Different? I'm Not Different. Am I?

There's a pull between who I am and the way I look. Do you accept me for who I am, or do you pity me because I am different? Or is it because I look different, I must be different? Why won't you see past the outside?

Why has nature done this, and why won't society accept it? Why did I have to go through emotional turmoil to find myself? Why did society's fears and ignorance keep me from learning to accept myself?

My name is Helen Brown and as a child I experienced the turmoil of being physically different. I had corrective surgery from birth to the age of 20. The turmoil was not from having the surgery but from the attitudes of my peers and society around me. I look at the turmoil now, and it almost doesn't seem real. It is the period I least remember, but that is because it was the most confusing and it was then I felt the most discontentment. The turmoil occurred when I was 13 and 14. There was a lot of name calling and teasing. I never knew when someone was going to make a comment. Would it happen at this corner or maybe that one? It almost always seemed to happen when I was most unprepared for it.

I think about what the teasing did, and how it led to a lot of anger (which was just hurt, deep down). And I look at what I did with the anger and how I would take it home and take it out on my parents. They tried so hard to show me that I was alright. “You're OK. You are not different. We do not see you as being different”. I start to believe that I am alright because I believe my parents. Then I go back to school and the teasing would start; I'd get on the subway, people would stare.

I became so obsessed with the way I looked I started to build a wall between myself and society. Any time I would meet someone, I would never give them the chance to get to know me because I was so aware of the way I looked. I would become very quiet and cut off my emotions.

They tried to get me out of my slump by different therapy and by different therapists but this didn't work. I would go to the therapists and they would tell me how to cover up the outside by make-up and dress. The only problem was that they didn't show me why I needed to do it for myself. I can remember leaving therapy crying and being very confused. That is where, I feel, the hurt should have been dealt with first. I should not have been shown how to hide from it.

This went on for about two years. Questioning: Why me?, disliking myself more and more. There was the wanting so much to look the same, so that people would stop defining the physical as being so different. Then things started to change.

The doctors were talking about more corrective surgery, but this time it was for my face. They were going to make me a chin, flatten out my upper lip. I was very pleased. I can remember standing in front of the classroom and one of the boys made a comment on how I didn't have much of a chin. I can remember laughing to myself, “Ah, maybe not. But not for long!” But with the lip I thought that was even better. It was the one thing I was most conscious of and I know it was the root of the turmoil.

They did the surgery and I was pleased. Then a couple of months later I started group psychotherapy. It was a group of two counsellors and six other young people. It was very effective, and it was where I learned to accept myself. My confusion was defined. I was shown the anger, then I was taught how to deal with the hurt. It was a step-by-step process, and it did not come over night. Questions arose: Why do you think you need or want the surgery? Why is it so important to look the same? The questions, I found, actually became more important than the surgery itself.

The therapy was the key to the understand-
ing, but the stability of my parents and family was most important. They were there when it was hurting and when I needed supporting. They were there when I had to have the surgery. I can still hear my mother's voice, “By tomorrow it will be all over.” And yes, by the next day it was all over; and yes, they were there. Even if I couldn’t remember, I still know they had been. And I now thank God for that.

I often wonder what would have happened if they hadn’t understood or if they hadn’t given me stability over the years.