

## “WHO WANTS TO BE NORMAL ANYWAY?”

My Life As A Dyslexic

by

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Dyslexia isn't just reading backwards, it's many, many things. It has affected my speech, hearing, coordination and my fine motor skills. Dyslexia has built my character, expanded my thinking and has become my strongest asset.

My Father used to take me out on back country roads to teach me how to drive. He taught me to drive by having me drive backwards down old dirt roads. We had so much in common, my Dad and I. We thought backwards, we saw backwards and we even spelled backwards. We had the same fears, frustrations and anger; fear of being perceived as stupid, frustrated with things being so difficult and angry because we didn't understand our own backwards thinking. I discovered much later in life that dyslexia is hereditary. It took me years to realize how alike Dad and I really are. That was what we had to hide, my Dad and I, that was our common secret.

My Mother was a good speller; it came naturally to her. She helped me a great deal and I would not have graduated without her help. In the third grade Mom took me to the principal of the school. In tears she told him that I couldn't read, spell, or write the way I should. I had been getting passing grades. The teachers liked me, I was cute, sweet and they passed me on. But Mom knew I wasn't making the grade and she made the school have me take the third grade over again.

I tried ten times harder and it seems I was tutored forever. It's true, it is ten times harder for a child with dyslexia to learn. Thank God, there has always been Mom, that someone in my life who will help me with the final draft or write that note by telling me how to spell a word, or at least give me enough of a start so that I can find it myself in the dictionary. It can take me hours to look up words that my mind can invert in so many different ways.

My Mother finally accepted my dyslexia. Somehow she had viewed dyslexia as a weakness that she didn't want to identify with in any way. But as I grew to understand dyslexia more fully I was able to educate my family also. When I was thirty seven, I took the various testing that confirmed my life experience. Shortly after the testing I got a Franklin Computer and a Macintosh SE Computer. I am having a love affair with words. I am finally able to get something out on my own

and with the help of the computer I am able to unscramble my thoughts in quick order. A whole new world has opened to me. As I have grown to accept and understand dyslexia many useless blocks have fallen away. New doors are beginning to open for me. The more I learn about dyslexia, the more fully I understand it, the more I am able to turn dyslexia into a personal strength.

It was hard to grow up with kids in school and with my friends when they knew how to read and spell and I didn't. I remember feeling angry for feeling stupid, angry for not feeling like I belonged and angry for being different. My life was marked with other people's labels and judgements, they labeled me dumb, they labeled me stupid, they labeled me slow. They said that I didn't want to learn and it drove me crazy because all I wanted was to learn. I was hungry for learning and confused as to why it was so hard for me. I was ten times more hungry to learn and still am to this day. I will probably never put my books away for good. I love to learn.

So I learned how to bluff. Bluffing my way through life became a habit, one that has given me a willingness to approach any task, just bluff it until I get it. I learned a lot about bluffing from my Dad. I learned to appear calm and controlled and not to say too much. I learned how to be a good listener and I learned people like a good listener.

Everywhere I went I had to read or write something. My apprehension of being perceived as stupid or labeled "slow" haunted everything I did. Fear permeated my soul making even unrelated situations scary. I carried it around with me not understanding where the fear came from, a shadow darkening my thoughts, like a little cloud following me around. It made me sad and I didn't understand where this sadness came from. It hurt. My emotional trauma has been intense and it has taken conscious awareness to begin the process of a deep emotional healing. It is a slow process but day by day the healing does take place.

When people thought I couldn't read or write well, they talked down to me, they corrected me. This often well-meaning reflex action interrupted my already disjointed thoughts and added to the problem, intensifying my tendency to say things backward. Communication skills became injured and stunted, filling me with shame and making me shy, silent and angry. Compensation became a way of life for me.

Dyslexia has affected all my relationships, both personal and professional, communication is mandatory in both. I didn't lack communication skills, as I was trained in them but I had to unravel my thoughts before I could communicate. The frustration of sorting through my distortions requires more time than most professional situations allow for. I have finally accepted and learned to take the added time I need. My mannerisms are slow and most people find it relaxing.

Personal relationships are so often filled with emotions that untwisting my thoughts become impossible at times and communication can become ineffective and painful. But with my new found understanding I have more patience with myself and am able to communicate myself with much less frustration.

Taking more time does not mean I am mentally slow. In fact I am mentally very active trying to catch up, some things simple take me longer to express. Digesting information requires more time and I must chew much faster. Too much information simply chokes me.

It was easy for outsiders to label me "slow" or "lazy". I couldn't explain my confusion or anxiety and I began to believe the labels as I grew up. If my dyslexia could have been diagnosed early on, it would have been clear that I was dyslexic and not mentally slow. It would have helped a great deal with my self-esteem, my emotional patterns and my attitude toward life and people in general. Today there are tests designed to do just that and by studying my own patterns I am able to work with myself much more effectively. I have moved beyond the labels of the past.

I graduated from High School with its set of systems that I couldn't begin to fit into. I did go to college just long enough to learn how to study on my own. I was drawn to workshops, lectures, trainings - any format where I could get information that I could process in my own way. I sought out a way to learn that didn't involve being tested, testing always created major anxiety for me. I have spent years reading, studying, researching and learning in the way that excites me and allows me to expand my way of learning.

Physical education was as difficult as mental education, everything moved too fast. I was uncoordinated and clumsy, it was impossible to follow someone else's movements. This only confirmed my feelings of inadequacy. I didn't develop any sense of competition because I didn't have the eye-hand coordination required for ball sports. I barely made it in team sports, I never really did. There is a visual floating motion to objects both fixed and moving. Adjustments have to be made for this motion and in ball sports there isn't enough time for such adjustments to be made. Now there are glasses for people with dyslexia to correct this floating moment. Now a dyslexia can read with glasses that stop the words from moving or floating.

Individual activities strengthened me, ones where I could spend a lot of time alone trying harder before I was seen doing it. Things that I could master alone at my own speed. I loved quiet time, time to sort through all the information. I would spend time with my horse, walking, thinking, writing poetry and playing in my own make believe world, where I wasn't wrong, slow or dumb. A world where I wasn't tested and proven wrong.

As an adult, I finally refined my motor skills and balance after years of yoga, tai chi and isometrics. Slow things, quiet things were less confusing. The concentration that I learned in yoga also helped my reading and spelling. Though I did find out later that inverted poses in yoga were damaging and I no longer do them. I have been able to gain a certain amount of grace and pose.

Medications heighten my inability to unscramble what is going on inside me. I have discovered that medications make it impossible to hide my dyslexia, reverting my speech, writing and my thinking. Being tired has the same effect, everything becomes scrambled and I am unable to concentrate. When my dyslexia is more visible I hide out and this has affected my social life. I am extremely organized with many systems that allow me freedom from dealing with my short memory functions.

When friends that I have known for years find out I have dyslexia, their shock is obvious. "But you are so capable. You do things so perfectly, so well thought out." One friend said to me, "I see you as the most limitless person I know in thought and in ability." Because I have learned to perfect the art of adapting I have learned my potential is unlimited. Dyslexia gave me a strong, vivid imagination which I have developed to be a useful asset.

Dyslexia can create a lot of determination and patience. I have been a vice president of a major corporation. I have created my own businesses and founded a company. I have modeled, been a guest on many radio and T.V. programs and have placed loan packages amounting to billions of dollars for people to make investments. The list of accomplishments can become a mile long even with dyslexia. It's not all that bad thinking backwards, sometimes it helps a lot. Respect is something I have had to fight for, that's okay because by learning to try harder I have learned to fight harder too. My backward thinking has given me perception, a broader picture. I approach life with a wider view and in a very creative way. Adapting forever has become my strongest asset. This is the gift, to be able to approach life in this way.

When anger and bitterness build up, I reach beyond it and get to the other side. I have learned to stand up for myself, to cry when it hurts, wipe the tears away and to begin again. I have learned to be a silent fighter. Quitting has never worked, there is really no way to quit. The information I learned about dyslexia has given me the power to move beyond it, to embrace it and make it my friend. My friends have proven to me my value over and over and without the help of my friends this piece would have never been finished. Seven friends helped me to rewrite and edit this piece over and over, over eight drafts have been reviewed and edited. Without the help of my friends this would have never become the break through for me that it has become.

I shall never forget when I was in my twenties I took private piano instruction from a woman who told me, "Your problem is that you are too smart." It was the first time I was ever told I was smart. It was like thunder going through my head. I was smart! I will never forget her words, I can hear them in my head. It was such a magical gift to me. I don't feel stupid anymore because I have proven over and over again to myself that I am not stupid and that I am a very capable person. I am no longer affected emotionally by other people's judgements because now I know better. Dyslexia no longer fills me with frustration and rage like it did once, because now I know better. I have been given a gift, and I feel blessed by it. It has made me who I am and I wouldn't want to be anyone else. Who wants to be normal anyway?

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