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Finally, a church for people ready to embrace their flaws
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"But my face is a gift, because my shadow side is on the outside where I have had to learn to deal with it. I know that other people are inspired by the simple fact I have learned to deal with it and that I accept myself."

From "The Church of 80% Sincerity," by David Roche

I was born with a spastic muscle in my right leg. I have always been rather unclear about what this means, but it was told to me often as a child, and so it became truth. When I was 7 years old, a doctor cut the tendon in my heel to end the spasticity. The operation put me in a cast for six weeks and then a leg brace for a few years. Because of this, I have always walked with a peculiar gait.

As one might imagine, my unusual walk was really only torturous during my middle school years when teenagers can't seem to do anything but be cruel to each other. Life got easier in high school, and by college, the attention paid to my funny way of walking had been reduced to polite inquiries about why I limp.

My leg is my story. I carry it with me every day. I try to avoid telling it, but sometimes I have to. Just today, my exercise instructor came up to me before class started and asked if I was OK. When I explained that's just the way I walk, she backed away — a tad embarrassed for asking.

I recently had the opportunity to hear motivational speaker, performance artist and one-time resident of Bloomington David Roche speak. Born with a grotesque facial deformity, Mr. Roche has had to wear his story quite literally on his face for his entire life. When in his 40s he uncovered the ability to tell the tale of his face with grace and humor, he started a one-man show called "The Church of 80% Sincerity." On Feb. 5, Penguin books will publish his memoir titled the same.

I don't believe in competitive suffering, but one must admit that one of the obvious flaws of the human race is that all lives are not created equal. Some of us are rich and some are poor. Some are born with disease or mental illness. Others are dealt cruel blows by random accidents, poverty or missing parents. So as I remember making my way through my teen years, getting tripped in the hall at school or being picked last for every team, I imagine what it would be like to hold your deformity like a bright neon billboard at the center of your person.

Everyone sees David's grotesque face first and must approach him through this very real deformity. The limps of this world seem hardly noticeable. David is unable

to hide from his flaws, and so, as the epigraph of this column states, he has been given an incredible gift.

For interested readers, I don't want to spoil what I think may be one of the more profound personal narratives of the year. The memoir is not necessarily told in a linear fashion, but rather in a manner of statements of faith of the Church of 80% Sincerity. David writes of the roles that miracles, cruelties, unconditional love and prayer have played in his life, which has always been painfully examined.

According to David's memoir, the Church of 80% Sincerity is the first post-modern church. "We have no ideals. We do not try to change people by having them conform to an ideal. We try to accept people as they are. We adjust our beliefs and practices to conform to the ideal of being human."

It is the church for all of us defective people, both the ones who continually need to explain themselves because they wear their flaws in their size 11 shoes and, even more importantly, the ones who don't need to explain themselves because their flaws are hidden somewhere inside.

Amy Cornell's column appears every other Thursday in The Herald-Times. You can reach her at amylcornell@gmail.com.