

... about the Woman Smiling Back

It is July 1983. I live in Waltham, Massachusetts, and teach history at a private high school nearby.

One night, I wake up and start walking toward the bathroom. I feel intense tingling sensations in my feet as I totter out of the bedroom. I worry that this is another flare-up of multiple sclerosis, the illness that has startled me for the last two years. Or am I just groggy and out-of-it because it's 3:00 a.m.?

I wobble back to bed but have trouble falling asleep. What is going on inside me? I obsess about my body—I want to control it—and finally cry myself to sleep.

The next morning, my fears are confirmed. When I try to get out of bed, I cannot feel my feet on the floor at all. I don't know where my body is in space. Close to 9:00 a.m., I call my neurologist and make an appointment. She sees me that afternoon and confirms that this is an MS flare-up. I have lost my balance.

That night, I cry myself to sleep again. I am terrified. Friends have



brought me dinner and helped me to laugh, but still, when they leave, I am alone, in a body estranged.

The next day, I start to compensate. I hold on to furniture in my apartment, the first floor of a two-story house. I call the National MS Society. Three hours later, Debra, the support services director, comes over to loan me a walker. It will help me balance and get around, if I'm willing to use it.



Debra's visit and generosity warm me. As she leaves, I finally notice that outside my door, the sky is a cloudless blue. I want to get out of my house and not let my body imprison me. I step onto the porch and gingerly go down the seven stairs, grabbing the porch railing with

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one hand and dragging my walker with the other as it bumps down the steps. When I had looked for an apartment the previous year, it hadn't occurred to me that I wouldn't be able to navigate stairs.

I stand in my driveway and face the road with my walker in front of me. I discover that I am trembling. It is my self-image—not trust in my physical ability—that is shaken. I fear what others will think of me. What do I look like, holding on to this walker for balance?

Twenty-seven years old, I'm supposed to be in fine health. Aren't people who use walkers elderly? I am dismayed to recognize my assumptions and prejudices. Young teens walk by my driveway and gaze at me—or is it through me? Do they see me or the freak I believe I am? They laugh as they easily walk on.

An older couple walks by and also stares, but then they nod and smile, acknowledging my presence. Later, it

occurs to me that they might understand, because they also know human frailty. They are not as afraid as I imagine the teenagers are, or as I am.

Slowly, I walk down my driveway to the road. Balance! If I ever get it back, I will cherish it. I reach the sidewalk and take a left, aiming to go around the block. Slowly, I am getting the hang of this walking.

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I see my reflection in a store window and stop suddenly. I am outside myself, looking in. Seeing myself so starkly, needing the walker, I feel pity. I don't want to see this vulnerability.

That day, I begin a course of prednisone. This is my third flare-up in five months. My loss of balance has uprooted my identity, the person who I believe I am.

I call my brother in New York. I cry and ask him what I did to bring on this flare-up. I have turned my fear and anger at this illness against myself and into self-blame. Adam reminds me that the illness is not my fault. He helps me to test my reality and to reconnect with some vital part of me. I am reminded that relationships sustain me.

The next week, my balance begins to return in more ways than one. I can move around my apartment with greater ease, although I still use the walker when I venture outdoors. I also start to let go of judgments about myself and my body. I talk and cry about my losses and fears. I begin to admire the cane that a carpenter friend has made me. Over and over again, I'm learning what I can control and what I can't.

I've begun to grieve. Running away from my grief that summer day with the walker estranged me from myself. I was fighting the MS, not learning new ways to respond to the illness. In my attempt to reject my own negative self-judgments, I imagined that others had those biases. I have to let go of my own and society's prejudice in order to accept myself with MS.

The next year, I decide to attend social-work school. I want to help others deal with the loss and vulnerability that encompass life. Social-work school and psychotherapy help me to understand myself.

Twenty years later, I tell the story of how my prejudices dared to challenge my self-image. Now, when I walk past a store window with my cane, the woman smiling back understands. I am no longer outside myself—she is me. ■

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