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Where have you been all my life?

What would your future self say about all those times you judge your body in the mirror now? Maybe it's time to feel grateful.

by Brandi Kelley

One morning, I stepped out of the shower and caught a glimpse of my face and body in the mirror. This isn't unusual, given that the mirror faces me as I exit the shower, but that day it was different, because I held my own gaze for a time. As I scanned over the reflected picture of my body in the mirror frame, a few thoughts crossed my mind: I might need extra concealer for those dark circles, time and gravity have a very specific relationship to boobs, the skin on my inner thighs seems extra saggy today, and....I have aged.

Reflecting back at me with two gray-blue eyes was a living and breathing body that showed evidence of a life that had been lived for 31 years. It wasn't just the evidence of age in my physical body that was notable this morning, but my reaction to this evidence that is worth a second glance. On most other days, my mind would have registered this image of my body as a reminder of what once was, and is no more; an internal judging of myself. But for a brief moment in the early hours of that morning, I viewed what was in the mirror with wonder and curiosity.

Where have you been all of my life? That curvy frame with freckled and stretch-marked skin. It has been through a lot on the outside and the inside for over 364,000 days....like swinging on the monkey bars, daring choreography, passionate embraces, and isolation. Not just my body, but my mind. The brain that is housed inside of this head has yearned for knowledge outside of its own understanding, protected itself by creating distance from harmful memories, created moving art works of the imagination, and has been both helpful and hurtful to itself as it over analyzes and reasons. As I slid each limb into my comfy and obligatory dance attire for the day, I imagine what it felt like to do this activity ten years ago. I know I was able to balance on one foot a hell of a lot better to put on a pant leg, but my arms and shoulders are much more mobile than I remember them being when I maneuvered my way through a tight slip-on sports bra in the past. Also, ten-years-ago Brandi would not have been riding a bike or working out before a class.... Or ever.

Daydreaming on my bike ride across campus, I wondered: What will my body and mind be like in 10....20...30 years from today? What will I care about doing when I first wake up? What will I be wearing on this body, and why? What will I be making time for? How will it feel to move in my body? What will the world be like around it, and what will my place be within it? So, with all of these questions in mind, I wrote a letter to my 61-year-old self.

Dear Brandi,

I hope that you are currently sitting down. I wonder if today you have stepped outside or seen your friends and family, and I am wondering if you're OK just being by yourself. Have you caught a glimpse of yourself in the mirror recently? Have the Keeton hips and thighs become more pronounced? Do you have freckles dusted permanently over your shoulders and nose? Does your body have character, but creak like the hardwood floors in a historic house? I hope that you have created something today—a soufflé, a laugh at yourself or with others, a piece of choreography in your kitchen with gripper socks on. Is the world kinder or more gentle than you

remember it when you were my age? Tell me that there is sweetness left, and giving of one's self, more than there is giving up on one's self.

Would you like to know a secret I've never told anyone? I actually love the idea of getting wrinkles, and I bet that your crow's feet on your eyes are divine and allow you to remember the times you laughed and smirked, and were scared, and cried. And times when you were in the experience of the sun, and conversation with daughters and dads, and an audience and your teachers. I hope you are taking comfort. I hope you are hopeful, and graceful, and rather than effortless, still putting effort in somehow. Still into the things that matter to you, and not the things that matter to others about you.

I hope that at this point you are able to enjoy your work in a new way. And what it is like to be a woman of a certain age with more anonymity and fewer eyes looking at you? What is it like to embody the wisdom and experience of 61 years in a female casing that houses a fierce soul? I look forward to the day when I might feel this contentment and self-assurance for more than just a few fleeting moments of a single morning.

With admiration,
Me

As I read this letter today, that state of self-assurance and ease seems so distant. I feel a heaviness in my chest at the thought of the time... it takes... that I've taken....all the years... the constant redirecting of attention. To what really matters. It's funny isn't it? How as a human, as a woman, it seems to take so much effort to be able to look at yourself and be yourself in the world with ease? As lovely as it is to imagine this future version of myself, I find it just as easy to imagine a version of my 61-year-old self who still struggles with her body in the world. Who still only accidentally looks at herself in the mirror, as if for the very first time, and wonders, "Where have you been all of my life?"

Brandi Kelley is a dance educator and choreographer who approaches her work and her dancers with a growth mindset and compassion. She holds both a B.F.A. in Dance Performance and an M.Ed. in Secondary Education from the University of Central Oklahoma, and she is currently a second year M.F.A candidate in Dance at the University of California, Irvine.