

From the Field

Disability Studies Quarterly
Winter 2002, Volume 22, No. 1
pages 74-76 <www.cds.hawaii.edu>
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What's a Leg Got to Do with It?
Donna R. Walton

Exactly what I thought when, during a heated conversation, a female rival told me I was less than a woman because I have one leg. Excuse me, perhaps I missed something? How could she make such an insensitive comment about something she had no experience with?

Was she some expert on disabilities or something? Was she, too, disabled? Had she - like me - fought a battle with cancer that cost her a limb? For a split second, my thoughts were paralyzed by her insensitivity. But, like a defeated fighter who returns to the ring to regain victory, I bounced back for a verbal round with Ms. Thing.

I am a woman first, an amputee second and a person with a disability last. And it is in that order that I set out to educate and testify to people like Ms. Thing who are unable to discern who I am - a feisty, unequivocally attractive African-American woman with a gimpy gait who can strut proudly into any room and engage in intelligent conversation with folks anxious to feed off my sincere aura.

It is rather comical and equally disturbing how folks - both men and women - view me as a disabled woman, particularly when it comes to sexuality. They have so many misconceptions. Women, for example, want to know how I can catch a man, while men are entertained with the idea that because I have one leg, sex with me must be a blast.

I have been confronted by folks who give me the impression that they think having sex is a painful experience for me. Again, I say, "What's a leg got to do with it?" For all those who want to inquire about my sexual prowess but dare not to, or for those who are curious about how I maintain such positive self-esteem when life dealt me the proverbial bad hand, this story is for you. But those who have a tough time dealing with reality probably should skip the next paragraph because what I am about to confess is the gospel truth.

I like sex! I am very sexual! And I even consider myself sexy, residual limb and all. You see, I was a sexual being before

my left leg was amputated over 20 years ago. My attitude didn't change about sex. I just had to adjust to the attitudes of others. For example, I remember a brother who I dated in high school - before my leg was amputated - then dated again five years later. The dating ended abruptly because I realized that the brother could not fathom the one-leg thing. When he and I were home alone, he was cool as long as we got hot and bothered with my prosthesis on. However, whenever I made a move to take off my prosthetic leg for comfort purposes, the brother immediately panicked. He could not handle seeing me with one leg. I tried to put him at ease by telling him a story like Eva's from Toni Morrison's novel "Sula" - that my leg just got tired and walked off one day. But this brother just could not deal. He booked!

I was 18 years old when my leg was amputated. I was diagnosed with osteogenic sarcoma, a bone cancer. During the first five years after my surgery, concentrating on other folks' perceptions of me was the least of my concerns. I was too focused on beating the odds against dying. You see, I was given only a 15 percent chance of survival because - with spiritual guidance and support from my family- I had the very difficult decision to stop taking chemotherapy treatments. Doctors predicted that, by halting the dreadful chemotherapy, I was writing my own death certificate. However, through what I believe was divine healing, my cancer was eradicated.

Before this cancerous ordeal, I was not strong spiritually, and my faith was rocked when my leg was amputated because I thought I was to keep my leg. At the time I could not see past the physical. After my amputation, I was preoccupied with the kinds of crippling thoughts that all the Ms. Things of the world are socialized to believe: that I would not have a shapely leg for men to admire; that I was not going to be able to wear shorts, bathing suits or lingerie; that my womanness was somehow compromised by the loss of a limb.

I could not see the big picture until three years after my surgery: God's plan was for me to lose a diseased leg to gain a healthier body, mind and spirit.

If you have a disability and are in need of some fuel for your spirit, check out any novel Toni Morrison ("Sula" is my favorite because of the one legged grandmother, Eva) or Kahil Gibran's "The Prophet." These resources helped me build my self-esteem and deal with my reality.

Ultimately, building positive esteem is an ongoing process and I believe that if the pioneering sisters from the National Association of Colored Women's Club were around today, they would be proud to know that I plan to carry out their motto by "lifting as I climb." To that end, I am currently producing a motivational video that will outline coping strategies for female amputees (For more information write 1900 Columbia Pike Suite 307 Arlington, VA 22204). In the film "Scent of a Woman," Al Pacino's character says, "There is no prosthesis for an amputated spirit.

Yes there is! No matter what your disability or

circumstance, you cannot give in to a defeatist attitude. When you do, your battle is lost. There is a way of fighting back. It is called self-esteem. Believe in yourself, and you will survive - and thrive!

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