

Finalist, Non-Fiction

Abled

By Wendy Kennar

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I am a reluctant disabled woman.

Although, I would imagine that I am not unique in that way. I would speculate that most people approach disability with a mixture of reluctance, denial, and anger.

My grandmother was disabled. She couldn't drive herself, and my grandfather was always rightfully infuriated when he couldn't find an available handicapped parking spot near the entrance to the market. My grandparent's car had a blue placard granting them access to these specially reserved spots. And my grandmother needed it. Rheumatoid arthritis, breast cancer, and strokes made physical movement difficult. My grandmother usually had my grandfather push her in her wheelchair. When she did walk, it was slow and laborious, and reliant on her cane.

She was disabled, and she looked disabled.

Truthfully, for most of my life, that is how I have viewed disability.

And that's not me.

At one of my acupuncture treatment sessions, I was face-down on the table with fourteen needles in my back. Lying there, a series of words came to mind: *bias, lied, dead, bled, deal, leads*. They all happened to be words formed from the letters within the word "disabled."

And it is those words that are instrumental to me in explaining and describing what it means to be a disabled woman.

Because it took almost a year and a half of tests and appointments, specialists and scans, to receive a diagnosis, I never fully processed what that diagnosis meant now and what it would mean for my future. Up until I learned I had an autoimmune disease, I was faced with the fear that comes with the unknown, the possibilities -- it could have been multiple sclerosis, leukemia, cancer. Being told it was an autoimmune disease seemed like a gift. It was manageable and not potentially fatal. I wouldn't soon be *dead*, so anything else was a blessing and nothing I should complain about. Or so I thought.

I didn't *deal* with my medical diagnosis. I can remember telling a fellow teacher that "my condition" (because "disease" seemed like too serious a word) was like my asthma. It was just something I'd have to live with and learn how to manage. Whether that initial reaction was foolish or ignorant or naive, I'm not sure. In any event, I was wrong.

Days away from my thirty-seventh birthday, I retired from my twelve year teaching career. Officially, I was retiring due to a disability.

Except, I wasn't. On most days, I can drive myself. I can walk. I feared calling myself "disabled," because, generally, regarding someone as disabled unfortunately *leads to bias*.

Just as my definition of "disability" was influenced by my grandmother, my new adapted definition has me learning that there are degrees of disability, and that not all disabilities are apparent the first time you look at someone. While I sit and write, bystanders might think I appear fine. If they looked closely, they might see me squirm in my seat as I try to find a comfortable position for my leg. If they followed me home, they'd see the bottles of prescription medications lined up on my kitchen counter. If I rolled up my sleeve, they might see the bruise left from my most-recent blood-test. And if I pulled up my left pant leg, they might notice that my calf looks rather hard and tight. They might see the scar left from a muscle biopsy. They might see the trail of veins snaking around my legs.

By refusing to call myself disabled, I realized that I had *lied* to myself. I am unable to do certain things because of my disease -- and one of those things is continue teaching. Teaching is not a stress-free job. It is not an easy job. And it was never just a job for me, it was a passion. And for my passion, for my students, I gave it my all. I cried, I screamed, I *bled*. The problem is, my body needed healing, it needed rest, and I wasn't giving it any of those things while I was teaching. For as much as I loved my students, ("my kids" as I affectionately referred to them), I had my own own kid to think of. My husband and I have a fantastic six-year-old son, and I needed to be as healthy as I could for him and for our family.

Acknowledging that I am *disabled* has actually *enabled* me to do things I would otherwise be unable to do. I am a mom who can take my son to and from school each day. I can write daily and increasingly see my writing published.

I don't know where this path of disability *leads*. I don't know if my prognosis will worsen or change over time. But I do know that living with a chronic medical condition, living with a disability, means I'm not *dead*. Which means every day, I have much to be grateful for.

I'm still a reluctant disabled woman. Although I am incredibly thankful for the opportunity to be a stay-at-home mom. And I love writing every day, not just calling myself a "writer," but feeling like one too. But it comes at a price -- my health. All I can do is try to *deal* with life, day in and day out, with varying degrees of acceptance and frustration and emotions in between.