

I believe I am not my body.

Every day, we see images of perfect bodies we can never have, and we become convinced our bodies are who we are. Passing through puberty, into adulthood and now into middle-age, I've wasted a lot of time lamenting the size of my hips, the gray in my hair, and the lines in my face. Finally, as I approach my 50s, I believe my parents were right all along: I am not my body.

I was born in 1959, at the tail end of the baby boom. Unfortunately I arrived without all my body parts fully intact. My left arm is a short stub with a small hand and three fingers, reminiscent of a thalidomide defect. To my good fortune, I had superb parents. They were fighters who struck "I can't" from my vocabulary, and replaced it with "I will find a way." They believed the development of the mind, heart and soul determine who you are and who you will become. My body was not to be used as an excuse; instead it was a catalyst.

My body was not neglected, though. It endured surgery; it was dragged to physical therapy, then to swimming, and finally to yoga. But it was not the focus of my life. I was taught to respect my body, but to remember that it was only a vehicle that carried the important things: my brain and soul. Moreover, I was taught that bodies come in all shapes, colors and sizes, and that everyone was struggling in some way with their physical inadequacies. Infomercials have convinced me this must be true, although through adolescence I found it difficult to believe the cheerleading squad had any self-doubts.

In my alternately formed body, I have learned lessons about patience, determination, frustration and success. This body can't play the piano or climb rock walls, but it taught all the neighborhood kids to eat with their feet, a skill it learned in the children's hospital. Eventually it learned to tie shoes, crossed a stage to pick up a college diploma, backpacked through Europe and changed my baby's diapers.

Some people think I am my body and treat me with prejudice or pity. Some are just curious. It took years, but I have learned to ignore the stares and just smile back. My body has taught me to respect my fellow humans — even the thin, able-bodied, beautiful ones.

I am my words, my ideas and my actions. I am filled with love, humor, ambition and intelligence. This I believe: I am your fellow human being and, like you, I am so much more than a body.

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