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A Literate Dyslexic (LD)

*M.L. Fraser, Ph.D.**

I struggled. I admit it. I struggled every day before I decided to do it. I applied to and was accepted into several graduate programs. The decision I struggled with was whether to go or not. I was financially set, as many of the programs had offered me good stipends. The only obstacle holding me back was being Learning Disabled (LD), and the possible ways that might be received. In the end, I decided to go. I went because I believed in a community of individuals who were supportive of one another while happily disagreeing with each other in the name of knowledge. I went because the educated knew about neurological discrepancies, especially within my department: Cognitive psychology. I went because I knew the law was in place and that it could help me if I needed defending, although I had that in the back of my mind only as the ultimate protection — I would not need to go there.

I knew that it would not be easy and I knew that my learning disability would add to the difficulty that everyone faces in graduate school, but I was willing to work hard. I thought that the professors and the school would know the law and I would not have to rely on it for protection. I went because I thought the twin protectors of privilege — education and law — would have my back. I stayed because I believed that each new unnecessary hurdle would be the last and I would be forever free from the politics to run for the gold medal: My degree. I stayed because I believed what I was told: That when I was done, I would be able to do what I loved to do — teach and conduct research. I was not expecting polemic objectification when I walked into my program. I thought diffidently that my success had nothing to do with their failure. A learning disability and the Learning Disabled are not to be feared.

I was wrong.

* Dr. Fraser is a Professor of Psychology in Northern California who is grateful for Dr. Janet Eddy, who pushed, cajoled, wheedled, and just plain believed in a dyslexic graduate student. Dr. Fraser is returning the favor by believing in her students. She also teaches activism and how to change things from within the system.

In graduate school, no one expects a learning disability. As an undergraduate, if you are LD, it is expected that you may need help sometimes; but a dyslexic who actually makes it into a doctoral program is unthinkable. The idea of someone who cannot read being in the upper echelons of education prompts incredulity and institutes a culture of disbelief. Your department, your instructors, and your institution imply, and even outright say, that you are lying. I was taught early in my program that, if I needed assistance, the situation must be extreme and I should have found a way to compensate for the problem myself. Seeking help through the otherwise appropriate channels did not always work and I was not aware of what I could ask for. It never occurred to me that I would be deprived of what I needed. The unfortunate truth is that those who need the protection of the law are those who least understand it and in my case, are denied access at the very fundamental levels. I began crashing classes at the law school on campus, especially those on discrimination.

Although discrimination against the LD individual is usually subtle, due to patent disbelief, it can also be very blatant and manifest in outrageous ways. One woman asked me if I was sure I was dyslexic, as if I could be mistaken. She furthered the idiocy by exclaiming, "but you are so sharp!" implying that my intelligence belied my neurology. I tried to pass this off as an isolated incident; sadly, it was not. Even my boss asked me if I was over the dyslexia yet, as if a good strong nap and a box of Kleenex could cure it. These types of comments began to occur so often that I knew I could not expect any support from my program, my mentor, my cohorts, or my school. I became more humorous, more bitter, more determined, and more alone. I was not protected, either by the educated (where *were* they?) or the law. I became a malicious "other" the instant I invoked the law; I was no longer seen as a student.

The LD student comes with a unique set of problems — no more so than any other student — but many administrators and authorities were frightened by the idea that these problems might create a new way of interacting. I was told, flat out, by some of them that they were frightened by my inability to read. As a student in a doctoral program, a sort of double indemnity is created — being both LD and a graduate student. Attempts to equalize the baseline were always greeted by my advisor with a "not part of my job description" attitude. All battles were left to me — the student, the person with the least amount of power — to fight. Especially disturbing is the concept of the student as an alien and the mentor, along with the University, denying allegiance. All of this is compounded by the fact that I am a female in a male-emulated system. It becomes easy to see how I was in a completely powerless position, how I had no way of either de-centering the power or fighting the discrimination, except to escalate it legally. My identity is not restricted to being female, nor to being dyslexic. In graduate school, however, I became a highly

visible and vocal token. I was used as a demographic. My gender and disability became yet another card to be played in the poker game of diversity (“Look what we’ve got . . .”).

I often pause before divulging my secret and frequently hide the fact that I cannot read. My hesitation is due to how this part of my identity is subjected to examination on a daily basis. I constantly ask myself how far I should “come out” as LD and how much those who are “in the know” would understand. This topic was discussed in my home department at graduate school, but never truly acknowledged. Fearfully, and ironically, I did all of the classic things that LD kids do when they do not want to be “found out.” I went to the bathroom at the right times and pretended to have left my glasses at home when asked to read in class. I cracked jokes and coughed so hard that they skipped over me. I colluded in my own oppression and no one found out. Just once, however, this did not work. I had to tape the class, and the Professor protested as a matter of policy. Then, I had to tell.

Sometimes, telling amounted to changing the student-teacher relationship. My disability became an object. The part of my identity that affected my relationships was not as a dyslexic individual, but rather, as a set of walking cognitive problems, or worse, the potential lawsuit. One man told me that my dyslexia was nothing more than an evasion. He did not believe in it. He was convinced that I just did not want to work hard, i.e., I was stupid, lazy *and* a liar. He held a lot of power in the department, as he was the one doling out the assistantships for research and teaching. I finally asked why I did not get one, especially since my GPA was one of the highest in the department and I applied every time an opportunity arose. He told me that he was afraid my disability would affect the students too much and that I would get the formulas wrong (the fact that the computers did most of the statistical work was irrelevant). Unfortunately, this is legally a legitimate concern about how I could accomplish the parameters of my job. It is also hypocrisy at its best: He did not believe me or in it, but just in case it was true, he did not want anyone to catch him discriminating, especially at the only level I could fight — legally. I did not always want that fight; the lawyer, who sometimes believed me, and sometimes just wanted the discrimination suit, escalated the issue.

Fortunately, he was in the minority of people who simply did not like me. This is actually part of the problem; most people really enjoy who I am. Somehow, they see my disability as incongruent with their smart, funny, diligent friend. I really do not understand this phenomenon but I know it exists. I know it exists because it has happened way too many times for it not to be true. In fact, it was a major factor in my experience with my labmates. My cohorts did not always hand me my portion of the work because they were not sure that I, or my dyslexia, could handle it — no matter how many times I explained that I could do it, that I just needed a

little more time or that I just needed to work it in a different way. In their eyes, they wanted to protect me because they liked me so much. The dilemma then became: Do I tell them and risk patronization and infantilization, or do I not and risk lunacy (not telling would prompt curiosity over the silly mistakes I made as a result of my LD and deny the legitimacy of my accommodations, thus creating indignation because I was not pulling my weight properly).

It would have been okay to deal with the phenomenally stupid comments and mistakes people make about learning disabilities, except for one thing: The way I was perceived within a highly competitive research program. Like all objects of discrimination, it was used against me by others jockeying for position. Even more profound was the unwillingness of faculty to take on a LD student at all — to the extent that some did not want me in their classroom, but had to take me anyway. Because, sometimes, the only recourse available to me was a legal course of action, I became hesitant to use it as a trump card. I became resentful that I had to use it at all. By involving the law, I would be escalating something that should be basic: Why should I have to get the law involved to tell you that I can do the work?

In the classroom, the forced compliance imposed on the faculty was felt immediately, creating resentment from some of the other students. One woman cried foul, wanting to know why she could not have access to the technology that I had; not realizing that for me, the technology placed me on par with her. Another remarked, “You bring the rest of us down.” The plight of the privileged is to be confronted with their own privilege, especially when the threat presented is seen as so similar to the self.

When I first entered the program I crossed the country for, my advisor told me that I did not know what I did not know and that steps needed to be taken to rectify this. At the time, I chalked it up to being a “first year,” not knowing what I should have known, and old-fashioned ignorance. In other words, I thought he was right. I just needed to work harder and be smarter and faster. He who was God knew much more than I ever could about this field. That is why I was a student, right? It never even occurred to me, until now, that his motive for saying such a thing may have been, in part, due to my learning disability. “The very brilliant” are often frightened that they will be found out to be “not quite so brilliant” by their underlings. My dyslexia may have been the downfall feared by this man, who was, and still is, one of the leaders in his field. For the first time, he may have encountered a student who did not fall into one of the theories of cognitive functioning he so often pontificated. I was a threat. He often dismissed me from our one-on-one meetings with a nonchalant air, as if my mere presence was simply too much for the eminence of his glow. It was the quickest and easiest thing for an advisor to do to a graduate student who had not hit the ground running. I was gone within the year.

Ultimately, the problem was that my advisor and labmates blamed me for being LD. How do you fight that, legally? How do you fight trepidation and ignorance, legally? You cannot sanction fear. Blame and fright were not true just of these individuals; most times, it came from the administration. "It's too much work," "it's too much of an unknown quantity," and "it's not my area of expertise," were all responses I received in my quest to find a second advisor. These sorts of comments and attitudes created additional pressure for me to perform and be brilliant within the program. It was not enough to just be a graduate student; I had to be bloody Stephen Hawking. I had to be better than the other students to prove, somehow, that a dyslexic could do it. I felt my "lesser than" status acutely; it was thrust in my face. I never felt this way as an LD undergraduate. I did not want to continually focus on the LD issue; I just wanted to learn. An LD individual threatened the stereotype. I now understand how the first students of color felt in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

When I complained of this to my (second) advisor, he told me that I had to try harder to understand ignorance. I just looked at him; I was not sure what to say. I wanted to tell him that he did not get it, but he was my advisor, and he is physically disabled — so maybe he did get it. At that point, I realized that hidden disabilities possess an indemnity that the physically disabled do not have. It is almost institutionalized that to be "disabled," the disability must be visible. People need to see their own largess when it comes to being compassionate ("some of my best friends . . ."). If there was one thing that I had learned about graduate school, it was that you never ever argue with your advisor — the holder of power and protection. Ever.

That day, I also realized that no matter how much my advisor wanted to believe that he was not the holder of institutionalized power, he was. He would fly off to foreign countries and we would communicate through email. When he would return, he often sympathized with my plight, but offered no help whatsoever. He refused to step up to the plate and advocate for me. He truly believed that the fight of the learning disabled was not his. He had already fought his fight; it was my turn now. The role of an ally was not part of his job description, nor was the role of advisor in this regard. I was illiterate and adrift in a world of readers. I felt I had no recourse. It was difficult enough to get an advisor in the first place who was willing to deal with someone like me.

I met a woman in my first year of graduate school who became my mentor. As the director of the Department of Learning Services, she also became my friend. From the day I walked into her office and put my head on her desk, not knowing what to do or how to do it, only knowing that I wanted to stay, she became my mentor. She became the mentor that I should have had all along, but never received. She was the one who should

have hooded me, but because she was not faculty, all she could do was watch and let the tears fall when they read my name. It is ironic that the faculty in my department were the ones least equipped to deal with a student who wanted, so badly, to learn. She risked ridicule at their very hands.

I believe it was my journey as LD that prompted my journey as a feminist. My feminism and my dyslexia are parts of who I am, but it was never my goal to deny the other portions of myself. To do so would serve someone else's political agenda. In many ways, the two fights are the same. All that I desire is access. I want to receive an education without apologizing for who I am, and what I am not. I do not want the LD banner waved as some sort of bullfight indicator, just as I do not want to be seen as a feminist rabble-rouser. I simply want to be seen as a student who wants to learn.

I knew that I could complete the degree if I was given the opportunity. I did not want to be rescued, just given a chance. The law says that I am to be given a chance. A "real" chance was all that I wanted. I did not know how to go about getting that chance or if it was even possible. All the "chances" up until then were lip service at best; lame attempts to show compliance with the American Disabilities Act. Discrimination, in all its forms, in all its colors, is protected by the law. However, you cannot sanction another person's view of your abilities. You can tell them how they need to behave around you and how they must treat you when you ask for an accommodation. It only takes one coworker, who does not want to add "extra work" to his or her plate, to create a situation over time, in which I am left running to Human Services citing the law. Even then, if the law is not specific, I cannot get what I need to function. I am not sure this would be the case if my "lesser than" status were readily apparent, as with skin color or accent, and I do not think there will ever be a class action suit for the Learning Disabled, as there is still disbelief.

I cannot be smart and capable and funny if I am dyslexic . . . No matter what the law says.