

WHAT'S A

Leg

GOT TO DO WITH

It?

By Donna R. Walton



Photo by René Alston

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EXACTLY WHAT I THOUGHT WHEN, DURING A HEATED CONVERSATION, A FEMALE RIVAL TOLD ME I WAS LESS THAN A WOMAN BECAUSE I HAVE ONE LEG.

EXCUSE ME. PERHAPS I MISSED SOMETHING. HOW COULD SHE MAKE SUCH AN INSENSITIVE COMMENT ABOUT SOMETHING SHE HAD NO EXPERIENCE WITH? WAS SHE SOME EXPERT ON DISABILITIES OR SOMETHING? WAS SHE, TOO, DISABLED? HAD SHE — LIKE ME — FOUGHT A BATTLE WITH CANCER THAT COST HER A LIMB? FOR A SPLIT SECOND, MY THOUGHTS WERE PARALYZED BY HER INSENSITIVITY.

BUT, LIKE A DEFEATED FIGHTER WHO RETURNS TO THE RING TO REGAIN VICTORY, I BOUNCED BACK FOR A VERBAL ROUND WITH MS. THING.

I AM WOMAN FIRST, AN AMPUTEE SECOND AND PHYSICALLY CHALLENGED LAST. AND IT IS IN THAT ORDER THAT I SET OUT TO EDUCATE AND TESTIFY TO PEOPLE LIKE MS. THING WHO ARE UNABLE TO DISCERN WHO I AM — A FEISTY, UNEQUIVOCALLY ATTRACTIVE AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMAN WITH A GIMPY GAIT WHO CAN STRUT PROUDLY INTO ANY ROOM AND ENGAGE IN INTELLIGENT CONVERSATION WITH FOLKS ANXIOUS TO FEED OFF MY SINCERE AURA.

It is rather comical and equally disturbing how folks — both men and women — view me as a disabled woman, particularly when it comes to sexuality. They have so many misconceptions. Women, for example, want to know how I catch a man, while men are entertained with the idea that because I have one leg, sex with me must be a blast.

I have even been confronted by folks who give me the impression that they think having sex is a painful experience for me. Again, I say, “What’s a leg got to do with it?”

For all those who want to inquire about my sexual prowess but dare not to, or for those who are curious about how I maintain such positive self-esteem when life dealt me the proverbial bad hand, this story is for you. But those who have a tough time dealing with reality probably should skip the next paragraph because what I am about to confess is the gospel truth.

I like sex! I am very sexual! And I even consider myself sexy, residual limb and all. You see, I was a sexual being before my left leg was amputated 17 years ago. My attitude didn’t change about sex. I just had to adjust to the attitudes of others.

For example, I remember a brother who I dated in high school — before my leg was amputated — then dated again five years later. The dating ended abruptly because I realized that the brother could not fathom the one-leg thing. When he and I were home alone, he was cool as long as we got hot and bothered with my prosthesis on. However, whenever I made a move to take off my prosthetic leg for comfort purposes, the brother immediately panicked. He could not handle seeing me with one leg. I tried to put him at ease by telling him a story like Eva’s from Toni Morrison’s novel “Sula” — that my leg just got tired and walked off one day. But this brother just could not deal. He booked!

It would certainly be misleading if I said I didn’t have some ill feelings when folks have dissed me. Indeed I hurt. But the pain I feel is not for me. Instead, I feel sad for those folks who just can’t see that the world is made up of a myriad of people, including bold and beautiful female amputees.

How does a woman with one leg maintain such positive self-esteem in a society where people with disabilities are not valued? Simply by believing in myself. I know you’re saying, “That sounds much too hokey.” But as I said earlier, this is the gospel truth.

I was 17 years old when my leg was amputated. I was diagnosed with osteogenic sarcoma, a bone cancer. During the first five years after my surgery, concentrating on other folks’ perceptions of me was the least of my concerns. I was too focused on beating the odds against dying. You see, I was given only a 15 percent chance of survival because — with spiritual guidance and support from my family — I had made the very difficult decision to stop taking chemotherapy treatments. Doctors predicted that, by halting the dreadful

chemotherapy, I was writing my own death certificate. However, through what I believe was divine healing, my cancer was eradicated.

Before this cancerous ordeal, I was not strong spiritually, and my faith was rocked when my leg was amputated because I thought I was to keep my leg. At the time, I could not see past the physical. After my amputation, I was preoccupied with the kinds of crippling thoughts that all the Ms. Things of the world are socialized to believe: that I would not have a shapely leg for men to admire; that I was not going to be able to wear shorts, bathing suits or lingerie; that my womanness was somehow compromised by the loss of a limb.

I could not see the big picture until three years after my surgery: God’s plan was for me to lose a diseased leg and to gain a healthier body, mind and spirit.

After gaining insight into God’s plan, I became aware of the words of Pastor Edward McIntosh of Washington, D.C. — words that have helped me to see past shallow thinkers who could not see past my disability:

*“Judge not your brother for wrongs he may do
For his experience is limited, as yours is, too.
Let love replace this condemnation.
For it will conquer with the right application.
Then one day soon we all will face
God above, who will judge the entire race.
So the next time you begin to criticize a friend,
Remember God who sees all will be the critic
in the end.”*

If you have a disability and are in need of some fuel for your spirit, check out any novel by Toni Morrison (“Sula” is my favorite because of the one-legged grandmother, Eva) or Kahlil Gibran’s “The Prophet.” These resources helped me build self-esteem and deal with my reality.

Ultimately, building positive esteem is an ongoing process, and I believe that if the pioneering sisters from the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs were around today, they would be proud to know that I plan to carry out their motto by “lifting as I climb.” To that end, I am currently producing a motivational video that will outline coping strategies for female amputees. (For more information, write 3001 South Ocean Drive, Suite 3Q, Hollywood, Fla. 33019.)

In the film “Scent of a Woman,” Al Pacino’s character says, “There is no prosthesis for an amputated spirit.”

Yes, there is!

No matter what your disability or circumstance, you cannot give in to a defeatist attitude. When you do, your battle is lost. There is a way of fighting back. It is called self-esteem.

Believe in yourself, and you will survive — and thrive.



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