

Jumping With Both Feet: Reclaiming My Identity in a Disabled Community

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I was twelve. It was an ordinary afternoon at day camp, and I was preparing to go swimming with my best friend. We were almost ready to go, so I took off my bulky running shoes and socks, without thinking.

“What’s wrong with your feet? They look weird.”

I looked down, as if I had forgotten that anything looked different, while silently screaming at myself for daring to go barefoot. Then I looked back up at the girl who had asked the question, feeling heat rise to my face, and shrugged. I don’t remember if I said anything after that, I just remember feeling so overwhelmed that I wanted to hide myself away in a corner and never face the world again. Camp was the first time (that I can remember) when anyone had directly asked me why my feet looked different, and I felt exposed. There was nothing I could do or say to deny the fact that I wasn’t like everybody else. Looking back now, I wish I could have said more, but I hated the idea of having to explain myself to other people. I was embarrassed.

When I was two years old, a case worker for the Infant Development program had noticed I often walked on my toes and had an uneven gait, among other physical delays. She suggested that I get an assessment done with an orthopedic specialist. The diagnosis came back—I had a ‘mild’ form of cerebral palsy. According to the CDC, *cerebral palsy* is “a group of disorders that affect a person’s ability to move and maintain balance and posture,” that can be caused by multiple factors occurring before birth or slightly after. The condition is also the most common childhood motor disability (CDC). In my case, I was born premature, which contributed greatly to my developmental delays that eventually led to a diagnosis of spastic hemiplegia: in basic terms, stiff muscles and weakness on one side of the body. Nevertheless, when I was younger, I was not completely aware of my disability. I just knew that I needed to go to various

doctors' appointments and wear leg braces to help my feet, and that I was considered lucky because the only outward manifestation of my disability was a limp and slight weakness on the right side of my body. As soon as I entered kindergarten, though, I stopped wearing the leg braces because I did not want any extra attention placed on me—in my young mind, I no longer needed them. There was nothing wrong with me, I told myself. I limped a little bit, that was all.

I was just a kid. A shy kid who wanted to fit in and be like everyone else. My parents never told me I was any different, and I did everything I could to avoid attention. Severe social anxiety created the impression that everyone else was perfect, and I was the 'weird' kid—if anyone found out about my cerebral palsy, I would become even further alienated from my classmates. I always wore socks and shoes, never barefoot, to hide my bunions that had developed as a result of the lack of care I gave my body; particularly the narrow shoes I would force my feet into because I did not want to wear anything that was different from my peers, anything that would set me apart. I would not even wear my glasses in a classroom setting unless it was absolutely necessary, because I feared that I would be made fun of—I was one of the only students throughout my elementary school years who wore glasses. I avoided miniscule details that would cause me to stand out from the crowd. If I had ever gone barefoot in front of someone during this time, it meant that I really trusted them, and that I was extremely comfortable in their presence.

The concept of a 'disability community' was unheard of to me as I entered my teenage years—I stopped attending physiotherapy sessions because I was told I was 'fine.' My cerebral palsy still affected me, but I pushed through the struggles without a second thought, refusing to acknowledge its existence. I felt as though I had 'graduated' from physiotherapy, and therefore I saw myself as less disabled because I no longer needed that type of regimented assistance. The

weird looks and offhand comments, like the one from the girl at camp, now lay behind me. I still wore uncomfortable shoes, no matter how many pairs I destroyed, and hid my bare feet from the world, wanting to disappear every time I had to take off my socks in public. I could ignore the pain, hide my limp, and participate in the same activities as my able-bodied friends. In my mind, I was not disabled enough to exist within that identity, but I still had cerebral palsy. I was alone, caught somewhere in the liminal space between able-bodied and disabled.

In 2019, I was volunteering at the Eden Mills Writers' Festival, working at the merchandise table for the literary magazine I work at, *The New Quarterly*. I had grown familiar with various other disabled voices in the Canadian literature scene and begun interacting with them on social media. I knew that Amanda Leduc, a prominent disability activist and writer, was across the street working at a table for another organization. I also knew that we had the exact same diagnosis: mild cerebral palsy, spastic hemiplegia on the right side. The thought of someone who experienced the same struggles that I did, after feeling alone for so long, was liberating. Eventually, she came across the road to our table, and I excitedly told her that I had cerebral palsy. In response, she hugged me. That was all I needed.

Through meeting Amanda, and reading her book, *Disfigured: On Fairy Tales, Disability, and Making Space*, I began to see that I had a rightful place in the disability community. My voice mattered, and the people around me who shared similar experiences would lift me up. I am still gaining the courage to put myself out there as a writer, but finding a place within this community after enduring the pain by myself for so long was integral to my personal development. I felt free. Amanda writes that she “tried to pretend, always, that there was no limp at all,” something that she didn’t recognize as “survival” until she was older (Leduc 120). I remember crying when I first read this, because I felt it so deeply, and saw myself so clearly. It

was validating to see that at least one other person had been experiencing the same things I had, and we both had many of the same feelings surrounding the complexities of living with a ‘mild’ disability. I was not alone anymore, there was someone out there who understood.

Reading *Disfigured* gave me confidence in my own disabled identity, and I discovered more people in the online disability community who shared the same or similar experiences as me, and others who were completely different. The smallest interactions made a difference—I could post something about how my muscles often tighten up in the cold, making it harder to walk, and someone would reply saying ‘me too!’ I started posting more frequently about my disability on Twitter and Instagram, and people who grew up with me would respond saying they had never heard of cerebral palsy, or known that it was so varied in its symptoms. I was teaching people, opening their minds to new perspectives and ways of moving through the world.

Returning to *Disfigured*, Amanda writes of a time when she was walking to work, repeating to herself in time with her steps, “you *don’t* walk *like* everybody else” (203). She then recounts the pivotal moment in which her brain reconstructs this refrain: “*It’s not that you don’t walk like everybody else*, the little voice continued. [...] *It’s that no one else in the world walks like you*” (Leduc 204). In reading this, my own brain began to rebuild my identity, reclaiming the ways I move through the world both metaphorically and physically. I was never meant to fit in, to hide away and never speak about my experiences. Being different was never a bad thing.

Recently, I came across a journal that my mom had given me when I graduated high school, that she had been writing in since I was two years old. A sentence stood out to me: “Jumping with both feet has become second nature to you.” My mom was talking about jumping in a physical sense, but the words could be taken metaphorically as well. At 24, I am finally able to jump into life with both feet—with all aspects of my identity and take up space the way that I

was always meant to. It is because of community that I can learn to love the parts of myself that had previously been hidden away and use my differences as a tool to open others' minds. I want to make it easier for younger disabled people who may be feeling the same way that I did in childhood and help them realize that they have strength in their differences; they can take on life without fear.

References

Leduc, Amanda. *Disfigured: On Fairy Tales, Disability, and Making Space*. Coach House Books, 2020.

“What is Cerebral Palsy?” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2 September 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/cp/facts.html>.