Written by Maja Sommer

When we talk about life with CP, one story is often repeated: That you have to train, fight, and constantly improve yourself in order to have a good life. But what if that story is not always helpful?

This question has stayed with me ever since I attended the CP Nordic Conference.

At the conference, I heard PhD researcher Olivia Dahl present her dissertation, *From Outsider to Crip*. She showed an illustration of a square box representing the system, alongside a cluster of balls, asking why they had to change to fit into the box instead of the box adapting to them. For me, that image was very powerful. It illustrates how both I and others can automatically assume that we are the problem because our bodies do not fit into the system.

In the research article *The Tragedy of Promising Happiness Through Overcoming Disability*, Olivia Dahl and Merete Monrad explore this issue further through interviews with 36 adults with CP. The participants reflect on their childhoods and experiences of growing up with CP to better understand the stories and ideas that shaped them through their parents, schools, healthcare professionals, and "the system".

Many of the participants describe childhoods marked by physical training, treatment, and surgery with a strong emphasis on improving physical function. At the same time, several of the participants felt that their social lives, wellbeing, and sense of identity recieved less attention.

Several participants also describe feeling that their bodies were "wrong" – something that needed to be changed. For many, this led to a feeling of never being good enough. When parents, teachers, physiotherapists, doctors, and others continually focus on becoming "better" or improving, if we just do X, Y, and Z, it can send the message that our bodies are not good enough as they are. How can we learn to value ourselves as we are when the world around us is constantly telling us we need to change?

The article also highlights a paradox: the efforts intended to help the participants sometimes created new challenges instead. When the goal becomes being as "normal" as possible, other important parts of life can be overshadowed. The authors therefore argue for a broader perspective. A good life cannot be reduced to physical function alone. It is also about belonging, purpose, and self-acceptance. It is about having friends, enjoying football, dreaming of becoming an actor, or hoping to start a family one day. These are ordinary hopes, interests, needs, and aspirations that we all share.

When I read about the participants' childhood experiences, it felt like reading about my own life with CP. It brought me a sense of relief because I realised I was not the only one who had

felt this way. At the same time, it was difficult to read because it brought back painful feelings: wanting to hide my disability and never feeling good enough, normal enough, or accepted.

You can hardly see my CP, but I still carry these feelings of shame with me. They still resurface when I am confronted with the limitations that come with my disability. For example, I experience fatigue quite easily and sometimes need to take time off work to recover. That can leave me feeling ashamed because I cannot always keep pace with others and, at times, feel as though I am failing to meet society's expectations.

When those thoughts arise, I think of the image of the square box and the balls. My body, and the needs that come with it, were never meant to fit neatly into that box. But that does not mean I cannot work or participate fully in society. It simply means that I need to do so in a way that works for me.

Perhaps we need to tell a different story. Perhaps people with CP should not have to spend their lives trying to overcome their disability, but instead be free to be themselves and live on their own terms.