The simple statement that is the title of this column took me 43 years to embrace. In March 2018, I had the privilege to share a bit of my journey of hearing loss to deafness and back again (through CI’s) on the TEDx stage. This talk was the first time in my life that I had ever shared some of my most personal thoughts and feelings about what I went through over the course of 15 years of slowly losing my hearing, and my mom was in the audience. While I don’t think it’s visible in the video, my right leg was shaking the entire time.

My talk has everything and nothing to do with hearing loss. It’s obviously focused on what I went through personally, but it’s also relevant for anyone who has ever felt different or not enough. For anyone who has experienced shame for something that is beyond their control.

Looking back, it’s a bit hard to believe that during that 15 years, I never talked about it. That was my coping mechanism. As if somehow, by not talking about it, it meant it wasn’t really happening. But that one day per year, when I had to go for a hearing evaluation, it couldn’t be avoided. I hated myself on those days. A few years in, I knew that on that day, I would be given the news that my hearing loss was getting worse. I also knew that it meant I would come out from the sound-proof booth to find my mom crying. And that’s where the self-hatred came in. For the pain I was causing her.

For me, being told year after year, by a plethora of professionals, “We don’t know why this is happening and we’ve never seen this progressive loss in a child” left me feeling flawed and broken. Being made fun of for the way I spoke, as my hearing and speech enunciation were deteriorating, taught me that being silent was the safest course—although this was often misinterpreted as being “stuck-up.”

What I’ve learned and embraced:
The thing that I thought made me flawed, has actually been a great gift. It has shaped me into who I am. For all of us, our specific experiences shape us into who we are. Despite our common social conditioning to “fit in,” we are not meant to be like anyone else! We’re not coming off an assembly line; we’re all unique, and that should be shared and celebrated. Not made to feel “less than.”

My talk goes into more detail, but for the parents of deaf children, I urge you to do everything possible to help your child understand my messages, messages that took me too many decades to embrace. Help them to understand that their deafness is nothing to be ashamed of and presents no limits to what they can achieve.

Parting thoughts:
Be you. Be bold. Share more of yourself. The world needs all our gifts and talents. ■

“The privilege of a lifetime is being who you are.”
—Joseph Campbell
https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/joseph-campbell-quotes

To view Angela’s inspirational TED talk: https://www.ted.com/talks/angela_irwin_what_losing_my_hearing_and_getting_it_back_taught_me_about_inclusion