

It was summer. I was sitting talking to my mom. I reminded her that the next day I would head over to the hospital to do some volunteer work with children suffering from different conditions. This hospital was the same place where I had been taken 14 years ago for a very special reason. In that moment, my mom took my hand, stroked the edge of my right thumb, and said...

"Hana, you were born with eleven fingers."

She went on to say there used to be a little finger with a tiny nail growing from the edge of my thumb and, astonished by the extra digit, she took me to the doctor right away and had it removed.

The next day as I worked at the hospital I thought to myself, "Is having ten fingers really normal? Why can't it be eleven? or nine?" Some people are tall, and some are short. Some wear glasses, and some do not. No one is really the same.

Before I go on, I should mention my mom almost didn't tell me about my extra finger. She was worried it would make me uncomfortable in my own skin. But my father encouraged her to do so because he felt it would be good for me to learn. And, it might just make me question how I react to difference. I'm so glad my mom married my dad. She is too. He can be pretty smart sometimes.

Learning about my extra finger did make me uncomfortable in my own skin for a little while. I almost didn't talk about my former extra finger here today. I was worried my friends might make fun of me or my teachers might look at me differently when they learned of my defunct digit. People are often quick to feel uncomfortable around people who are different. Ask my brother. He's autistic. He knows what it's like to be made fun of.

However, I realized my former finger had given me a rare opportunity. Talking about it has allowed me to give all of you the same gift my parents gave me, a chance to think about how you treat people who are different.

When we welcome difference, our minds open. We see new ideas, new possibilities. Most importantly, we conquer fear and discover kindness and compassion, allowing us to warm up to a better definition of what "normal" actually is.

I don't want to see children suffer from being compared to what is "normal". Having missing limbs, missing organs, an extra finger, or autism doesn't make you any less of a human being. In fact, it's facing and welcoming these differences in yourself and others that turns you into a better person. "Normal" to me means being kind, and respecting and accepting other people as they are, doing so more often than you can count on just ten fingers. I hope you will look inside yourself, see how you react to different people, and make sure you do so with acceptance, compassion, and love!