

SINK OR SWIM – A JOURNEY OF ACCEPTANCE

By Heather Burns

If you've spent time in the ocean before, have you ever found yourself struggling to escape the big waves that can pull you under the water before they crash against the shoreline? You're moving away from those waves as fast as you can even though it's inevitable that they'll catch up to you. How can they not? They are an inseparable part of the ocean – something we simply accept as we wade deeper into the blue water. In my own life, these waves represent disability.

When I was growing up, I spent so much time trying to separate myself from having Cerebral Palsy. I rarely talked about it. I'm 29 years old now and I'm still working through my internalized ableism. I expect it to be a lifelong journey because of how deeply it ran through my veins as a teenager. I was in constant conflict with my mind – a mind that found it hard to accept the truth because of how disability is viewed in the world. Would people treat me differently? Or would I be my biggest enemy? Over the years, that discomfort and shame turned into growth and acceptance. The wave eventually caught up to me and I had no choice but to stand tall and face it.

Growing up felt a lot like wading out into the ocean. It was exciting at first, looking out at a beautiful horizon and imagining endless possibilities. Then as you grow older, you move deeper into the water, and come to a point where your feet no longer touch the bottom. Hesitation and uncertainty start to creep in. Do you turn around and head back to shore? Or do you push yourself to go a little bit further?

As a child, I felt pretty secure in who I was. I didn't really pay attention to the fact that I limped, and the people around me didn't. All I cared about was spending time with my friends and feeding my Neopets. I went to physiotherapy, I wore my AFOs, and I did my stretches (okay, *sometimes* I did my stretches – I didn't enjoy them too much). Insecurity had not yet planted its roots into my mind and the waves didn't quite pull me under.

At 12 years old, I had surgery and people started to ask questions. At 14 years old, I remember a classmate gasping at the noticeable size difference between my right and left calves. People would stare at the way that I walked and would ask, "What's wrong with your leg? Why can't you walk normally?" These questions came up more frequently and I found that the carefree attitude I had as a child slowly started to slip away. People would make comments and at the end of the day, I felt shameful, as though I brought those comments on myself, instead of seeing them as a direct result of a world filled with ableism and stigma. I got so caught up in other people's opinions that I internalized everything that was said to me.

I told myself I couldn't do X, Y and Z because of Cerebral Palsy. I never talked about my insecurities, and the few times that I did, people would say, "Well, it's not that noticeable, there's no reason for you to be upset." While these comments were well-intentioned, my feelings were invalidated. Am I not allowed to talk about it because my diagnosis is considered mild? Does that mean I can't feel frustrated? Does that somehow make me less qualified? Am I seen as less disabled?

It was hard to find my place and feel like I belonged. All I wanted to do was blend into the background and not be seen because I didn't believe that I deserved to take up space. I felt lost, like I was in the middle of the ocean without a shoreline in sight, and no compass to guide me back home – to the childlike sense of wonder I once had as a kid.

I often wonder how I might've viewed myself differently if I saw disability representation in the media. Representation that is relatable. Representation that doesn't perpetuate negative stereotypes. Would I have felt the same shame or would I have felt proud? Would I still be running from the inevitable crash of the wave or would I have embraced it? I can't say for sure, but I know I would've felt less alone. It wasn't until university that I started being more open about having Cerebral Palsy. Talking about disability felt cathartic – it was years of suppressed emotions coming to the surface, ready to be released. The wave had caught up to me and I was finally in a place where I wanted to face it.

I wish I could say there was a big epiphany for me, an aha moment that made everything click into place. Accepting that having Cerebral Palsy as an inherent part of my identity happened slowly and over time people's opinions and judgments became less important. It felt easier to quiet the voices in my head that told me I wasn't good enough. While I never agreed with the harmful stereotypes surrounding disability, my own deeply-rooted insecurities and internalized ableism made it hard to see having Cerebral Palsy as something I should feel good about because of the judgment that came with it. How could I look past the stares as I walked down the hallway at school? How could I pretend that people asking why I can't just walk "normally" (whatever that means) didn't bother me? I can't say that these things don't bother me now, but they don't hold as much weight as they used to.

I'm still working through the internalized ableism that found its way into my mind as a teenager and replacing those thoughts with better ones will continue to be a lifelong journey. I'm at peace with my disability now. I still get frustrated sometimes, but shame no longer greets me like an old friend. Ableism continues to run rampant in the world, but I feel better equipped to handle it. If I could tell my younger self anything it would be this:

When you are overwhelmed with insecurity and doubt, keep going. You'll find your way. The waves will come – you can't stop that – but as time goes on, they won't feel as daunting. Just like the ocean, there will be ebb and flow, chaos and calm. But this time I choose to set my sights on the horizon – a place where I am reminded of my younger self and all of the excitement and possibility that existed within her.