

TO WALK OR NOT TO WALK? – By Roxanne Ulanicki

Is that really the question? Or is it more about what we believe to be socially acceptable?

I have always wondered this as I grew up. Everyone around me seemed so intent on enabling me to walk. I watched them try, dozens of surgeries and another dozen leg braces. Personally, I just wanted to be a kid.

I lived up to everyone's expectations and tried my best to walk. It's easy to look back now and realize how hard I tried. I was an active child, always willing to try something new. I rode horses, drove snow mobiles, built forts, and the other things children do. As well, I saw a local physical therapist on a regular basis (at one time, 3 times a week), unfortunately, only to see my body continue to deteriorate. After years and years of trying to walk I found it hard not to look at medical establishment figures with resentment.

My entire childhood was about walking. As a teen, I felt lied to and afraid of the future because I knew walking was unrealistic. I took it so far as to stop walking completely once I left home at the age of seventeen to attend university. I felt more in control as medical advice rarely proved to be right in my experience.

I now regret that decision and wish I could have found the balance. I knew walking full time was unrealistic but I should have kept walking to some degree. Atrophy is a consequence I do not like. I realized now that if I had kept walking to some degree, I may have prevented some pain and agony now.

But what I do know is that a wheelchair helped me socially more than it hurt me. People are more able to accept me on wheels than they were on crutches and braces. Maybe it's because I feel more able on wheels and others can feel that.

Confidence is especially important for people with disabilities. We have so many barriers in front of us. We need to feel confident when we interact with others. It enables us to include ourselves in society. I know that my wheels gave me much needed confidence at a time when I needed it most.

On wheels, I am able to keep up with my family and friends and travel greater distances. I am also not constantly distracted with the potential of "falling over". I am solid on my wheels and much more protected from human traffic. I would rather have someone sitting in my lap than pushing me to the ground.

My best advice for young people with Spina Bifida would be: FIND THE BALANCE. Walking is important for long term health but wheelchair use may be more effective to achieve your goals. Try to do both!

Okay, just my free Canadian opinion. Best wishes for all of you out there struggling with finding the balance in your lives. I'm still struggling to find mine!