

To Finish or Not to Finish

(That Is the Question)



by Cindy Charlton

I was at my prosthetist's office the other day, having some work done on my myoelectric hand. He asked if another of his clients could join me in what I have named the "great room" at his shop. Chatty person that I am, I said I'd love the company.

The other client entered the room, and we immediately fell into easy conversation. I was surprised to see how wonderfully she walked when I realized that she, like me, was a bilateral below-knee amputee. I commented on her natural gait, and we began discussing issues amputees often experience at some point in life.

With the introductions and limb-loss stories under our belts, we moved on to chatting about our prostheses. She asked me if I was having work done on my legs. "No, today I'm here for the hand," I said with a smile. "One body part at a time."

With a big sigh, she nodded her head and replied, "Yeah, I know what you mean." She was eyeing my less-than-attractive legs (one socket is in the test socket mode, and the other is pretty old and very beat-up) and asked if I was ever going to have my legs finished.

I wasn't sure what she meant until she said, "You know, like mine." She showed me her legs, and I have to admit, the cosmetic coverings were beautiful. "No," I replied, "I kind of like the high-tech robotic look." She just shrugged as if to say, "To each her own."

I want people to know that I have survived, and I want them to think, “Wow! If she can survive and accomplish that, then maybe I can survive and overcome the obstacles in my life.” I want people to know that the human spirit is formidable, that any adversity and challenge is not too great to conquer.

When my appointment ended, I said my goodbyes, and headed off to my car. As I drove away, I began to replay the conversation I had just had with my new friend. I started to think about the reasons why I have never opted to have cosmeses.

When I was new to the amputee world, not having cosmeses was more of a practical matter than anything else. Every time any tweaking had to be done – and there was a lot of tweaking – the prosthetist would have had to tear into the covering to make adjustments. Consequently, I never had the coverings made. But I also realized in those first months that it wasn't important to me to have that “finished product.”

As I was driving, I was thinking about all the children I have been able to talk to about prostheses, or as my kids have named them, “robot parts.” Had I had cosmetic coverings, many of those children would never have known that I have prosthetic legs, and I would not have had the opportunity to talk with them about it. I tell people all the time that I am a veritable walking show-and-tell, and I relish in the opportunity to educate children and adults alike about limb loss and prosthetics. It's important to me to get the message across that people with disabilities are just the same as anyone else in this world. I often hear myself saying, “I'm just like

you, except I move a little slower.” For some reason the kids think that's funny – probably because they know I'd move slower whether I had “robot parts” or not.

But that wasn't the only reason – it was just the more obvious reason. So I pondered a little further: “Be honest,” I heard myself saying. I have known the deeper reason for baring it all, almost since I began walking the prosthetic path: Plain and simple, I want people to know that I wear prostheses. And, as much as I hate to admit it, it comes from a sense of pride, almost like being proud of some sort of accomplishment. As any lower-extremity amputee knows, there is a great deal of accomplishment and pride when you learn how to walk with a prosthetic leg. But even more than that, I want people to know that I have survived, and I want them to think, “Wow! If she can survive and accomplish that, then maybe I can survive and overcome the obstacles in my life.” I want people to know that the human spirit is formidable, that any adversity and challenge is not too great to conquer.

We are all made of the same stuff, I've come to realize. Some of us, though, have been fortunate enough to truly test our mettle. Amputees know intimately what they are made of, and most of the time we realize how lucky we are to be

here on the same planet with everyone else, even if we move a little slower.

I don't know if I'll ever choose to “finish” my legs. I guess I view them like I view the rest of my life – to be completed at a later date. ■

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