

first person

## Using a cane made my disability more acceptable to strangers

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Illustration by Juliana Neufeld

“I don’t need a cane!” I growled. “I have been walking perfectly well for the past 37 years without a cane, why would I want to change now?”

“Because it will make walking so much easier,” replied Emma, with a smile.

Admittedly, I knew my law partner was partially correct. Having been born with cerebral palsy, my walking was a bit ungainly, and at times, I found that the extra energy needed to move forward made me tired. The extra movements that I put into walking meant that more energy

was being burned, sometimes more than necessary. I knew that my hiking pole enabled me to walk further, longer and faster but that was in the forest where few people saw me use a “crutch” to deal with my disability. Being in public was a different story – I wasn’t going to give my disability any more concessions than necessary. Using a crutch in public meant weakness, and I was damned if I was going to appear weak.

Interrupting my internal diatribe, Emma’s soft voice piped in yet again: “If you use a cane, you might even walk smoother ... that would look really nice.”

I was getting tired of this discussion. With the dogged determination of a good litigator, she kept at it, convinced that her subject would finally break down if pushed hard enough.

I couldn’t figure out a way to get her to stop this discussion so I agreed to try it for a month. My logic was simple: once I tried using a cane, it would be much easier to say: “Tried it, didn’t work, go away.”

Within hours, she dragged me down to Main Street, to some of our favourite antique stores, to find the “right” cane. After much searching, we found nothing remotely elegant. However, we did find a basic, wooden cane. As it was painted the same shade as my oxblood-coloured shoes, I decided it would suffice. After all, I was only going to use it for a month.

The following day, as I started using it, the results immediately amazed me.

While walking was only marginally improved, and tripping over the cane as I worked at learning to use it drove me crazy, I found the effect on people’s attitudes mind-boggling.

Given the awkwardness of my cerebral palsy, strangers who encountered me on the street often did not know how to respond. Their interpretation of my wacky walking pattern came out in many different ways. The reactions ranged from taunts from passing drivers to teenagers spitting at me and calling me rude names to sales clerks refusing to deal with me. Other times, it involved people slamming doors in my face or, at night, women crossing the street to avoid contact. I have learned to take these types of responses in stride and often find humour in them.

I also learned that blending into the background is not an option.

However, I quickly discovered that this rather mundane, oxblood-coloured cane had magical qualities. The cane immediately started to change people’s attitudes. When I wandered into stores, clerks would smile and say: “Good morning, can I help you?”

As I approached building entrances with heavy doors, someone would invariably rush over and say with a grin: “Let me give you a hand.”

Gone were the rude, insulting comments. The most shocking change was the nighttime sidewalk passing of strangers. Instead of avoidance, as people walked past me, a more common response became a smile and a friendly “Good evening.”

The one-month trial period came and went. A couple of decades later, I'm still using the cane. The paint is worn off, but it still gets the same results. My walking pattern is the same and I'm as unco-ordinated as ever but I am still amazed at the changes in people's reactions. Despite the acknowledgment that I'm using a crutch, it doesn't bother me. After all, it is nice to have someone smile, open the door for me and not call me a "drunk idiot."

The immediate, positive results still puzzle me. Some of my wiser friends suggest that the cane provides a quick answer to a picture that many don't understand. My movements are weird and my walk unusual but the cane provides a silent, easy explanation: "This guy has a disability that makes his walking a bit different."

Maybe, but I prefer my theory – the cane is magical and with a quick wave, it instantly changes people's attitudes.

Perhaps Emma knew a bit more about magic than I gave her credit for.

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