

Learning to Love the Way I Walk

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Cripple! You don't belong here!

When I was seven years old, elementary school boys yelled those words as I walked by. As they laughed, they began pelting me with small stones. I was unsteady on my feet since I'd just learned to walk without braces, so I quickly fell to the ground. The boys scattered. As I sat on the asphalt, bewildered, I wondered—Why are they being so mean to me? What's wrong with me? While I wasn't physically hurt, that incident forever changed me. With my pronounced limp and weak arms, I felt different and defective for the first time.

I don't remember life before polio because I contracted it when I was three months old in India, a few months before I was to get the vaccine. The doctor assumed I had typhoid and gave me cortisone to reduce my fever. By the time the physician realized the mistake, I was almost a quadriplegic.

My parents left for England soon afterward since the doctors in India told them I would be a vegetable with no hope for any progress if we stayed. From England we moved to Canada, where I was treated at the Shriners Hospital for Crippled Children in Montréal and spent several months out of every year there. I walked without braces at age seven and had 21 operations, mostly muscle transfers, before 13.

I had just been released from the hospital when that first bullying incident occurred. Soon afterward we moved, and I hoped a new school would change things, but the taunting continued. I almost came to expect being mocked because kids frequently snickered, imitated how I walked, and asked what was wrong with me.

I assumed my parents would be disappointed if they knew what was happening, so I didn't tell them. They were so proud of the way I had adjusted and were committed to keeping me in regular school to be mainstreamed with other children. Following FDR's philosophy, they encouraged me to

succeed in the normal world by not feeling sorry for myself, walking as straight as possible, and wearing clothes that camouflaged my disability. Walking straight was actually impossible, but I tried anyway because my limp drew unwanted stares. I hated the way I walked.

At the same time, I was cheerful and outgoing and learned to adapt to my world. I found a role model in Tiny Tim from *A Christmas Carol*, who was the catalyst for Scrooge's change. He accepted whatever he was given and always thought of others. Determined to be well-liked, I tried to be a helpful friend, a diligent worker and a positive person so people would want me around.

That determination propelled me to become valedictorian of my high school class and even voted Winter Festival Queen as I worked hard to be popular. I then wondered if I could live independently, so I chose to go to college out-of-state, to the University of Virginia, where I knew no one just to see if I could do it. Since this was before the ADA, many of the buildings had steps with no railings, making them difficult to get into.



When I mentioned it to one professor, he said, “Well, I guess I could move the class if we absolutely need to. But that would involve a lot of inconvenience for everyone ... Is that what you want?” I said I would figure something out, and so every day I would ask a stranger to help me up the steps. At first, I was embarrassed but it soon gave me a sense of freedom. If I was willing to ask strangers for help, the world could open up to me.

With that confidence, after college I accepted a job in Boston’s financial district where I worked for four years and then moved to California to get my MBA at Stanford. There I met and married a classmate. Life seemed perfect, and I only thought about my disability if I glanced in the store window and saw the reflection of my gait.

But soon afterward, my perfect life began to unravel. The doctor made a mistake with my infant son’s medicine, and he died suddenly. Several years later, I was diagnosed with post-polio syndrome and told to stop painting, scrapbooking and gourmet cooking to conserve my energy. The team at the Spaulding clinic in Framingham recommended I use a wheelchair and other assistive devices to preserve my strength.

I was slowly adjusting to these changes when my husband left me for someone else and moved out of state, leaving me to parent two adolescent daughters alone. His betrayal reinforced all the painful things that I had whispered to myself over the years—You’re not enough. You’re a burden. You’ll never be fully accepted.

Painful as his leaving was, it was a pivotal point in my life. I had long been a pleaser, turning myself into a pretzel trying to please everyone. My unspoken life goal had been to fit in, but I finally saw that I didn’t need to live for other people’s approval. My faith was a critical part of that journey as I saw that I had value and dignity; I didn’t need to keep apologizing for myself.

Six years after my ex-husband left, I married an amazing man named Joel. Soon after he proposed, I mentioned that I was still self-conscious about how I walked, especially walking down the aisle. Joel looked directly at me and said, “I love the way you walk, and I’ve loved it from the beginning.”

Joel’s words have come to symbolize my current outlook. From hating the way that I walked for most of my life, I have learned to love it as Joel does. I’m grateful for polio. It has made me deeper and more compassionate. More concerned about the vulnerable and overlooked. More grateful to God and more joyful. More appreciative of community and more hopeful.

I recently heard that people who were bullied as children often believe they are not enough as adults and have three traits in common—they are high achievers, pleasers and insecure. I can identify with all those characteristics and hope my writing can help others break free from that mindset and pressure.

With my post-polio diagnosis in 2003, I cut back on the activities and hobbies that were overusing my arms and started writing with voice recognition software. I’ve had a great response to my work and have written two books. The second one, a memoir entitled *Walking through Fire*, will be released in January 2021. ■



Vaneetha Risner’s upcoming memoir, *Walking Through Fire: A Memoir of Loss and Redemption*, will be released in January 2021. However, for a limited time, if you preorder her memoir NOW at www.walkingthroughfirebook.com, you can stream the entire audiobook immediately, read by Vaneetha, for free. Vaneetha and her husband Joel live in Raleigh, NC where she blogs at vaneetha.com.