

#TakeBackStaring: The Power of a Selfie

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I don't remember a time in my life when I could go out in public without being obviously stared at by strangers on the street, in the mall, or at the grocery store. I don't remember a time in my life when more than a week went by without somebody telling me I was inspired or brave or merely existing in public, or telling my parents what saints they were for dealing with a child like me. To this day, I have near-daily interactions with strangers who tell me I would be beautiful if not for my wheelchair or confide in me that they would rather die than be cursed with a life like mine.

Throughout my 26 years on this planet, I have learned that my mere presence makes many people profoundly uncomfortable. The unavoidable difference of my body and the strangeness of the way I move and take up space rarely goes unnoticed or unaddressed. Even in the most crowded of spaces, I'm seldom granted the comfortable anonymity of simply being a face, or a body, in the crowd. I'm not designed to blend in, and people seem to have the need to remind me of this fact every chance they get as if they're worried I will forget about the twitches of my muscles or the fact that I roll instead of walk.

For most of my life, I wanted nothing more than to be invisible. I craved the ability to move through the world unnoticed and unseen. The constant stares and unwelcome commentary made me want to disappear. My greatest wish was to be "normal." Quite literally, average, unremarkable, and indistinguishable from those around me. I hated my body for its quirks, and I felt betrayed by its stubborn refusal to conform to everyone else's standards.

I believed to the core of my existence that I was a problem that needed to be solved and that I was the one that needed to change. I spent years destroying my body from the inside out. Completely devastated that no matter how hard I tried I could never fit into the coveted box labeled "normal." For years, I kept playing this game, and I still sometimes fall into it, but I got lucky.

I found a community that helped me see the power being in exactly who I was. I found people who challenged me to believe I deserved to be loved and to love myself, for everything I am, and never in spite of it. I learned that the greatest gift I could be given was not learning to fit into somebody else's box, but learning to love existing outside of it.

I slowly have stopped wanting to fade away and disappear, and instead, have learned to demand the right to be seen on my own terms. I have stopped being ashamed of other people's discomfort with my existence. I've given up wanting to shrink into the background or blend into the crowd. I'm learning to take up space without apology, and tell my story, in my words, and on my own time.

Instead of fearing the gaze and stares of others, I am learning to reclaim it. I am learning to proudly claim who I am, instead of trying to deny it. I know the power of owning the labels once used to make you uncomfortable in your own skin. I now laugh and call myself things like a fat crippled chick, because that's who I am, and there's nothing inherently wrong or bad about that.

I take selfies every day and post them for the whole world to see because I have learned there is no

power in trying to pretend you don't exist. I have turned the stares that once haunted me and made me wish I could be anyone else back on themselves. I no longer will people to look away. Instead, I invite them to go ahead and stare, but this time I get to tell the story.

Selfies have given me the power to re-write the narrative of how I am seen. When I take a selfie, I am no longer somebody else's passive subject to define. Selfies have the power to turn the gaze sharply away from assumptions, fantasies, or comfortable stereotypes, and interrupt the status quo by allowing somebody else to see you through your own eyes, instead of society's lens. They take back the power of staring because they proclaim that I am unashamed of who I am. They declare I have no reason to hide or feel uncomfortable for existing exactly as I am.

Selfies have given me the power to claim my space in a world that is still uncomfortable with my existence. Selfies show me as I am, and proclaim the beauty of everything I once rejected. Selfies remind me that even though I may never meet arbitrary standards of normalcy or beauty, I am valid, I am real, and I am enough. They remind me that claiming who you are, in spite a world that often screams at you to reject it is not only freeing and beautiful, it is powerful. Selfie are a reminder that I am here, in my body, exactly as I am. They are a statement that even on the roughest of days when I'm struggling to exist in my own skin, I will not apologize for who I am, and I will not give in and fade away.

Selfies are beautiful. They defy convention in an ultimate way. Selfies don't request or require the permission or approval of anyone besides their subject. They are resistance in the quietest but strongest of ways.

There is beauty in all of the things that make us different, and there is something amazingly beautiful and rebellious about embracing who you are. The greatest act of resistance is demanding to be seen when the world wants you to disappear.

Be seen. Share your selfies on [Facebook \[http://www.facebook.com/claimingcripblog\]](http://www.facebook.com/claimingcripblog) , [\[https://www.blogger.com/null\]](https://www.blogger.com/null) [Instagram \[http://www.instagram.com/KHitselberger\]](http://www.instagram.com/KHitselberger) , or [Twitter \[http://www.twitter.com/Karionwheels\]](http://www.twitter.com/Karionwheels) using [#FlipTheLens \[https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/flipthelens/?hl=en\]](https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/flipthelens/?hl=en) and [#TakeBackStaring \[https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/takebackstaring/?hl=en\]](https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/takebackstaring/?hl=en)