



Embracing Fitting *Out*

When You Never Really Fit *In*



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Thank you.



*LEGLSS WITH TOO MANY
PAIRS OF SHOES*



It hit me the summer that my face went funny. I was cattywompus and lopsided enough inside, but in June 1995 I was stricken with the worst case of Bell's Palsy that three doctors had ever seen. I spent a year seeing doctors and healers of every type and had every kind of medical and alternative treatment offered including acupuncture three times a week. Over that year I did improve from the early days when I felt like *The Phantom of the Opera* and could not look at my face without crying, to one year later when I gazed at the face I had previously known to be mine and the woman who stared back only smiled on one side.

The left side of my face was still paralyzed, and though better my eye drooped and the left corner of my mouth was still

slightly turned down. Eighteen years later I don't so much droop as smile on one side only, and my eye is not really noticeable unless, I'm told, I am sad or very tired. I am now as lopsided and cattywompus on the outside as I always was on the inside. I think, perhaps, what tipped the scales for me was the realization that I could not hide anymore. Now everyone could see, would know, that I didn't fit in with all the *normal* people, in fact, never did.

That summer, the summer of 1995, in terrible pain for the first three months from not only the Bell's but another syndrome that caused tremendous pain causing me to have my face packed in ice a lot of the time, I was determined to survive the ordeal in the only way I knew. I would create something beautiful to balance what felt like the opposite of all of the pain I held both inside and out. I sat crying and prayed for some kind of sign of what I should do.

Prior to the day that Bell's struck I had ordered a beautiful blue hibiscus, *Hibiscus syriacus* 'Bluebird.' It is an extraordinary woody perennial that grows into tree form with very large sky

blue flowers that have magenta at the throat. The picture in the catalog looked lovely and it had come and been planted just weeks before. After the first few days when I was shuttled back and forth to doctors only to come home and take pain medication and sleep with ice packs on my face I came to realize that if I were to have any semblance of a life I couldn't live on pain medication and would have to work as best I could, for the most part in bed. I gazed out the window one morning and was startled to see the first flower open on the tiny bush that seemed far too little to support such a bloom. I went outside in my nightgown and stood staring at the little bush with a sky blue blossom bigger than my hand. I said, "*Hello Miss Blue,*" and a small press was born.



I came back inside, dumped the pain medication in the toilet and flushed it, and would spend the rest of the summer using anti-inflammatory medication only, with ice, and I wrote like mad. I created *The Blue Hibiscus Press* and a quarterly publication called *The Contemplative Way - Slowing Down In A Modern World*. Those were the days before I even knew what the internet was, no e-mail, or websites, or blogs. I had a little laptop with a black and white screen only and I would type the columns, print them out, and cut and paste the text with Victorian artwork and hundreds of quotes in each issue. It became a 100 page quarterly publication, a small press success, and was beloved by hundreds of people. But it was in the first issue that I wrote an article that would foreshadow what my life and work would be for the rest of my life. It was called *Legless With Too Many Pairs Of Shoes*.



I sat down to write the article one day after yet another difficult time with a close family member who would constantly chastise, ridicule, and berate me for not being what she thought I should, in her estimation of the way a woman/wife/mother should live and be in the world, be. I buried my crooked face in the pillow and cried and cried and then I sat up, wiped my tears away, and started to write. I was odd, yes, when it came right down to it. A survivor of long-term sexual abuse, having been hospitalized more than once for nervous breakdowns, fragile, clinically depressed, and more, it was very hard for me to interact with the

world the way everyone else seemed to, and the more time passed the more difficult things got for me. I would be in my 50's before I would be diagnosed as bi polar with a severe anxiety disorder, PTSD, clinical depression, and borderline agoraphobia. I don't like to hang my hat on labels but it felt like a relief to finally understand the complex web of conditions that made my life so difficult to navigate. Today I live a life of solitude where I can do my work in peace and offer the best of myself, my gifts and talents, my writing and art, through this wonderful medium that has made it possible for me to interact with the world in a way that feels safe. The internet is one of the greatest blessings in my life.

Legless, with too many pairs of shoes. On that day, as I sat up and dried my tears and picked up my pen to write an image came to me that was so powerful I couldn't write fast enough. I finally had a way to understand, and to explain, what I had felt all my life but never been able to describe.

I saw, in my mind's eye, a woman sitting in a wheelchair with no legs. Everyone around her seemed to think that if they could just bring her the right pair of shoes she would get up and walk, would be the way they wanted her to be, would run and play and be social and go all the places and do all the things they felt she should be doing. If they only brought her the right pair of shoes she would stop being the cripple in the wheelchair that they neither understood or liked and were even, at times, embarrassed by. The woman in the chair sat with tears running down her cheeks as she watched person after person come up and sit yet another pair of shoes on the pile. Could no one see that she had no legs? No pair of shoes in the world were ever going to make her walk. What would it take for them to see the truth?

Something happened to me that summer. The Bell's Palsy was and is one of the most difficult things I have had to deal with in my life because it radically changed the way I looked. I had once been pretty, had modeled, acted, and before the breakdowns and accumulation of too much held in for too long until the dam broke, been fairly social. This, of course, made things more

confusing for people around me so that they became more insistent that I could and should change, there was no reason I could not, they insisted, which only frightened me and caused me to draw back even further within myself. When the curtain of Bell's Palsy dropped wiping away the self I had known everything in my life changed. For me, already extremely fragile and increasingly so, a mother of 3 children, I had gained weight over the years and my last vestige of confidence in myself had been the face that others deemed pretty (The "*You know, she has such a pretty face, if she'd just lose the weight...*" kind of face.), and most especially everyone always remarked about what a beautiful smile they thought I had. Now the last bit of self-confidence I had was gone. The face was no longer the face that everyone thought pretty, and the smile that they loved was gone forever. I looked in the mirror and saw a freakish face. I felt like my inside and outside matched.

Yes, the Bell's was a turning point, and it was hard because it was truly the straw that broke the camel's back. I had two choices. I could accept who I was, lopsided, cattywompus, and all,

and I could begin the long road to try to unravel the mystery of who I was, and try to find a way that I might be able to survive and even thrive in the world, or I could opt out entirely. The latter was not a choice I would accept. With children that I loved dearly I would not take my life and leave them with a gaping wound in their heart that would be the terrible burden they would have to forever shoulder, I would shoulder the burden of unraveling a life in which I never fit in and spent most of my days depressed, afraid and alienated, and I would find a way that I could live in the world, not only for myself, but for others.

How many are there, I wondered, that are sitting there with a pile of shoes in front of them, unable to walk no matter how hard people try, only to feel worse and worse about themselves leading them to feel ostracized and even, in the worst case scenario, see suicide as the only way out? These are the extremes. Most people are, well, not even in the middle, most people experience this in varying ways in their lives, a touch here, a touch there, perhaps a longer stretch somewhere along the line. Most people will be living lives that for all intents and purposes to the

outside world look normal, but they may carry a wound inside them, or have a physical disability, or limitation of some sort, or just a different way of being in the world than is easily understood by others. In any or all of these cases people can feel anywhere from mildly to seriously depressed, and, until they are able to accept and love themselves for all of who they are, they will never live a whole and complete life.

I use the words whole and complete meaning that to the individual it is whole and complete. Others might not believe that it could be so, but I can tell you that when you truly come to accept and love yourself for who you are and begin to build the life that brings you peace, that gives you joy, you will have found the foundation for a life that will exceed your heretofore wildest expectations. You can wake up, one day, and, unbelievably, find yourself happy, or happier than you'd ever dreamed you could be. The hard times will still come, as they do for every single person who walks the earth, but they will be bearable because you will have built a life that supports you in your uniqueness, you can celebrate the gifts and talents that you do have because they will

not be measured against the world's view of what you should be, and from there you will accomplish things that are bigger and wider and broader than the sky, and you will find yourself limitless. Legless and yet you need no shoes to fly.

This has been my journey. The discovery that, at the bottom, no matter what it was or is for me, or for you, or for anyone else, the only problem there ever has been is that we have been trying so hard to fit in, or others have been trying to make us fit in in the world in a way we thought we should, and out of guilt, and trying to please, and make others happy we continually tried and fell short causing the problems to build and our self-confidence and relationships with those around us erode further and further. To wit, the struggle is not about trying to fit *in*, the task at hand is to become comfortable with fitting *out* when you never really felt like you fit in. When you do you will be ready to embrace your full, beautiful self in a way that you will never be able to until you reach that point.

Fitting in and fitting out is different for each and every one of us and I don't think I'm mistaken in saying that most everyone feels it to some degree. My work, then, the work that I have committed my heart, mind, body, and soul to for the rest of my life, is to help others embrace fitting out. Wherever you fit in, marvelous! Those places in your life will feel a little easier and less challenging, but where you fit out, well, those are beautiful places too, and you can use what you find in those places to grow in ways you never would have. Had I not been given the gift, yes, the *gift* of Bell's Palsy, I would never have begun to heal on the inside. I am happier and more comfortable inside myself today than I ever dreamed I could or would be in my life. Today I can say, *"Thank you, but I don't need the shoes, I'm fine just as I am."*

There will be those who will disagree, some will try to change your mind, may berate you or say ugly or hurtful things. Your biggest task, and this is huge, is to so fully embrace who you are with confidence and love that you can stay calm and centered as you say, *"I really care about you and I don't want to hurt you but I am going to tell you now that you have the choice to accept*

me as I am and engage with me in a loving peaceful way, or know that I cannot have you in my life and be at peace inside myself, be okay, be able to live my life fully and gently. I can no longer have people in my life who do not accept me as I am. I wish you well, I wish you love and all the happiness in the world, but we will have to go our separate ways.” If saying this to someone feels impossibly hard, consider the alternative. Can you live with the way things are and pay the price? What will be the cost? It is your choice.

I have said this. I have said this in myriad ways to more people than I wish I had to, and it has been the deepest pain in my life when some of the people involved were close family members, a parent, or friends of a lifetime. It does not serve you or them to continually engage in a way that is damaging, that brings so much pain that the gifts you have to bring to the world will never see the light of day. These challenges must needs be met with all the love you can muster because if it does not come from a place of inner peace, and self-love, it will injure, and will be a wound that never heals. It is all about *maitri*.

In 2005, after my divorce, I went to the courthouse and legally changed my name to Maitri. *Maitri* is the Buddhist teaching of loving-kindness and compassion. The heart of that teaching is that we must first have it for ourselves before we have it to give to another. You cannot give from an empty well. I took the name as a reminder that I must work toward that self-love all the days of my life because it was only then that I would be able to truly have that compassion to give to another. My work in this lifetime is about spreading kindness and compassion. In so doing I will say no to everything that I know does not serve me or would hurt me in some way because only when I love myself enough to protect myself can I offer you, from a place of pure, unselfish love, all that I have to give. And I have a lot to give, but I must give it in the way that I am able to from where I am. This is the gift that I offer you.



Look in the mirror. Perhaps, for the first time, really look without judgment. Don't think fat/thin, wrinkled/smooth, don't look for seeming imperfections, know that what you are looking at, the woman or man looking back at you, is perfect in the eyes of God, is perfect just exactly as you are.

Touch your face softly. As you run your fingers over places that you have previously judged harshly, or that others did, or that made you feel less than, send love to those places. If it feels like an artificial gesture at first, that's okay, *act as if*, and keep doing it. Move from your face to your body. Not fat, or thin, short or tall, simply, "*This is my body, I love every part of my body.*" Like cradling a hurt or broken child in your arms love yourself fully, because unless and until you do anything that might be changed to ease your way in the world will not be changed. Those changes only come from a place of love and acceptance. That is more than half the battle. Love yourself, completely, and the changes that had seemed impossible will happen with such ease you will not believe it could be so.

You may have to do this for months, maybe even years. This work does not happen overnight, but I can guarantee you that every single day, if you practice maitri, you will see little changes happening. Maybe you breathe a little easier, maybe you feel a little lighter. It will be a few steps forward and a few steps back. But with help and love from others – and this is why you must try

to surround yourself with those that are loving and kind – and a daily practice of learning how to be loving with yourself, miracles will occur and a life will open up to you that you never, in your wildest dreams, could have imagined.

To that end in September of this year, 2013, I will open the online doors to *The Outsider Institute* centered here at Dragonfly Cottage. The cottage is not just my home but it will be an online community whose purpose is to be a loving haven where others can come to learn how to love themselves, can be supported in their efforts. We will celebrate living maitri and helping others do the same. We will celebrate Outsider Art, and what I call Outsider Gardening. We will embrace and celebrate all of the ways in which we fit *out*, and even those ways in which we fit in. We will celebrate all of who we are.

You are love, I am love, it is what we are made of, and if you are unwell in heart, mind, body, or soul, if you have suffered at the hands of others or yourself you have been hurt in your heart, the place where everything we do, everything we are, everything

that we create, or imagine, or dream is rooted. We are here to heal the heart, we are here to embrace and celebrate all of who we are.

I see you. I accept you. And in the end none of that matters. It starts with you. Look in the mirror. Softly, gently, touch your face. Feel love flowing from your heart center out the tips of your fingers, feel the warmth, the tingle, the energy as love meets the soft surface of your skin. Begin here. Do it now. *Act as if* if you must but act. Your life depends on it. *If not, why not? If not now, when?*

I send you my love from Dragonfly Cottage. You are safe here. You are in my prayers. I wish you well as you begin your journey. I have done it and I will actively do this practice every day of my life. We never fully arrive, but we get closer all the time. As we almost reach the shore it may seem eternally out of reach but there is so much grace in the trying. I accept that. I accept the grace. It is enough.



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