

Shoulders

Every girl out there knows what I'm talking about when I mention that "one awkward body part that makes shopping a royal pain." Boys-- either take my word on this one or feel free to ask any female present if they have a problematic physical feature. I promise they do. For some it's "lanky legs," others have "thunder thighs," more are simply "too short to fit in anything." In my case, it has always been my shoulders. My disproportionately broad and fairly muscular shoulders are a complete hindrance when I attempt to buy flattering clothes of any kind. If it fits my abdomen, there is approximately a 73.6% chance that I can't lift my arms higher than a ninety degree angle. I can't tell you how many times I've gotten stuck in a shirt and needed to call in a rescue squad (usually my mom). Okay, I've probably made my point. But really... they're huge!

But I have grown to love my shoulders. Yes, you read that right. I love my shoulders. Obviously, it would be nice if I could find clothes to fit them, but I have managed thus far with my 26.4% success rate. The truth is that my shoulders are broad because they are strong. As a swimmer, I have done endless laps and countless weight repetitions to help strengthen them. The power of my shoulders has enabled me to do things atypical of a girl my age. Since twelve years old, I have been my family's designated 'lugger of the Morton salt bags.' Unfailingly, I am the lucky individual that my tired friends flock to when they are looking for a piggy-back ride. On canoe trips to the Boundary Waters, who usually portages over 80 pounds of gear? Yours truly.

This is all fine and dandy, yet it is not the real reason that I am willing to accept and even appreciate my abnormally broad shoulders. Sure, being capable of hauling heavy objects is nice. But my shoulders' true strength lies beyond the lifting capacity of my deltoid, infraspinatus, and

other muscles. Their power is hidden somewhere that cannot be demonstrated by how much I can bench press; it is far beyond any conventional definition of “strength.” Over time, I have learned how to harness and refine their power. I use it every single day. It has defined who I am.

The true strength of my shoulders lies in their invisible ability to take on the weight of my emotional burdens. They are the dumping grounds for all the tough stuff: worries about the future, ruminations on the past, stressful situations. Basically, my brain and shoulders have perfected their trade relationship. Whenever a troublesome thought threatens to crowd my mind or cloud my judgment, it is immediately exported to my shoulders. There, the worries are always willingly accepted. No burden is too small or large; all will be stored away and carried. Yes, my muscles become tight when they are strained. Anyone who has attempted to give me a back massage will tell you that my shoulders can, at times, be riddled with knots. The knots are, in an abstract way, a Braille documentation of the current loads I am carrying with me. They are often quite numerous, telling the tales of my troubles. If these loads were stored exclusively in my mind, I wouldn’t be able to function beneath their weight. But my shoulders can handle it. With them, I can continue on with my life.

My shoulder-system has been there to mitigate the jumble of thoughts in my head for as long as I can remember. When I was really little, the biggest issues that life threw my way were fairly miniscule and easily manageable. A friend didn’t want to play jump rope with me? Fine, I would go play kickball with someone else and giggle any frustration away. More demanding problems were things that grown-ups needed to deal with, so I didn’t concern myself or my shoulders with them. Then came the awkward middle school years. Life was no longer as simple as coloring between the lines of my Disney coloring book. Peers found their egos, friend

groups changed, school became more challenging. In seventh grade, I took a trip with my grandma to Guatemala and my eyes were opened to extreme poverty, starvation, and illiteracy. The world was no longer a shiny, wonderful place where laughter could solve all of the problems. In order to keep a smile on my face, I began to put my shoulders to work.

My life was not the only one that began complicating as obliviousness melted away: all of my friends were right there with me. Those years between the loss of childhood and finally getting our drivers' licenses were some rocky ones. Backs were stabbed; hearts were broken. Although there had been tragedy and pain all along, our eyes had just opened to it. As reality hit, I discovered another hidden power that my shoulders possessed: comforting others. If a friend's boyfriend broke up with them, my shoulders were there to catch their tears. I shared the burden-carrying ability of my shoulders with people I cared about. My basement held countless venting sessions and deep life chats. There, worries were dumped, and I picked each and every one up.

As one could imagine, soon I was toting around a pretty heavy load. Sure, my mind was kept relatively clear, but I knew that carrying everything with me couldn't be healthy, so I quickly learned ways to alleviate the pressure. It came to my realization that there was no need for me to hoard the majority of this emotional baggage in my shoulders. Thus, I began letting go. I shed some of my knots in tough workouts at the pool; others were dissipated in happy tears from laughing too hard. Life simply became lighter.

At sixteen, I was appreciative of the powers of my shoulders to carry, comfort and let go. Little did I know that my shoulders would be the sole reason that I would make it through the next part of my life.

All it took to crumble my world was three words. Three words that instantaneously changed everything. When my dad spoke them at a family dinner one night, I was completely blindsided.

“I have cancer.” Lymph and tonsil cancer. My dad. Stage IV. Thousands of pounds came crashing down onto me. I could barely breathe. How did this happen? Why him? What will we do? Will anything ever be okay again? Burdens.

I may not have known it, but I had been training myself for these burdens. Somehow, I was ready for them. The fear, worry, and weakness were all forced out of my mind and onto my shoulders. My dad needed to fight this cancer, and within minutes of hearing the news, I had already decided that I would be strong for him. I knew that my shoulders were powerful and I drew my strength from them. They became everything for me.

As treatments began, our family was truly turned upside-down. My father had always been a motivated man with a fiery spirit that you could see in his eyes. The chemotherapy dulled his spark and he sullenly dwelled on the couch most days. The radiation burned his throat and made eating nearly impossible, so his nourishment came via a feeding tube. My dad was still determined to beat this disease, but the battle was taking away many of the qualities I loved the most about him. Often, I didn't know who he was.

Life outside of my home continued moving relentlessly like a raging river. My shoulders were the reason that I kept my head above the water. They were gnarled with knots of pain and anxiety, but I tried to keep smiling and many people at school never even knew about the turmoil in my home. My mom, fourteen year old brother and I all coped with the pressure very differently. I tried to share my strength of my shoulders with them, but there was only so much I could do.

Months later, the treatment cycle was complete. While we were waiting to see if it had been successful, I started dumping burdens and breathing became easier. In April, four months after the diagnosis, my dad was declared cancer free. The moment I found out, the gnarls melted off of my back and a genuine smile plastered itself to my face. We had made it.

My dad was back. Slowly but surely, I saw our old life return to normal. Little things mattered more; we all were more appreciative of the life that was regained.

Then, I heard the two words that I feared the most: “It’s back.” Last April, almost exactly a year after the cancer had been declared as eradicated, it returned. This time, we knew exactly what to expect. My shoulders sprung back into action the moment those dreaded words were uttered. Doctors recommended a special type of treatment, proton therapy, which could only be completed in Chicago. Thus, my father lived seven hours away from us for most of the summer. This brought with it a whole new set of struggles and emotions, but we made it through. In September, he was declared cancer free yet again. The disease has left an indelible mark upon my father and family, but I thank God every day that my dad is still around.

I am also thankful for my shoulders, despite the fact that they are broad and make finding clothes a hassle. They are my blessings in disguise. I have worked hard to make them muscular and physically strong. More importantly, they take on the brunt force of the worries of my world in form of knots. I can share their power with others, helping those I love. When the world tumbled in on me, they were crucial to my survival. I use them every single day to keep my mind lucid, and they adapt to constantly changing needs. It is not clear what the future has in store for me. Whatever it may bring, I am confident that shoulders are prepared, for I have trained them.