



Loving Letters

A Project of the Women's Forum

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In the spring of 2014 a group of women living with Osteogenesis Imperfecta were asked to write a letter to their 16 year-old self. The response was enormous. Contained on these pages are those letters along with some biographical information on the women who wrote them.

It was a great experience for each of the women to reflect on what life has taught them and what they would have wanted to know at one of the more difficult times for a young woman - the age of 16.

A special thanks go out to the wonderful women that contributed to this project. You ladies rock!

Anna Gualano

Anna Curry Gualano is a 34 year-old attorney from Birmingham, Alabama. She attended Vanderbilt University, graduating in 2002 with a degree in English Literature. She graduated from the University of Alabama School of Law in 2005. She worked in Atlanta for several years before moving to Birmingham, where she practices employment litigation with the law firm of Littler Mendelson, P.C. Anna was a member of the Board of Directors for the OI Foundation from 2006 to 2012 and has been actively involved in planning and facilitating the 2012 and 2014 women's forums. Anna married Mark Gualano in 2010 and has a 2-year-old son, Luke.

Dear 16-year-old Anna,

Consider this a message from your older and wiser self. While I know you think you know everything, there are a few things that it would be great for you to know:

First, the bad news: you don't get any taller. You'll actually shrink a little bit in your '30s and you'll be exasperated about it. The good news is that you'll find "the guy." You'll kiss some toads along the way, and there will be plenty of times when, like now, you think there is no one for you. I assure you that he's out there, and he is worth the wait. He'll see you in a coffee shop – when you are studying for the Bar exam and are not concerned about dating – and he'll be struck by your confidence and self-reliance. He'll think you are smart and funny and beautiful, and he'll love you for all that you are.

You should also know that you have an amazing body. Yes, you do. Right now you look at yourself and see nothing but deformity and imperfection. You feel that your body is wanting in some way. It's not. In time you will come to see that your body is not a cage. Your limbs are strong, even if uncommonly formed. Your body will serve you well in the coming years – it will rebound after each break and every surgery you have; it will carry you up a mountain; it will carry and nourish your child. You'll eventually learn to see your body as beautiful. You won't want to hide your scars because they will be welcome reminders of each challenge you met and overcame.

I wish you knew that what you think about yourself is far more important than what others think of you. You know by now that people can be cruel, that callous remarks can cut you deeply and make you feel insignificant. You're not. Each unkindness you encounter and overcome will equip you for dealing with life's inevitable hardships. Consider yourself well-armored. Stand up for yourself when others dismiss you, but don't pick fights unless you have to. Be able to distinguish cruelty from well-intentioned ignorance, and be patient with those who mean well, even when their comments sting you. You will learn to be self-reliant. More importantly, you will learn that you are not defined by diagnosis, but by the many attributes that make up your character. The remarkable truth is that others will accept the self-image you project. If you view yourself as worthy and capable, others will not doubt that you are. Life will be better for you once you figure this out.

You should know that your attitude matters. Amazing things are in store for you, but they are contingent upon your attitude. Remember that there is good all around you, and the good in your life will always outweigh the bad. You have some hard times coming your way. These are unavoidable. Remember that pain is temporary, and don't forget to be thankful for the blessings sent your way, especially those in the form of friends and family. You were blessed with a sense of humor and you'll need it in the coming years. This will break down barriers for you and connect you to others in ways you cannot imagine right now.

You already know that your only real limitations in life are those of your own making. You have a right to be fearful about injury and pain, but don't let fear be your master. Decide what you want out of life and pursue it. Nothing will come easy for you, but your victories will be sweet because you'll know what it took to achieve them. Your parents tell you that nothing is impossible for you and they are right. You'll do more in the next 18 years than you ever thought possible, but you have to believe in yourself to get there. You won't have it all figured out by age 34, but you'll be able to recognize what a long distance you've traveled. You'll love yourself a bit more at 34 than you did at 16. For now, be grateful for all that you are, and enjoy the ride.

Love,
Anna

Karen Braitmayer

Karen Braitmayer is an Architect in her 50's working in the field of Accessibility Consulting, supporting Architects, Owners, Developers and Builders to ensure high levels of access for persons with disabilities in new construction.

She attended Rice University and the University of Houston for her Masters in Architecture. Braitmayer was awarded Fellowship in the American Institute of Architect in 2004. She lives in Seattle, WA with her husband and teenaged daughter. She served as a volunteer OIF Peer Group coordinator in the Puget Sound area for nearly ten years and continues to share her knowledge of home modifications for persons with OI at OIF National Conferences.

In September of 2010, President Obama appointed Ms. Braitmayer to the U.S. Access Board, an independent Federal agency that provides leadership in accessible design under the ADA and other laws.

Dear Karen at age 16,

I know you have questions and worries about your future. Will you grow up to have a full life - with a job, love, and a family and be able to give back to your community? I want to reassure you that you WILL.

As I recall, your top concerns are how you look (Do my pimples show? How is my hair? Are my clothes the right style or type?) and your crowd (Am I popular enough? Am I surrounding myself with real friends?) While in some way, I still worry about my looks, I have found that a stylish haircut that is easy to maintain, clean skin and body and clothes that are flattering make it easier for me to present a polished appearance. (Oh, plus I do enjoy a nice manicure!) Some of these concerns fade as you get older and you discover what's best for you. Take care of your body, it's the only one you'll have. Exercise and get outside and laugh a lot - all healthy things for your body and your mind.

As far as finding the right friends, I still can't help rolling my eyes at people sometimes! I have found over time that the best practice is to be understanding when adults and kids who may not have seen someone that looks like us are confused and perhaps may act stupidly or unkindly. Be the person who helps them see how much alike you are. Be kind. A little kinder than is necessary. People often respond to people with disabilities or who seem different through their stereotypes - break that stereotype by teaching them about you and about others with disabilities. We are all the same underneath - humans.

Remember when Aunt Gigi told you that if you are ever in a room and feel like you are all alone with no one talking to you, look for another person who is all alone and be nice enough to go up to them and say hi. Everyone feels like they are the odd man out at some time. They will appreciate your kindness and you both will have someone to talk to. It is super hard to be the one who makes the effort but it works wonders. Honestly! I have met some of my best friends that way. (My pals Diane and Ronda will both attest that I just went up to them and said "Hi!")

Another thing to keep in mind - you really do meet people doing what you love to do. (Turns out Mom was right.) You will meet your husband doing something you like to do (in our case volunteering for a community sailing organization.) I have learned that if I do things for other people I get so much more out of it - more fun, more friends and more connections.

Speaking of personal connections, you worry about finding that “one right person” for your life. You are scared that you will never find love and get married. When you are older, you will even write to the OI Foundation to ask if OIers ever got married. The response from a kind OIF volunteer was that OI adults marry in about the same rate as the non-OI population. My experience shows me that this is true. However, it seems we often meet and marry our spouse at somewhat older age so be patient. I never dated in high school or college although I had plenty of friends. I met my husband when I was in my early 30's. We married about 2 years later. We are coming up on our 20th wedding anniversary. See, patience is worth it!

You will become a parent! I know you wish for that, deep down, even if you are afraid to share that dream with anyone. What I have learned is that there are many, many pathways to parenthood. My husband and I chose international adoption and now I have a daughter a bit older than you. Keep looking for all the information you can to get you on that right path to being a parent. Lots of OIers are happily parenting and you will too!

Take advantage of any opportunities for a good education. As an OIer, we should take advantage of our quick thinking nature to focus on jobs that use our brains over our bodies. A good education is the best stepping stone to a full life. I have learned to be flexible and to keep an eye out for unexpected opportunities that come along. When I went to college I thought I would become a Sociologist. It turns out that career wasn't what I expected and I had an opportunity to go back to school for Architecture. I tried it – and fell in love with the work. I have owned my own Architecture practice for nearly 20 years. I love what I do and look forward to going to work every day.

I know you don't take no for an answer. Keep that up - don't let anyone tell you that you can't do something because you have OI (or are short, or use a wheelchair, or any such thing.) If you are passionate about a job or a sport or an art or hobby, patiently ignore the naysayers and keep hunting and explore different ways that work for you.

And lastly, I have learned to keep in touch with others that are supportive. Come to the OI Conference when you can. You won't find a better place to share the joys and trials of being a person affected by OI. You will find peers and adult mentors to share all those things that your parents don't understand. Turns out, they worried the same and have found the answers you hadn't thought of!

With love and hugs,
Adult Karen

Adrienne Baez

My name is Adie, pronounced 80. At least, it is at the moment. Names are like people, they get stranger the longer you know them so I keep changing mine. I am a 24 year old who is allowed to sleep on the bed when my cat Midna says so. I grew up in Indiana and I do as much as I can to hide that fact as possible. I'm not very good at it though, I keep telling people. I graduated from Butler University with degrees in advanced sarcasm, nerdiness and psychology. I'm currently attending American University in Washington DC where I'm learning to write big papers full of bigger words about people's brains and then talk to people about them. I hope one day to have a job talking to lots of different kinds of people, about lots of different kinds of things.

Dear Adrienne,

The whole reason that I'm writing to you is to tell you that it gets better. I know you don't believe me. All of your teachers, all of your family friends, your parents; they always tell you it gets better. At least, they would, if you ever told them anything was wrong. I know they tell you you're doing great, and you've never been more pissed off in your life than when they do. The second part, "for someone in a chair", is always louder than the first; especially when they don't say it. I know they always point out how inspirationally wonderful you are, and all that brings up is anger too; and uncomfortable awkwardness. Because you wouldn't be if you weren't different. Obviously.

So you try to hide it. You do everything all your friends do, regardless of whether it makes sense (or is safe) or not. You don't even want to think about you, everything that happens to you is just that much weirder. One more step removed, always. Even the good stuff they come up with is different. You focus so hard on making sure "you" fit with everyone else that there is no "you" anymore.

You let them call you names and you laugh when they do, pretending the embarrassment is pride. You even start using them on yourself: cripple, shrimp, midget, half-a-person. You let them push you around (heh, get it, that's a pun). You give yourself up; you "walk" through the halls, you "stand" in line, you "run" to class. Everything different, everything you hate about that difference, is who you are. Because how else can it work?

I'm here to tell you though that you will find that place you fit, even if only you can fit in there to begin with. It's little, but it will get more comfortable with time; so don't freak out. You'll add new names, like disabled-and-empowered. And you'll make people use them. Oh, that'll be a pain in the frickin' butt, but if you don't stop they'll start listening eventually. And when they do, they'll fit in the little place you carved out in the world too. You won't be alone for long.

People will be surprised; "you've changed" they'll say, "you never used to care about all this before". And you'll smile and shrug and tell them it's just who you are. Because finally, you understand that they don't understand. They never will, they can't. But that's okay, they don't have to. They just have to know. And you have to be patient. Because they will get it. If it matters to you, they'll see that. (Even if you occasionally have to use a mallet to get it to stick.)

So do me a favor kid, and stop trying to be like them. Stop looking in the mirror and making a face. Look in the mirror again; she's all awkward angles and strange proportions. She looks nothing like what you've got in

your head. But guess what? That A you got on your last research paper? That was her. That recital you made it through, even though you were almost sick because you had a solo part? That was her. Those therapy goals you blew past and kept going? That was her. When your friends tell you that you look good? That's her. She IS worth noticing. And you know what? Own it kid. 'Cause she's you. So notice.

Love,
YOU

Pamela Wagar

My name is Pamela S. Wagar Smith and I'm 30 years old. I have type III/IV OI and was raised near Reading, Pennsylvania by my single mother. Growing up, I intended to pursue a career in art as either an animator or a medical illustrator because I thought becoming a pediatrician was impossible. It wasn't until my junior year of college at Alvernia University that I realized my true ambition was possible, despite my disability. After finishing with a Bachelor of Science degree, I was accepted to the Penn State College of Medicine and graduated with a Medical Degree in 2013. I'm currently a pediatric resident at the Children's Hospital of Georgia in Augusta, GA. Last year, we moved from Hershey, PA to begin my residency and I also married the love of my life, Adam. We own a mini-dachshund named Daisy and housecat named Binx. Although we don't have any children at this time, we look forward to the future while growing personally, as a couple, and in our careers.

Dear Pam,

What a crazy time it's been for you. It was only 2 years ago that you were recovering from your spinal fusion; and right before that, you had to deal with shattered arms caused by a fall from a public bus lift. I know it's been hard for you to fit in at school with everything that's gone on and all the time you missed, especially with the aide following you around whom you don't really need (despite what the school says). Please remember your peers are still immature and haven't learned to look past differences. You are a beautiful girl, both inside and out. It doesn't matter that you have a funny shaped forearm or a pointy jaw with braces on your teeth. It doesn't matter that you're 3ft 6in tall or that you have a barrel-shaped rib cage... and please know, you most certainly are NOT fat! Boys will take interest in you, but you have to be patient and give them time. You will find a handsome and loving guy when you're least expecting it and you'll marry him (I promise).

You are talented in so many ways and very bright. This will become obvious with more self-confidence. Try to be more outgoing and more willing to speak up in classes. Allow yourself to shine! Also, I have exciting and shocking information that I hope will open new doors for you. There are actually doctors with physical disabilities, including doctors who use wheelchairs. Please don't limit yourself in your choice of career because I know you can do this, if it's what you truly want. You are so determined and a real fighter! It won't be easy because you'll still be a pioneer, but the obstacles will be well worth it. Remember, patient and family acceptance of you is what will matter the most. There will be people who try to discourage you along the way. But, you don't need them. Don't let them pull you down! Your pediatric patients will love you as much as you'll love caring for them.

You wouldn't have made it this far had it not been for your mom, but you know this. You're going through a rough time together and have been, off and on, for the last few years. Please know that her depression is not your fault and her anger isn't meant toward you. She loves you with all her heart. You'll go through an extremely difficult time with her while in college and med school. Try not to be afraid because she will be okay, with time. She would never leave you because you mean too much to her. Don't feel guilty for leaving her alone in order to reach for your dreams. Know that it's okay to take time off from your education in order to focus on her getting well and so you don't lose sight of your own life. Don't risk everything you've worked so hard for. It's okay to talk about this with friends, you're not alone.

You are brave, a real survivor. You've survived over 200 fractures, at least 30 surgeries, and the difficulty of fitting in at school. You've remained a high honor student despite missing school days and you have friends who love being with you. You're in the school chorus and high school musicals. Think of all you've accomplished! Know that you will blossom into a beautiful daughter, physician, wife, and mother. Best wishes for the future and stay true to you by embracing who you are and what makes you such a special girl!

Best regards,
Dr. Pam

Nathasha Alvarez

Dear 16 year old self,

I'm glad that you're reading this after that amazing New Year's Eve resolution to stop drinking soda. Good move! It's going to be rough because you know mami loves soda but you can do it. Besides, it's horrible for your bones and later on we find out it's worse for the skin! You know how vain you are. Drink water instead. Do yourself a big favor. Stay away from junk food. You will thank me later. Drink your veggies since you hate eating them. Later on when you haven't even hit 30, your bones are going to ache. Don't wait until you're 30 to start new eating habits. Start now! You will be so happy.

Nathasha Alvarez aka the Latina Diva On Wheels is a middle school teacher, professional speaker, founder of a Audacitymagazine.com and Audaciouslady.com. She currently lives in Miami, Florida and can be spotted speaking up wherever there is an injustice to teachers, children, animals and the disabled.

I know you're not too concerned with your OI and that's a good thing but I know that being different makes you hesitate in some areas of your life. Life isn't going to be easy as a 3 feet tall, Latina with an outspoken mind but don't ever try to be anyone other than yourself even when people tell you to lower your standards. Keep your head up and your wheels rolling away from negative people.

Starting at a new high school away from your friends is devastating. I won't deny that at all. Unless you want to wait until the end of your junior year to enjoy school, you should do the following:

1. Join every group that interests you even if you don't know anyone. You've loved politics since you were 11 years old. Join student government. Even if you don't run for office, you will get to befriend other students who have bigger goals in life than to get high and drunk. Join the Mock Trial Competition Team and Speech and Debate club. Continue to be in the Key Club and Youth Crime Watch. You're nerdy! It's ok. No one notices it except for you and your sister. That's her envy speaking out. Have fun! Don't wait until your junior year to join the wrestling team as a wrestlette. People are willing to make reasonable accommodations for you. Besides this is where you earn your varsity letter! How many OIers can say they have a varsity letter in wrestling?

2. Do you know why people are willing to be so nice to you even after they find you again on social media networks? Because you've kept your smile. Keep smiling. Smile on the first day of school. Keep smiling even after you cry and beg your mom to take you out of the school. Don't fall into the blues. When you smile, others will smile back. They will remember that you were friendly. They will approach you and ask you to join the fun. Because of your positive attitude, you will achieve more. Your teachers are your friends. They will understand you more than your peers. The great teachers will challenge you. The wheelchair and your OI don't define your ability to succeed in the classroom. Thank mom for never allowing you to give or take excuses for not excelling in school. OI has nothing to do with IQ.

3. Study! School comes so easily to you. Yet, you slack off. No excuses. Even later when you get accepted to top schools, you know you could've done better. Just because there isn't a gifted program in your high school doesn't mean you can slack off in the honors courses. Accept your teachers' recommendations for AP courses. Education is your key to a better future. Later on you will meet other people with disabilities. Some will have OI. They have trouble in school and blame it on their OI or their disability. Don't fall for that. People will say you're cold but you're not. You can't allow excuses in your life. At 16 years old, your goal is to follow your interests and succeed in school. Boys will come and boys will go.

4. Which brings me to my next and last piece of advice. Men! We love men, don't we? They are so cute. They smell so good. When they smile at you, it's to die! Enjoy their attention. Keep your standards high. They don't care about the wheelchair. They don't care if they have to fold the chair and put it in the back of their Camaro. They don't care if you're tiny. They only care that you are fun, smart and pretty. They are guys after all. The guys worth keeping in your life had no problem respecting your boundaries. The best part is that many of them stayed your friend way after you ended the relationship. That doesn't mean your heart won't be broken. It will be. But every broken heart brings you closer to your true values. Do you want a guy who wants to be with you simply because he thinks he can hook up with you? You never approved of that when you saw it on tv. Value yourself. Your friends will say you're a prude. That's ok. Later on those same friends will come to you crying after a guy used them for sex. But you held on. Good for you.

I can't say life will be easier now that you've read this but I can say that this letter is to let you know that you're on the right track. I think it's because we don't just get up and follow our impulses.

I'm proud of you. You will encounter others who aren't so strong. Don't be ashamed of your strength to deal with the hardships of life. Open your heart. Feel compassion. Never pity! Dance! Dance! Dance! Confidence not cockiness will help you meet amazing people, experience unbelievable adventures and live an audacious life.

See you soon!
Nathasha

Tracy Mulroy

Tracy Mulroy lives in Bethesda, MD with her husband Kyle, their 12 year-old son Reece, and their soon-to-be adopted 10-year old daughter. Tracy has Type III OI, her husband Kyle has Type IV OI, and their son Reece has Type I OI. Tracy graduated from Franklin & Marshall College (where Dr. Jay Shapiro also went!) and Georgetown University Law School. Tracy served on the Board of the OI Foundation for six years and has been a part of every Fine Wines Strong Bones fundraiser since its inception more than 13 years ago. Tracy now co-owns a small government relations firm with her husband, Kyle.

Dear 16-year old Tracy,

I am writing this letter to my 16-year old self at the age of 45 – nearly three decades since I was 16. I wish I could tell you how many wonderful things you have awaiting you! I think the best advice I would give to my 16-year old self is to play hard, work hard, forge connections with other people with OI, and never give up on your dreams. Because your dreams will all come true beyond your wildest imagination. You will have a career, a husband, a family, and the biggest gift of all – happiness.

I had a very good social life when I was 16 but my 16-year old self wondered if I would continue to have a good social life and how I would manage college and adulthood. I spent a lot of my adolescence and early adulthood trying to pretend that I didn't even have OI. I lived a pretty "normal" life. I got my driver's license and my own handicapped accessible van the day I turned 16. I went away to a college about two hours from home right after high school. I had a lot of friends, went to parties, bars, and concerts, and had a very active social life. Sometimes a little too active!! Although there was no ADA law back then and many places were inaccessible, I didn't have many physical barriers because my friends carried me anywhere I couldn't get to independently. My friends sometimes carried me places and in "states" that they probably shouldn't have. I broke several bones because friends dropped me or fell while carrying me. But I wouldn't change a thing about any of that. My advice to my 16-year old self would be to keep putting yourself out there even when it's scary to do so, take risks (ok, maybe not so many risks!) and don't live your life in a bubble.

My 16-year old self wondered if I would ever get a job! I remember applying for the same summer jobs as my friends and they would be hired and I wouldn't. It was very frustrating and discouraging but it taught me that I had to work even harder for what I wanted professionally. A few years after graduating from college, I decided that I wanted to be a lawyer but I wondered if I would face the same discrimination of my teenage years. I got into Georgetown University Law School and knew this was the opportunity of a lifetime. I had to pay for school and living expenses on my own so I worked full time while going to law school at night. It was a grueling, tough schedule for four years but I did it! I worked so hard and graduated magna cum laude. I applied for and got one of the most sought after clerkships with a federal judge and then was hired by one of Washington, DC's most prestigious law firms. So my advice to my 16-year old self would be to work really hard and you can achieve anything you want.

My 16-year old self wondered if I would ever find love. I met my husband, Kyle Mulroy, doing a fundraiser for the OI Foundation. Growing up, I never thought about marrying someone with OI because I never really knew anyone else with OI. I didn't grow up going to OI conferences. I went to my first OI conference in 1994 at the age of 25 by myself – I literally didn't know one person there. But it was one of the best decisions I ever made. I began the journey of making lifelong friends who also had OI and the journey of accepting that I had OI in a profound, life-changing way. And it also opened the door to finding my partner for life.

After dating Kyle for a short time, it became clear that he was (and still is) my soul mate. In our wedding vows to each other, we both said that although we had faced a lot of adversity – surgeries, pain, casts, fractures – we would do it all over again to find each other. I marvel at how we could find someone so right for each other in the small population of people with OI. And then sometimes I think maybe it's not a coincidence - maybe going through the things that we did made us look at life differently and made us so compatible.

My 16-year old self wondered if I would ever have children. If I did, how would I do it? After Kyle and I got married, we began to explore adoption. I joined a Yahoo group called Disabled Adoptive Parents. A friend with OI posted in that group about a two-year old boy in Bulgaria with OI who needed a forever family. When I read that email, I just knew we had found our child. I had not considered adopting a child with OI because I didn't know if Kyle and I could physically handle a child who had OI like we had. It turned out that Reece had very mild OI so we took a leap of faith and adopted him. Again, I marvel that this little boy with OI so mild that Kyle and I could handle him sitting in an orphanage halfway across the world found his way to us. He is my joy and my heart and on days when my creaky, old OI bones don't feel well, he is my purpose.

Kyle and I are embarking on our second adoption journey, as we are about to travel to Colombia to adopt a 10-year old girl. We decided a couple of years ago that we wanted to add a second child to our family through adoption. Our path to our new daughter has not always been easy. We've faced some discrimination during the process and resistance from some of my family who worry about my health. But I know our second child will bring us the same joy and love that Reece has. And again, this falls under the category of never living my life in a bubble and always reaching for my dreams even if the path isn't easy.

I wish my 16-year old self had known that one day I would not only learn to embrace my OI but that I would actually be grateful for it. It may sound crazy to say that I am grateful for OI but I really truly am. I found the two most important people in my life, my husband and my son – people I always dreamed and hoped I would have - because of OI. And most importantly, I wish I could tell my 16-year old self how happy my life would be and how blessed I am with love and incredible family and friends.

All the best,
Tracy

Michelle Duprey

Michelle is a type III Oler who lives in Connecticut where she works for the City of New Haven doing disability law compliance work. Michelle graduated from the University of Connecticut School of Law and Bryant University. She lives in a fabulous condo with her little dog Violet. She enjoys traveling with her boyfriend Gary. Michelle loves to bake, watch UConn Women's Basketball and has been known to be a rabble rouser on the OIF board of directors where she has consistently pushed for more focus on adult OI issues.

Dear 16 Year Old Michelle,

It's me, your 47 year old self and do I have a lot to tell you! I know ringing in your 16th year with a broken leg really sucked. But very soon the breaks will slow way down and you will go decades without a fracture! And I know you are pissed that you didn't get a car for your birthday. Take comfort in knowing that you will own and drive several cars in your lifetime. While none of them will be your dream car, a Porsche, you will travel hundreds of thousands of miles on many great adventures with friends, family and even men.

I know high school is tough socially. It does get slightly easier by the time you graduate. And you will be happy to graduate and go on to college. Yes, you will go on to college and have way more fun than any one person deserves. You will make lifelong friends that you will cherish and decades later will still joke with and share good times.

While I'd love to tell you all about your future, I'll just let the future find you. But know that you will have a successful career, loving family and friends supporting you every step of the way and you will find love. Unfortunately you won't be President of the United States or in any other elected office, you'll figure out that they really are sucky jobs to have. But you will be involved in politics, meet many politicians and policy makers, and even meet a President of the United States. I won't tell you which one but everyone will ask you if you washed your hands afterwards (you'll get this joke in 1998 or so).

What I will tell you is that you are beautiful just as you are. And you absolutely need to believe that. I know, you think I'm a total nut case on this one. But really it is true. The quicker you embrace this idea that even with your curvy, lumpy, twisty little body, you are beautiful and you will be told that you are beautiful and as shocking as this may sound, even sexy. Yup, might seem impossible right now, but it is true. I know you are ashamed of your OI body and try to hide it and everything associated with it. That's wrong, be proud of who you are and the OI is definitely part of who you are, it's part of your experience and shapes your whole world. It's in your DNA after all!

Stop fighting using a wheelchair. While I understand you see it as a cause of differentness and discrimination, it isn't. You can get more places, do more things, have a more exciting life when you accept that using a wheelchair is helpful. So quit pushing yourself to walk and strain when you can just use a chair. Walk when you want but don't feel you have to. You won't regret it.

You need to be assertive in love. Boys, and men down the road won't know how to approach you. You need to feel confident, approach them! And if they aren't interested in being more than friends, move on! Don't waste time trying to convince them that you are the right woman for them, they may never come around and you CAN and WILL do better.

Kudos to you for asking one class mate out, he turned you down but three decades later he will come to you groveling and telling you how much he regrets it. Keep asking! Don't let a few rejections damage you, you have the strength to carry on and will do so until you find Mr. Right. And you do find him and he's not what you'd expect.

Now for some practical tips. Your hair looks better longer and DO NOT let mom perm your hair. Stop trying to find kids clothes that look like adults. Buy women's blouses and shirts and wear them as dresses. Learn how to shorten stockings with clear nail polish. And most importantly, use EVERY penny of your allowance to buy stock in this little computer company called Apple, you'll thank me later.

Cherish the people in your life. Some of them will leave before their time and you will regret not saying "I love you" so say it sincerely and say it often.

Push the limits my friend. Whether it is work, life or love, go beyond what people imagine for you. Go for what you imagine for yourself. Employers, friends, family, lovers, and even the general public may not see your potential, that's ok. Show them how wrong they have been, that they've underestimated you, by succeeding in ways they never thought possible.

Dream big, dream confident and be strong!

Love,
Older & Wiser Michelle

Ellen Painter Dollar

Ellen Painter Dollar is the author of *No Easy Choice: A Story of Disability, Parenthood, and Faith in an Age of Advanced Reproduction* (Westminster John Knox, 2012). She blogs about faith, family, disability, and ethics at Patheos, and her writing has appeared in many publications. She and her husband, Daniel, live in Connecticut with their three children, who are 14, 10, and 8.

To my 16-year-old self:

I feel like I should start by telling you to realize how lucky you are. But I think you already know how lucky you are. You truly love high school, and really, how many people can honestly say that? You have wonderful friends. You are healthier and stronger than you've ever been. It feels great to just walk around without those cumbersome metal braces and crutches, doesn't it? Savor your strength and your stamina. Keep moving. Work to be as strong as you can possibly be now, when it's so easy. It won't always be.

You're convinced that those silly dumb boys have trouble seeing past your body's crookedness and scars, and that no one will ever choose you. You're right about the first part; a lot of boys do have trouble understanding that no real woman can measure up to the pin-up posters on their bedroom walls. Add a lopsided spine and long shiny scars to the usual teenage imperfections, to the occasional breakouts and the bad perms, and the poor things just can't handle it.

You're wrong about the second thing, that no one will ever choose you. But your heart will be broken a few times before you get to your happy ending. I'm sorry to tell you that.

It's okay to ignore all that baloney about loving yourself first. It's okay to roll your eyes at the people who ask whether you'd really want to go out with someone so superficial that he can't get past your scars and funny way you walk. It's okay if the answer to that question is "yes," because dammit, shouldn't you get to make bad decisions about going out with jerks, just like your girlfriends do?

But don't make the mistake of assuming that loving you requires some daring leap of faith, some kind of romantic hero. And especially, don't make the mistake of waiting for that guy you will be smitten with in your 20s to make the first move, and when he doesn't, deciding he must not be interested. He is interested. Only he's an idiot. So he won't tell you that he's interested until you're on his couch, crying, telling him that you're tired of sticking around as his best buddy while he chats up the new girl in town. Then he will tell you that he has thought about whether he might want to marry you. This will be the first you've heard of this. That's when the lightbulb will go on. You will realize with devastating clarity how much time you've both wasted, tiptoeing around whether this is destined to be some great love affair, when it could have just been a run-of-the-mill fling. You will realize how much fun you could have had exploring the implications of your very obvious chemistry. If only you weren't so convinced that only some kind of

super-compassionate daredevil would want someone as imperfect as you are. If only he understood that you were strong enough to have your heart broken properly, after a reckless immersion in the foolhardy possibilities of love. Instead, you got death by a thousand cuts from the dull knife of lukewarm deliberation.

We live in an unfair world where the women with long perfect legs and lean muscular abs don't have to prove that they are worth someone's attention. But you don't have to be complicit in the world's questioning of whether you deserve their attention too. You do. You know you do. So act like it.

Someday, a friend will tell you that she doesn't even see your scars and your limp anymore. She just sees you. Someday, another friend will tell you that you don't need to get a tattoo proclaiming your story, of being broken again and again but still thriving, still growing, reaching your crooked limbs toward the endless sky. She will tell you that your scars already tell that story, and that anyone who really loves you understands those scars are the hardest won sort of beauty mark, far better than any tattoo. Someday, your husband will tell you that he's the lucky one, and also that you are beautiful.

Believe them. Believe them the first time they say these things, and every time after.

Love,
Your 46-year-old self

Robin Wright

I was born in Arkansas where I lived on a farm with my big, loving family. I always loved jewelry and science, so I got a degree in Geology at Arkansas Tech University and eventually a degree in Gemology from the Gemological Institute of America. Yes, I truly do have rocks in my head. I now live on the other end of the spectrum of life, right in the middle of New York City. I worked in retail jewelry for 20 years in Arkansas and Colorado and then moved to New York 15 years ago. I have worked at Sotheby's auction house for over 14 years, working my way up from the jewelry vault master to Vice President/ Senior Jewelry Specialist. I've been with my husband for nearly 25 years and I still really like him! He is a native New Yorker, who I met in Colorado. Nothing like the match between a Southern Baptist farm girl and a New York Jew. It is never dull, and it is most often bliss.

TOP 10 THINGS ROBIN WRIGHT WOULD LIKE TO SAY TO HER 16-YEAR-OLD SELF

NO. 1 NO ONE LIKES A DRAMA QUEEN

Except maybe reality TV producers. There's a sign in my office that says "Put your Big Girl Panties On and Deal with It". There really is nothing that is the end of the world, except maybe nuclear holocaust or the cancellation of "Seinfeld"

NO. 2 DON'T TRY SO HARD TO BE NORMAL...OR DIFFERENT

Just concentrate on trying to be. You. Period.

NO. 3 FRIENDS ARE GREAT. GREAT FRIENDS ARE BETTER

You will have lots and lots of friends during your lifetime. Some of them will move or move on. It is a natural progression of maturity. Don't feel badly if people change and you grow apart. As you get older you will recognize who will stick with you to the end.

NO. 4 YOUR PARENTS REALLY ARE SMARTER THAN YOU

I know, I know, it's hard to believe. They may not understand you completely, but they have already been where you are and they learned those mistakes the hard way too. If you're lucky, maybe they'll share some of their bigger mess-up stories with you; so you can tease them about it later in life.

NO. 5 STAY FIT AND ACTIVE

Don't get lazy and flabby. It's so much harder to lose flab than to find it.

NO. 6 EVERYONE HAS JUNK TO DEAL WITH

When you get aggravated at that person who rubs you the wrong way, always remember that they may be dealing with something that you don't know about. That kid that sits next to you in class and can barely stay awake may actually not be sleeping at night because he has someone sick in his household. Be thoughtful and forgiving, and listen to them.

NO. 7 DON'T STRESS OVER GETTING A DATE OR MATE

Be picky; you deserve to. Don't get hung up on "types". And, "Alive and Breathing" is not a type.

NO. 8 FIND SOMETHING YOU LIKE TO DO AND STICK WITH IT

And if you can turn that into a career, then you will enjoy your life so much more. Be really good at something. My daddy used to tell me "I don't care what you do, but be the best one of those that there is. Even if you're a hooker, be the best one." I actually think that was a bit of an exaggeration, but you get the drift.

NO. 9 TATTOOS ARE PERMANENT, CIRCUMSTANCES ARE NOT

Sometimes things will look insurmountable, but if there is one sure thing in life, it is that change happens. Refer again to No. 1.

NO. 10 LIGHTEN UP

Laugh, a lot. At you, at others, at happenings, at random stuff that you see each day. My favorite motto is "If I can laugh ABOUT it, I can live THROUGH it".

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