

## Transitioning to Acceptance

By Judy Squires

I sat legless on the floor of my minivan peering out at the smiling Jiffy Lube employee as she offered to help me load my wheelchair.

“My Grandma is missing a leg because of diabetes,” she said.

“Does she wear an artificial limb?” I asked.

“At eighty two, she’s kind of hard headed. She has a leg but it’s standing in her closet,” the girl looked disappointed.

“Don’t be hard on your grandma. I expect she’s given walking her best try. Please go home and give her a hug and tell her ‘good job, I’m proud of you.’”

As I drove out of the parking lot, my compassionate words washed over my own feelings of self-condemnation as I pictured my bilateral prostheses standing unused in my closet. Why did I switch to a wheelchair after fifty years of walking on seven different sets of artificial limbs? Why the guilt associated with the switch?

My life with artificial limbs began at age ten when the Shriners Hospital amputated my deformed feet secondary to proximal femoral focal deficiency (PFFD). I credit my mastery of walking to my determined dad who rose with the sun to put me in my heavy willow wood legs. That doesn’t mean I kept them on after he went to work, especially when the thermometer hit 100 degrees in Chicago in the fifties.

Fortunately, necessity provided the impetus for me to wear future sets. My job as a counsellor at the Kiwanis Camp for Crippled Children in the sixties worked best if I was on my feet. As a coed on the sprawling University of Illinois campus in Champaign/Urbana in the seventies, I wore my limbs for cosmetic reasons while navigating in a wheelchair. As a graduate student my legs and I climbed three flights of stairs at the old Speech Clinic where I trained to become a speech pathologist. I walked down the aisle on my wedding day and did career and motherhood wearing them fulltime, except to sleep, swim or deliver babies.

I’d cruise for about ten years, but hit the wall each time I needed a new set of prostheses. Invariably I’d say to my prosthetist: “I hate change. Can you duplicate what I had? No new technology for me.”

But something happened during my preliminary appointment for my fifth set and I surprised myself when I signed on the dotted line as the prosthetist described possible sockets, feet, and knees that were too good to be true. I’m sad to say I never was able to get those legs to walk. It was a mismatch from day one. I felt like I was walking on a mattress. I fell backwards with no warning. But it took two frustrating years to call it quits and to start all over again. By that time I’d lost my confidence in walking plus gained weight during menopause and concluded using a



wheelchair with no limbs was what worked best.

I credit my hero, prosthetist Bill Coles at Hanger Prosthetics in San Francisco, with finally resolving my problems and creating a set of artificial limbs that work. But the sad news is I wear them minimally travelling through life, preferring the safety and speed of my manual wheelchair. Could it be what works at sixty is different than what worked at sixteen?

What do I need to do to come to peace with my limblessness? Step by step I am transitioning into my change of lifestyle. I know intellectually that artificial limbs are a tool, like a wheelchair or walker, tools that I have the right to use or not use. Yet how I perceive myself is deeply enmeshed with legs or no legs.

The fact is life's a journey. Change comes, and with change comes challenging transitions. Who we are and finding peace with who we are is a balancing act between our mind and emotions.

I believe each one of us is uniquely made with intrinsic worth. My value is not limb related, which I tend to forget. I'll remind you if you remind me to give ourselves the gift of grace. Let's not be hard on ourselves. Rather, let's give walking our best try and if it doesn't work, give ourselves a hug and say, "Good job. I'm proud of you."

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