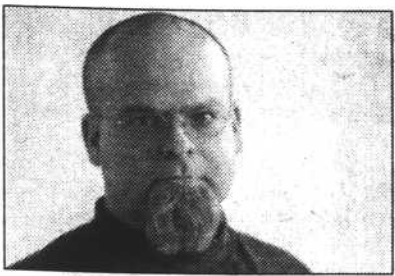


Not like the others

Disability brings growing up too fast, working extra hard



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It took me years to realize my mistake. It took too long.

I don't know how I got the idea, or where it came from:

That I was "fixed," that I was "cured," that I had somehow outgrown the learning disability that had prompted one specialist, Dr. Jones, to tell my mother privately, "Your son will never write or draw like other children."

This was the summer of '69. I was four years old.

Even now, years out of the closet, and I still would rather not have to explain it. It still gets me mad to hear it denied to my face: "Oh, you are not!"

But I am; I'm disabled.

I have what they call, or used to

call, dysgraphia. I don't know what they call it now but there's not a whole lot of information on it, that I can find. It tends to get grouped with dyslexia a good deal; it involves the dyslexic "reversing" of letters and numbers so familiar to us from after-school specials and celebrity factoids (Cher, for instance, is dyslexic).

Dysgraphia, implies, however, not a problem reading, but a problem writing.

"But you're a writer," you say, as if that proves something.

Yeah, and I can dance, too, what of it? The fact that those things were harder for me to learn than they were for you does not actually keep me from being able to do them better than you. And I do.

(I don't mean you personally.) And I suppose I don't really care what they call it - dysgraphia, by any other name, would stink like meat.

Even "learning disability" is just a term educators, who discovered the problem in the first place, like to use.

If neurologists had invented learning disabilities they would have called them something else, "perceptual perturbances" maybe - and that seems to lie closer to the point.

Learning disabilities aren't problems that keep you from learning

-they're problems with the way your brain functions.

Saying that makes them sound pretty serious, and to those who have them, they can be.

Myself, I have trouble putting things in order. That's not so bad, and as disabilities go, it beats a kick in the head, believe me. But it makes it sort of hard to file a tax return.

My recall of events, my recall of events is affected.

From 1970 to 1979 I attended a special school for learning-disabled (and gifted, they liked to add) children. I think I was the gifted one they were talking about; other members of the student body were pretty damaged.

Patrick was borderline mentally retarded, with a cleft palate that slurred his speech.

Sharla was an albino with runs in her stockings and a low IQ.

Todd turned purple when angered - and he was always angry at something or someone.

We pretty much all were. We were an angry bunch.

Still, we got along and we found we had an awful lot in common.

When I was in fourth grade, I had friends, and sometime classmates, who were old enough to drive. Think of it! Friends with cars of their own! Kids

who, like me, couldn't add two numbers together, who split their sides laughing if I used a word like "whimsical" in conversation.

They were emotionally not much older than me, some of them, but they could drive. Let me tell you, it's good to have such friends when you are just a little kid with a head full of rubbish.

Early on, I learned to think of myself as an adult, to take myself seriously and demand that others do so as well - contributing a good deal of hilarity to the lives of real grown-ups I'm sure.

A little old lady said to another, once, in my presence, "I had Mark in my Sunday school class when he was a little boy, and he was an old man even then."

So my disability aged me, in a way I feel it stole part of my childhood.

But learning disabilities are something we think of children having, isn't that so? You can get a lot of books, and my mother bought a few as I grew up, about the "Learning Disabled Child." So maybe you can see, sort of, where I got the idea:

That I would grow out of it.

And this is what my parents and teachers kept telling me would happen, though not in so many words.

I'm sure they meant to encourage

me, not lie to me, but they ended up doing both. Maybe that's the way it had to be.

Fortunately for me there is a rule in the universe that says: Draw 100,000 pictures and the 100,000th will be better than the first.

That's how I learned.

How I learned to write and draw so well that I feel I should be able to earn my living doing either - if it were not for one tragic fact:

No good at being anyone else, I have always had to be myself.

Dr. Jones was right: I still don't write or draw like the other children, more's the pity for my poor credit rating.

I keep believing that I'll find my niche one day and make it big on the strength of Spellcheck™ and talent alone (contact me with offers of money).

But I have given up on "growing out."

I will remain myself, my disability disappearing into my identity like a trick of the light. I will seem merely odd, a little eccentric, maybe whimsical.

I will never leave it behind like a wooden leg propped in a corner or false teeth forgotten in a glass:

My disability looks just like me.

The lighter side

Wandering mind takes over as graduation nears



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I just remembered I was supposed to be a student. Problem is, my homework certainly isn't done for tomorrow, and I haven't stayed awake in class once this semester. Do you hear what I'm telling you? The prince is marrying the sea-witch in disguise!

I may have a sleeping disorder. I'm not supposing you care, but it's rather serious. The doctor suggested some impractical advice that I don't drive until I'm cured.

Imagine trying to explain to your professors that you suffer from an unidentified sleeping disorder, so they should disregard the snoring in class. It goes over really well. I'm doomed. I may as well just quit school and do nails.

I think you can tell a lot about people by looking at their fingernails and cuticles. I'm serious. Look at your neighbor's hands. Are they well-kempt? I think people with well-kempt hands are the ones who wash after using the facilities.

And I think it's reasonable to demand that people wash their hands before eating at the same table with you. They'll touch the salt shaker or something and then you have dirty-facility- salt-shakers on the table.

Does it concern you when people don't put salad dressing on their salads? What kind of a person prefers dry salad? It's communist. At least put some oil and vinegar or cottage cheese or something on it. Anything but Dorothy Lynch.

Dorothy Lynch just tastes like crap. People in Nebraska try to pretend like they like it because here in the Cornhusker State we feel obligated to support small local businesses, but you don't have to lick the cat's butt to support your hometown. That's what.

Don't you think people with dark eyes should give up on the green or blue contact idea? They end up looking like a victim of alien abduction off "X-Files." I tend to think "X-Files" is really just a spin-off of "The Twilight Zone," only the music from "The Twilight Zone" is considerably better.

The weeks before Christmas vacation, spring break and summer always seem like "The Twilight Zone." It's like a string of Mondays without "Ally McBeal." I think it's because you know the rest of the week isn't going to get any better. You know just one fast-food, slick-ass, Persian bazaar day after another.

But spring break is on its way. Yippee! Are you off to spend Daddy's

money and shake your junk around at some stinky aquatic paradise? Or are you just going to keep pretending like you are reaching your goal of self-actualization at some dreary coffee house?

Self-actualization equals a bag of manure with a yellow ribbon tied around it. It's a cultural excuse to be lazy. It's a bunch of people who want to be really deep without actually

developing a personality to speak of.

These are the people who connect to Dave Matthews or Smashing Pumpkins or something.

Smashing Pumpkins is pretty good, if you like to play the air guitar and sing off-key. Not that they're off-key, it just doesn't sound so bad when people are off-key to Smashing Pumpkins.

Maybe when you're singing along to them, it's impossible to be off-key. It's like the national anthem. How can anyone sound bad singing the national anthem?

I think we should say the pledge of allegiance at the beginning of every class. We could resurrect patriotism. Overnight. We'll call it a movement and start a foundation. We (who's we? I don't know, just play along) could pay some overpriced guy with an advertising degree, a healthy dose of depression and an addiction to over-the-counter sleeping pills to develop a national slog-go for the "movement."

Make love to America: Sport your patriotism or something equally silly. Go ahead, you try now. We'll erect billboards with Vanilla Ice, the Jolly Green Giant and Ginger Spice decked out in Tommy Hilfiger gear and the kids will start fan clubs. The movement will be so inspiring that Puff the Magic Dragon will move away from the sea. It'll be the hottest trend since a bad attitude and goth.

As a teen-ager, I suffered from a bad attitude. But I grew out of it, and it wasn't really my fault. Can't you tell Flanagan is Irish? What's your excuse? It was predetermined that I would be hot-tempered and opinionated. The first is curable, the latter is not.

I think we should have Irish History Month, because the Irish are unjustly portrayed as drunks in the media and because they've been persecuted. I know, I know they haven't been heavily persecuted in America,

but hell, why not? No other country will give them a month, and as far as I know, March is up for grabs.

Do they still have study hour in school? I wish I would have had Latin instead of study hour. I never had the opportunity to learn Latin in school, and I do believe it has been a barrier to my academic achievement. Latin is a medium for many languages, the key to the vocabulary of science and historic documents and should be a basic tool of education.

What do you think of people who correct grammar for others in mid-sentence? Oh sure, you can try to pass it off as constructive criticism, but usually the people who do it are just trying to illustrate their superior intelligence. Why not wait until later to correct them? Because they're pompous, that's why. They're the same people who have a smug smile if they finish their test first.

Have you ever had to take a test in a room with a sniffer? For some reason, there is always a sniffer in my classes on test days. I know it's not really their fault, but it makes me absolutely insane. Is it rude to offer them a Kleenex? Is it wrong to demand they use it?

It seems to me that as students near graduation they begin to freak out. You know we all want to be so grown up, but it's not all warm fuzzies out there. We've spent all this time and money and now we have to convince the world we're capable. Can we do it?

Just forget about that for now. Find other ways to occupy your thoughts. Mask your insecurities about graduation. How?

Find a boyfriend or girlfriend and start planning your future with someone who doesn't even know how you take your coffee. That seems to work for many.

And if you really want to ensure a long-lasting relationship, make certain your counterpart is chosen for looks and start making memories at the bars.

I think guys with horn-rimmed glasses are hot. And I love popcorn-flavored Jelly-Bellies. And I think everyone should dye their hair a red tint and wear pink this spring. And I think dandelions are one of the finer things in life.

What's my point? I have no point. I often have no point. It's part of my charm.



DEB LEE/DN