

Surgery after a brain bleed changed my appearance. I wish it didn't matter. | Column

An Eckerd College professor wonders why appearances matter so much.



An MRI of the brain [HAYDEN BIRD | Getty Images/iStockphoto]

By **William Felice**

Published Yesterday

I've been a college professor for almost 30 years and during this entire time I've passionately enjoyed teaching and mentoring students. Yet today, as the spring semester begins, I am filled with anxiety.

Everything changed in August 2019, while I was working hard, enjoying teaching and juggling two book projects. I started to get headaches, which I normally do not get. Over-the-counter pain medications didn't help and, after the pain became intolerable, I went to the hospital. A scan revealed life-threatening bleeding on both sides of my brain. I was immediately taken into surgery to drain the blood and relieve the pressure. The surgery went well and after six days in ICU recovering, I was able to go home. I owe my life to the outstanding care I received from the doctors, nurses and staff at St. Anthony's Hospital. I am fully recovered with no neurological damage. I am indeed a very lucky man.

Yet, the surgery left me with four significant "holes" (dents) in my skull; a freakish sort of look that is a bit overwhelming. It is this radical change in my appearance that has created the profound feelings of insecurity. When I'm out in public now, I notice the looks I get from strangers — which seem to say "Yikes! WTF!" Friends have been kind and tell me that I'm "looking great," which I know is not true. I still have a hard time looking at myself in the mirror.

Why does our appearance matter so much? I intend to continue to work hard to inspire, provoke, and challenge students; and, the pedagogical techniques I've mastered do not depend upon my looks. Yet, we as a society put so much value on appearance. Think about the billions spent on hair products, cosmetics, and plastic surgery. Think about the ads that bombard us hourly on social and mainstream media. Think about the studies that demonstrate the advantages in life "good-looking" people have over others. Think about how much time we each spend each day looking in the mirror to affirm the way we want to present ourselves to the world. I now no longer have control over how I am presented to the world.



Eckerd College professor William Felice after brain surgery [Provided by William Felice]

But, I do have control over some things, including my attitude and approach to my new scarred appearance. It may sound "new-agey" to talk about "acceptance," but what other choice do I have?

And in this regard, I know my students will be incredibly helpful. Over many years, I have found Eckerd College students (from millennials to Gen Z) to be accepting, kind, generous, thoughtful, engaging, nonjudgmental and supportive. Thus, on a very fundamental basis, I know that these students will not define me by how I look, but by who I am and how I teach. I know that I will gain strength from them. The transition will be tough...but then it will be over.

I look forward to the day when our society as a whole becomes less judgmental and less obsessed with superficial appearances.

William Felice is professor of political science at Eckerd College. He was named the 2006 Florida Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. He can be reached via his website: williamfelice.com.