

Jimmy Didn't Respond
Final Project
November-1994

A familiar sinking feeling rose in the pit of my stomach as class got started. Class members were introducing themselves, and I was already in an anxious quandary. What should I say about myself? I should concentrate on learning names. Oh, shit! I'm missing (not comprehending) what my classmates are saying. These were some of the thoughts coursing through my mind at the beginning of "Courage and Craft" Now it's three classes later, and I have only learned a few names. How embarrassing! I am unable to address classmates by name.

Life in the classroom has always been a constant juggling act of setting priorities and employing strategies: unobtrusively using neighbors to obtain missing instructions; sacrificing less important needs such as memorizing names, to focus on the ongoing conversation; rereading a passage to myself, after having just read it out loud in a round robin; and consolidating notes I am taking, at the expense of listening to the teacher. Above all I have felt compelled to perform competently. On one hand, I have always had an unwavering compulsion to succeed in my endeavors. On the other, I have felt an anxious need to protect myself—to blend in and appear normal — to hide a sense of shame. These feelings were old scars from deep and painful wounds inflicted over a long period in coping alone with an invisible handicap.

Before I begin my account of the struggle to overcome a handicap that has afflicted the core of my identity, I will briefly describe the nature of this bane. In 1971, I was first diagnosed as having a minimal brain dysfunction; since then I sought other opinions. In 1983, I was told that I had a cerebellar dysfunction that was responsible for dyslexia, and in 1992 that I had attention deficit disorder. Attending California State University, Northridge in 1992 as a credential student, I was tested for and labeled as learning disabled. All these labels overlap and relate to a problem with processing information. The following are parts of the constellation of cognitive deficits which make up the learning disability: Visual and audio blurring — there's a subtle lack of clarity in the visual and audio input of salient information so that body language and conversation are lost leaving fragmented incoherent chunks; a dysfunction in processing rapid sounds — a normal reading pace makes comprehension impossible; and background interference with focused attention — noise and movement often divert attention away from where it's fixed. For example, the teacher may be giving the class instructions, while at the same time someone coughs or moves their chairs — this may jerk my attention away from the teacher, and I've lost the instructions. The deficits described above highlight lasting cognitive deficiencies that I must deal with.

As a youngster in school, there was no way I could adequately cope with the magnitude of these problems. Perceptually I was on the margin. My energy, socially and cognitively, was spent on trying to establish and maintain lucidity out of a perplexity of fragmented, blurry discourse. I was in a constant struggle to understand what the teacher was saying. For instance, I had difficulty with both understanding and following instructions, and when I just couldn't get them in my head, I

would feel confused, vulnerable and shamed. Things got worse when I tried to get the missing information from another student, and was admonished for talking or disrupting the class. Compounding this was my impulsive talking in class. Impulsivity was another facet of the handicap, and a behavior that was hard for me to rein in as a child and adolescent. All I wanted and what I strived for in school was to adapt and achieve. On the contrary, impressed in my memory is the feeling of an awkward child anxious and discouraged in a bewildering and often hostile classroom.

During my school years I remember a litany of the same transgressions that appeared on report cards, and for which I was superficially judged and often admonished. They were confined to a narrow set of contexts: being disruptive, because of continual talking in class; not finishing assignments, not completing assignments; not completing work on time; not following instructions; not being tactful; and not working up to my potential. In a confidential school report, I was described by my sixth-grade teacher in the category labeled "Schoolroom deportment": "Lacks self-control -- chats with neighbors unless continually reminded. Not boisterous or mischievous." Under the category of "Powers of attention," he wrote, "Rather short attention span. May be partly since his ability exceeds that of many of his classmates." Possible ameliorating methods or interventions were rarely used by my teachers to try and modify the problematic and habitual behaviors. A point to take into consideration was that my public schooling was completed well before the field of special education was established and mandated by law.

Going to kindergarten was like being snatched from the warm sustaining bosom of my mother and home, to be thrust into an authoritarian wasteland of rules and expectations beyond my ability to assimilate. I might as well have been abducted by aliens, with whom I shared identical physical characteristics and language, but little else. In a teacher's conference, my mother, who has never gotten over its significance, was told that when the class was asked to stand and pick up their chairs, Jimmy didn't respond. I wasn't ready for kindergarten, so I had to repeat.

In schooling the biggest challenge that I faced and overcame was learning to read. Vaguely I recall this time in my life — when I dreaded the clock as it got closer and closer to reading period. My teachers used reading circles, and I prayed that the teacher wouldn't call on me to read. I could never keep pace with my classmates, or comprehend what was being read. When called on to read, I was mortified. The teacher would have to point out where to start reading — then I would tentatively bungle my way, mispronouncing most of the words and needing constant cues from the teacher. This was an anguishing and exhausting process for me, and probably exhausting for the teacher and fellow students. Eventually I fell far behind the class.

I believe that it was around fourth-grade that I caught up. There were several factors which led to my success in reading: the teacher's willingness to try different approaches, especially a heavy dose of phonic knowledge; working with flash cards with my mother; and finally, comic books which made reading enjoyable. Without a stubborn perseverance and a compelling desire to succeed. I would never have learned to read.

My struggle with reading unleashed some indelible feelings, feeling overwhelmed, anxious and discouraged. They have lasted, and are triggered to some degree by challenging learning situations. In the past those feelings dominated, but now I keep them in check by not worrying about the future, and by reminding myself of my abilities.

This ordeal of learning to read revealed a durable side to my personality, which allowed me to effectively counter the devastation of learning disabilities and the ensuing school experiences. Three innate traits stand out: a deep-seated curiosity that has upheld a long-long intellectual journey, nourished my soul; a compelling desire to succeed that drives me to work hard and do my best; and a dogged perseverance that has sustained both the will to overcome adversities, and to fulfill important aspirations. Without these attributes, I couldn't have maintained a passion for striving to live life to the fullest.

To cope with the pressures of school, I needed a safe and living haven, and this was provided by my mother. She gave me the space in which to revitalize from the frustrating and exhausting demands of school. I could stay home from school on the flimsiest of excuses without being taken to task. She acted as a buffer, cushioning me from the requirements of self-discipline and taking responsibility that schools try so hard to inculcate. Looking at the school report again, my sixth-grade teacher wrote, in summarizing me in a thumbnail sketch: "He will not accept the responsibility of arriving at school on time or completing work when due. He has been absent 43 days during the year — usually because of an upset stomach or being overtired." In my high-school years, the stomachaches became more frequent, and a couple of years I was absent 80 days or so.

There were some flaws with my home life with two bad marriages that ended in divorce. My father was a cold, extremely rigid and distant man, who wouldn't take responsibility. From my birth, he reneged on his role as a father to his two sons. He stated one day, according to mom, that he would have nothing to do with his son (James Jr.) until his son was old enough to respond to him. I was still waiting for him to respond when my mother divorced him just before my fifth birthday. Two years later, my mother remarried. In the first years of marriage, my stepfather made half-hearted attempts to act as a father. However, with the arrival of half-brothers, and the responsibility of taking care of a new home...he faded into an alcoholic haze.

Again, mother acted as a buffer. One night shortly after the marriage, my brother and I were acting rambunctious. After several warnings, our stepfather appeared and proceeded to whack us with the flat side of a hairbrush. An argument erupted between mother and our stepfather, and that was the last time our stepfather ever laid a hand on us. After twelve years and four more children, this shattered marriage ended.

It is hard for me to say what kind of influence this fractured home setting had, and how it impacted my handicap. I believe it may have delayed my social development, and certainly made it harder to make my way in the world.

After middle school, my self-esteem started to suffer greatly. I was experiencing problems on different fronts — physical development, social development and continuing problems with learning. Physically, I was late maturing — more than two and one-half years behind, in stature and sexually. Almost everyone in my tenth-grade class was bigger than me, even though I was a year older. My first driver's license, at 16, stated my height at 5' 1" and my weight at 105 lbs. This was just another worry to exacerbate my ability to cope.

Socially I was becoming more isolated. My childhood friends were beginning to date, while I was left at home. This was causing much suffering, but there wasn't anything I could do. I was extremely self-conscious about my height, and learning problems that were starting to come to my attention.

In school, I was having trouble in a number of classes. I was having great trouble with writing in English class. The trouble was that I wrote fragmented sentences and I didn't understand how to organize a paragraph. It took several attempts at college, and the passing of many years, before I became comfortable with writing. Foreign language was beyond my capability in high school, because it was impossible for me to comprehend the verbal language. My geometry teacher would play mathematical games verbally with the class, by picking a number and doing a number of operations with it. He might multiply it another number — subtract an amount, divide it by two, etc. After the second or third operation, I would be hopelessly lost, while the rest of the class was continuing. That was like a tragic epiphany. The evidence was overwhelming that something was very wrong with me, that I was different from all my classmates. This revelation was quite disturbing, and I kept it to myself. After this, I became quite sensitive about my shortcomings in comparison to others, and I have never stopped being sensitive.

After finishing with public schooling, I recall being left with a bitter residue of negative feelings. School had been fraught with unpleasantness and constant anxiety. My self-esteem was profoundly shaken. Socially and emotionally, I was stuck in isolation — a self-absorbed solitary confinement. The painful wounds, some inherent, some inflicted over the course of my public education, are still healing. Well after I finished high school, I was mindful of a determination to achieve a college degree. In the mid 1960's I made three serious attempts. Each time I failed because of an inability to cope with the rigors of academe. Nonetheless, each time I learned a little more about my strengths and weaknesses, about university resources, and about strategies to compensate for the learning handicap. I learned how to structure my class load, and how to use my disabilities to get pre-enrollment status. In reading, I began to use the "SQ3R" method — which is the abbreviation for survey, question, read, recite and review. I stopped cramming, and made sure that I was well prepared and had adequate time before exams, if possible. One thing I never took advantage of was to employ note-takers, readers and special test arrangements — just pre-enrollment.

Consciously I try not to worry unnecessarily about the future and my ability to handle certain inevitable matters. If I don't keep those feelings in check, I'm susceptible to shaming myself needlessly over and over. In the past, heavy reading and writing assignments have sometimes

triggered painful emotions from perceived deficiencies —how I was a slow reader and how hard it was for me to organize and write a paper without going through misery. When this happened, my learning-disorder identity would rear its ugly head. Automatically I would regress back to my childhood emotions when I felt different from my peers — as a result, I would feel ashamed.

My third attempt ended in the winter of 1970. For the next fourteen years, I worked in a variety of manual labor jobs. I entered UCLA in 1984, and was able to complete a Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology. From the time I started college, twenty-three years had passed before I received a bachelor. I went to California State University at Northridge, and received a clear-credential to teach at the elementary school level.

I was a late-bloomer in every way. Not dating until my twenties, married at the age of 36, became a teacher at 48 years of age, divorced at age 49.

Addendum 2010:

At the age of 64, I was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome.

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