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Tracy Akers

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As I Walk By

By Tracy Akers
Photography by Kerry Akers
Mirrors have become funny to me, because every day that I walk by one, I see someone different. For some people maybe it’s not like that, but this is how I see the world. The world sees me, too, and not like it used to. My body is different now. It is not similar to those in books or magazines. It is different from the bodies that most others see in the mirror every day. I’m OK with that, but some people aren’t. It’s not really that they aren’t OK with it, it’s more so that they don’t understand it. Because they do not understand, things happen that I quite frankly wish I didn’t have to understand.

On March 10 of this year, I lost my leg to cancer. Now hairless and one-legged, my body tends to draw attention everywhere I go. I see horrified eyes. I see soft ones. I see surprised eyes. And sometimes I see eyes that could not care less as their foot hits my wheelchair.
I recently started to wonder what I want other people to see in me, and then I realized that that’s not what’s most important. What’s more important is asking myself what I’d like to see in me. Who is that girl in the reflection? For the past five months I’ve gotten to reinvent myself. Ever since I decided that I get to choose my own self-image rather than the world selecting for me, I have a healthy self-worth and higher self-esteem. I no longer watch eyes even though they watch me. I realize that it’s hard not to look with curious eyes. I am pretty curious, after all. There aren’t many students who look like me on campus. For those of you who are like me, who have some sort of permanent handicap, I’ve seen some of you. I encourage you to share your voice on this matter, because my voice isn’t the only one that matters.

Many of us find ourselves marginalized in some way. The world loves to marginalize. We love to point out differences and colors. We love to define cultures by the color of skins or if we categorize people by the number of limbs they have and the tools they use for physical mobilization. The U.S. often tries to ignore its problems, because I think we’re embarrassed of what actions we’ve committed against or the images we’ve projected onto Native Americans, African Americans, women, the LGBTQ community and so many others.

We project the images onto people and onto our country that we want to see, just like people do when they walk by me, and just like you do when you look into the mirror. Be careful of the images you pick and choose. If we are serious about changing the world, we must try not to judge unjustly. We must do our bests not to marginalize, and to find our authentic selves. We ought to love ourselves for who we are, and love others for who they are.

I return to campus in January for my final semester. It’s the semester I was supposed to finish last spring but didn’t get the chance to complete because of my medical situation. I wonder how different campus will seem, as well as its people, and even my classes and the work I produce. I wonder what image I’ll see in the mirror on my graduation day in May.

For now, all I know is that I will walk across the stage with my beautiful, mechanical leg.

Class of 2017—thank you for making me an honorary member. It’s a privilege to graduate with you.

-Tracy