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I'm Not Ashamed of My Dyslexia



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I don't enjoy reading. I've been told this is the definition of dyslexia. Or at least part of the definition. Dyslexics lose their desire to read, or they never gain a desire, or they can't seem to maintain a desire to continue along the written page. It seems dyslexia is more than the reversal of letters and words. It's more than a punch line about atheists who don't believe in dog. It's more than erroneous spelling and perpetual i before e confusion.

Dyslexia is an issue of desire. My mind does not desire the written word. No matter the scolding, the guilt, the prodding or pushing, my mind does not enjoy reading.

Fortunately, I was born into a family of language specialists. Their respect for the written word was greater than their respect for my brain's wishes. Consequently, they spent countless hours forcing my brain to read. They were gentle with me, but ruthless with my mind. Unwilling to let my dyslexia set the parameters of my existence, they became mind drill sergeants.

Reading is a race I've never enjoyed running. While others sprinted ahead, I lumbered forward, pausing between words and sentences as if they were high hurdles or steep chase walls. At every pause, my mom would push my brain forward. "Trace it out Dougie, sound it out, speak it out." Eventually, I would scale the road block and move forward. By the time I finished the phrase I had forgotten how it began. Reading became a form of necessary conditioning, an unavoidable medicine, a chore I had to finish.

Over time my dyslexia yielded to my parent's will. With much foot dragging, I slowly learned to read and to comprehend. I even learned to spell, or at least spell check. The more I was able to read or accomplish the task of reading, the more I began to view my dyslexia as defeated, vanquished, or simply gone.

As I grew older, I began to tell people the story about how I used to be dyslexic, about how I grew out of my disability. It sounded right to me and it made me feel special, even though it wasn't true. Dyslexia doesn't go away, it doesn't disappear. Dyslexia is the name we use for people with different brains. For some reason, no one bothered to tell me this. . . or maybe I chose not to hear it. Or maybe I had read it somewhere but failed to comprehend the meaning.

Regardless, I have lived most of my life believing the erroneous fiction that I am no longer dyslexic. Consequently, I have mislabeled just about everything that has caused me struggle.

Instead of seeing my most pervasive struggles as the fruit of a dyslexic brain, I attributed my shortcomings to a lack of character, commitment, or moral integrity. My inability to remember someone's name became a sign that I was uncaring and egotistical. My inability to remember important dates and events meant I didn't pay enough attention to important things. My failure to learn a foreign language was blamed on poor study habits and a lack of respect for other cultures.

I blamed my competency failings on everything and anything other than the culprit. Although my life was producing the fruit of dyslexia, I perpetually mislabeled the tree.

At some level, I knew these issues went beyond effort, but I always felt sheepish or embarrassed with my generalized excuse. "I'm sorry, I've got a really bad memory. I know who you are, I just really struggle with names." I'd say these words as if I were the town drunk, apologizing for the liquor on my breath. "Sorry, I just can't help it. If only I were a better man."

It has not been until very recently that I've discovered the truth of my life and the futility of all my unnecessary guilt and shame. It seems odd to write, but I find it necessary to say these things. I don't lack character, I'm not a bad student, and I'm no more egotistical than anyone else. I'm just dyslexic!

That's it, no big inner struggle between my better and lesser virtues. No, I struggle because I'm dyslexic. My dyslexia is nothing to be ashamed of, it's just the brain I've been given.

Frankly, I'm just barely beginning to understand my dyslexia. It has only been a couple months since I came to the clear awareness that I have been, and will always be dyslexic.

I host a daily radio show and a few months back I thought it would be nice to do a show about dyslexia. I thought I could help people by sharing my story about how I learned to read and grow out of dyslexia.

The only problem with my show idea was I couldn't find a specialist to perpetuate my fiction. Instead, I found a professor from Yale (I can't quite remember her name right now) who began to describe my life. But she didn't use my name, she used the word dyslexic.

In the middle of our interview, I proudly blurted out, "I'm dyslexic!" I said those words as if I'd won a prize or at least found a place to stand without shame.

I got so excited that I wanted to go out and buy the specialist's book, so I could figure out who I am. But I haven't done that yet, because I don't remember her name, and I don't remember the title of the book, and oh yeah, I almost forgot. . . I don't enjoy reading. I'm dyslexic!

(I googled the Yale Expert. Her name is Sally E. Shaywitz and you can find more about the Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity by clicking this link.)