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Making It With Dyslexia

I have always believed that dyslexia breeds a different type of thinker. I am dyslexic but have always thought of myself as a survivor, one who existed without a goal in mind, attempting to go through life unscathed by challenges which might lead to failure. I tried to overcome this disability by finding a way to hide my shame. Humiliation was my enemy; it required all my thinking to outwit its scourge. Colleagues were strangers to me – a group of students who completed tasks on time while I squirmed in my desk, frustrated with the knowledge that I was being left behind by every measure that a nine-year-old student understands as success. I most remember the psychology of thought – the need to conceal my invisible disability from others so that I would not be exposed and labelled as 'special', 'slow' and all the jargon-terms that follow a student through school. I was not successful.

In 1962, I was already showing signs of a learning disability in my kindergarten classroom. My teacher cautioned my mother that I had trouble with my motor skills and coordination. It was in my Grade 1 classroom that these challenges took actual shape in my proclivity to reverse the shapes of letters, to practice handwriting through a mirror in my mind that would not allow me to create letters in their correct form. My teacher at the time showed little patience. Her gestures, edgy with disapproval, and her voice, exasperated with my lack of progress, were my first indications I did not belong in a classroom. Somewhere deep inside, I began to sense that I was a failure, estranged from my peers and different from my classmates. That mirror in my mind was suddenly faulty, a metaphor for something invisible to me, but a division nonetheless separating me from an education that was not in my grips.

I suppose the alienation I felt as a young boy was the genesis for my inappropriate behaviour. Success as a student was not a reachable goal, so I decided to become the class clown. The laughter at my anecdotes was the first time I received positive acknowledgement at school. The attention of my classmates felt good and even drew some students to befriend me. My teacher saw it differently, of course, and my behaviour resulted in an endless procession to the office, ending in the strap, a form of corporal punishment practiced in those days. Why would I persist in behaviour that only promised negative consequences? It was my only way to fit in school, to amuse students while I avoided the most abhorrent aspect of school, the academic work that was frustrating me to no end.

Throughout the following years, I spent time in the 'opportunity' class, a kind of holding cell for students identified with a range of cognitive disabilities and behaviour problems. 'Opportunity' meant anything but opportunity to us students. A day consisted of worksheets and crafts, a set program of activities that each student was to complete before being granted free time. I usually finished early and had free time for much of the day.

In this classroom, I was privileged to become friends with two students who possessed a level of emotional intelligence at which I marvel to this day. Their names were John and Dominic, and you could carry on a highly intelligent conversation with them, never realizing the frustration they experienced every day with their academic work. One thing we learned quickly was the profound logic of the school system: to survive the verbal and physical attacks from peers at recess, special education students had to criminalize their behaviour. That's when our skills as fist fighters were put to the test. To the students at our school, we were the 'retarded ones' who needed to be purged from the 'normal' group. I cannot recall losing a fight – no doubt, thanks to the brawling abilities of John and Dominic – but we felt no joy in our success because we spent a lot of time in the office, subject to 'consequences'.

I believe students such as John, Dominic, and I could never face the shame we felt about our disabilities any more than our teachers could see us as anything more than difficult students, too lazy to work in a regular classroom. My dyslexia was not just an academic challenge, but a journey of the spirit to rise above the violence inflicted on others as well as on myself.

I managed to leave special education by the time I reached Grade 4 and stayed in school through secondary school. However dyslexia has never left me. It is still with me, in the mirror I see in my mind that allows me to write letters in correct form. It is with me in the way I face the possibility of failure in all my actions, knowing how humiliation has played a key role in my life. Even as I earned a Masters degree, I often felt fraudulent, waiting to be 'outed' from a course that I had no business taking with others. Yet I refuse to let it control me as it did in the earlier part of my life. I have become a teacher. I strive to deliver a program that is open to cutting edge ideas in education, from balanced literacy to theory on differentiated learning. It is my chance to give back to those few teachers who helped me along the way to success. It is even my way to go back in time and help friends like John and Dominic, who remind me of their presence in other students who sit in my classrooms today – redemption for me on the other side of a mirror.

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