

**A GOLD MEDALIST'S GUIDE
TO FINDING AND LOVING
YOURSELF**

BEYOND the SURFACE

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 **sounds true**
BOULDER, COLORADO

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Introduction

SOME PARENTS ARE introduced to their new baby on a sonogram screen and then meet them in a hospital room after nine months of careful preparation, but some parents—like mine—are introduced to their child through a photograph from an orphanage and travel to meet them for the first time in a foreign country.

The first time my parents ever held me, I was already thirteen months old. “Little Tanya” is what the Russian caretakers at the orphanage called me as they first placed me in my dad’s waiting arms. I was kept in a room with rows of cribs, my little blond head peeking through the bars of my cradle at this man who represented a whole new world and family waiting for me. He’d traveled to Irkutsk, Russia, to adopt me and another little boy from the same orphanage while my new mom stayed back in Maryland with their two other children. My dad walked into that drafty old orphanage in the middle of March, locked eyes with me, and didn’t see the disability I’d been born with. He saw only his beautiful baby daughter he had come to take home.

When you cannot conceive or carry a baby after previously giving birth, it’s called *secondary infertility*. My parents, Steve and Beth Long, had two children and then weren’t able to have another. But adoption had been a possibility they’d talked about even before experiencing infertility, so they immediately turned to that alternative—which started my journey through this amazing life.

My mom says that as she held that picture of a little Russian baby girl, she knew right away I was the child God wanted them to adopt. My parents had connected with a team of people who were in the process of starting

an adoption agency, and this team had taken the picture of me the last time they visited the orphanage where I was living. My soon-to-be parents stared at that picture as they were told about a little girl in Russia who was born without part of her legs. They knew that many orphans overseas had physical disabilities, and wanting to care for whatever children they could, they checked to make sure their health insurance covered any surgeries and hospital visits that might be necessary. They'd always wanted a big family, so they also decided to bring a second child home from the same orphanage. In December 1992, Steve and Beth made plans to adopt a little boy, Dennis Alekseevich Tumashoff, along with the little girl from the picture, Tatiana Olegovna Kirillova. Our names were changed to Joshua Dennis Long and Jessica Tatiana Long, and we officially became members of the Long family!

Even though he is two years older than I am, Josh was very small for three years old and had recently gotten over dysentery when he was adopted, so we were the same size and looked like little blond-haired twins. Josh was born with a cleft lip and palate, but soon after coming to the United States, he had surgery to repair it.

Doctors told my parents that I had been born with *fibular hemimelia*, which means I was missing my fibula bones and most of the other bones in my lower legs. My tibia bones made a ninety-degree bend a few inches below the knee, and I had tiny feet with three toes on each side that looked like they were attached to the back of my legs. Before bringing me home, my parents considered the idea of a leg-lengthening surgery, but they knew when they saw me in person that I didn't have ankles or enough leg bones to even attempt that. After consulting with multiple doctors, they decided on amputation so that I could be fitted with prosthetic legs and learn to walk.

I was eighteen months old when my little feet were amputated. My parents were able to stay with me while I was sedated. Then the anesthesiologist carried me to the operating room. They remember me looking back at them over the anesthesiologist's shoulder, quietly saying, "Nyet, nyet," the Russian word for "no." It was heartbreaking for them. They watched me as I was carried away for a major surgery and prayed that they'd made the correct decision, knowing it was one that couldn't be undone.

I woke up wearing a plaster cast on each leg with red aluminum poles sticking out the bottoms and attached to plastic feet. Those were my first prosthetic legs. I looked over to see my baby doll lying on the hospital bed next to me. My parents had cut off her legs before my surgery and wrapped her in two casts to help prepare me for this moment and so I wouldn't feel alone in that sterile, white room. Within twenty-four hours of waking up from my amputation surgery, I stood up on that first pair of legs, balancing in the middle of the children's playroom in the hospital. My parents had scheduled an appointment with a physical therapist to help me learn to walk, but they canceled it because I was already tottering around on my prosthetics. My parents quickly learned that I was never one to be slowed down.

Growing up, I remember my parents had a black box that they kept up high in their den office. It was our "Russian box," filled with Joshua's and my Russian passports, birth certificates, and naturalization papers; those first pictures of us; and a necklace from Russia that my parents said I could have when I turned sixteen. The necklace excited me the most; it was a silver egg-shaped pendant with a purple stone in the center. My favorite movie was *Anastasia*, which is about a Russian orphan who is also a long-lost princess, and Anastasia was gifted a necklace by her grandmother that helped them to find each other in the end. I would hold my necklace from my Russian box and imagine that I was a princess, too. I always wanted to stare at the items in that box and sometimes tried to climb up onto the tall bookshelf to go through it myself, which is why they kept the box so high up, where I couldn't get to it and lose anything. It felt like a secret treasure box that could tell me who I was. Even then as such a small child, I found myself questioning who I was and hoped that the simple answer for it could just be found in that one small box.

Every once in a while, my dad would pull it down and go through each item with us on the floor while he laid on his side, propped up on an elbow. "You're part of our family because we chose you," my parents would remind me. We were met with a big surprise three years after the adoption when my mom suddenly got pregnant again with a little girl. We thought it was a one-time miracle until two years later she had

another little girl! I became one of six kids: four girls and two boys. I was confused at first about not being from mom's belly, like four of my siblings were, but holding those items from my Russian box helped by giving me tangible evidence that I came from somewhere, too. I was part of two worlds. I'd look through the box with my siblings and wonder about my birth mother—whose name was Natalia, according to my birth certificate—and I'd wonder if she ever thought about me, too.

I always loved my family, but I also felt like the odd one out while growing up. I wasn't treated any differently than my other siblings, yet I was always the different one in my mind because of my legs. And once I understood what adoption was, I realized I was also different because of how I came to my family. Although my brother didn't have a desire to know more about his past, I had so many questions about where I came from and why I was given up. These early realizations about my differences from everyone else around me were the first seeds of a years-long battle within me. A battle to feel worthy of this second chance, at having a new life, of being different. A battle rooted in a fear of abandonment, understanding that I'd already been abandoned once. A fear that I was broken and unlovable. This battle would follow me, waging on inside me for years to come.

You may not be missing any limbs or have a disability. You may not be adopted or an athlete. But I believe we can all identify with having struggled with our sense of value and worth at some point in our lives. So many of us spend years trying to be the people we think our families, friends, coworkers, and society think we should be. If we dress a certain way, then we'll fit in. If we just follow the rules, then we'll be accepted. If we have the right job, then we'll be successful. We spend so much time comparing ourselves to others, folding ourselves into boxes, and feeling ashamed of the very things that are our inherent gifts, that we completely lose sight of how much we have to offer others and the world.

My journey to self-acceptance has been one of the hardest of my life. My biggest difference from those around me was obviously very visible, something I couldn't fully hide. My legs were a source of real shame for me. And as my shame mounted throughout my childhood, I attached

myself to wanting to be seen as pretty, strong, and all of the other things that made up who I thought I was. I threw myself into anything I could to try to take attention away from my legs and prove myself. I made everything a race with my siblings that I needed to win. I wanted to wear all the trendy clothes and be one of the popular girls. I immersed myself in gymnastics and learned how to do flips on the trampoline and balance beam. But none of those things fully quieted the battle that was building inside of me, fed by my anxieties and fears about my own unworthiness. It's funny that we often think that distracting ourselves from our feelings will somehow make them magically disappear—that by immersing ourselves in a sport, an instrument, social media, “being the best,” or even being the child our parents can rely on, we'll somehow fill that worthiness hole. Like if we can convince everyone around us that we are worthy, maybe we'll start to believe it, too. But that's never the case.

Our worth cannot be placed in external things—our looks, our job, or the approval of others. That will never make us feel truly worthy. I've repeatedly learned this lesson over the years through my own internal struggles and battles that I've fought, even as the limelight was on me. Standing on podiums and winning gold medals couldn't compensate for a lack of self-love.

True self-acceptance lies in embracing every aspect of who you are, including your flaws and imperfections, and recognizing that they're integral parts of your unique identity and humanity. I've seen the impact it makes to embrace who we are and find the power in our differences and what each of us has to offer. Self-acceptance is a process—it certainly doesn't happen overnight—but we can find our way back to ourselves and what we stand for. When we step away from all of the external noise and reclaim who we are and who we want to be in this world, we have no limits. We can be confident in our abilities and trust that we're on the right path.

I've spent my whole life working to accept that I am worthy, I am loved, and I have nothing to prove. I want to share the lessons and tools I've used to help me restore my confidence in who I am and my place in the world to help others who are struggling. If you can see yourself in me,

maybe you can also see that you're capable of so much more than what you're giving yourself credit for. I've included some of the practices I've used and still use today. Our journey to self-worth is ongoing. We'll have ups and downs as our lives change and flow. But I believe that having a strong tool kit that you can easily reach for is the key to moving with the water and not against it.

This book is written in two parts. In part 1, we're going to start within. I'll share some key moments in my life that shaped the way I thought about myself and how we can start challenging those mindsets and learn to accept ourselves in the process. In part 2, we'll look outward to the world around us, taking steps to find our purpose and be the change the world needs. By fully accepting ourselves, we create an outward ripple that will inspire others.

I want this book to feel like we're chatting over a cup of coffee at one of the cute, aesthetic coffee shops I love. I want to look into your eyes and share my story and then hear yours. Like a conversation between friends, we'll laugh and get vulnerable and maybe challenge each other. Some of my experiences might bring up similar hard memories and feelings for you, but we're here to support each other. I've got your back! We can do this!

In sharing my journey with you, I hope there's something valuable that you can take from it and apply in your own life. Something that inspires you or makes you look at the world a little differently. Something that gives you a greater compassion for yourself and your own journey.

I'm going to share all the many pieces of me: the good and the bad, the beautiful and the most achingly challenging moments I've faced. I want you to see my daring just as much as my disenchantments, the full journey to who I am. I used to struggle with vulnerability, with anything that made me feel or appear "weak." But I'm ready to share with you now, friend. I'm ready to explore and share my journey to self-acceptance, through my own doubts of self-worth and battles with insecurities. I'm ready to lay it all out there and examine it piece by piece—and I hope you're ready to do the same. No matter what season you find yourself in, you're not alone. Let's take this first step together.

Part I

STARTING WITHIN

Learning to Accept Ourselves

I

The First Ripples of Otherness

I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND why I was different.

I didn't get it. I didn't like it, and as a child, I didn't *want* to be different. Through my formative years, all I wanted to do was blend in. But growing up without legs, I was faced with countless moments where I had to confront the fact that I *was* different. I had the atypical childhood experience of repeated surgeries and a constant sense of insecurity about my place in the world and what my future would hold.

When I looked around me, I saw that my family didn't have to go through the same pain that I went through. The pain of waking up from another surgery. The fear that gripped me as I entered the hospital again, putting on the itchy nightgown, being wheeled into a white room that smelled like rubbing alcohol, surrounded by doctors and nurses in blue. The whole scene was always so upsetting for me. It was terrifying, really, though I tried not to show it.

I was only eighteen months old when I had my amputation surgery after being adopted, so I don't remember it, but what I do remember is feeling a tightness in my chest and a nervousness that overwhelmed me with each surgery after that. The doctors' masks, as they came into the surgical room, made it all the more scary. I could never fully see their faces, these people who would put me to sleep and change my body, even as I knew that they spoke to me nicely. I felt like I was a problem. How many little girls knew how to climb from the hospital bed to the cold

surgical table without being prompted? How many knew the flavors of anesthesia (I always chose orange) or that even if you fight it, they will still put the mask over your face and put you to sleep?

As a child, I hated the doctors. Sure, they usually had kind eyes, and my parents made sure I understood that they were helping me with my legs. But I also knew that whenever they put me to sleep, I woke up in pain. I always felt a weight in my chest as I waited for my next surgery, but the disorientation of waking up in a different room and feeling like my legs were on fire was always worse than the weight of that dreaded anticipation. For me, these surgeries came around so quickly. It felt like just when I'd conquered one and fully recovered, I'd have to go back in for another. I would sometimes avoid telling anyone of the physical agony I was in just to avoid going back.

As I grew and got old enough to understand, the frequent surgeries came more into focus for me. Doctors told us that the bones in my legs had developed "bony overgrowth." Every couple of years, I'd need to get a revision surgery to have the bony overgrowths in my legs removed. When my parents first adopted me, they thought I'd need a one-and-done surgery, not several rounds that seemed to go on forever. They weren't expecting more surgeries once my little feet were amputated; yet there we were, back at the hospital, over and over again. My tibias kept growing with my growth spurts, and the doctors had to keep cutting them.

As the years went on, when the doctors told me I could bring a parent back into the surgical area with me for support, I found that I was often doing it more for my parents than I was for myself. I wanted a parent to come back with me just so they got to see what I had to go through. After a few surgeries, I stopped looking to my parents for support or comfort the way I saw other kids in the hospital doing, but I still wanted them to *see* it, to *understand* it. I wanted to show them that I was really strong. If I was strong, then maybe they wouldn't see me as a problem. Maybe people would see that strength instead of my differences. I didn't want pity or for people to treat me differently, so I tried to prove how tough I was instead. I tried to hide the fear.

We would talk about all sorts of different things to get my mind off of the surgery at hand, but I was scared, every time. And it was a waiting game—a waiting game of smells and images that haunted me even when I was at home. Then the time would come for the doctors to do all the surgical prep and mark up my legs yet again. My parents and I learned to be very specific with the doctors about my history of surgeries and what medications worked for me, and to ask a lot of questions. If they left my bone too sharp at the end of my leg, and it wasn't rounded, I'd feel like the sharp point of it might break through my skin as I walked. As a small child still playing with dolls, I was already instructing doctors about my health and well-being.

Physical touch from others became too much for me, mounting with each passing doctor's visit, but I was still too young to understand why. Around four years old, I stopped letting my parents hug or cuddle me, both inside and outside the hospital. I remember my parents trying to touch me before and after surgeries, and that really upset me too much for me to handle and process. When the doctors tried to help me onto the bed, I'd swat them away and refuse their help. I hated those helping hands. So, I would jump onto the cold operating table on my own.

I would think to myself, *You can't cry, you can't be upset*, even when my little heart was beating so fast and my ears were warm from fear. There was a terrible beeping from machines that always bothered my ears and bright fluorescent lights that made the room feel like something out of a movie. Scrubs, masks, and surgical caps. Drainage tubes that got pulled out of my legs in the middle of the night as I was sleeping, feeling as if my skin was being ripped open as blood dripped out of my leg. Inside, I wanted to cry. Outwardly, I was angry—it was like a vibration through my body. I was once so angry after a surgery that they had to sedate me when I started punching at the doctors and nurses. But I couldn't articulate why I was so twisted up inside.

After every surgery, I would get special visits from family members, sometimes bearing gifts. My grandparents would always bring me my favorite strawberry popsicles, which I usually could only have when I visited their house, since they weren't the organic ones my mom would