So, two weeks ago I was a bridesmaid and the reception was actually here, at the New York Public Library, and I will never forget this wedding. Yes, it was very beautiful, but, more importantly, I survived the slick marble floors that are all over this building. Tile and marble floors are public enemy number one to a stiletto-loving girl like me.

See, when most people learn to walk in very high heels—and I had five-inch heels on that night—they bend their ankle so that the ball of the foot touches the ground first. You have more stability. I don't have ankles, so I hit each step on the stiletto, which makes the possibility of the banana-peel-wipe-out very likely. But given a choice between practicality and theatricality, I say go big or go home, and go down in flames if you’re going to go.

I guess I’m a bit of a daredevil. I think that the nurses at Dupont Institute would agree. I spent a lot of time there as a child. Doctors amputated both of my legs below the knee when I was an infant, and then, when I was five, I had a major surgery to correct the wonky direction in which my tibia was growing. So, I had two metal pins to hold that, full plaster cast on both legs. I had to use a wheelchair because I couldn’t wear prosthetics.

And one of the best things about getting out of a hospital is the anticipation of the day you return to school. You know, I had missed so much class, I just couldn’t wait to get back and see all my friends, but my teacher had a different idea about that. She tried to prevent me from returning to class because she said that in the condition I was in I was inappropriate, and that I would be a distraction to the other students, which of course I was, but not because of the cast and the wheelchair.

Clearly, she needed to make my difference invisible, because she wanted to control her environment and make it fit in to her idea of what normal looked like. And it would have been a lot easier for me to fit in to what normal looked like, you know. I wanted that back then. But instead I had these wooden legs with a rubber foot that the toes broke off of and it was held on with a big, rusty, you know, bolt that rusted out because I swam in the wooden legs and you're not supposed to swim in wooden legs, but, you know—the wood rots out, too. So, there you are in second grade music class doing the twist, and mid-twist I hear this [splintering noise], and I'm on the floor and the lower half of my left leg is in splinters over there and the teacher faints on the piano and the kids are screaming, and all I'm thinking is, "My parents are gonna kill me. I broke my leg."

It's a mess. But then a few years later my prosthetist tells me, "Amy, we got waterproofed legs for you. No more rusty bolts!" I mean, this is a revelation, right? This is gonna change my life. I was so excited to get these legs. Until I saw them. They were made of polypropylene, which is that white plastic milk-jug material. And when I say white, I'm not talking about skin color, I'm talking about the color white. The "skin color" was the rubber-foam foot painted "Caucasian," which is the nastiest shade of a nuclear peach that you've ever seen in your life that has nothing to do with any human skin tone on the planet. And these legs were so good at being waterproof that they were buoyant. So, when I'd go off the high dive I'd go down and come straight back up, feet first. They were the bane of my existence.

But then at the Jersey Shore one summer, you know, by the time we get there there's like 300 yards of towels between me and the sea and I know this is where I first hone my ability to run really fast.
I was the white flash. I didn't want to feel hundreds of pairs of eyes staring at me. And so, I get myself into the ocean, and you know I was a good swimmer. But no amount of swimming technique can control buoyant legs—so, at some point I get caught in a rip current, and I'm migrating from my vantage point of where I could see my parents' towel and I'm like, you know, taking in water, and I'm fighting, fighting, fighting. And all I could think to do was pop off these legs and put one under each armpit with the peach feet sticking up and just bob, like, just wait. Just, like, someone's gotta find me, you know, and a lifeguard did. And I'm sure he will collect for therapy bills. You know, like, "They don't show that on Baywatch!"

But they saved my life, those legs.

And then I was fourteen, it was Easter Sunday, and I was going to be wearing a dress that I had purchased with my own money; the first thing I ever bought that wasn't on sale. A momentous event, you never forget it. I had a paper route since I was twelve, and I went to The Limited and I bought this dress that I thought was the height of sophistication: sleeveless Safari dress, belted, hits the knee. Coming downstairs, in my living room, my father's waiting to take us to church. He takes one look at me he says, "That doesn't look right. Go upstairs and change."

I was like, "My super classy dress? What are you talking about? It's the best thing I own."

And he said, "No, you can see the knee join when you walk. Doesn't look right. It's inappropriate to go out like that. Go change."

And I think something snapped in me. I refused to change, and it was the first time I defied my father. I refused to hide something about myself that was true, and I refused to be embarrassed about something so that other people could feel more comfortable. And I was grounded for that defiance. And so, after church the extended family convenes at my grandmother's house and everybody is complimenting me on how nice I look in this dress. And I'm like, "Really? You think I look nice? 'Cause my parents think I look inappropriate."

And I outing them. Kind of mean, really—but I think the public utterance of this idea that I should somehow hide myself was so shocking to hear that it changed their mind about why they were doing it. You know, I had always managed to get through life with somewhat of a positive attitude, but I think this was the start of me being able to accept myself. You know, OK, I'm not normal, I have strengths, I got weaknesses. It is what it is. And I had always been athletic, but it wasn't till college that I started this adventure in track and field. You know, I had gone through a lifetime of being given legs that just barely got me by, and I thought, "Well, maybe I'm just having the wrong conversations with the wrong people." Maybe I need to go find people who say, "Yes, we can create anything for you in the space between where your leg ends and the ground."

And so, I started working with engineers, fashion designers, sculptors, Hollywood prosthetic makeup artists, wax museum designers—to build legs for me. And I decided I wanted to be the fastest woman in the world on artificial legs. And I was lucky enough to arrive in track at just the right time to be the first person to get these radical sprinting legs modeled after the hind leg of a cheetah—the fastest thing that runs—in woven carbon fiber. And I was able to set three world records with those legs. And they made no attempt at approximating humanness. But then I got these incredibly lifelike silicone legs, hand-painted capillaries, veins. Hey, I can be as tall as I want to be, so I get different legs for different heights. I don't have to shave. I can wear open-toed shoes in the winter. And I can, most importantly, I can opt out of the cankles I most certainly would have inherited genetically.
So, then I get these legs made for me by the late, great Alexander McQueen, and they were hand-carved of solid ash with grape vines and magnolias all over them, and a six-inch heel. And I was able to walk run ways of the world with supermodels. And I was suddenly in this whirlwind of adventure and excitement and, you know, I was being invited to go around the world and speak about these adventures. And now I had, you know, legs that look like glass, legs covered in feathers, porcelain legs, jellyfish legs—all wearable sculpture.

And I get this call from a guy who had seen me speak years ago, when I was at the beginning of my track career, and he says, 'We loved it, we loved it. We want you to come back.'

And it was clear to me he didn't know all these amazing things that had happened to me since my sports career. So, as I'm telling him he says, 'Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, hold on, Amy. The reason everybody liked you all those years ago is because you were this sweet, vulnerable, naive girl. And I'm afraid that if you walk on stage today and you are this polished young woman with too many accomplishments'—for real, he said that—'I'm afraid they won't like you.'

Wow. He apparently didn't think I was vulnerable enough now. He was asking me to be less-than, a little more downtrodden. He was asking me to disable myself for him and his audience, and what was so shocking to me about that was I realized I had moved past mere acceptance of my difference. I was having fun with my difference. Thank God, I'm not normal. I get to be extraordinary, and I'll decide what is a weakness and what might be a strength. And so, I refused his request.

And a few days later, I'm walking in downtown Manhattan at street fair, and I get this tug on my shirt, and I look down and it's this little girl I had met a year earlier when she was at a pivotal moment in her life. She had been born with a brittle bone disease that resulted in her left leg being seven centimeters shorter than her right. And she wore a brace and orthopedic shoes, and they got her by. But she wanted to do more. And like all Internet-savvy kindergartners, she gets on the computer and Googles, "new leg." And she comes up with dozens of images of prosthetics, many of them mine. And she prints them out, goes to school, does show and tell on it, comes home and makes a startling pronouncement to her parents. "I wanna get rid of my bad leg," she says. "When can I get a new leg?"

And, ultimately, that was the decision her parents and doctors made for her. And so here she was, six months after the amputation, and right there in the middle of the street fair she hikes up her jeans leg to show me her cool new leg, and it's pink, and it's tattooed with the characters of High School Musical 3, replete with red-sequin Mary Janes on her feet. And she was proud of it. She was proud of herself.

And the marvelous thing is that this six-year-old understood something that it took me twenty-something years to get. But we did both discover that when we can celebrate and truly own what it is that makes us different, we're able to find the source of our greatest creative power.

Thank you.