Open Doors

Scholars in the field of disability termed the word, passing, as a simple act of overlooking the presence of disability in the body. Though physically concealing disability in a body is often more recognizable, Jeffrey A. Brune argues passionately in his book, “Disability and Passing,” that passing equally occurs in literature but in more abstract levels. In literature, passing can take form in authors and audiences as both fail to notice the existence of disability in texts and in public discourses. The implications of passing is the continuous suppressed discussions of disability and failure to acknowledge the many challenges and struggles held within the disability community. To honor their struggles and respect the work of disability scholars, I dedicate my research on noticing Katharine Butler Hathaway, who wrote about her struggles of body deformity in her memoir: *The Little Locksmith*. I found that although tuberculous constrained Hathaway physically, her disability mentally freed her. In her writing, Hathaway used her mental freedom to combat her struggles by symbolically reuniting her body and mind through the restoration of her house.

Katharine Butler Hathaway was born in 1890 in Baltimore, Maryland to a fairly affluent and well-educated family. Though born in Baltimore, the majority of her childhood was spent in Salem, Massachusetts. At the age of five, Hathaway writes that fell terribly ill and “changed from [being] a rushing, laughing child into a bedridden, meditative one” (Hathaway, 14). Her doctor diagnosed her with tuberculous (TB) of the spine. TB at the time was a common deadly disease that “killed one out of every seven
people living in the United States” (CDC). However, Hathaway’s version of TB was non-infectious, asymptomatic, and non-deadly, known as latent TB infection (CDC). Though not deadly, Hathaway still faced the challenge of having a large ball between her shoulders that would eventually physically impaired her. To limit the growth, her doctor prescribes her to be “strapped down very tight on a stretcher, on a very hard sloping pad, with [her] shoulders pressed against a hard pad” (Hathaway, 16). Medical doctors in the late 1800s and early 1900s concluded: “that the simple spinal board, with jacket, mattress, and hypertension applied as required….is the best for all-around treatment” (The British Medical Journal). The only parts of her body free of constraint were her arms, hands and ultimately her mind.

**The Little Locksmith and His Talent**

Hathaway’s understanding of TB as a child was from the locksmith who occasionally came to her house. She knows that “without the treatment [she] was having…[she] would have had to grow up into a-well… like the little locksmith who used to come to [her] house once in a while to fix locks” (Hathaway, 14). She thinks the locksmith was a “very fascinating” man (14). The locksmith never looks at Hathaway, even when she is strapped to her bed, as his eyes are always fixated on the task at hand. He seems to not want to socialize with anyone around him too (14). The locksmith was not a tall man either. His body resembles that of a young boy, but his facial features said another story (14). Hathaway writes that “he was more like a gnome than a human being…[and] naturally seemed to belong to [a child’s] world more than to the grown-up world” (15). She intensely examines the locksmith physical body as a way to imagine what her future life would be, especially what her future body would be. She notices that
“in the back of [the little locksmith’s] coat hung down from an enormous sort of peak, where the cloth was worn and shiny, between his shoulders…. [that made his walk have] a sort of bobbing motion” to it (14). She often finds herself thinking, while looking at the locksmith, what others thought of him and ultimately her future body. Hathaway writes that she knows “somehow… that there was a special word that the grownups called a person shaped like the little locksmith and….to ordinary healthy grownups it was a terrible word” (15). Yet to Hathaway, that terrible word was an idea that she barely escaped. She emphases that she feels “wonderfully lucky and safe” when “compared with him” (15). Her treatment physically separates her with the little locksmith but “underneath [her] luck and safeness, the real truth was that [she] belonged with him, even if it was never growing to show… [she] was secretly linked with him” (15). That ‘secret link’ with the little locksmith carries through the shared talent of being able to use their hands and mind’s focus to make something happen in the world.

Aside from looking at his ‘bobbing motion,’ she sees that “his hands were long, narrow, and delicate, and his fingers were much cleverer than most people’s fingers” (Hathaway, 14). This skill shared between herself and the locksmith is clearly seen in her works of art, and very detailed writing. She calls it her “joyous days” when she is able to compensate her “denied… natural scope” with an “activity on a microscopic scale” and magnify everything at hand and give it “importance [that became] very dear and delightful” to her (16). She “held [her] pencil and pad of paper up in the air above [her] face, and [wrote] microscopic letters and poems, and made little books of stories, and very tiny pictures” (17). The many unfinished stories, poems, and letters made during her life were all published in her book called, The Journals and Letters of The Little Locksmith.
Locksmith, four years after her death in 1942. In addition to her stories, poems, and letters, she sows the tiniest of clothing for dolls with the “most delicious little ruffles” (17). Her skill extends to painting with watercolors and she uses paper to make all sorts of toys like paper dolls and furniture for dollhouses (17). When she “grew tired from… close application,” she has all her creations to enjoy and love (17).

Hathaway’s ability to break away from the straps that constrained her to her bed, allowed her to free her mind. She viewed things differently from others as her worldview was only horizontal. All her paintings, drawings, stories, poems, and physical creations came from her imprisonment of a treatment. Though physically obliged to lie straight and not move, her mind became powerful as it was the only force she could ultimately use and free to move. The help of her arms, hands, and fingers that followed Hathaway’s every mental thought was the only force that linked her body and mind.

**Mirror and the Disconnection with Her Full Body**

That link between her body and self, however, divorces when her “horizontal life of night and day” ended at the age of fifteen (Hathaway, 36). She was pronounced cured and was allowed to walk around. At her immediate release from her bed, Hathaway needed to learn how to walk. Her doctor helped her and taught her how to walk. The moment she is able to walk on her own, she “went to a long mirror to look at [herself]” alone for the first time. Hathaway especially makes sure not to let her mother know and hear her outcries (41). Yet to her surprise, “there was no noise, no outcry; [she does not] scream with rage” but “just felt numb” (41). Before she was able to walk, Hathaway at times “slide [her] hand up under [her] to explore that fateful part” of her body but her “hands always got strangely panic-stricken and came hurrying back without making [her]
any wiser than before” (36). She writes that she constantly thought, “How much it had disfigured [her]”? (36). Hathaway just waits “for the day when [she] should get up and stand plainly revealed” (37). That day came at the age of fifteen when she stands before the mirror thinking, “that person in the mirror couldn’t be me” (41). In her memoir, she writes throughout that feels completely healthy inside just like ordinary people (41). Although she is cured from the disease and is no longer bedridden, whenever she “turned [her] face to the mirror there were [her] eyes looking back, hot with shame” (41).

Growing up, Hathaway feels that she was lucky to be constrained to a bed to help her condition. She knows that her treatment separates herself with the little locksmith but that day when she got a full view of herself in the mirror she knew that she “turned out after all, like the little locksmith…[and] enough to be called by that same [terrible] word” (41). That day marked her life and ignited her struggle between her body and herself.

Hathaway became obsessed with bodies, both hers and of others. Whenever she is in public, she would “pick [beautiful young women] out from among the ordinary people and [lose herself] in contemplation of them, almost as if [she] left [her] own body and entered into theirs” (Hathaway, 87). She stares at “beautiful and worldly-looking girls” from a safe distance and always makes sure to “avoid meeting” them as it makes her “suddenly feel uncomfortable and unsure of” herself (87). This supernatural force of jumping into another’s body made Hathaway “fiercely scorn and despise the girls because, having the bodies of young goddesses, as it seemed to [her], their behavior was a ungoddess-like” (64). She writes that “they took for granted their physical perfection… and if [she] had their chance, if [her] body had risen up, like theirs… [she would] dramatically prepare… for great experiences” (65). Her obsession with bodies also
translates into her dislike for “fussy, broken, clumsy movements of elderly ladies or of vulgar young ones” (87). She mentions that “older people seemed to take everything for granted” too (45). In part, that dislike comes from her perspective that not having a perfect body waved away ‘great experiences’. Moreover, her dislike for older women and vulgar young ladies is the transparent feeling she has for her own body. The “herself” aspect of body and herself, comes from the disconnection of not being able to prepare and experience the ‘great experiences’ the ‘beautiful and worldly-looking’ women have.

Be that as it may, Hathaway continues to writes despite the disconnect of body and herself. She is “always at ease in writing [because] on paper nothing embarrassed [her], nothing was too difficult or too emotional for [her] to try and express” (Hathaway, 50). She finds that “those hours of writing had a shape, a fullness, and solidity that ordinary hours did not have...they were round and full, like fruit...[and] without them the day was barren and sorrowful because it had no meaning” (140). Hathaway’s way of trying to mitigate her pain is to write her pain away. She writes poems for her older brother to read and struggle “for half a day before [she can] bring [herself] to give the poem to [her] brother” (60). Her brother “would take it to his hands very seriously as if [he] were honoring something valuable” and critic her work (60). In her brother’s judgment, some of her works are bad but some, which delights Hathaway very much, was, “wonderful…. [and] pure genius” (60). The praises that come from her brother are rare times and each praises, as Hathaway writes, is “like a magic cloak that he would put around [her], canceling [her] predicament as swiftly and entirely as Cinderella’s was canceled when she found herself dressed for the ball” (60). That ‘magic cloak’ is Hathaway’s way of hiding her body from others but more importantly from herself to feel
normal and beautiful for one night. Despite her efforts in trying to alleviate her sudden pain, writing did not entirely cure it, rather it temporarily ‘cloaked’ it.

**The Unifying House**

Hathaway’s only memoir, *The Little Locksmith*, was part of the cure for pain. Her first house was the ultimate glue that reunified her body and herself. Her entire memoir centers around the purchase of an old and large farmhouse in Castine, Maine. The importance of that house is her decision to not only buy the farmhouse despite what others thought about a thirty-four-year-old and single woman buying a house but her decision to restore the house as opposed to reconstruct it. Hathaway is “awestruck by the force of destiny” when she takes her first step inside the house (Hathaway, 7). She writes that “whether [she] liked it or not this, at last, was her house” and it “frightened [her] very much [as] it filled [her] with astonishing joy” (7). The previous owners sold the house relatively cheap because they “felt contempt and hatred for the house and [did not understand] that it could have beauty or value for anyone” (8). The noteworthy idea around the house is Hathaway’s house was really her body. Whether she liked it or not, that house is hers much like how her body is hers whether she liked it or not. She feels joy when stepping into the house because she finds beauty and value even when others think otherwise. This similarity between her body and the farmhouse was Hathaway’s destiny and solution to her struggles. Her house reunifies her body and herself.

The notion of restoring the house and not reconstructing the house is her way to correct the damage that her old-self made, much like how the previous owners did to the house. Hathaway does not want to reconstruct the house because she wants to show herself and others that something that others believe to be long gone is not a rule written
in stone. She always has a different view of the world and that view translates to her house and ultimately to her view of herself. What others think about her body deformity being far from beautiful and valuable has affected her for too long, so it is truly ‘destiny’ that she has the house. It provides her a clarity that she is also beautiful and valuable. Like the little locksmith, her talent is to restore damaged things. Buying her house to restore its beautiful form bridges the link between her body and herself. She has the ability to restore herself because she has fingers that are cleverer than most people and a mind that is free to think different and be happy when others think she cannot.

Her found happiness of body and mind is a secret she wants to share with the world. She “believed that every human being could be happy” and do so in their “own kind of happiness boldly and positively” (Hathaway 153). She has a firm belief that what ordinary people think is happiness is not the only kind of happiness because she is “deprived of what is generally considered necessary for a happy life” and she makes “something out of nothing” (153). Her secret to her happiness is “through the medium of writing” and using her “house to provide…opportunity for fulfillment, not only for herself but for any others who” want it too (153). Like the little locksmith who restores doors for others, Hathaway restores her house and open doors for herself and others. After her death, the notion of open doors continued through her memoir. Publishing her memoir a few months before her death, was her way of forever having open doors for others because once her life ended, the memoir’s life begins. She never saw her memoir win Bestseller nor did she live to see the many people she inspired, but her publication of her memoir meant her doors will never close for others.
Her disability may have limited Hathaway physically, but it mentally freed her and made her who she is: a strong woman who can find beauty and happiness where others cannot. As seen in her writing, her struggles in body deformity cease to exist as she finds the beauty and value in her house as it symbolically links her body and herself together. Instead of jumping into other’s body and trying to envision herself in a different life, she uses her disability’s gift of mental freedom to find her happiness. Her mental freedom provides her a platform to see life differently and give other’s meaning, like her house and writing. Her house is the unification of her body and herself and writing being the outlet where she can express herself. Hathaway also uses her shared talent with the little locksmith to show to the world beauty is the original form. Her body deformity is who Hathaway is and reconstructing her body would only hide her true beauty. By restoring the house’s original beauty and ultimately her born beauty, she can restore and open doors that were damaged by what others think is beautiful.

I found Katharine Butler Hathaway a woman I aspire to be one day. I wanted to notice her and acknowledge all that she went through. Hathaway taught me through her writing that I will forever aim to be aware of my actions as I never want to commit the act of passing her or anyone else in the disability community. Writing about Hathaway was my way of opening doors for others to see Hathaway and feel how powerful life can be if you love and value yourself for who you are.
Work Cited

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