

Life On The Intersection Of Queerness, Jewishness And Disability | CPD Blog

Storee Powell

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What does it mean to live at the intersection of queerness, Jewishness and disability? For University of Utah student, Athena Schwartz, who uses they/them pronouns, it means each part of their identity informs the other, as well as the advocacy work they ardently take on.

"I've always known I don't fit into the normal boxes of life," Schwartz said. "I've always questioned my gender identity, but I didn't know other options existed."

They were called a 'tomboy' growing up, but Schwartz realized presenting as masculine wasn't quite right. Today, they present as feminine most of the time, but considers themselves gender non-binary and demi-sexual.

"When I learned they/them pronouns were an option, it felt so right to me. I'm very comfortable as non-binary, but because I haven't changed my gender expression, sometimes others question my non-binary validity," Schwartz said.

Correcting people when they use the wrong pronouns is something Schwartz is still learning to do. Something that has increased their confidence in this is the knowledge that other cultures and their own Jewish culture have a long history of other genders.

"I learned that there are six genders in traditional Jewish texts (read about it [on the UF Hillel website](#))," Schwartz said. "Judaism has helped me be more open not just about my gender identity, but my mental and physical illness too."

During the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur, followers are asked to fast all day – if they can Schwartz said.

"Every scripture says your health comes first – and taking care of yourself is considered a mitzvah – or a good deed. I realized the world won't end if I take a moment of self-care," Schwartz said.

They do a lot of advocacy work on behalf of many different people, including LGBTQ people, disabled and mentally ill people, and homeless people. Schwartz takes pride in doing these things, and helping others is a true life passion for them, but they have learned it is ok to take the time to care for themselves.

"Self-care is seen in popular culture as applying face masks or using bath bombs, but what I need to do to take care of myself is work on recovering from past traumas," Schwartz said.

As someone with physical and mental illness and disability, they know listening to themselves every moment is a lifestyle and is something they are still learning to do better. Depression, anxiety, PTSD, possibly OCD all are part of their mental health. Schwartz also has an unspecified autoimmune disorder of their eyes, which left them with cataracts and low vision since age 14. Also, as a teen, Schwartz had a major surgery to have titanium rods put in her back to stabilize their spine, and now struggles to bend over and doing things like tying shoes. And recently, Schwartz was diagnosed with POTS (Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome), which affects their blood pressure, their ability to stand without becoming faint and weak, and causes exercise intolerance, dizziness and heart palpitations.

"I haven't felt as included in the disability community because for so long I've seen myself as not as disabled as other people – like I shouldn't include myself in my community," Schwartz said. "I've long felt I should hide that part of me – I became hyper-fixated on hiding my disabilities, but with the POTS symptoms, it has made life harder and therefore harder to hide my disabilities."

The American value of pulling oneself up by their bootstrap is part of the reason Schwartz has felt shame and guilt around their disabilities. Before being diagnosed with POTS, which is incredibly underrated in Schwartz's opinion, they were told their symptoms were caused by anxiety and not a physical condition, so they pushed the illness down.

"I was told as a kid I was making it up," Schwartz said. "But I couldn't pull myself up by my bootstraps anymore. Mine were tired and worn out. I couldn't physically be myself within expected able-bodied social norms. I feel better embracing myself, I feel more whole, and it helps me fight for what I believe in."

And the pandemic has strangely presented the opportunity for better self-care to Schwartz. Sometimes it means more rest, other times it means getting more salt and electrolytes. Other times, it means asking for accommodations or help. Partially blind in one eye, Schwartz can't drive at night or when weather affects visibility. They need rides at these times. They also can't read things from a distance, which means classes require teachers to accommodate their needs. Yet family and friends have told Schwartz they are not disabled and accordingly they have not felt welcomed into the disabled community.

Another important part of their identity that has been suppressed is they are a sexual assault survivor. Embracing this part of their identity was taboo as the disability part. They were told they shouldn't talk about it too much. But Schwartz has realized that the more they talk about it, the more they learn about themselves that would otherwise stay hidden deep inside.

Finding a community that understands them has been greatly aided by social media support groups. Talking to people with similar symptoms, learning about accommodations, and how to accept themselves and all their identities helps Schwartz to ignore the judgements of others because they know that the people that love them the most will listen.

"I've realized there are others like me, and it has helped me see myself in others in a way I never have before," Schwartz said. "And while I am shamed for having online friends, I know it has made my life better."

Schwartz's advice for those struggling to find a physical community is to make your own online. The Youth of Utah Advocacy Coalition group has been one such organization that has helped them be in touch with themselves.

"I wouldn't be myself today without it," Schwartz said.

Disabled communities need to include LGBTQ people and the LGBTQ community need to create accessible welcoming communities for disabled members, Schwartz said. At the end of the day, it is all about accessibility in all spaces so everyone can work together towards the goal of making the world more equitable.

"All activism should be accessible," Schwartz said. "LGBTQ Pride is about including people – so why is disability accessibility forgotten? We need to amplify the voices of disabled queer people."

As for Schwartz's future, they hope to make advocacy for underprivileged people their life's work, including lifting the voices of the most vulnerable. And perhaps most importantly, Schwartz has learned that one of their identities isn't better or more important than any other.