeker" but as having a remarkable

able ability to feel the emotional highs and lows of others. "I can only wonder at his attention to fields of interpersonal communion of which I never even dreamed."⁹ Again, here we see a commitment to the everydayness in which wonder takes place. Adam's attentiveness to human emotion offers a picture of the way members of the kingdom of heaven ought to be attuned to one another's needs.

Fourth, Adam enjoys many people. Brock powerfully exhorts this final point: "If the kingdom of heaven is a new social order whose characteristic is joy, I have most powerfully glimpsed what this might mean because I have lived with Adam."¹⁰ Joy is imperative to life in the kingdom, for, as the apostle Paul notes in Romans 4:16, "The kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." Wonder is not possible without joy, for joy often can be the outcome of a life lived at the heart of wonder. It is with this joy that Adam welcomes others into the kingdom.

Health in the kingdom of heaven

Brock claims that "a theological definition of health goes beyond this catalogue of bodily vulnerabilities in asking *how people enact their creaturehood*."¹¹ What is at stake is not how many doctor appointments one has to attend or how many prescriptions or treatments one is prescribed. What

⁹ Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 164.

¹⁰ Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 165.

¹¹ Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 168. Italics added.

is at stake in Brock's claims about health is how creatures operate in the world. In this way, in light of the examples listed above, Brock can claim that Adam is the healthiest person he knows. Adam's health is not represented by being absent of illnesses or diagnoses. On top of his Down syndrome and autism, Adam's life has been subject to sepsis, significant

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brain injury, inability to speak, and aversions to textures of certain kinds of food. The Brocks are unsure of how well he hears, and at six months of age, it was discovered that he had a pair of holes in his heart. Adam contracted leukemia at the age of eight, which resulted in over two years of chemotherapy. For years he has had problems with gastric reflux, which often keeps him up at night, and most recently he has contracted kerato-

conus, which results in loss of vision and eye pain. Yet, not only despite this but exactly in light of this, Brock continues to claim that Adam is the healthiest person he knows.

Ultimately, what is significant about Adam's health is the way that he witnesses to an alternative social order, manifested in the everydayness of life. Brock testifies that he often finds himself interrupted by Adam's acts, acts he believes testify to an alternative social order, one representative of life in the kingdom of heaven. It is as if Adam himself is representing the social dynamics Jesus taught and lived, confronting sinful realities of our fallen world. Adam is both an exemplar and a witness, yet not of the ways we may traditionally think. Adam is an exemplar of life lived in an alternative order, and he witnesses to a reality that is possible beyond the snares and traps of our fallen world. This is not to claim that Adam is without sin or "wholly innocent" but rather that perhaps the apostle Paul was correct when he claimed that God has chosen those who the world views as foolish to shame the wise (1 Corinthians 1:27). It may just be that Adam and people like him have been chosen to witness to the alternative reality that Jesus spoke about as the kingdom of heaven, drawing those around them into the heart of wonder.

Accepting Adam's invitation

To accept Brock's claim that Adam is the healthiest person he knows is to be confronted by Adam's invitation to life in the kingdom of heaven.

It is to accept that Adam, alongside a host of others living with what we understand to be intellectual disabilities, may be a herald of the kingdom, calling others to faithfulness under God. The challenge presented to able-bodied individuals by this welcome is to evaluate our being in the world and how we conceive ourselves in light of our own sin, our capacity to wonder, and our pursuit of freedom. It is a challenge presented not in life's extravagant moments but in the everydayness of our existence—in the mundane, repetitive nature of our daily lives. The alternative social order to which Adam witnesses may not be one without sin—as Adam, as a human being, is a sinner just like anyone else—but it is one that lives life presently, full of truthfulness, emotional sensitivity, and joy. Certainly a life—even a mundane one—governed by being fully present, truthful, emotionally sensitive, and joyful would be a stark difference to a society in which these manifestations of the kingdom are often absent.

Finally, notice the conditional statement by which Brock concludes his chapter “Health in a Fallen World”:

If the kingdom of heaven is anything like Jesus teaches, and Adam displays in significant ways the tenor of this kingdom in his form of life, and it is the state of our hearts out of which the social order of our world flows, then, to recognize the true health of those we call disabled, we will have to have our hearts assayed to see how deeply they welcome this kingdom. To genuinely receive the presence of another person means not to pity them, be repelled or frustrated by them, but to welcome them without regret.¹²

Adam's witness is one of welcoming others into the kingdom of heaven. It is one of a life lived with God, the true sign of a healthy life. As Christians, we are called to join Adam and those like him in the kingdom of heaven, journeying alongside the God who liberates us from our false pretenses into a life full of wonder and freedom. For Brock and his son Adam, this is what it means to be healthy.

About the author

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¹² Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 167.