

The Punk Rock Choice By Madeleine Trees

Faced with a sudden and chronic diagnosis,
I floundered, but ultimately, I made the punk rock choice.
(This is not to say I made the *right* or *only* choice; rather,
I aligned myself with the choice that most empowered me,
and that is the right choice.)

A young person named Tai started it all, igniting what would become the cripplepunk movement.
My fellow Tumbrites joined in with
wheelchair handles adorned with spikes to ward off non-consensual pushers,
stickers of crutches with the words “I can’t stand you,”
and, above all,
a denouncement of able-bodied standards. No longer would we assimilate!
Participants made tutorials for drawing characters with wheelchairs and cochlear implants.
ASL was for every body who wanted to learn it.
Satirical how-to articles for interabled interactions were written.
We made our own norms. We were innovative bodies, constructing a new world, piece by piece.
We tapped into the veins of radical self-love, radical environmentalism,
radical art, radical *everything*,
bathed in the fiery, oft-misguided glow of youth. It was a good place to grow up,
though I was already in college. I was born into a new body, after all.

Twitter posts started popping up under the hashtag #AbleDsAreWeird.
Users provided witty accounts of
vigilante guardians of handicapped parking spaces,
unsolicited health advice,
and intrusive, misinformed anatomical questions.
The chatter on Tumblr roamed towards the idea that abled society
really needs more accommodation than we do, when you think about it.
They demand explanations. They need justification of our status.
They need us to be out of sight, or at least productive enough to make up for it. They need
some sort of proof that our existence is worthwhile, or at the very least
inspirational in a warm and fuzzy way.
And, most of all, the notion that we could be
proud, happy, content,
open, unashamed, and *empowered*
was uncomfortable and even offensive. Those of us who flaunted our cripplepunk pride
were accused of co-opting disability status for clout, for faking, for being downright obscene!
(As if the odd malingerer here and there
could singularly eclipse the good imparted to the rest of us.)
Somewhere, in the midst of all of this, I started to love myself.

If I told my younger self that I would be here today—
that I would be
happy, thriving, loved,

beautiful, well-traveled, and curious—
she would hang her head in sorrow. She would not believe me.
Sure, I don't love the pain. I don't love the stares in public.
I don't love being a target for snake oil salespeople. I don't love the bad days.
I don't love being tokenized,
talked down to, ignored,
pitied, treated like a model cripple,
treated like a pawn in intellectual debates,
or judged for making decisions that benefit my body.

But none of that is *me*.

I am in a body that is complicated. It hurts when it shouldn't.
It stiffens at random. My nervous system throws tantrums at the slightest upset.
It takes a lot of maintenance. It takes a lot of meds.
It has demands that I can't always interpret. Its mind is atypical.
It tires easily. It remains largely a mystery to doctors.

And you know what else?

It is *beautiful*. It is a story that nobody else can tell. Even I don't know the ending!
It makes itself known every day, to me and to others.
This body is *loud* about its limits. It forces me to slow down.
Its shape and its movements defy the expected, and that fact alone moves mountains.
It is a vessel that houses a soul, and no matter what, that is powerful.

And it doesn't take bravery. I am not an inspiration.

I am inheriting the rights of every living being:

to love and to be loved; to be secure;
to pursue the things that give me joy; to be curious;
to be free; to access connection with the wider world.

I was made a newborn at eighteen, tumbling into awareness of corporeality,
thrust into a world uncomfortably bright, with undecipherable sounds and
unfamiliar creatures.

The infant who progresses through the stages of development is not brave.

Infants simply grow, and produce thought, and have experiences.

I am not a hero bravely facing tragedy; I am an organism who has naturally blossomed,
grown aware of its surroundings, become stronger, and maintained homeostasis.

Yet, I am empowered – but that does not necessitate bravery
or a goodness of character that surpasses most others.

There is power in the processes of nature, which has driven on for thousands of years
unaided by the intellect of man. There is power in community.

There is power in simple contentment. There is power in me.

Scholars have written at length about the alien notion that disabled bodies
can be seen as anything *but* a tragic outcome.

Their existence borders on the monstrous. They are extraordinary, sublime.

They force us to think of new definitions for words like

human, productive, successful,
ability, beauty, intelligence,
communication, participation, and connection.

They are an immediate shock to the senses. They defy all definition.

They are uncomfortable and scary. All new things are and should be.
They challenge, at every step, their inhabitants and those around them,
and we would all do well to seek out challenges like this.

Some part of me will always live with the cripplepunk crowd. In practice,
it's the juvenile stage of a population that grows into
scholars who are defiantly disabled,
activists that make real changes,
and, crucially, people living lives in loved bodies
who are happy and at peace, whatever that looks like for them. I have seen
my fellow cripplepunks grow up into
doctors, teachers, parents,
academics, independent artists, musicians,
fiction writers, nonprofit founders, and more.

And while, in my professional life, I cite the sources more academically recognized—
monographs, articles, journals, and the like—
at night, my heart returns to roost in hashtags laden with punchy slogans,
fiery defiance, passionate validation,
and a view of what I can confidently call the future of *all* of us.

Tai lived a vibrant and brief life. Before I became myself, the world lost Tai,
but 21 years was plenty of time to leave a beautiful legacy.
I never had the chance to become their friend, but I am proud to say that they,
and those that they empowered, raised me.
I sought out to write a love letter to my youth
and to the internet and to Tai
but I find that, in the constant story of my own body,
that love letter is written every day. There is no way to write
what is still being written. Tai's life was a love letter to
creativity, love for one's fellow humans,
radical empowerment, art, and the absurd humor of it all
and this letter, too, is still being read and written
in the lives Tai's light continues to touch. Most times I think that I want my legacy to be
like that of the scholars that I look up to, cited across disciplines,
changing the institution, making their way. But truly,
I think my deepest desire is to be like Tai. I am now older than they ever lived to be,
yet younger in so many other ways.
In pursuit of a beginning, I leave, for now, this coda in my 22nd year of life
to the youth who, like my younger self, are staring down the barrel of a loaded body:
you will find your people. We are out here waiting just for you.
You *belong*. You will love and be loved.
You will be happy. We will be proud of you.
We will take care of you. You will take care of us.
You are, and always will be, powerful.
And as long as we all shall live, there will be
nothing about us
without us.