**Embodiment through Play**

By: Ali Hiebert, cōpe guide

In college, I mentored this young woman who was facing some health challenges. We met weekly and talked (and talked and talked) until one week I decided we were going to mix it up. We met in our usual spot, her with an arm load of information ready to share with me, and I took her by surprise when I suggested we try something new with body paints, fancy wigs, stick on gems, and various other craft supplies to adorn our bodies with.

This activity became a core memory for me, and I still have a framed photo of that day in my college memory box. As it turned out, painting in an empty classroom with a friend turned into something far more impactful than either of us would realize that day.

I’d spent months and years being analyzed by the medical system. I endured scrutiny, the opinion of many doctors on what was wrong with me, tried various treatments, and painful procedures all in an attempt to extract a particular outcome. Through those experiences I’d learned an approach to relating to life and my body that was more akin to grin and bear it and white knuckle my way through. Somewhere along the way I’d forgotten being alive was supposed to be fun and bodies were supposed to be joyful.

My body, covered in scars with tubes and wires attached, was a sight of pain and frustration. I had a lot of incredibly strong feelings, very few of them positive, when it came to my relationship with my body and my body image. That’s why the exercise of being covered in pink glitter and wearing a teal mermaid wig, was so profound. I found that while my body could hold pain, it could also be celebrated - that my feeding tube and its matching accessories could be bedazzled.

When our mentoring session came to a close, we agreed upon the idea of choosing to see ourselves in new ways. Embodiment work like this and getting curious through the avenue of play is something I credit my thriving post-transplant to. Whether it was with wigs and glitter or just our everyday outfits, could you step into the acknowledgment that there might be a new way to see things? Are you just seeing one side of an image or story? What if there was another way to see your situation? What if putting on a wig and bedazzling a medical accessory was the way to stepping into a new relationship with your body and illness? What’s the worst thing that would happen if you tried it?

This activity became important for me after my transplant while grappling with my changing body. It was this idea that the way I was currently seeing things was just one version of the story, and I could step into a new retelling at any moment. It became the added whimsy I brought to my physical therapy sessions, the way I maneuvered my mobility aids down a busy downtown street in a bright pink cardigan to bring fun it brought to the otherwise bleak hospital waiting rooms. And how, when I lost my hair and people kindly suggested I might want a normal colored wig, I opted for bright orange and pink.

Here's what I’ve taken with me since that day: life doesn’t have to be so serious, there’s more than one way to tell a story, and always believe in the power of a little glitter.