



## **Liz Possee Corthell**

***I'm a service designer with a passion for the future.***

***At UnitedHealthcare, I'm a Principal Service Designer, working across lines of business with product teams to envision what an equitable health future might look like. Through research, service design, workshop facilitation, and strategic foresight, I help tell the story of what the future could be, and how we might get there. Occasionally, I also get to use my skills as an illustrator to really show what these future worlds could look and feel like. When I'm not designing, or thinking about the future, you'll find me knitting, painting, or exploring.***

## **Centering Equity in Design**

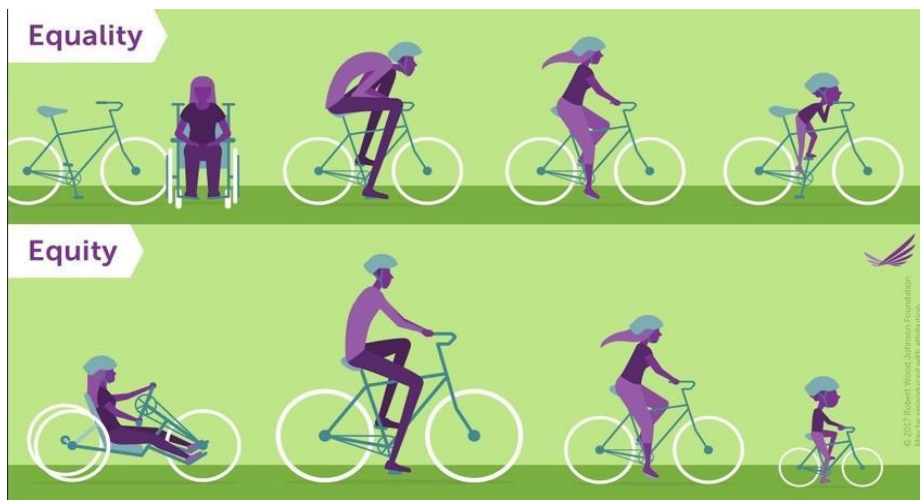
*by Liz Possee Corthell (she/her), Principal Service Designer, Health Equity, United Healthcare*

**When I decided I wanted to be a designer, it was because I wanted to use my creative powers for good. I wanted to create a world that made people feel seen, understood, safe, and supported. I wanted to create this world because I saw evidence all around me of inequity and inaccessibility that were so ingrained and designed into our spaces, our digital experiences, and our products.**

**I saw buildings with wheelchair accessible entrances hidden in back alleys, making sure every wheelchair user who entered that building felt the subliminal message of “this place isn’t really for you,” before they even went through the door. I saw mothers struggling to get their strollers on buses, cautiously whispering “I’m sorry,” to other passengers as they felt the unwelcome glares. I saw Black women being followed in stores by retail associates who think they’re preventing theft when they are really communicating “you aren’t welcome here,” in their actions. I saw transgender students at school having to face the question of “which bathroom will I not be attacked in?” after spending hours in the classroom. In my own life, I’ve struggled with a vision impairment that has made my left eye almost blind and feel the fear rush over me as I cross an intersection fearing a driver can’t see me and I can’t see them. Almost all these inequities can be traced back to a design decision, be it in architecture, public transit, service design, or city design. I became a designer because I wanted a more just world; a world where we**

can all feel safe. A world that celebrates diversity instead of punishes it.

Now, I have the incredible privilege of being a Service Designer in the Health Equity Studio at UnitedHealthcare, one of the largest health payers in the United States. Through my design work, I focus on equity, which is about meeting individuals and their specific needs, particularly the inequities an individual might face. There are so many factors that impact how people interact with our designs, like race, culture, gender, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, immigration status, socio-economic status, ability level, neurodiversity, and all the individual experiences that people bring with them every day.



Equity is different from equality. Equality is about giving everyone the same resources, where equity is about giving each individual resources to meet their individual needs. If we look at this image from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, we can see this depicted through bicycles. In “equality” image, everyone is given the same bike, even when it doesn’t fit their height, their ability, or their

needs. In the “equity” image, everyone is given a different bike that fits their size and needs.

Equity is also different from accessibility. Equity is the goal of our work, and accessibility is a result of that. Accessibility is giving everyone, across the broad diversity of humanity and experience, equitable access.

With all that being said, the critical question each of us should be asking ourselves is how do we become more equity-centric designers? To start, we must acknowledge that equity doesn’t happen by chance, but with intent and focus. There are a million paths toward becoming a more equity-centered designer, and many of them start with developing a self-awareness through reflecting on our own experiences, privileges, and inequities we have faced. One of the methods you can use to better develop this self-awareness is by deliberately conducting an Equity Pause, a design process coined by EquityXDesign<sup>4</sup>. To conduct an Equity Pause, we can ask ourselves and our teams several questions, like these created by Public Design for Equity<sup>5</sup>:

***Awareness: What would we like to say that hasn't been said?***

- ***Inclusion: Who are we not hearing from? Why?***
- ***Relationships: Is this conversation/action/project moving towards relationship?***
- ***Acknowledgments: Are we acknowledging the history? What and who would you like to acknowledge and celebrate?***

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<sup>4</sup> <https://medium.com/@equityXdesign/racism-and-inequity-are-products-of-design-they-can-be-redesigned-12188363cc6a>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.publicdesignforequity.org/resources/2020/5/25/equity-pause-questions-H71mB>

- ***Process & Practice: Are we on the right track? Do we need to update our practices and processes?***
- ***Goals: Are we moving towards more and/or improved equity and inclusion practices?***
- ***Implicit Biases: Where are our blind spots and biases?***
- ***Never Would I Ever: What social issues do I feel I must recuse myself from, that I would risk publicly refusing my work to support?***

As individuals, we can reflect on these questions and others to better show up for communities that need it most. What privileges do we have? What inequities have we faced? When have we failed to show up equitably? When have we succeeded? Taking the time to reflect and consider how we show up in different conversations is a crucial step toward being more equity centric.

I know that all of this puts a lot of pressure on us as designers. Pressure to create a better world. Pressure to create products and services that can meet people's needs, make them feel safe, and honor their identity. All of this while still dealing with business pressures, economic pressures, climate pressures, life pressures. I feel the pressure, and I know you do too. What I try to remind myself when I'm feeling the pressure is a quote from tennis legend Billie Jean King, "Pressure is a Privilege." She said, "Usually if you have tremendous pressure, it's because an opportunity comes along. Most of the time... if you really think about it... usually it's a privilege."

**As designers, I think we carry an immense amount of privilege. The privilege to shape the world around us, to design systems and services that shape our everyday lives. I think we can use that privilege for greater good. It won't happen by chance, it takes intent and focus, but we can all become more equity-centric in everything that we do.**