

THE ROSE BUD ~ A PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Carrie A. Newton, M.S.W., California State University, Long Beach

This narrative explores the author's experience as an individual born with an upper-limb anomaly. The narrative will explain how the experience of growing up feeling different led to the understanding and empathy the writer, as a student of social work, inherently feels for clients she works with.

"If your right hand is a rose, Carrie, your left hand is a rose bud." These words of my mother's hold great meaning to me now as a mature and confident adult. However, the journey to this meaning through a childhood full of insecurities was a long and rocky road.

When I was a freshman at the University of California, Irvine, I had a wonderful Resident Advisor who always planned activities for his residents in order for us to bond. During one activity in which we were asked to form a circle and join hands with our fellow residents, I realized my heart was pounding, my palms had become sweaty, and, knowing my own reactions to anxiety, it was likely my face was a dark shade of crimson. *I did not want to hold hands with anyone.* Whereas the common act of hand holding is something of an enjoyable experience in our culture, for me it was one of my most despised actions. I left the room that day, unable to join hands with the resident next to me and unable again at eighteen to face my own insecurities.

Growing Up Different

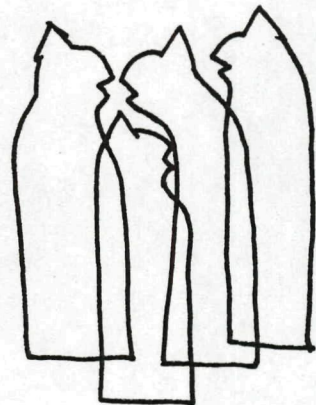
Since the time I began first grade at six years old, the act of holding someone's hand, whether it was my best friend or a stranger, haunted me. The physical reaction I experienced that day in college was something I had experienced my entire life. I was born with a left hand that is one-third the size of my right hand. My fingers consist of short stubs of skin accompanied by small bones. The doctors never really offered my parents a good explanation of why my hand developed this way. My mom has mentioned that they

referred to it as simply "an act of nature." To use the words of one of my fellow classmates in the sixth grade, my left hand resembled an "alien's hand," which is exactly how I saw it for the majority of my life until college. I never wanted to associate my left hand as being a part of me; it was an entirely separate entity.

I was raised with wonderfully supportive parents and siblings, who taught me that having a slight physical difference did not make me any less of a person. On the contrary, my parents always conveyed to me how special I was to be different from the masses. However, at that point in my life, being special did not supersede the fact that I was different. When you are young and struggling to become comfortable in your own shoes, different can be the only word that matters.

Elementary School Experiences

Going to a Catholic elementary school was intimidating enough for a six year old. The plaid uniforms, strict rules, and church services were all so new and overwhelming. My teachers stressed compassion and friendship, which I did understand, having come from a family that also taught these principles. Establishing friendships and treating others with compassion were actions that came easily and naturally for me. I loved developing close bonds with girls in my classes and giggling with them for hours. I was eager to start a new school year and meet new friends. As someone with two older brothers, I was anxious to develop friendships with females. I attended that school from kindergarten through the 3rd grade.



It was during one of the many church services we attended as a class in the 1st grade that I began to question the meaning of what we were being taught. Day after day we would discuss principles of compassion and friendship and were asked to find places for them in our own lives. During the service, there was always one portion when the priest would ask the students to grasp each other's hand as we prayed. From our seats in the wooden pews, no one would ever dare to question a priest's order, but rather follow his actions quickly and diligently. That day I clasped hands with my classmate to the right and then with the classmate on the left. *I thought nothing of the situation.* In fact, I enjoyed the chance to interact with my classmates. That day, the girl on my left was one of my friends, a girl whose company I had come to enjoy in the classroom. However, after about ten seconds, I could tell that she noticed something was different about my hand. I did not want to say anything, but when she began looking down at my hand and twisting our clasped hands to get a more thorough look, humiliation consumed me. Then after a long, arduous pause, as if she was deciding her next course of action, *she let go of my hand.*

That was the moment when I realized that I was different from my peers. It did not matter whether or not I was special, as my parents had taught me. I was different. I did not see anyone else who was not holding hands. My right hand was still firmly clasped by my classmate on the right. It was my left hand. That left hand was the problem. This girl was my friend, and she chose to let go of my hand.

Questions raced through my mind about what it meant to be a compassionate and friendly human being. Wasn't my friend taught the same things as I? Hadn't she learned that we should secure a place for compassion and friendship in our lives? Was she still my friend now that she noticed I was different? The question that came to plague my heart more

than any other was the question of whether or not everyone was like my friend. Would I ever be accepted?

Continuing to Struggle

Over the next few years of my life, in the 2nd and 3rd grades, I would continue to struggle with these questions, searching for answers yet usually succumbing to the influence of my own self-loathing. This was not to say that I was not a strong and outgoing girl. I made many friends, participated in school activities, and remained as close as ever to my family. I was a healthy and vibrant girl, adoring of friendships and full of compassion for others. What I was not was comfortable within my heart of who I truly was. My insecurities did not allow for me to acknowledge my difference. Rather, they drove me blindly towards self-doubt.

After that day in church, my spirit grew slightly darker than it had been that morning. An action by a six year old that to some would have seemed silly and insignificant to me was truly life altering. One simple action had made me ponder whether this was how I would be treated for the rest of my life. Three years of the same situation occurring with other classmates tainted my perception of acceptance. I began pulling my sweater sleeve down over my left hand so it would not be visible to anyone. My feeling was that it was better not to acknowledge my difference; that way I would not be singled out. During that first year, when we would have to hold hands in church, I would use my brilliant sweater trick and no one would seem to notice. I remember one boy asking me if my hands were cold which because my sweater was covering my hands. I thought, "Great!" Now I had a new excuse as to why I hid my hand.

Advocating for Myself

However, as my education progressed, it was quite obvious to everyone that I had a physical difference. I was good at hiding my

hand, but I could not hide it all of the time. Most days were fine, with no one mentioning it or staring, but there would be days when someone would make a comment or blatantly stare. In the 3rd grade there was one girl would terrorize me with the same question everyday: "Why is your hand like that, Carrie?" The answer that I had been taught to say was an answer that I understood: "Because I was born this way." However, as curious children often do, this girl would ask me this question incessantly. It came to the point that the sight of her evoked the same physical reactions that I experienced when I had to hold someone's hand. I would see her sauntering up to me, usually in front of many other classmates, and my heart would pound, those palms of mine would get sweaty, and my face would turn that wonderful crimson color I became so well acquainted with.

One day, I reached my breaking point. After asking me yet again about my hand, I took off my sandal and smacked this girl in the arm, sending her crying to the teacher. For a little girl who had never hurt anything, this was a considerably significant moment for me. Although I was disappointed in myself for using physical means to exert my frustration, I was proud of finally sticking up for myself. That day it was *I* who had her name on the board, and it was *I* who had to stay in from recess. My bullying classmate received nothing but condolences. However, it was *I* who grew a little taller that day with the realization that although my strategy had not been the best, I did have the vim and vigor to advocate for myself and my feelings. I was still nowhere near being accepting of my hand as an important part of who I was, but I had come to the realization that I did not have to be a target of social scrutiny. Finally, I realized that it was up to me to do something about my situation.

Unbeknownst to me, on that day, I began my journey towards becoming a social worker. Social workers advocate for those

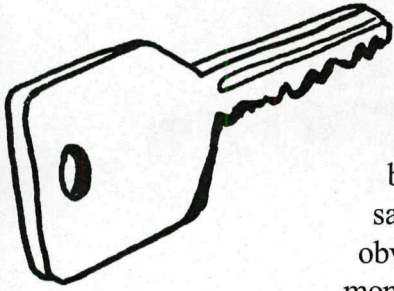
who are less fortunate and help them learn to empower themselves and to seek the lifestyle they wish to have. I look back now with the realization that at that young and naïve age, I understood that insulting other human beings by attacking their dignity and human worth was not acceptable. I knew in my heart that a slight physical difference was not a reason to allow others to impose their own fears and insecurities on me. I knew that there were others in a similar situation as I; I wanted to help.

A Change of Pace

After a move across town, I began the 4th grade in a new school. This school was a public elementary school and I was happy to be away from the Catholic school. I had not come to terms with the fact that the school preached compassion and decency, yet so many of my classmates had not treated me in this way. I had lost interest in my faith completely after those experiences in the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grades, mostly because the church signified my most distressing childhood experiences. Memories of being forced to hold hands were more influential than my beliefs and thus, I had no emotional connection to the church after that point.

From the moment I started my new school in the 4th grade, I was more confident with who I was. That is not to say that I still did not cover my left hand with my sweaters; I continued to do so on a regular basis. However, my new intent of wanting to advocate for myself and against injustices I had endured stuck deep within me, urging to break free.

Although I no longer had to be confronted with the anxiety church gave me, I did face new challenges. One challenge that became my new nemesis was the pull-up bar. Every month or so, during physical education class, our teacher would have the class line up to do as many pull-ups as we could. It was beyond me how the teachers could not see



how humiliating this was for those students who could hardly do one pull-up. Because my left hand was barely large enough to clasp around the small bar, my teacher would single me out saying that I did not have to do them, obviously assuming I could not. For many months I accepted this offer with relief.

However, after months of escaping the pull-up bar, I realized that I had never actually tried. It occurred to me that everyone always assumed things about my left hand, including myself. My insecurities had led me to automatically underestimate my hand. Remembering my new promise to self-advocate, I asked my teacher one month if I could attempt to do a pull-up. My teacher was supportive and hoisted me up to the bar. With all of my classmates watching from what seemed like miles below, I struggled to gain a firm grasp on the bar. Although I did not have a good grip with my left hand, I slowly pulled my weight up until my chin was just about parallel with the bar. I had done a pull-up! I let go with my hands and fell back to the sand beneath. My teacher said she was proud of me and for once, I was proud of myself *and* my left hand. I began to wonder what else my hand could do. I also began to wonder if I could learn to stop disassociating my left hand from the rest of my being. After all, it was a part of me.

Later that same year, I was at recess watching my classmates have relay races across the “monkey bars.” Back and forth, back and forth they would fly across the metal until they reached their teammate who would fly back in the other direction. Much like the pull-up bar, I had never attempted the monkey bars. One day I decided that if I could do a pull-up, I just might be able to do this as well.

I approached the bars and my excited classmates. I asked one boy if I could join the team. The boy looked at me, then looked at my hand, and stated, “You could, but I don’t think you can do this because your hand is

too little. We go really fast when we do this.” Embarrassed, I shrugged and started walking away when one girl, who would turn into one of my lifelong friends, stated, “Why couldn’t she do it?” I turned around to find one of the best girls on the relay team questioning the boy. She smiled at me and said, “You can join my team.” Elated at the invitation, I climbed up the steps to the bars. I did not make eye contact with the boy who had turned me away. Once everyone was lined up, someone yelled, “Ready? One, two, three, go!” I held on tightly to the bars and began swinging from rung, to rung, to rung. Although I certainly did not come in first place that day, I completed my journey across the bars and learned yet another thing my left hand could do that I never imagined it could.

High School Presents New Challenges

By the time I was matriculating to high school, I had come to the realization that I could be a happy and confident person, capable of establishing and keeping close friendships despite my physical difference. The close-knit group of friends I had during my final years of elementary school and middle school rallied around me, celebrating my unique qualities while supporting the fact that I was struggling with my physical difference. Knowing how I felt regarding my left hand, none of them ever pressured me to “get over it” nor did they feel embarrassed around me, as the children in my previous school had done. I look back on those girls and am truly grateful for their compassion. I think it is that period of one’s life when true friends are of the utmost importance. They had helped me gain the confidence I needed during those tumultuous adolescent years.

Luckily, I found yet another cohesive group of friends in high school. However, despite the support these girls offered me, this time there was a new factor arousing my insecurities yet again: boys. Of course every teenage girl struggles with self-esteem issues

in high school. The high school atmosphere can pressure teenage girls in terms of what to wear, how to style their hair, and what to physically look like. Social pressure can become completely consuming for many teenage girls, myself included.

With both my first boyfriend and other boys with whom I went to the occasional school dance, I would never let them hold my left hand. When they would reach out to hold my hand, it was *I* this time that would pull away. At the time, I could not think of anything worse than getting rejected by a boy I had feelings for because of my left hand. Of course, at that age any boy who pays attention to a girl is a “future husband,” so I was determined not to let my left hand get in the way of future husband material. Rather, I would always position myself when walking with a boy to be on his left so he would be able to hold my right hand. Unfortunately, this behavior would continue through my first years in college. When I reminisce about all of the effort I went through to do this, I realize exactly how ambivalent I still was about my left hand. High school presents new challenges to every girl and boy. As for myself, my adolescent struggles towards becoming more accepting of my left hand had been forgotten amid my new high school scene.

One way I coped with this high school self-consciousness was to face it head on by enrolling in drama classes. Being on a stage in front of my peers, I thought, would not allow me to hide any part of myself.

As the months went by, I became more and more confident as a performer. I surprised myself with my hidden talent for acting. The very first assignment given by our teacher, who always expected nothing but professional-level work from each of us, was to perform a monologue in front of the class. At first, the thought of being so incredibly exposed on that stage, pretending to be someone I was not and speaking alone for ten minutes, seemed daunting.

After a week of scouring drama books, I finally found a monologue that I felt I could perform well. Something about the passionate words of the female character spoke to me. The monologue was based upon a young girl who was speaking to her mother about life, friendships, and love. What struck me about this piece was that the character’s mother was dying. Being only fourteen at the time, I wondered what it must have felt like for that young woman to be having that conversation with her mother, knowing that she might never have it again. I immediately thought of my own mother and how I would feel if faced with that situation. My emotions overwhelmed me and I used them as I practiced my portrayal of this character. Looking back, I realize now that what I was doing was learning how to *empathize*. As social workers, we are taught that our clients do not always need our sympathy, but they do need our empathy. Our ability to learn to place ourselves in our client’s shoes, if only for a moment, is immeasurably important. I have found that I am able to provide the best support for clients when I am able to imagine how they must be feeling and, if I were in their shoes, what I would want from a social worker.

From then on, I used my newfound empathy for the characters that I portrayed in my performances. After that first monologue, my teacher, knowing full well that I had never acted before, pulled me aside and said, “So what is your secret?” When I explained what I was doing, he smiled and simply said, “Well there you go.” It would be this same teacher who three years later would pull me aside again and make one of the most significant interventions in my life.

One day before I was to perform a scene with two of my fellow classmates, my teacher asked me to speak with him at his desk. Over the past three years, I had come to respect and admire this man as a teacher and a friend; anything he said to me I always took to heart. He said, “Carrie do you know what you do

when you perform?" Confused, I shook my head. He smiled and said, "For three years now whenever you perform you let your sweater cover your left hand. Do you realize that you do that?" Now embarrassed and feeling my face turn crimson, I again shook my head. The truth was I had not realized that I had been doing this. I had become so wrapped up in my performances of other people where I could lose myself, that I had not made the effort to continue my own effort to be comfortable in my own skin. My teacher stated, "You need to know that nobody cares, Carrie. I know it is difficult when it is you who is different, but you need to realize now that no one cares. You are who you are and that is what people love about you." Dumbfounded, I didn't know what to say, and to this day, I can't recall how I responded. What I do know is that up until that point no one had ever taken the time to say those simple words to me. I knew in my heart that these were the words I needed to be telling myself all of these years, but it took someone who noticed to say it for me.

After that day, I made the effort never to cover my hand, either on the stage or in the classroom. *Nobody cares*. Powerful words that meant more to me than anything a sixteen year old could have wanted. My teacher had done for me what I would learn to do for others as a social worker, which is to validate feelings while simultaneously affirming their worth as a person. I realized that my teacher had been taking a risk of his own that day by confronting me. He could have simply ignored my actions and let me go on the way that I had been. However, he took the initiative to intervene. Quite often I think about what it would have been like for me if he had not taken a chance that day. I like to think that I would have been able to eventually tell myself the same words. However, remembering the path of insecurities I was once again heading down, I am not confident I could have done this. Moreover, I would have hoped that

someone else would be willing to risk his or her own embarrassment to confront my insecurities and how they influenced the way I presented myself.

Reaching Out

At that point in my life, it was time to take what my teacher had reminded me of and what I knew in my heart and slowly but surely learn to accept my body the way it was. In high school I was part of a political studies program called *Civitas*, in which students were required to complete 500 hours of community service during their junior and senior years. My mom had the idea for me to work at the Easter Seal Society and was instrumental in helping me begin volunteering at that site. My time at Easter Seals was one of the most important experiences that influenced me to become a social worker working with older adults.

I did not know what to expect on the first day, and I was nervous that I might not be a good fit at Easter Seals. What I did know was that I would be working in a day program for adults with disabilities. The adults in this program ranged in age from 30 to 70. Before that time I had never worked with adults. Like many teenage girls, I had always had babysitting jobs, and was also a French tutor to a younger girl, but I had not had the experience of working with someone who was older than I was. I questioned whether these individuals would want to work with someone who was only sixteen years old. Would I be able to relate to them?

When I walked into the room where my program was located, I was immediately surrounded by about ten adults, some who had been diagnosed with mental retardation and some who had physical disabilities, all wanting to know who I was and if I was going to stay. Overwhelmed by their honest and welcoming attitude, I immediately felt at home.

On that very first day, a woman known as Kimmy* who had been diagnosed with

mental retardation when she was very young, approached me, enthusiasm radiating through her eyes. Kimmy grasped my left hand and brought me to the table where they were going to finish an art project they had begun the previous day. When Kimmy grasped my left hand, I did not let go. I felt so welcomed in that room, surrounded by individuals who were all unique in some way, that I was at peace with my physical anomaly. What struck me was that none of these extraordinary individuals seemed to care at all that they were different. One man had only one leg. One woman, because of surgeries on her foot throughout her life, had a severe limp. Another man was confined to a wheelchair and could not hear well. Nevertheless, I remember thinking that I had never been in the presence of so many individuals who were at peace. To them, enjoying the day was the priority. I knew that I was at Easter Seals not only to work with these individuals, but to learn from all of them in terms of accepting my own physical anomaly.

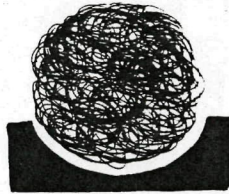
Over the course of the next two years, I volunteered with these individuals mainly during the summer months and during holiday breaks from school. The staff at the program showed that they had confidence in me, as they allowed me to work individually with some of the participants. One of the men in the program, Tommy, who was in his seventies, had some behavioral problems that would cause the other participants to isolate themselves from him. From what I had learned about him, he did not have much family support and although his diagnosis was not made known to me, looking back it seems as though he may have had schizophrenia. Tommy was a good worker, always willing to help. He was one of the first participants to invite me to eat lunch with him during my first days in the program.

However, there were days when Tommy would become agitated and use obscenities with the other participants. When I was asked

to sit and work with him, I remember feeling apprehensive. Would I know what to say or how to help? What did I know about Tommy's life? What triggered him to become so agitated? Yet, I realized that I needed to use the tool I had developed in my drama classes: empathy. Tommy was not a character in a play. He was a real human being who needed support and comfort. I began to wonder what it might be like for this man to not have family waiting for him when the day was over and how it must feel to have the other participants not want to have anything to do with him. I delved into my thoughts about how I felt when people stared at my left hand or made rude comments, as the children in elementary school had done. I wondered if Tommy had been through many of the same experiences because of his difference. I empathized with him, knowing what it was like to become angry, and wanted to help. As a social worker, I now know that what I was experiencing was counter-transference, as I related many of the participants' situations to my own. However, I believe it was the magnitude of the counter-transference that helped me to empathize with those participants, or as I like to see it, my first clients.

I do not remember what it was that I said to Tommy that day. What I do remember is that there were many more occurrences of his agitation during the day program just as there were many more occurrences of catching myself feeling insecure or ambivalent about my left hand. However, I learned a major lesson of social work early in my life: my work would never be finished. There would always be a situation when I would need to call upon my skill of empathy to help understand why clients were acting the way they were and what the circumstances had been during their lives that led them to act in a certain way. As in my situation, there is always much more to a person than meets the eye and it becomes the job of the social worker to truly listen to

that person. Only in their own words can people express what their life has presented them with and how those experiences shaped them. Only after listening to Tommy and empathizing with his situation could I help him to settle down and begin to feel safe in his environment. I realized that is all that I ever wanted for myself as well. I yearned to feel safe in my environment and know that those who surrounded me would accept me the way that I was.



A Worthwhile Experience

The two years I spent working with the adults at the Easter Seal Society solidified my love for social work. I realized how much wisdom I could gain from older adults who had experienced the world so many years before I had. Those individuals helped me to become more accepting of my own physical anomaly than I had ever been before. They taught me that no matter how someone may be physically or mentally different, it should not affect how brightly their spirit can shine. As part of the program, we would plan day trips around the community to destinations such as the grocery store, the mall, the bowling alley, and even to the haircutters. For many people, these activities are taken for granted and disliked due to the time they can take away from more enjoyable activities. That was not the case with these individuals. They took pride in even the simplest of activities. To them, being a part of the community meant that they could experience what most experience on a daily basis.

On one summer trip to the bowling alley, the man who had only one leg was not able to bowl. However, he took so much pride in

keeping score for the rest of the participants that his enthusiasm was contagious. Smiling broadly from ear to ear, he told me, "This is more fun than I have had in a long time. You have to plan this again." Never once did he comment on how unfair it was that he was not able to bowl like the others. Never once did he comment on how a different activity should have been chosen to accommodate his needs. *I held him in the highest regard.* I realized that I needed to develop an attitude similar to this man. I thought back to all of the time and energy I had spent over the course of my life worrying about how others perceived my left hand. I thought about how many tears I had shed over my hand, knowing full well that there was nothing I could do to change my situation. It was time to embrace my physical anomaly. It was time to hold myself in the highest regards.

Conclusion

My right hand is my rose, and my left hand is my rose bud. Such a simple and wonderful way to view my physical anomaly. If only I could have come to accept this early on in my life. But then, as a social worker, I know that a journey of self-discovery is necessary for growth. I do not think I would be the same person I am today if I had not endured the experiences that I did. I needed the experiences that both darkened and lifted my spirit to truly become a self-aware individual. I feel that I would not be as effective as a social worker if I could not relate to my clients' struggles towards acceptance of their situations and struggles towards self-advocacy. Whether or not a social worker has been through exactly what a client has experienced is not always relevant. However, as a social worker when I am presented a situation that I am not able to directly relate to, I rely on the power of empathy to help me understand what it might be like to live for one day in my client's shoes.

My experiences in high school did not completely eradicate my insecurities, which did creep up on me from time to time in college. The day when I could not participate in my Resident Advisor's activity called my attention back to the insecurities of my youth. I knew that they would slowly resurface if I did not fully commit myself to acceptance of my left hand as an important part of who I was.

The acceptance of my left hand came full circle during my junior year in college. On a first date with the man who would turn out to be the love of my life, I once again pulled away when he tried to hold my left hand. He did not say a word. I remember feeling flooded with relief at his acceptance of me as I am. He never did mention my actions and he never would until I brought it up years later. Finally, on one sunny day in June, when he again tried to hold my left hand, I contemplated everything I had learned and everything I knew in my heart about acceptance, *and I let him.*



Carrie A. Newton is a recent M.S.W. graduate from California State University, Long Beach. This narrative was a project for her thesis requirement. Questions and comments regarding this narrative can be addressed to the author at: cookiesandcream428@hotmail.com.

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