

Learning Disabilities and Life Stories

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In the LD Bubble



Lynn Pelkey

Lynn is a 35-year-old, working-class, white woman, who was working toward a bachelor's degree in hotel management at a large northeastern state university when she wrote this essay. Although Lynn was in special classrooms for students with learning disabilities (LDs) from early elementary school to her graduation from a public high school, she had little understanding of her own specific disabilities until her late 20s, when she sought an evaluation from a psychologist. This evaluation confirmed that Lynn met criteria for dyslexia.

In this essay, Lynn focuses on the isolation and separateness from "normals" created by her learning disabilities. The "LD bubble" is her metaphor for this separateness, and her essay is devoted to articulating a moral, social, and psychological argument for the necessity of altering the conditions in which such separateness—and its crushing effects—forms. Describing a lifetime of struggle

against the private conviction that she was “stupid,” and thus unworthy of the esteem of herself or others, Lynn explores how reentering college in her early 30s brought about positive change.

As much as I want to find the perfect words to express what it is like to be dyslexic, I cannot. I can no more make you understand what it is like to be dyslexic than you can make me understand what it is like not to be. I can only guess and imagine. For years, I have looked out, wanting to be normal, to shed the skin that limits me, that holds me back. All the while, others have looked upon me, as well. There were those who have pitied me and those who have just given up on me, those who stood by, supporting me and believing in me, and those who looked at me as if I were an exhibit at the zoo. But, in general, people have shown a desire to understand what dyslexia is and how to teach those afflicted with it. Each side, it seems, longs to understand the other.

My dyslexia is like a bubble. I am enclosed in an invisible sheath that allows me to come excitingly close to being “normal” but never completely there. It is flexible yet confining. I can move within it but never outside of it. You cannot see it, but I can feel it. It has thick walls that are impossible to break free from. Sometimes, I hardly know it is there at all, and other times I have felt as if it were suffocating me, killing me.

I invite you into my world for two reasons. One is the hope that you will gain some insight, understanding, compassion, or even strength. I also write for myself in the hope that this process will help me to love myself for who I am and all that I can be. For, you see, I believe I was taught to hate myself.

“Dyslexia” is a label and only a label, but it carries so much negative weight. Had I been described as “gifted and talented,” this, too, would have meant dealing with a label, but a positive one. Why must LD categories be classified around negative attributes? Can we not focus on strengths or positive attributes? As a child, my foundation for hating myself grew out of my much noted shortcomings and a lack of any abilities deemed positive.

I cannot remember my infancy, but I doubt very much that I hated myself then. My memories of my early years of childhood are happy. I was loved, and I felt loved. It was during my elementary school years that I started to feel different from the other children. It was discovered that reading and writing were difficult for me. I began some special programs designed to assist in my learning process. On the playground, in gym and art classes, or playing games, I was the same as any other child, but academically I could not achieve what other children could. As academics took on a more important role in my daily life, being with my playmates became less than pleasurable. We were no longer equal. At times, I was physically separated from my classmates. During these times, I was brought to the “special” room where I would receive help with my school work in hopes of bringing me “up to my class level.” No one ever said this to me directly; it was what I overheard: “She is not

doing as well as the other children," "She is having difficulty," "Scoring low," "Not trying," "Lazy." I knew the latter two were not true, but they certainly did not make me feel good about myself. It was in these ways that I became *less than*.

I do not know when I was labeled as learning disabled. It was not until junior high and maybe even into high school that the term LD started to surface with frequency. For years, my fellow LDers and I wondered what LD meant. No one ever told us. We did know that it set us apart from others and that we were different. Being LD was not something we received awards for. It was secretive and suspicious. It was something talked about in hushed tones. It was discussed at secret parent/teacher meetings. It was the reason I had to go to summer school. Is it any surprise that, even before I knew what LD meant, I felt ashamed about being LD? It was obviously something that was not good, and I had it.

I am not really sure how the school set about grouping us into the LD category, but I always had a feeling that it had something to do with the "state tests," the kind where you had to fill in circles with a number two pencil. While I was in early grammar school, I do not recall the tests bothering me, but when I started to realize that I didn't do as well as others, they bothered me greatly. The teacher always told us not to worry, but I did. I dreaded those tests. I would break into a sweat the moment the teacher would announce her plan. I could feel my face change color, first red hot with fear and embarrassment, followed by a pale, colorless sense of utter hopelessness. There was no way around it; I would have to take the test. We would each receive a booklet, face down, and a brand new, freshly sharpened, number two pencil. The teacher would give us some brief instructions on how to properly record our answers and take the test. We were to turn our booklets over and start when she said, "Begin!" and lay our pencils down and stop when she said, "Stop!"

The room would be unbearably quiet. The teacher would look at a stop watch, which I suspected the state must have provided with the testing package, because those were the only times I ever saw it. *Begin!* would echo through the room. My ears would absorb the word and send the painful message to my brain, my malfunctioning brain. At this point, just filling in my name was a challenge. I would be off by one column or fill in too many circles in another. Reality would kick in. Time was passing. My heart would be pounding as I frantically erased, rechecked, and colored in circles until my name was right. A great amount of time had already passed since *Begin!* had violated my brain, and now I couldn't remember the instructions the teacher had given us. I would have to read and reread the directions, using more valuable time. *Focus, focus, don't panic! Keep cool. I don't want other students to know I can't do this.* I hated the teacher. *How could she do this? She must know something is wrong with me. She always had those meetings with my parents. She must hate me as much as I hate her or she wouldn't be putting me through this. Maybe I should just leave, but then everyone would know that I can't do this and my parents will be called. Oh God, what am I going to do?* By this time, my nerves would be shot. I couldn't even sit still. I would glance around the room to see my classmates systematically filling in circles and working their way through the booklet. They seemed to have a look of deep concentration on their faces. That would be it, my

body would betray me, giving me away to the whole class. My eyes would puddle up, my body temperature would rise so high that my ears would be on fire, and my hands would be so sweaty that my test booklet would start to warp beneath them. The lump in my throat made it difficult to breathe. I felt like the whole class was staring at me.

It felt like an eternity before I heard the word *Stop!* What a great relief! I would relax into my chair and start to feel better. As I brought my head up, my red-rimmed eyes met Chrissy Watson's. She sat at her desk, upright and proper, with her hands on her lap, her pencil positioned approximately four inches from the top of her desk. Her test booklet centered on the desk top just two inches below her pencil. Her answers right there in perfect sight, displayed so that the whole class could see. Her little black circles looked as if they had been printed with a laser printer. My test booklet was wrinkled and worn looking, except for the pages that I never got to. Big black smudges streaked my answer sheet and some spots I had erased so much that the print was coming off. I had to turn my booklet over so that no one could see. My pencil was worn to a dull point, and during the test, I had bitten down on the other end to maximize my erasing ability. I would put my head down on my desk pretending to be bored so that I could cover my booklet until the teacher collected them. As I lay there trying to give the other kids the impression that the test had simply bored me to death, panic was beginning to build. Who would be collecting the tests? Would it be the teacher or one of her pets? Probably Chrissy.

At first, the gap between me and my classmates was small. However, it was not long before I was ashamed of myself. I would compare myself to those around me. My performance was always less, the lowest, the bottom of the class. As the years passed, the gap grew, and the shame turned to deep-rooted self-hate. The gap, the shame, and the self-hate were not just my doing. Others, too, perceived me as "less than," and they taught me to accept their perceptions. Other students did not have any trouble telling me what was wrong with me, "Stupid," "Mental," "Idiot." I had to go to the "Retard Room" for a lot of my classes. This classroom was different from all the other classrooms. The doors were metal, and they had a long, thin window, which made it difficult to see in or out of the room. This had some advantages, because once you were inside, people in the hallways could not see you. The trick was getting into the room. I would usually hang out across the hall, by the entrance to the library, until after the second bell, waiting for a chance when the coast was clear. Then, quick as a dart, I would run into the room. In an arc printed across the top of the door in big black letters was "Remedial Reading." RR. The Retard Room.

The normal class had neat little rows of wooden-topped desks with metal blue legs facing the front of the classroom. The teacher's desk and the blackboard looked back at them. Above the blackboards were rolled up maps of far-off places that would snap up like the shades in my bedroom. The rooms were quiet in color. I always wanted to be in one of those rooms.

The RR was different. We had one large room about the size of two normal rooms. This space could be divided by a curtain that hung from the ceiling, like the kind they have in hospital rooms. We did not have individual desks but large rec-

tangular tables. Our tables did not face the front of the room but were randomly placed throughout the room. Our blackboard was on wheels, and it was mostly used as a partition to separate us from each other. We did not have any maps; I guess they felt there was not a need to teach us that kind of stuff because we wouldn't need it for the types of lives that we would lead. It was during a humiliating episode with my cousin that I learned that Massachusetts was a state and not a country. The RR was cheerfully decorated, the bulletin boards were covered with construction paper in bright and happy colors. The decorations and colors would change to correspond with the seasons. The curtain that divided the room had been embroidered with a sort of spring scene. It was all very cute, like kindergarten. This room only fortified my feelings that I was dumb. Something was very wrong. All the other kids my age were growing up, but I was still in kindergarten. I felt humiliated going in and out of that room.

The teachers were very kind, but I believe now that they underestimated me. I would do what they told me to do, recite what they told me to recite, but I was rarely asked to really *think*, and I almost never experienced those moments when something I was learning came together and made sense. I think I did a lot of memorizing, but not much understanding.

However, I do recall one unique experience in junior high school when I did learn. This was outside the Retard Room and away from any "special" programs. I had made some friends on the outside. I would walk to their classes with them, and then at the very last moment I would hurry off to my class. As I lingered at the door of my friends' algebra class, waiting for the bell and fooling around, Paul, their teacher, would talk to us. Paul was really cool. He got to know me even though I was not in his class. One day, I was hanging out particularly late after the second bell had already rung. Getting through the halls was going to be tricky. Paul asked if I wanted to join the class. I said, "Yes," and grabbed a seat next to my friend. I did not have any paper or a book, I just sat and listened. I was in a "real" class with normal students. It was great. I just started skipping whatever class I was supposed to be in during that period and started attending Paul's algebra class on a regular basis.

As I sat in that class, something magical happened to me. I could understand what he was teaching. I was learning. I even started participating in the class, raising my hand and answering questions. I was LD. But then again I wasn't. I still couldn't multiply or divide very well, and I had to use elaborate ways to come up with the answer. But I wasn't memorizing, I was *thinking*, and I was figuring out the answer. I was learning. This was one of the first experiences that shot a pinhole in the bubble that trapped me in my LDness.

Sometime during the seventh grade, it was discovered that I would need corrective surgery for a birth defect that had gone undetected as a child. I would need a total of four operations in all, and I would miss a significant amount of school. During my first homebound sentence, I had a tutor. You would think that with the one-on-one attention I would have made great leaps and bounds, but it turned out to be a bust. My tutor just wanted me to read the textbook and do the problems, and she would check them on her visits. Of course, I was supposed to get them all

right and never have a question, because then she would have to know the material and teach it to me. I had never been a self-directed learner, and trying to teach myself these lessons was no exception.

The next phase was to send me off to school for a reduced amount of time. I would meet with a tutor in a small, quiet room in the library. As much as I would like to say that my success with this tutor was all my doing, I can't. She is the unsung heroine of my junior high learning process. We really connected. It was there in that little room that I wrote my first paper, learned to solve for "x", and much more. But the most effective information that this tutor gave to me was information about myself. She talked directly to me about my disability. She explained it like this, "Lynn, you are part of a minority, a small portion of the population that has a learning disability. You and others like you learn a certain way. The rest of the people learn another way. Kind of like putting a round peg in a square hole. It can be done, but not as fast as putting the matching shape in the matching hole. I am sorry that you have to learn like this. You are truly special because you have stretched your brain and learned beyond and outside your abilities, and this is something the majority have not had to do."

She treated me as normal, and her expectations were normal. We were there to do work, and that is what we did. She was very patient, and she took me through my learning very systematically, step by step. We would not move ahead until I clearly understood what she had taught. We did a lot of repetition, but the learning moved quickly. I never became bored or idle. She was right there, moving me along. In this instance, the one-on-one attention was successful, and I was able to keep up with my class even though I had missed a lot of school.

During junior high, I did have a few regular classes such as science, art, and gym, but the rest of my time was spent in the Retard Room. I do not recall exactly the first day that I entered the remedial reading room at the junior high school, but I do remember an assortment of feelings associated with being there: fear, anxiety, uncertainty, and many more. I did not have one positive feeling about going into that room. Just me and the guys. What a group! Maybe about ten of us, ranging in types and degrees of disabilities. One girl (me) and the rest boys. That's right, I was the only girl in the whole school that was stupid, and it remained that way until I graduated.

Some of the boys frightened me, others annoyed me, and a few seemed tolerable. But as odd as it may seem, I developed a friendship so special and dear to me that nothing has ever compared to it. I think he knew how afraid I was. Maybe he was afraid, too. It was never a girlfriend/boyfriend thing or even a crush. I just needed a friend, and Brian was there. We were kind of the same in that you couldn't tell from looking at us that something was wrong. I think that we both played the same game with others. There was this unspoken and unwritten law that we both abided by. A code of silence. We never talked about our LDness with anyone except each other or other LDs. We would say "hi" to each other when we passed in the halls, and if any of my friends asked how I knew him, I would just say he is in one of my classes and leave it at that. And I am sure he did the same. We didn't really hang out together, but he kind of watched out for me. A lot of times, the other boys

in the class would bother me, but Brian always seemed to come from nowhere and tell them to knock it off, and they would. There was such a comfort and ease being with Brian. I could be myself with him. He knew I was LD, and that was OK with him. As the years passed, we became better and better friends, and we made friends with other LDs. Brian even introduced me to my first real boyfriend.

I believe that being LD affected my adolescent dating experiences in numerous ways. As I mentioned earlier, I was the only girl in the LD class, and I think I was more concerned with survival than with thoughts of romance. Secondly, because of the separation between LD students and normal students, I did not spend much time with my female peers, so I did not have peer pressure to date. Third, I was not attracted to the boys that I spent a majority of my time with, and I did not have much exposure to the male population that I did find attractive. And finally, when I was with my normal peers, I felt out of place. I always felt like the new kid. They all spent so much time together, sharing the same classes, the same teachers, and the same assignments. I also think that it was less than desirable to date someone from the RR room.

In high school, things changed. Brian introduced me to Rich, one of my crushes. It turned out to be perfect for me. Rich was LD also. He was a junior, and I was a sophomore, so we did not have any classes together, but our routine was the same: some regular classes with normal students and the rest were LD classes. As I got to know Rich, I met his group of LD friends and their LD friends and so on. There was a whole underground network of LDs and I was part of it. It was like being part of a fraternity, a brotherhood, and we all lived by the code of silence. I experienced an additional thrill, because, while I found strength in numbers, I also felt special to be the only female with entrance. It was not uncommon for us to make jokes about being LD or to tease each other. This was OK for us to do because we all based our friendships on so much more. "Normal" students would judge us as stupid and worthless because our handwriting was similar to that of second graders. Our friendships and bonds went beyond these superficial judgments. What was important was that we were kind, supportive, and nonjudgmental of each other. Therefore, the teasing and jokes were harmless and really just a way for us to laugh while loving each other.

During my adolescence, I never got involved in sports, although I always wanted to. It appeared to me that only the smart kids got to play sports. Instead, I found my satisfaction in working. I always was proud to work. It was wonderful to experience praise and positive reinforcement. I took my jobs seriously. The harder I worked, the more praise and responsibility I received. The more I received, the more I wanted. My bosses seemed impressed with me and would rave about my maturity toward work. My friends at work would goof off, call in sick, and not show up, but I was always there, and I did my job. On the job, I got to prove myself, I didn't have to be the dummy. I pulled my own weight. Had I known at that point in my life that you could drop out of school, I think I would have. I am glad that I didn't, though, because I would probably still be stocking shelves at a toy store, and I'd probably be miserable. But there were times when I would think "I can do this. I should stay here. This could be my job." I would feel this sense of urgency

to find my place in life and stick with it, because I knew I would never be able to get a college education, and I had to function within my limits.

I think another reason that I worked so hard was because it gave me a sense of freedom from being so needy. I couldn't make it in school on my own. I was so dependent on everyone: my parents, my teachers, the whole stinking system. But at work, it was up to me to prove myself, and again and again, I did. My bosses were always nice to me, and I worked very hard to please them. It was all very affirming for me.

Until one day, CRASH!!!! Bob, my boss at the time, was doing inventory. He asked me to help him, which I willingly agreed to. We started working on art supplies. I would tell him the product and count while he recorded. This all went along very smoothly until we got to the paints. Have you ever read the names on the tubes of oil paint? It was like a foreign language. I panicked. My face got red, I was sweating, and I didn't know what to do. I stumbled across a couple of the names and then with every bit of nerve that I had I told my boss, whom I respected and trusted, that I couldn't read them. He looked at me in disbelief and said, "Why? What's wrong?" I think he thought that maybe the writing had been unclear, or maybe I couldn't see. But when I repeated myself, saying, "I can't read it, I don't know what it says," he understood exactly what I meant. He snatched the tube of paint out of my hand and spoke to me in a loud disgusted tone, "BURNT UMBER." He said it maybe two or three times, his voice getting louder each time. I couldn't believe it. I was so embarrassed. But that wasn't enough for him. He started in on me. "You can't read this? How old are you? What the hell is wrong with you? You'll never go to college! You'll never be anything!" He may have continued his outburst, but that was all that I could take in. My ears hurt, and his words just melted together as I turned and walked off.

As I walked toward the front of the store, the whole incident replayed itself in my head, his words ripping me apart. It was difficult to breathe. Even now, I can see his ugly face, all distorted, yelling insults at me, treating me like I didn't have any feelings at all. All my fears were being screamed at me. He confirmed what I secretly had feared: I was stupid, I would never be anything to be proud of, and I'd never make it to college.

I worked the rest of my shift in silence as I thought about what kind of future was in store for me. He didn't speak to me either. Sue, a friend of mine and a fellow worker, had helped him finish the inventory. The night seemed to drag on. I was so relieved when 9:30 finally arrived, and I could leave. I waited outside the mall for my father to pick me up. It felt so good to get into the car and be driving away from that place. I started telling my father what had happened. When I got home, my mother joined my father and me, and they both listened to my story. They really listened. Neither one of them overreacted or told me that it was not a big deal. They were both very supportive and acknowledged my feelings of sadness, hurt, anger, embarrassment, and whatever else I was feeling. I felt much better after telling them, and they agreed that his behavior was out of line.

I took some time off, and when I returned to work, my boss asked to speak with me in his office. I was scared to death, and now I hated him, but working meant so much to me. The idea of quitting never entered my mind. I also felt thank-

ful that I had a job, and I did not think I would ever be able to get another one. At this point, I had my walls so built up that I was determined that he couldn't hurt me. I wouldn't let him. He apologized and offered to help me if I ever needed it. I wish I could have accepted it and left it at that, but I couldn't. I could not forgive him. I knew he thought I was stupid, and his apology felt like pity. I was not about to feed his ego and ask him for help. No thank you. I told him it was no big deal and went back to work.

Being LD must be similar to how some gay people feel. You spend so much time and energy trying to hide who you really are. You are ashamed of what you are, and at times you long to be like others, but you are who you are, and so you lead this double life. Some know you as LD, and others know you as one of them, but you are not one of them. You are just pretending. You hate yourself for being LD, and you hate yourself for being a fake. And in the end, who are you? It is all very confusing. All the while you really just want to be you, without any fears. We LDs live a life of deceit—pretending to be like others—and shame—not wanting to be who we are.

My self-efficacy, my belief about my competence, fell into the category of failure-accepting. I expected to fail, so I set no goals, believing my ability was set (I had none). Thus, I learned helplessness. Everything was black and white, with no grey areas. There was good and evil, positive and negative, and, of course, smart and dumb. As I grew, I started to believe the negative stereotypes associated with my academic abilities. I was stupid! I couldn't do it! I accepted these stereotypes and let them define me. I erased myself. I hid who I was out of shame. I also had a growing fear of the unknown. What was really wrong with me? There had to be a reason and an explanation for why I was the way I was. Would it get worse as I got older? Was this it? Was I retarded? I was not sure that I wanted the answers to these questions. Eventually, I turned my back on academics.

I am the middle child among five children: four girls and one boy. Having two siblings that are not LD and two that are may have caused a heightened level of sibling rivalry in my family. It must have been very difficult for my parents to find a parenting style that would not be damaging to any of their children. Because home was a safe spot for me to be who I was, my parents and siblings usually had to bear the brunt of any frustrations school created for me. I am sure that my mother and father didn't have time to analyze my every mood to see if anything had upset me at school, and even if they had asked me, I don't know if I could have verbalized an answer for them. Sometimes life just sucked.

My sister, Carol, the oldest of the five, is suspected to be LD, but she has never been officially diagnosed. Our relationship was that of two strangers living in the same house. She did her thing, I did mine. Let's face it, I was her little sister, and I annoyed her. Carol could be a hostile, violent, and angry child. She was like a pressure cooker ready to blow. She would attack anyone at anytime for just about any reason. She would physically go after my father, which was truly frightening. I believe that she felt safe taking out her frustrations at home, because she knew deep down that we loved her and knew that she was good, no matter what others made her feel like. At the time, her anger confused me. I could not understand why

she was so mad. Now it is painfully clear. From day one of her schooling, she was identified as a troublemaker. Not performing up to standards meant that she was not trying, and that made her a "bad girl." She knew she was not bad, but that is what others saw her as, and that's how they labeled her. Is it any wonder that she developed stomach ulcers by her early teens? To this day, I believe that she is fighting to find the child that got lost when she entered school.

My next oldest sister, Patty, was a tough act to follow. She was popular, smart, beautiful (she really does look like Snow White), and very talented. It seemed as though there wasn't anything she couldn't do. I envied her so. Patty could read five books at one time without getting confused, and her handwriting flowed evenly and beautifully across the page. Heck, she could even write on unlined paper using a fountain pen. She was a constant reminder that I was less than.

In junior high school, I joined the chorus because Patty was in chorus, not because I had a burning desire to sing. Patty was an alto, so I forced myself to sing low so that I could be with her. She had a beautiful and powerful voice. Mine, on the other hand, was painful to listen to. When the school decided to present *Oliver*, the musical, the tryout list was posted. There was such excitement. Patty got cast in a leading role, Nancy. She had solos to sing as well as lines to memorize. I got a part also: I was one of the peasants who sold knives in the street. On opening night, I was instructed to just mouth the words in the song, and the other knife-selling peasant girls would sing the monotone line, "Knives! Knives for sale!" My only line, and I didn't even get to say it. Well, the play went off without a hitch and Patty was great. I was so proud of her. After that evening's performance, my parents took us all out for ice cream, and I reveled in the attention. I felt very much a part of the whole thing, as if I had played the leading role. And, in a way I had. I knew all of Patty's lines and songs by heart, and when she was out there, I put my heart out there as well. I love music, but I now believe that I was meant to appreciate it through listening to it and not trying to make it. By the time I reached high school, I gave up on the chorus and just watched in amazement.

My brother, Mark, and I have an extraordinary bond. We think, feel, and behave in a similar manner. We fought as children, often putting each other's well-being at risk, but it was nothing out of the ordinary for siblings. Mark was two years behind me in school and was also labeled as LD. He did not go to the RR, but to the "Learning Community." What a lovely name! You can call it what you want, but it was the same thing. As children, we never really talked about our experiences within the walls of the school. It has only been over the past ten years that the stories have started to surface. I was talking to Mark just this past week, explaining my involvement in this book, when I realized that he, too, was never properly diagnosed while in school. He, too, does not know what is wrong. We started talking about what it was like for me to be diagnosed, and he wanted to know what it did for me. I did not really know how to describe it. "Do they give you a gold card with your name embossed saying *Certified LD?*" he asked sarcastically with a twinge of pain in his voice. No one wants to be dyslexic, but when you are, you know something is wrong. Although you cannot explain what's wrong with you, you always hope that someday something will click, and it will all go

away, and you won't be stupid anymore. Deep down, you know, it's with you to stay. And if you get diagnosed, you get a definite label, and then you *know* it won't ever go away. Both Mark and I are very hard workers, and we found a great deal of satisfaction in doing a good day of hard work. We both found jobs that did not require a great deal of reading and writing but physical work and effort instead.

My sister, Marie, who is ten years younger than I am, was never a real threat to me when she was young because she liked me and I adored her. I lived through her at times the way a parent sometimes does with a child. I believed in her so. When she started to learn new things, she was encouraged by all of us. I can remember how thrilled I was the first time she crawled and how I loved her to perform for us. She had nothing to hide. She was not going to be stupid like me, and when she accomplished something I would beam with joy. I was so proud of her. She was my little sister. When I moved out of the house, she was only eight. She loves me and I her. But as time passed and we lived apart, our relationship changed and grew apart. Marie went on with her life and grew into a beautiful young woman with many of the same talents as Patty. They are almost carbon copies of each other. I am still very proud of Marie and all that she has done, although I do not think she feels the same about me. I think that she is ashamed of me and embarrassed by me. She has an intellectual facade that she carries off very well, which makes me feel all the self-loathing that I felt as a child. I love Marie, I really do, and think that maybe her persona is just part of her age and that in time she will be able to see the good in me and stop judging me for what I cannot do and start judging me for what I *can* do.

Not long ago, it became very clear to me that I would have to come face-to-face with my feelings about being stupid if I was going to find peace within myself. Four years ago, my mother encouraged me to go with her to an open house at a local community college, the same college that I had flunked out of ten years earlier. I agreed to go, but I had no intention to sign up. I went just to satisfy her, to say that I went. I started to talk to a woman about my diagnosis, and she guaranteed me that if I wanted to learn, they could and would teach me. The next thing I knew, I was agreeing to give college another try. I can still remember sitting in class the first day and thinking to myself, "How long are you going to carry on this charade?" I was certain that I would last only about a week or two. But, I kept hanging in there. I was facing the monsters of my past. I was no longer going to be held back. I had to admit what I was. I heard myself saying out loud to my professors that I had dyslexia. It's not that it all came easy to me, because it didn't. Saying it made it very real. All the promises that were made to me on that open house day didn't quite pan out. I was supposed to have my books on tape, have extra time to do assignments, and be given untimed tests. This all sounded good, but it took a lot of work and persistence to get the things that I needed. I really learned to become an advocate for myself. I no longer fell into the role of helplessness; I knew that if I did, I wouldn't make it. As the semester went on, I realized that I wanted this. Not only did I want to succeed, but I wanted to be one of the best. I had a goal.

No longer were my classrooms "special." They were real. I was with real students. At first, I did not say anything, because I was sure that they must be so much smarter than me. After all, this was college, someplace I thought I would never be.

As time passed, I realized that I wasn't the dummy in the class. The professor would ask a question, I would have an answer in my head, and most of the time someone would say what I was thinking. I wasn't so different after all. In time, I began to ask questions or respond to those asked. And I was learning, right along with the normal students. The gap that was once about the size of the Grand Canyon was beginning to close. I couldn't believe it when my fellow students asked me for help. This sounds very childish, but it was an experience that I had missed out on as a child, and it was a wonderful feeling. I was not worthless, and my opinion mattered. My success at that college was a milestone for me. Not only did I graduate with an Associate's Degree, but I did so with honors.

My success at the community college gave me the strength to believe in myself enough to continue my education. So here I am, a junior at a four-year college with a goal. Being LD has become less important to me. There are arrangements that I make due to my disability so that I am able to learn, but no one is giving me the answers. I certainly don't get a free ride. I don't have a tattoo on my forehead saying that I am dyslexic, but I don't hide it either.

In junior high school, being LD was a big part of my life. At that time, the universe revolved around me. I was my biggest concern. I was self-centered. My world consisted of very little, and so being LD was a big part of who I was. But as I became older, I grew out of the self-centered mode and into a more complex way of being. As my life evolved, being LD became a smaller piece of the whole.

Above all, I thank my parents for their unconditional love and support. I am fortunate to have had parents who emphasized my attributes rather than my shortcomings. They always saw in me what others could not, and they taught me to love myself for what I could do. It is from their encouragement that I found the strength to face my fears and become who I am. While my disability will last my lifetime, it no longer has to limit me.

I now strive to see myself as my parents see me.