

**Learning Disabled Graduate Students:
A Life History of Learners and Their Learning**

by

Avi S. Rose

**A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Department of Education
University of Toronto**

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Abstract

An extensive review of the literature suggests that as students with learning disabilities age, the effects of their learning disabilities persist into adulthood. Despite the fact that more students with learning disabilities are now reaching higher levels of formal education—due to increased awareness and service provision in childhood and adolescence—relatively little is known about the ways in which to approach and assist this population. Preliminary studies indicate that though legally mandated to do so, an insufficient number of colleges and universities are prepared to offer appropriate guidance and support to students with learning disabilities, particularly as they enter post-graduate or professional programs of study. Authors suggest that more study is needed into the ways in which adults with learning disabilities succeed and into the special needs which they have as students in the higher end of educational programs. It is suggested that qualitative methods are best suited for this type of inquiry, as they are able to capture the experiential nature of the phenomenon and more likely to generate models of common growth and need.

This study examines the learning lives of six students, all of whom reached various levels of study at the graduate level and who were at some point, identified as learning disabled. Using Life History Methodology as the primary means of inquiry, participants were asked to recall their learning experiences, the role of significant others in their learning and the means by which they overcame the effects of their learning roadblocks. Advice to teachers and allied professionals, parents, educational institutions and future students with learning disabilities were offered by participants in light of their experiences and perceived needs. Special attention was focused on the graduate studies

experience, since little is known of the relationship between this and the target population.

From these interviews, a panoramic view of the phenomenon and a trajectory of common experience and insight emerged. Similarities in the cognitive and affective domains were noted, as were reactions to institutional structures and outside support systems. A set of evaluative comments emerged on the nature of key players in the lives of students with learning disabilities and how they affected the learning experience. These experiences are compared and contrasted with literature relevant to the population and to those covering learning and psychological experience in a wider domain. Recommendations to future learners, educational systems and professionals, parents and graduate programs are included.

Dedication

I wish to dedicate this work to the memory of two extraordinary friends:

SHIRA WALDMAN, ז"ל

of Blessed Memory

and

KATHY ROSENZWEIG, ז"ל

of Blessed Memory

Both were long time confidants, guides and cherished members of my spiritual family. Their wisdom, love, caring and laughter warmed my life; their untimely passing has left my world a colder, lonelier place.

Acknowledgments

The task of completing this dissertation was often a solitary endeavor, yet, it was never a lonely one. I am blessed to have received the support and guidance of many wonderful individuals whose assistance assured that the experience was one of great learning and immeasurable reward.

Firstly, I wish to sincerely thank my dissertation supervisor, Dr. Ardra Cole. Her guidance, patience, encouragement, enthusiasm and trust, have allowed me to take risks, travel great intellectual and emotional distances and push myself to the limits of my creativity—while remaining firmly grounded in the discipline of research and academic rigor necessary for the integrity of this work. The biblical tract *The Ethics of Our Forebearers*, states, "Find yourself a teacher and acquire a friend." Dr. Cole has become both of these to me—I am grateful for the opportunity to have learned from her and fortunate to have been given the gift of her friendship.

I would also like to express my gratitude to the members of my Thesis Committee, Dr. Solveiga Mieзитis and Dr. Peter Lindsay, for their wise counsel and support throughout my thesis journey.

I wish to acknowledge the important role that the Special Needs Department of O.I.S.E. played in assisting me at various points along the path of this journey. Helen Simpson, director of the department, introduced me to several Co-researchers, offered support and arranged for the transcription of my interview data. Gay Claitman undertook the task of transcription with great care and aplomb. I thank you both for your assistance.

To my greatest support system, my family, I wish to give special thanks. My parents, Neal and Carol, have been the best role models, cheer-leaders and problem solvers in the world. They have assisted me at every level of my education and have ensured that I was able to find the spiritual fortitude and sense of humor necessary to succeed. My siblings, Carnie, Kliel, Or-Nistar and Adira and sisters-in-law Paulie, Yonina and Doris, have listened patiently, checked-in routinely and cared greatly for my work and progress. To them all, I wish to say *Todah Rabah*—many thanks from the deepest place in my heart!

My life has been blessed with the gift of extended family in the form of many loving friends. The members of my community in many parts of the globe, have generously given of their time, energy, enthusiasm and support for my work on this project, and so many other aspects of my life. Though I cannot list them all by name, I wish to make note of two who were especially instrumental in the completion of this dissertation. Judy Goldsmith and Jody Markow, have worked with me on many aspects of this journey and have offered their creative spirit and watchful eyes to it from its inception. To them and to all my friends, I simply say "Thank you".

For a person with the kind of learning disability that I have, a computer becomes more than a tool, but another member of the team, helping to give shape and definition to letters and words that might otherwise emerge illegibly. So, to the three computers who so consistently and faithfully gave form to my voice—"Elsee", "Mac" and "Fred"—thank you and your creators at Apple Computers for making it so easy for me to look good!

Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, I wish to thank the five very special individuals who consented to participate in this study. "Sam", "Noah", "Manya", "Kit" and "Sandy", gave generously of their time, freely of their thoughts and memories and insightfully of their ideas and feelings. Meeting with them changed my life in so many ways and added new meaning to the work of this project. It is no small exaggeration to state that without their enthusiastic and generous contributions to this project, it could not have emerged as it did. I thank you and wish you continued success in your journeys; you have added much to mine.

Avi Rose

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Hassidic legend tells us that in front of each person there is a group of angels who proclaim to the world:

"Behold, here comes a perfect reflection of the Divine!"

If we could only allow ourselves to listen for this and to see each person accordingly, how wonderful the world would be!

—Rodger Kamenetz

Mandala Art—A Road Map

The Colour plates in this dissertation consist of two types of artwork, both known generally as "Mandala" or circle art. For a full explanation of these drawings and their use in the composition of this dissertation, please refer to page 28 (in Chapter 2) of the text.

The first type of Mandala art that the reader will encounter are a series of pieces which I have composed. These represent a visual account of my personal journey as a first-time qualitative researcher and organizer of the enormous project that has become known as my dissertation. Using different media, I have endeavored to express my feelings at various stages of this process such that when complete, a sense of movement and growth can hopefully be seen in both the written and visual components. My goal was to include in this project the important halves of myself as artist and writer, thinker and feeler.

To this end, I have placed the artwork throughout the project, more or less at the point in the process where they were completed. Included with copies of the original artwork are written explanations highlighting the ideas and feelings behind the art.

Additionally, the reader will note the inclusion of Mandalas from the six Co-researchers of this study. I invited my five colleagues to join me in representing our learning life-histories in a non-verbal manner, as an alternate means of communication. In some cases the pieces that emerged were self-created, while others were co-created, or produced by me. Written explanations, along with copies of the original artwork precede each biographical sketch.

"Pulled in All Directions"

COLOUR PLATE #1

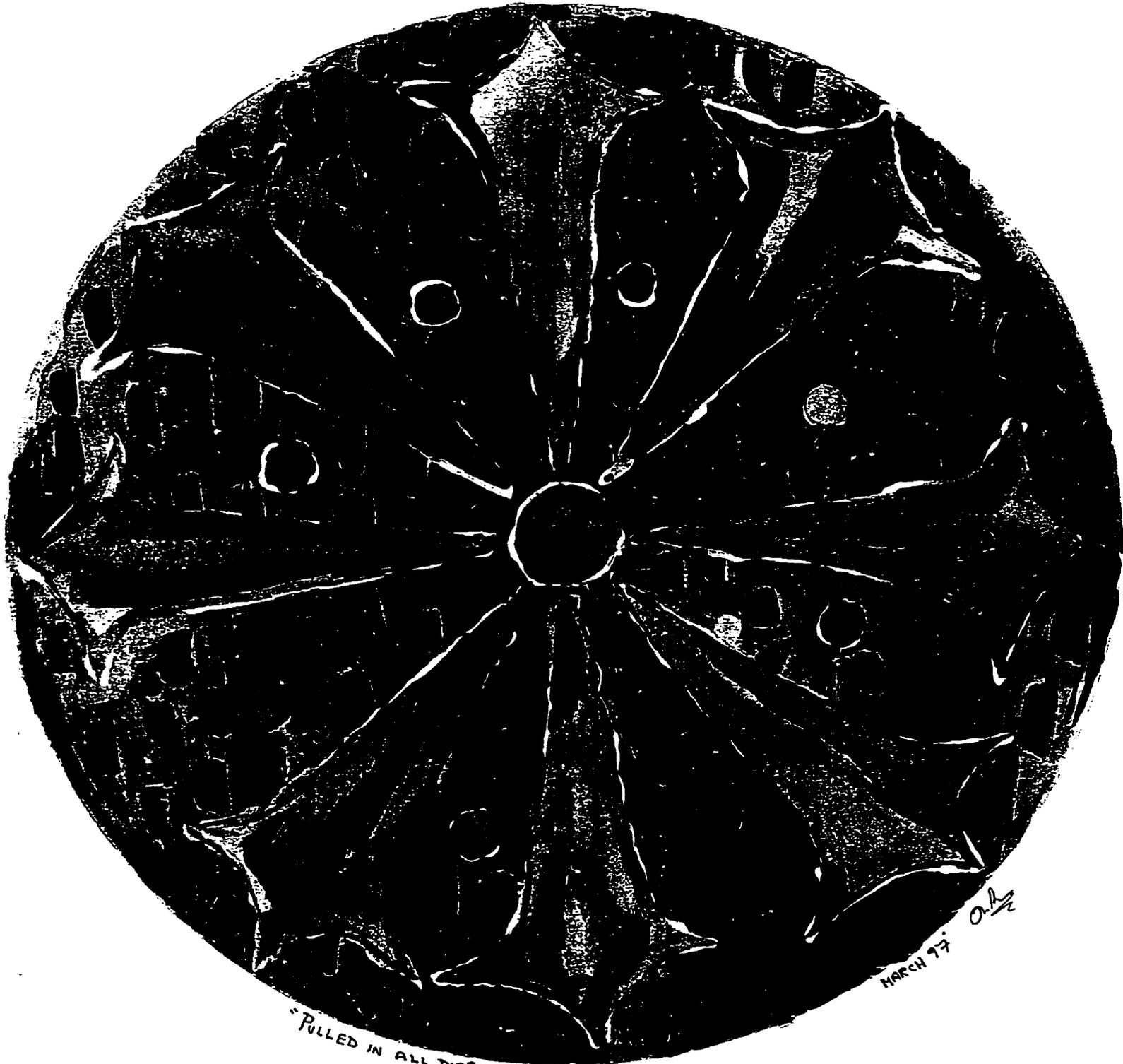
In the beginning there was...chaos! As I worked to complete my review of the literature, the interview process and began to organize my thoughts for the work of finding thematic significance, I was confused. Here was a mass of information forming (I hoped) both the fore and background of my work. But what did it mean? How would it all come together? Was there significance, unity or even cohesion to these divergent lives and experiences?

I represented this confusion in several ways. The choice of 2 elements—earth and water—seemed to me to indicate a lack of interaction that might some day work to form a bond that would lead to growth. Small circles outside these streams represent the seeds, also outside the mix of potential growth and unity.

Beyond this, represented by the patterns in shades of purple and pink, was the sunset of the previous stage, the preparation of the background material—the dissertation proposal, the method of study, the literature review and the interviews themselves. All of this was neat, orderly and in place. Yet, it too was separate, unmixed with the newness of the data and seemingly apart from it.

Did I really have the necessary tools to mix these ideas, this information, these feelings? Where was the insight that would find the patterns, the cohesion, the flow from which the meat could be placed on the bones of the already constructed frame? Despite the months of academic preparation and the work I had already achieved, I was plagued by doubt and question.

It was up to me to engage in all of this material,—to, as it were, dirty my hands with the process of steeping, mulling and intermingling the disparate elements of the work. Did I have what was necessary on intellectual, emotional and creative levels to make the most of the gifts I was given by previous researchers and my Co-researchers? Only time would tell...



"PULLED IN ALL DIRECTIONS"

MARCH 97

O.A.

**Learning Disabled Graduate Students:
A Life History of Learners and Their Learning**

CHAPTER 1

Canvas: An Introduction To The Study

Prologue

Excerpt From Personal Journal, April 6, 1995:

As I sat in our farewell session, emotions began to overtake my ability to concentrate and logically put an end to this most exciting of intellectual pursuits. Here I was, at the last class of the final course that I was to take for my Doctorate—an end to an almost continuous string of courses taken over a period of what has amounted to three quarters of my life—and I was not able to give it the intellectual focus it deserved. Despite the fact that this was a course of immense value and meaning to me (probably more so than almost any other I have taken previously), I realized that it was not the termination of this course alone that was the source of my emotional ground swell.

After the class was over and the room had emptied, I sat alone amid the quiet space, in order to sort out and understand the feelings that had come so powerfully to me. I began by examining the surroundings of the classroom, so familiar to me as a primary residence for almost twenty-seven of my thirty years. These rooms, with their bare, whitewashed walls, harsh fluorescent lights and dusty chalk-boards, had been the theatre in which the drama of so much of my personal story had unfolded. This room—and so many like it—bristled with memories of triumphs and failures, pride and shame.

Leaving the safety and the danger of this room forever as a student was, of course, monumental. For better or for worse, it was a place that I had become most familiar with—I knew its overt rules and regulations and its covert games and manipulations. I was a seasoned professional at navigating thorough its daily activities. It had gone from being a safe and fun place to be as a preschooler, to one of extreme embarrassment, shame and anger for me as an older child to a place of triumph, growth and stimulation as an adult. What went on in the classroom was mirrored in my personal life as well, such that the two had become almost indistinguishable.

It was then that I realized the source of my emotional surge, for I began to sense that though I was by myself, I was not alone in this, my final classroom. Suddenly, I became aware of the others, former incarnations of myself, present in the room, only now coming into view. I knew instantly that they had been with me all along as I went from classroom to classroom, guiding my every move and influencing many of my thoughts, feelings and reactions. Immediately, the room, though still, silent and empty, became absolutely full and charged with memory and emotion.

On the floor, sat the littlest reverberation of myself, happy and comfortable in this place of wonder, with its many secrets and discoveries yet untapped. I have always known that my quest to regain that playful self in the classroom has never left me and that through it all, it has influenced me and given me the sense of awe and joy that permeated every learning experience I have had since. I think that it is this special set of memories with their never-ending positive feelings, that have sustained me and have allowed me to seek out the solutions necessary for me to deal with the many problems brought on by my learning disability.

Nearby, though, huddled in a little wooden desk with its obsolete inkwell and cold steel underside, sat the student I had been in my later childhood and youth. Here was a presence full of fear, anxiety and rage. Here was the child desperately trying to remember which direction the words were written in, echoing in his head the voice of his teacher who told him that he was too dumb to even write his name the right way. Here was the sad child, unable to reconcile the need to learn and explore with an inability to achieve and succeed. Here was the child violently afraid of being asked to stand and read, lest he again stumble and see words that simply did not come together to form meaningful units, as his teacher and fellow students looked on in amazement and ridicule at such simple concepts ignored and overlooked.

This child too has remained with me, along with his fears and self-doubt. No matter how much I have been able to succeed as a student and work to negate my learning difficulties, I have never been able to overcome the nagging negativity that has grown out of that student experience.

Not far from him, stands a young man in university now, finally discovering the truth that one could be intelligent and incapable of the most basic of skills, but that this could be reconciled and overcome. Here was the man finding his strengths, working to subvert his weaknesses and finally enjoying the process of learning and of expressing his ideas. Though he was still fearful that it might all end and return to the horrible days of his past, he persevered and progressed and put away the pain in order to fully focus and achieve that which had alluded him for so long.

It was no wonder then, that I had been so emotionally charged in those final classroom moments. These various incarnations of myself were also completing a cycle and each screamed out to me to feel its emotions and recall its memories. It has been these three competing themes—the desire to learn and its associated joy; the fear of ineptitude and its overwhelming, almost paralyzing anxiety; and, the sheer determination to succeed and overcome with its power and strength—that have been the hallmark of my existence within the walls of these many classrooms.

It was now time for all of us to leave this incubator and face the new challenges that lie ahead. I knew then, that these incarnations would follow me forever and that in order for me to be at peace with them, I had to meet them head-on and confront fully their many memories and competing emotions.

Introduction to the Study

The above described experience is, I feel, the best place to begin the journey that is this project. It was an intense and powerful moment for me, and though it was certainly not the first, it was the most animated of its kind and served to crystallize for me many of the feelings I have encountered in the past. I have often known, in one way or another, that I carried with me the memories of past learning experiences, along with the lingering emotions that permeate my present functioning and push me in so many ways.

It was the conscious realization of this, I think, that had lead me, in that final classroom year, to come to the decision to confront my learning disability in a manner that I had not done before and make of it my final student project. For me, learning disability is central to my make-up, it was a reality for me even before it had definition or title and it continues to affect me in many ways. It is a part of my life that has fueled the fires of my learning and has, in many ways, influenced my decision to become an academic and a psychologist. Though it has often been relegated to a secondary consideration, it has nonetheless lurked mysteriously in the background of my mind and has saturated many of my thoughts and resulting actions. In that last moment, alone in the classroom—having already set myself on the path toward clarity and discovery in connection with my learning past—I was visited with the most vivid manifestation of its existence yet and it gave me new purpose and strength.

The decision to explore the phenomenon of learning disabilities and its effect on graduate students, was of course, emotionally based. I wanted to give form and shape to my experience and derive meaning from my peregrinations. However, it also came from a genuine interest in the experiences of a group of students whose patterns and lessons had not yet, I believed, been adequately highlighted. I knew that if I had no guide from which to learn and no forum in which to express my understanding of this phenomenon, that there were others who were also unable to do so. This meant that I, and many others, were deprived of an opportunity to share a common story and learn from the lessons of an important collective.

Thus, I chose to look at perhaps the most obscure group of students with learning disabilities, in order to discover more about myself and to give insight and voice to the experiences of an entire population. While the lives and needs of younger students with learning disabilities have been explored and charted in some detail over the past thirty years (Serebreni, 1991), studies involving the phenomenon of similarly challenged adults are still rare (Gerber, Reiff & Ginsberg, 1988). Of those studies available, none have exclusively examined a population that strives to learn at the highest levels of the formal educational process. My own experiences, along with many discussions that I have had with other graduate students with learning disabilities, convinced me that this was a fascinating and important vein of knowledge to be tapped and mined.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study, then, was to explore the experiences of graduate students with learning disabilities so as to draw conclusions based on their educational life-histories. I was interested in finding those challenged individuals who have succeeded academically and who have reached the pinnacle of formal learning. This success has come despite (or possibly as a result of) learning difficulties which can often severely impair an individual's ability to accomplish the most basic of academically related tasks.

As such, I interviewed graduate students with learning disabilities and explored with them their lives and learning, in order to paint as complete and colourful a portrait of their experiences and thoughts as was possible. I wished

to understand this population and the common themes that emerged from their collective narrative. I presented stories of individual students, so that each could give insight and inspiration. I explored the findings generated from this inquiry in the context of previous research into the experiences and personalities of learning disabled adults, as well as relevant literature in the areas of resilience theory and existential meaning-making. In addition, I made statements based on this information as to the ways in which younger students might benefit from the lessons learned here.

Goals of the Study

Thus, the goals of the study were twofold: As a writer and an academic, I wanted to tell a story and highlight individuals who have new insight and information to share. As a psychologist and educator however, I also wanted to learn and be able to share insight with those who may benefit from the experiences of predecessors who have already succeeded, despite the difficulties brought on by a learning disability.

In presenting the individual stories of participants, the goal was to highlight examples of unique lives in the context of learning. As individuals with learning disabilities, participants faced great challenges and met with adversity as they attempted to acquire skills and knowledge which, for the average student, are obtained more naturally and with less effort. The information generated from this contextual presentation of data, complete with the personality and personal history of the individual, does, I feel, serve as a powerful example of courage, determination and ability to rise above difficult conditions. It has also, I believe, highlighted the place of educators and institutions who have served in assistive or adversarial roles within the life of the individual.

Along with this, the stories collected act as vehicles for the extrapolation of collective information. The goal here was to seek out common themes and experiences, so as to broaden their scope and begin to form a group portrait of persons with learning disabilities at various levels within the educational process. As such, themes emerging from the narratives were explored, looking for the common ways in which individuals with learning disabilities experienced

and coped with their disability and faced the challenges of education. The question of how and why such individuals persevered with the various formalized educational programs is central. Such information will hopefully provide those who work within these institutions, as well as those students who will later enter into them, an understanding of how to best assist and facilitate success among the population.

In assessing the material derived from the study, I attempted to place it within the context of the existing literature on the nature and needs of adults with learning disabilities. Specifically, I utilized the work of Gerber and Reiff (1992), which describes a model for success among the population. This was primarily used as a framework from which to organize and evaluate the material gathered.

The work of the present study may serve, in one sense, as a means of highlighting or strengthening Gerber and Reiff's model, insofar as it illustrated a group of successful learning disabled adults who have achieved a high degree of success within the world of formalized education. Using this model as a framework has, hopefully, lent support and given new depth and dimension to a theoretical model, which I believe, has great strength and relevance to the population.

Similarly, I examined the material derived from the interviews in the context of the theories of Existential Psychology, as posited by Viktor Frankl (1984). Frankl's work in highlighting the power of the individual to overcome adversity in many extremes and to derive meaning and strength from it, was, I felt, an important lens through which to understand the experiences of graduate students with learning disabilities.

Along the path of this journey, I encountered another theoretical construct, whose relevance and value in the context of this study, appeared to warrant some elucidation. This was the work of several authors whose theories have become commonly known as "Emotional Intelligence" (Goleman, 1995). Here too, I felt that there was exciting learning to be gained from exploring the experiences of this study's population through an important understanding of the human mind.

However, my objective was not necessarily to replicate the work of Gerber and Reiff, Frankl or Goleman, nor to add, in a traditional sense, a fill in the gap of their theoretical constructs (though, in some respects this did occur). The present study is unique and makes use of prior material only as a means of framing new insight and material and not merely as a force for substantiation of existing work. Its main focus on the educational context (with other personal life-events serving as a backdrop), distinguishes this work from more generalized studies. The fact that its origins lie in the personal experiences of the author and make use of a limited, homogeneous population, make this a highly specific and individualized enterprise. The use of life history methodology and Mandala drawings, are also features which make this project unique and therefore untenable as a replicative study.

Another facet of this project was to assess the educational systems through which participants have passed, as a means of highlighting areas of support and opposition. In this way, I feel I have made a statement on their ability to properly prepare and sustain individuals with learning disabilities. Special attention was focused on the graduate studies educational process and its relationship with the learning disabled. My goal here was to use the theoretical constructs which emerged from the narratives in order to make statements on the previously unexamined relationship between graduate education and its learning disabled participants.

Methodological Framework

The method chosen for the exploration of this population falls under the general rubric of Qualitative Research (Smith, 1983) and the more specific research technique of Life History Methodology (Cole & Knowles, 1993). As detailed further in Chapter 2, this method of inquiry, is, I feel, most aptly suited to me as an individual and as a researcher. It is the best format that I am aware of from which to seek knowledge that is both academically rigorous and emotionally honest. It allows for the development of research that is replete with insight, information, learning and affect (Huberman, 1984; Gajar, 1992; Gerber & Reiff, 1991, 1994). It was also, I believe, the most thorough and complete method of exploring this unique group of students. It is my feeling that this

paradigm helped yield much acumen and understanding into the phenomenon of the lives of the chosen population in a way that no other would have been able to.

The life history methodology used in this study, allowed me to present my own story as a member of the target population. This was done for two reasons: Firstly, the clear presentation of my experiences, allowed for my personal bias and beliefs to emerge, such that they were taken into account and considered. This, hopefully prevented me from becoming overwhelmed by my own experiences and left me open to finding new insight and information from the full spectrum of data collected. Secondly, I feel that like my colleges in this venture, my story is of value. It was presented, examined on its own and placed in the context of other gathered data. In this way, it became equal to all other accounts collected, analyzed and re-told.

Presentation of the Study

The research described above is presented as follows: Firstly, I have presented a detailed outline of the research methodology employed. This includes an overview of qualitative inquiry and a statement of personal methodological preferences and beliefs. It is followed by an outline of the project itself, the collection of data, along with the method of analysis and presentation.

Following this, the existing literature on adults with learning disabilities is examined. This provides a backdrop to the study and a context in which to place its findings.

Finally, the research results are presented in their two formats—the stories of individual participants and an analysis of common themes and lessons. The project concludes with a statement on the place of this research in the context of existing materials and the lessons learned for adults as well as younger students with learning disabilities. The limitations of this study and suggestions for further research are also included.

Implications of the Study

The material derived from this study, seeks to answer the following questions:

- What does it mean to be a learning disabled adult and what are the functional, educational and emotional consequences of this?
- What was it like to grow up with a learning disability and what were the functional, educational and emotional consequences of this?
- What is it like to be a learning disabled student in a graduate studies program?
- What were the factors which have allowed for success within the educational context?
- What were or are the obstacles created by the learning disability which stood or stand as impediments to normative educational functioning?
- What has allowed the individual (internally and externally) to overcome these obstacles and succeed as a student?
- Who played a role in supporting or opposing the individual in their quest to succeed in the educational context?
- What are the features of graduate studies programs which act as helping or hindering mechanisms for the success of students with learning disabilities?
- What statements would those who have succeeded in formalized educational programs like to make to educators and students with learning disabilities, as to the best means by which to properly support and encourage those with learning disabilities and those who work with them?

In so doing, this study has hopefully provided several pieces of important insight and information. Firstly, it highlights the nature of learning disabilities as they are experienced by a specific group of successful individuals. It focuses on the various educational institutions, programs and providers, who did or did not meet the needs of students with learning disabilities and who have left indelible marks on them as individuals. It specifically examines the nature of graduate studies programs and their ability to accommodate and support students with a learning disability. It examines current theories and understandings of learning

disabilities and their relevance to a population that has not had its nature or needs previously exposed.

Finally, it has allowed individuals who possess significant experience and insight to make statements aimed at assisting those younger students grappling with learning disabilities as well as those who seek to provide them with professional and personal support. While professionals and parents have access to theoretical material pertaining to the nature and treatment of learning disabilities, there seems to be little available insight into the experiential nature of the condition. By reading the stories and themes of a population that has succeeded and persevered, parents, educators and students will be given a view of learning disabilities that will fill in the emotional, social and personal information which is often lacking in discussions pertaining to the nature and needs of those with learning disabilities.

In this way, the study becomes twofold in scope and importance. Firstly, it examines and exposes a specific population that has held little previous research attention. Additionally, it allows this information to be filtered down to those who work with or live with a learning disability. In so doing, it permits the experiences and lessons of the population to have relevance that is both informative as well as transformative in nature.

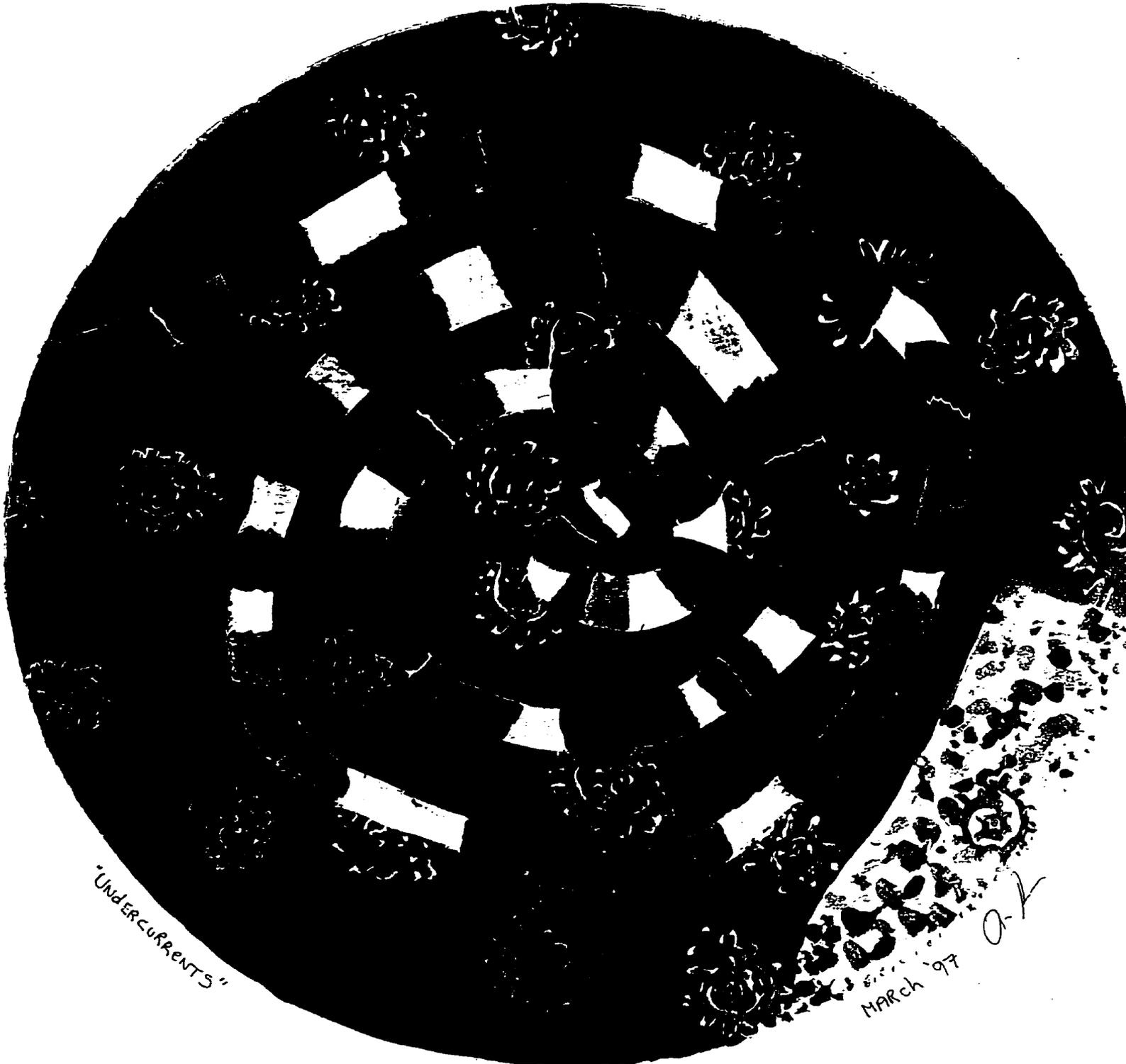
"Undercurrents"

COLOUR PLATE #2

After sitting with the material and with the anxiety of the previous stage, I began to ruminate. Without yet theorizing or even organizing the interview material, I began to allow it to intermingle in my mind. I looked over the broad expanse of the interviews and the moments that seemed to stand out for me—the stories and their power to communicate so richly the experiences of the Co-researchers. To do so was an act of faith, an expression of my belief in the power of the material, of the qualitative process and most especially of my creative and intellectual skills.

I represented this phase through the theme of churning. Small spring-like cogs turn, moving, as it were, the material in new directions. Slowly, a sense of order and direction emerges as exemplified by the snake-like strand with its repetitive colour pattern. In the corner are bits of insight and information—are they the stirrings of insight, an early byproduct of the process, or are they the last of the unmixed ingredients yet to enter the fray? I am not certain.

What I do know is that for the first time since I completed the interview process, I feel a sense of hope that it will all work itself out in the end.



"Undercurrents"

MARCH '97

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CHAPTER 2

Palette: Method of Study

For Myself, earth-bound and fettered to the scene of my activities, I confess that I do feel the differences of mankind . . . I am, in plainer words, a bundle of prejudices—made up of likings and dislikings—the veriest thrall to sympathies, apathies, antipathies.

— Charles Lamb

Epistemological Assumptions and Personal Research Philosophy

Introduction

It seems obvious that the design of a human behavior study such as this one, should relevantly follow the subject matter chosen as the focus of investigation. Beyond this statement however, lies a deeper core issue, where the philosophical and epistemological assumptions of the investigator come to light as the sources from which the selection of particular phenomena are drawn (Moustakas, 1990). The choice of topic which will ultimately lead to a choice of particular methodology, will itself be influenced by the beliefs which lead the explorer on the journey to begin with.

In my journey, I have come to see myself as one who believes in the limited and multi-faceted nature of truth, in the power of truth as derived from both the individual and collective narratives and in the constructivist ontology which leads one to seek these truths. This thinking is consistent with the general school of thought known as Qualitative Research, a form of human behavior investigation which is distinguished from the traditional "positivist" paradigm which has lead to the more familiar form of inquiry known as Quantitative Methodology (Smith, 1983). Within this broad framework, iie many choices for particular qualitative paths, with a wide range of methods and beliefs underlying their purpose and structure (Polkinghorne, 1989). For the purposes of this study, I have decided to utilize methods which reflect my epistemological assumptions and which have informed my choice of phenomena to be studied.

Qualitative Inquiry—An Overview

The history of human behavior inquiry, particularly in the disciplines of psychology and education, has been one of close cooperation with the mathematical and biological sciences. Human behavior was thought to be wholly quantifiable, neatly categorized and ultimately predictable. It was assumed that these behavioral patterns could be charted through the use of scientific principles and methods. Certainly, there was precedence for the use of such methods, which had led to great progress in the areas biology, physiology and anatomy. Thus, the early pioneers of human behavior inquiry set about the task of testing, cataloguing and predicting human behavior in a manner that was considered to be thorough, objective and methodically scientific (Howe, 1992).

For over a century, psychology and education research has been almost inextricably linked with this form of exploration. This association has led (and in some cases continues to lead) to many important discoveries about the nature of human behavior and its root causes. However, it is becoming increasingly clear to many scholars and practitioners, that this type of inquiry is no longer meeting the needs of those who serve and are being served by research. Traditional quantitative methods are seen to be too murky and shallow in their examination of human nature and action. Able to capture only the surface meaning of the human experience, researchers feel that they are left without a deep and clear understanding of many phenomena, with no means to begin the delicate and important process of examining these complex issues (Cole & Knowles, 1993).

As a student of psychology and education and as an emerging practitioner in the fields of research and psychotherapy, I too found traditional research methods lacking. There seemed to be a tangible absence of the personal, the face of the individual, as it were, had been erased. Information emerging from many studies which appeared informed and impressive, seemed simultaneously devoid of personal meaning and context for me. I felt that my understanding of and contribution to the exploration of human behavior and experience had to delve deeper into the human condition. For me, research had

to include, in some way, the faces and stories of those whose lives were being studied.

In an attempt to fill this gap in knowledge, many human behavior scientists have turned their attention to alternate means of inquiry. Based on precedents set by sociologists, this research seeks to examine human behavior outside the sterile and clinical walls of the laboratory and meet humanity on its own terms and in its own natural environment (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). The basic tools of this inquiry preclude the quantifiable, the mathematical and the redactic. These are, instead, replaced with the time honoured tradition of deriving meaning from observation, interview and discussion. No longer is the complex, often confusing and seemingly contradictory world of naturalistic human observation to be feared and therefore declared unreliable and untenable as a legitimate pursuit. Instead, this complexity is embraced and explored for its richness, its depth and its ability to illuminate the personal and collective understanding of humanity and its existential experience (Van Manen, 1990).

Qualitative research is, at its heart, as much of a philosophy as it is a set of data collection tools and techniques. For it is the assumptions made about truth and human complexity, as well as the methods used for its inference and interpretation, that distinguish it from its quantitative cousin (Howe, 1992). This ontological difference will ultimately influence the epistemological divergence that characterizes these two distinct sets of research tacts. Morgan and Simirich (1980) characterize the differences between qualitative and quantitative research as falling along a continuum of the subjective and objective. The basic ontological difference, or the conception of human nature, creates differences in the ways in which human behavior is studied and the ways in which theories regarding this behavior are posited.

Objectivist theory (the home of quantitative inquiry), on the one end, sees a highly structured order to human social behavior, one that can be understood through a methodical analysis of the laws and relationships that govern behavior in this structure. Exploration of these laws and relationships can be observed by the investigator in a detached and objective manner. It is only by studying large numbers of subjects whose personal identities are obscured, that

research can be sure to have a sample that purports to represent reality for the entire population. Known as a "positivist" paradigm, this form of investigation carries with it the assumption that human behavior is universally fixed, measurable and factual (Smith, 1983). Humans are subject to laws of behavior and relationship, much as they are to the laws of gravity and physics (Howe, 1992).

On the other end of the continuum, is the so-called "subjectivist" paradigm, from which emerges qualitative research. Its deep-seeded belief is in the constructed nature of knowledge, human behavior and reality. The subjectivist believes that human understanding and relationships are individually relevant phenomena which give meaning and purpose to behavior. Such a belief rejects the notion that human behavior and relationships are universally ordered and precludes the possibility that humans are subject to an all-encompassing framework or truth (Howe, 1992). While this paradigm does wish to explore the commonalities of human reality and behavior, it may also attempt to understand that which is individually relevant (Plummer, 1983).

In keeping with this ontology, there is an understanding that the researcher—a being who has constructed personal world views and carries with them inexorable beliefs and prejudices—cannot objectively examine human behavior. Whatever form it takes, qualitative inquiry operates with the understanding that exploration is limited to the subjective reality constructed by those being studied and the by subjective reality of the one who undertakes the act of study. Thus, the subjectivist, seeks truth that it relative, flexible and to a certain extent, individually created.

For the positivist, the world is comprised of a pre-ordered set of laws. The researcher can obtain a series of partial views of this, leading to the discovery of one great universal truth. The examiner of these various perspectives should remain as clinically detached as possible from that which is being studied, so as to allow for the maximum vantage of unobstructed view. As such, positivists objectify to whatever extent possible, those whom they are studying. This is done in an attempt to remove the cloud of the personal bias, which will impinge upon the continued discovery of the universal truth.

A metaphorical allegory that can best describe this process, is found in the following ancient Asian allegory: Seven blind men stumbled across an elephant, not knowing what it was. Each man grabbed a section of the elephant and began to describe it as if it were a separate being, a tree, a snake, a flap of leather (Adler & Towne, 1987). If the men had suspended their personal bias and had worked together, each could have contributed their own piece of undisputed and objectively gathered evidence. This would have ultimately lead them to collectively conclude the unavoidable truth , that they had all found one single object.

In opposition to this, the subjectivist rejects the existence of a single objective truth and the indisputable parts which create the whole. Each person creates his/her own being and relates this to others in their own unique way. The only blind one in the subjectivist paradigm, is the one who searches in vain for that nonexistent being which is universal and all-encompassing. While positivists search for the one large elephant, subjectivists seek to hear and experience the menagerie of creatures created by the infinite minds of humanity. To be sure, subjectivists believe that there are common elements to these the creatures, but each is ultimately different and reflective of its creator.

Subjectivist ontology is, to a large extent, a research offshoot of Existentialist philosophy. Existentialism, born at the height of civilizations seemingly orgiastic fascination with science, technology and bureaucracy, called out to humanity as a voice of opposition and frustration. At its core, is the belief that humanity is not pre-ordered, pre-destined and in the care of a benevolent scientist who has created a perfect world. Its darker thinkers, such as Camus (1991) and Kafka (1952, 1994), declare human existence to be desperate, a useless struggle against the void of chance and chaos. More hopeful Existentialists, such as Buber (1974, 1988) and Frankl (1984) see that meaning and fulfillment can be obtained, if individually and collectively searched for and guarded by humanity. Human-kind is seen as infinitely powerful in its ability to find meaning and create personal and collective levels of truth and beauty. It is by discovering personal meaning and sharing this with others, that humanity answers its calling and leaves the world a better and more complete plane of existence.

The belief in an individually subjective, constructed reality, does not rule out the existence of a communal or collective reality. The constructivist realizes that humans are social animals, that their language, art and music are means by which this collective construction permeates. There are, however, limits to collective truths as they are filtered through the lens of the individual eye. The word "red" for example, is a socially constructed concept that once linguistically deciphered, has meaning for a large collective. However, there is no possible way to account for individual variance in the personal and subjective understanding of the word "red" beyond the very basic and superficial meaning of the collective truth. An individuals' concept of the hue, shade, feeling, memory and association with the word "red" is so personal as to be ultimately unique.

For the constructivist then, truth exists in parallel harmony for the individual and for the collective. To look only for the collective truth is to miss out on the beauty and intricacy of the personal construct. Seeking both the collective and the personal truth, gives the researcher, the researched and the research consumer, a simultaneous feeling of belonging and a sense of uniqueness. This creates comfort on many levels and informs, educates, gives insight and otherwise enhances the experience of all involved in research.

For the Positivist, the only worthwhile truth to find is that which unites and illuminates the conceived meta-truth. Individual narrative is a means of collecting data which will lead to that meta-truth. For the constructivist, the individual is not only part of a greater whole, but is significant as a unique unit of meaning making. For them, the individual is extremely important, as there is value in that which is personal as well as collective.

In keeping with this, there is great emphasis and value placed within qualitative methods on the relationship between the researcher and the researched. Those being studied are not called "subjects" and are not objectified, distanced or subservient to the needs of the researcher. Instead, those who participate in the information collection process are termed as either "participants" or "co-researchers" (Moustakas, 1994; Seidman, 1991). This signifies the great respect given to the individual and to the information and meaning that they are providing. Wherever possible, great effort is made to maintain a high degree of respect for the co-researchers and their consent is of

utmost importance. Building a relationship based on trust and negotiation is the hallmark of qualitative research. Its aim is to preserve the dignity and uniqueness of the individual so that the humanity of the research is as trustworthy as the information gathered.

Truth, if it is to emerge, can only do so within a mutually constructed gathering process. The personal meaning of those interacting, is supplemented by the meaning created out of the interactive experience. It is from this special moment, where human meets human, on a respectful and mutually agreed upon plane, that real truth can be found. Qualitative methods are not merely bound by their respect for the collaborative process, they are emancipated by it. For more than simply gathering information—where one party gives and the other takes—the qualitative process seeks to create a place where knowledge is shared and therefore enhanced. This dance, with its rhythm of give and take, allows (at its best) for both parties to emerge with a clear understanding of the self, the other and the mutually created truth that is the result of this delicate, shared, risk-taking process.

The positivist seeks to collect voices so as to hear the harmony of universality. S/he erases the face of the personal in order to paint a wider portrait of the collective. The constructivist, in contrast, seeks to give voice to the individual, realizing that the beauty of harmony is but one beauty, embellished equally by the depth and tone of the soloist. S/he illustrates the individual in order to highlight colour and light, while simultaneously giving shade and shadow to a collective montage. The positivist sees in the individual a limit to real objective understanding and meaning-making. The constructivist sees in the individual an opportunity to reach subjective understanding and meaning-making.

Personal Research Philosophy

Searching for a personal place and voice within the broad context of qualitative inquiry, has been for me, a challenging and ultimately rewarding process of self-discovery. It was clear to me from the outset that I was philosophically in league with the ontology of qualitative research. However, what was less obvious to me was how this would ultimately express itself in my

research. What are the epistemological assumptions which guide my thinking and what do I ultimately want to get from the research process?

It seems to me that the various qualitative methods are separated epistemologically on a continuum with regard to their use of context in research. Context, for me, implies the importance given in research, to the individual story and extent to which the collective truth takes precedence over personal meaning. While there is considerable difference in the level of emphasis placed on these truths, the uniting force which allows each method to lay claim to the overarching title of "qualitative", "constructivist" or "subjectivist" research, is the commitment to the interpersonal and to the understanding that truth is limited and at some level, individually constructed.

As such, it was important for me to conceive for myself, the type of research that best reflected my beliefs and the level at which the individual voice was to play a role. A further element to be considered, was the role of the researcher's personal voice in the research. All qualitative research acknowledges the fact that personal subjectivity will, at some point, emerge as part of the research process (and should be clearly articulated so as to either set it aside or make use of it within the context of research). The inclusion of personal experience or the selection of a research subject based on personal experience with that subject, is a matter of choice and serious epistemological consideration when formulating a project and a method.

So, while immersing myself in the general constructs of qualitative inquiry, I was simultaneously exploring its various research options and paths, in order to find the ones which most closely resonated with my personal world view. This process lead to me to consider the place of the collective, the individual and the personal truth and story and to conclude that all, must at some level be articulated.

I have concluded that my personal research philosophy requires me to seek truth on a multiplicity of levels. I am simultaneously interested in seeking knowledge that is personal, individual and collective. I believe that each can inform the other and that together, can create a picture that is as complete as it possibly can be, given the limits of truth and knowledge.

By this, I mean that I am interested in looking at a phenomenon from as many angles as possible. Firstly, I feel that my own personal understanding of and relationship to the phenomenon must emerge. Why did I choose this phenomenon, why is it of great interest to me? Do I have any personal experience relating to this phenomenon and how will that influence the direction of my research and the information I seek from others?

Next, I seek out the story of the other, the individual narrative that informs with great power and personal relevance. Detailing the experience of others whose lives constitute a component of the sought after phenomenon, will, by necessity, give great insight to it. Allowing the phenomena to emerge as part of the life history of the co-researcher, gives it as much depth and breadth as is possible. What lead a person to a particular experience and what was that experience like for them? What were the factors that contributed to the individuals personal manner of coping with or making meaning from a phenomenon? What is the meaning of this phenomena for an individual and what is it that can be learned from their most personal of understandings?

Finally, there is the search for the collective, that which is common to both the self and the other, as ones who share experience with the studied phenomena. What are the themes that emerge from the stories gathered from the self and other? What are the common words, phrases and expressions which were articulated? What feelings, thoughts, insights and emotions were most prevalent? What were the shared triumphs and torments of the chosen collective? What are the lessons to be learned from these commonalities—lessons that can be shared with those reading the gathered information?

For me, this combination of voices is the most honest and exciting forum of human experience and behavior research possible. It is a means of constructing a multidimensional, intellectual portrait of a phenomenon, complete with the sights, sounds, feelings and thoughts that make for true richness and depth. It is in keeping with my beliefs as a Humanist and Existentialist, and with my tradition as a Jew who learns great lessons from biblical narrative and the storied lives of ancestors. It is also the way in which I

have come to see the world as an artist, performer, teacher, therapist and storyteller.

Most importantly, though, it is how I have come to see my real path to the acquisition of knowledge. This research is for me, the truest and the most effective way in which to shed light on the human condition and to contribute to its advancement. For me, there is no greater pursuit than this and it is one that I feel I will undertake in some form, for the rest of my life.

The Research Process

Having articulated in broad and general terms, the ideas and assumptions that will inform my research and give shape to it, I turn my attention to the chosen phenomenon. I have been fascinated by the experiences of students with learning disabilities for some time. This is mainly due to the fact that I am myself such a student and am aware of the unique perspective and experience that such a condition creates. I know that my learning disability colours almost everything I do and see around me in general and that it shapes my process of learning in particular.

In addition to my own experiences, I have discussed and observed those of other students and professionals similarly challenged by learning disabilities. It became clear to me that there is a story to be told here—a personal, individual and collective tale of learning and coping with a set of differences that have become known as "learning disabilities". Though the term is widely used and in some cases abused, it does serve to highlight the existence of an impediment, a deviation from what is seen as the standard means of acquiring knowledge.

Embarking on this journey, I wished to find the stories of those who have remained a part of the formalized learning system through to its highest and most demanding level, despite their non-standard skills and abilities. There is much in the way of study and research on children and adolescents within lower levels of the educational hierarchy. Yet, little, if no, light has been shed on the learning disabled in the post-graduate sector and they remain a hidden minority. I wanted to know what it was about this level and type of education

that was considered so rewarding, despite the ill-matched nature of the learning and the learners? I wanted to give voice to my story within this context, to hear the stories of others and to create a better understanding of learning disabilities, graduate education and the process of training and teaching.

Most importantly though, I sought to highlight an example of human survival and meaning-making that emerges from a set of conditions that are challenging, discouraging, uplifting and triumphant. I wanted to use the stories as a means of furthering an understanding of the human condition and the skills which allow for success. I attempted to present them as examples of the "extraordinary ordinary", in a manner that only this type of research can do.

Goals Of The Project

The goal of this research project was twofold. Firstly, I wished to highlight the personal experiences of graduate students with learning disabilities as conveyed to me in the telling of their own stories. My aim was to hear these stories as the life histories of learners, of those who at times triumphed over adversity in the learning process and were at other times defeated by it. I wanted to know why each chose, despite all of the obstacles created by learning disabilities, to remain a student and take their academic pursuits to its furthest end.

In addition to this, I sought to highlight the communal themes which emerge from these stories. What were the frustrations, salvations and skills common to this group? What are the lessons to be learned from these individuals and can this information assist those younger students with learning disabilities? What do these experiences say about the various educational systems constructed for higher levels of learning and graduate study? How do the themes which emerge compare with existing literature on learning disability, Existential Psychology and theories of resilience?

In order to achieve this, I employed a process of in-depth interviews with participants, so as to draw from them their individual stories and collective themes. Additional materials such as photos, journals, and related institutional documents, offered a means of supplementing interview material. To further

highlight these interviews and give voice to a non-verbal means of expression (often important to those challenged by learning disabilities), I asked myself and my Co-researchers to produce a Jungian style "Mandala" drawings, artistic reflections of feelings, thoughts and emotions related to the subject. A discussion of each participant's Mandala was transcribed and included in the data.

As I am a graduate student with a learning disability, I chose to include in this voyage, an exploration of myself as a learner. A biographical narrative of my experiences served to highlight the collective and illuminate the individual. Obviously, my own experiences coloured my perception of the phenomenon and influenced the way in which I approached my colleagues. Therefore, it seemed important for me to clearly articulate my experience and give it room to exist alongside the stories of others. My goal was to add my voice to the chorus of students who participated in the research. I undertook to clearly analyze and comprehend my feelings and thoughts, such that my voice did not drown out those of others. In this way, I feel I have learned as much as is possible from us all.

Co-researchers

A total of six individuals participated in this study, including myself. There was equal gender representation. The ages of Co-researchers ranged from mid-twenties to mid-fifties, with a majority falling somewhere in their thirties.

Those asked to participate in this research were students at the graduate level who have been identified as learning disabled. The label of "learning disabled" is a broad one and includes such syndromes such as Dyslexia and Attention Deficit Disorder. It was impossible to find sufficient numbers of Co-researchers whose specific learning disabilities were identical in nature. As such, I did not focus on one specific syndrome, but rather on the general category. I feel that this wider spectrum of experience added, rather than detracted, from the magnitude and power of this project. By looking at a broad base of learning difficulties, I feel that I was able to see the phenomenon with greater scope.

Similarly, though it was my intention to focus solely on students currently working at the highest level of graduate studies (namely, Doctoral candidates), I

was unable to do so. As such, I interviewed candidates for Doctoral and Masters degrees, as well as those who had already graduated from their Doctoral programs and were willing to recount their experiences. This too added to the richness and texture of the study, since there were varying vantage points to consider. The diversity in specific learning disability and enrollment in program of study, did not in any way detract from my ability to discover thematic meaning from the interviews. As can be seen in Chapters 5 and 6, much valuable insight was derived from this collective.

Life History Research

The chosen method of data collection for this project is commonly known as Life-History Research (Bertaux, 1981; Cole, 1991, 1994; Cole & Knowles, 1995; Measor & Sikes, 1992). This form of inquiry, asks respondents to recount their lives in the context of the studied phenomena. It makes the assumption that a person's present functioning and perspective come about as a result of past experiences. In this sense, a person is seen as a product of the experiences that have brought them to the contemporary point. Thus, the present-day experiences of a learning disabled graduate student will necessarily be a result of a life-long process of education and dealing with a disability in the learning context. By going over the life history of a learning disabled learner, one gains insight into the skills, abilities, failures and successes that have worked to create the unique perspective of the co-researcher.

Life History research also assumes that functioning in one area of a person's life will be influenced by the total life experience and should, therefore, be explored in the broadest possible sense. Thus, it is important to see an individual as one whose educational, social, spiritual, and intellectual experiences have all contributed significantly to present day functioning (Cole & Knowles, 1995). While the focus of the research was on the educational world of the graduate students with learning disabilities, it was assumed that an understanding of the student could only emerge if the whole person and experience was brought into view. As such, it was important for the co-researcher to be given the opportunity to discuss the impact of the learning disability on their familial, social and other lives that span beyond the

classroom. Reciprocally, it was also important to understand how these experiences contributed to the Co-researcher's functioning as a learner.

Biography, a well established literary and scholarly form, has long been used as a means of human behavior inquiry (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). It has though, normally been confined to the study of the famous and infamous, ignoring the ordinary life for the extra-ordinary. This is done under the assumption that lessons learned from accomplished lives will yield insight into the human condition and its advancement.

Life History Research turns the lens of biography onto the lives of those whose accomplishments may be much less known, but whose life-enriching lessons, achievements and insights are of great value. By focusing in on specific areas of study and carefully documenting the everyday triumphs and tribulations of ordinary individuals, these lives come into focus as unique, exciting and informative. Every person has a story to tell, has a life lesson to be learned from and is an example to others in some way. By carefully interviewing, observing and recording the lives of everyday people, Life History Research not only makes the mundane sacred, but contributes in a significant manner to the deepening of human understanding and insight.

The Interview Process

Within the framework of Life History Research, the procedure for this study was as follows: After a preliminary interview designed to test the suitability of the research partnership, Co-researchers were asked to participate in three formal interview sessions, lasting approximately ninety minutes each. Seidman (1991) states that this combination of number and duration of interviews is an effective means of establishing and maintaining a positive, reciprocal and mutually satisfactory relationship with the Co-researcher. Multiple interviews, allowed for the development of a continued, trusting and open dialogue and served to alleviate as many feelings of exploitation as possible within a research context. Similarly, the length of session was designed to facilitate a comfortable amount of discussion time, so that feelings of too much or too little time were eased to the degree possible.

The interviews were unstructured, to the extent that they consisted of opportunities for the research partners to examine and explore various avenues of dialogue within the desired phenomena. Though there was great thought put into the questions asked and I, as interviewer, sought to keep the dialogue focused on the phenomena, there was great flexibility in the use of questions and the routes taken toward the emerging knowledge on the subject. This meant that as interviewer, I followed the lead of my interviewees within the broad context of our discussion of their experiences as a learning disabled individual. I remained open to the possibility of surprise, to the emergent nature of the research and to the limitations and needs of Co-researchers. At no point, did I abandon the goal of the interview, but rather, sought to wander with my interview partner down whatever road was deemed necessary in order to arrive there.

The interviews were structured, in the sense that they were thematic and sequential. Interviewees were asked to discuss their lives within the context of their learning disability and experiences as students (within a broad holistic understanding of this term). The first interview consisted of the life-history of the interviewee up to and until the graduate school experience. The second interview discussed experiences within graduate school, past and present. The final interview allowed the interviewee to make meaning and generate reflections from the life-history detail provided.

Though there was some variation in the length and theme of individual interviews, all covered the three base goals outlined above. By providing both structure and freedom to the interview process, a set of unique stories emerged that contributed to an understanding of the phenomenon.

Preliminary Interview

Before agreeing to participate formally in the interview process, all potential co-research participants were invited to a preliminary interview, conducted either in-person or by telephone. An important step in the process, this session served as an opportunity to share information, delineate the parameters of the venture and to establish rapport.

After the initial review of the project—its goals and purpose—potential research participants were asked to give a brief overview of their lives as students with learning disabilities and a summary of their specific learning disability and diagnosis.

If both I, as researcher, and the individual, as potential participant, were satisfied with the potential of the research partnership, we continued our discussion. I outlined the format and content of the interview schedule, including duration and number of sessions. Issues such as the location of interviews, recording and handling of materials, along with the question of confidentiality, were discussed. I notified each potential research participant that interviews would be audio-taped and transcribed by an outside party. I explained that the transcripts would be used for the creation of an individual narrative portrait, a comprehensive digest of the transcripts to be included in the final dissertation. Additionally, I outlined how the material would be utilized in the derivation of themes and discussion, as part of the group data. I assured each interviewee that only my dissertation supervisor and I would have access to the transcript in its entirety and that most likely, it would be seen by me alone.

Further, I explained that transcripts, along with the individual narrative portraits, would be made available to Co-researchers for review and approval. If they contained material that was inaccurate or objectionable to the Co-researcher at the point of review, we would discuss the possibility of removing or altering it. I stated categorically, though, that once this review process was complete and agreement reached on the final content of the transcript and portrait, it, its interpretation and use, became my sole property. Though I agreed to share the results of my thematic analysis and conclusions with all participants (welcoming their comments and suggestions), I could not be obligated to accept these as conditions for inclusion of interview material.

Anonymity was of great importance to me, to the institution in which I study and to the Co-researcher graduate student, who remains within an educational system (though they may be critical of it). Every possible step was taken to conceal the identity of Co-researchers and the institutions that s/he was or had been enrolled in. As several researchers have noted (Measor & Sikes, 1992; Shulman, 1990), complete anonymity is often impossible, despite rigorous

steps taken to ensure it. Nonetheless, all possible steps were taken to protect the identity of those who participated in the study. This was communicated to potential participants before they consented to become Co-researchers.

Following the initial meeting and agreement on both sides to participate, a letter of explanation, as well as a consent form, were forwarded and returned. A file containing these forms, along with transcript and narrative portrait copies, was collated and placed in a secure location, as per the dictates of our agreement. Electronic copies of transcripts, along with audio-tapes of the interviews, were also placed in secure storage.

First Interview Session

The focus of the first formal session, centered on the past history of graduate students with learning disabilities. Co-researchers were asked to recall their educational lives and their emotional, social and learning experiences within this context. They described the ways in which they understood their differences, how these played out in their lives and how they coped with this reality. The role of teachers, peers and family members in the context of the phenomenon was explored. Specific examples of coping strategies were requested, as well as the associated feelings that may have been experienced while attempting to organize and execute them.

Second Interview Session

This session, focused on the graduate school experience. Co-researchers were asked to discuss their reasons for choosing to continue in the educational stream and the issues they expected to face. They discussed the ways in which their studies and the graduate educational system impacted on their lives as learning disabled persons and in the broader context of their existence. Present functioning, coping and feelings were of importance, so that an accurate picture of contemporary issues emerges. As two of the Co-researchers had already completed their programs of study, this portion of the discussion concentrated on their present lives as teachers within academic institutions.

Third Interview Session

The final session was less historical in orientation and more evaluative. Co-researchers were asked to make sense and meaning out of their lives as students with learning disabilities, both in the past and in the present. What and/or who were the influences that helped them to cope and to succeed? An evaluation of the educational systems of the past and present was called for, as well as suggestions that might be made to future students at various levels. Specific attention was focused on the graduate school experience and its impact on the life and education of the student with learning disabilities.

Mandala Drawings

In addition to the usual method of generating insight and information through the use of discussion-type interview techniques, I requested that participants to partake in an alternate form of research. Learning disabilities often strike a person in the area of language and can impair their ability to express themselves fully. As such, I felt it was important to provide Co-researchers an opportunity to express themselves in a non-verbal forum. I also hoped, that it would trigger further memories and feelings that would inform the research and offer greater depth into the experience of living with learning disabilities.

For this purpose, I chose to use the Mandala drawing. A Mandala drawing exercise, asks the creator to begin with a white sheet of paper onto which a large, plain circle has been drawn. This circle seems to be evocative in nature (Cornell, 1994), spurring the creator to levels of creativity and expression that would not be seen if presented with a blank space. Creators are free to do with the Mandala space whatever they wish, be it within or without the circle shape, or a combination thereof. Use of colour, form, texture, letters or words, were subject to the discretion of the creator.

Mandala-type drawings permeate the artistic world and can be seen in the symbolism of almost every civilization and culture (Dahkle, 1992). Often linked with religious art, there exists a belief that their power is mystical and

revealing (Garfield, 1979). Carl Jung (1964, 1973), one of the early pioneers of psychotherapy, saw great value in the Mandala and remains its most well-known modern advocate and researcher. Believing that humans carry with them both personal and collective levels of unconscious thought and experience, he saw the Mandala as a means of tapping into that experience. Jung himself kept an on-going record of his own Mandala drawings and asked his patients to produce them as part of their therapy (Arguelles & Arguelles, 1972).

For me, the Mandala is the artistic manifestation of the type of research I believe in. It is wholly personal and conveys an individual message, yet at the same time contains elements of the collective. It is the purest form of expression within this duality and has, I believe, given added dimension to my research.

Co-researchers were asked to produce their Mandala drawings at the end of our final interview. They were given the option of writing an accompanying note of explanation, or to have their drawing discussed and tape-recorded for transcription.

Of the six participants, there were varying reactions to the request for a Mandala drawing. Two produced their drawings independently describing them verbally or in writing. One requested to work alongside me, so that we could produce the piece together. One described his concept for the drawing and asked that I produce the actual image. One Co-researcher declined to participate in this aspect of the process. I took it upon myself to create a piece inspired by my reactions to his narrative.

Originally, my own intention was to produce a single Mandala to add to the corpus of data; however, as the process of organizing, interviewing, analyzing and writing this dissertation project unfolded, I found myself in need of artistic expression for clarification and insight. As such, I produced a visual diary of the research journey and it too has been included in this project.

In my discussions with Co-researchers, as well as from my own experiences, I can see that there is much power in the use of alternate, artistic forms of representation in research. There appears to be an emerging interest in this area of study, as more researchers are taking steps to discuss work that

they have engaged in previously, or wish to undertake in the future. One of the many exciting outgrowths of this project for me, has been my immersion into this unusual and fantastic realm of work. I hope to continue in this vein in the future.

Other Relevant Material

Life history research, as a holistic endeavor, seeks to formulate a complete composite of the co-research participant. As such, it is open to material that is ancillary to the spoken interview. Photos, school documents, diaries and other material are welcome as additional pieces of evidence (Merriam, 1988; Moustakas, 1990).

The inclusion of such material serves three main functions; Firstly, it allows for the deepening of rapport between researcher and researched, as it adds depth and reality to the words of the co-researcher. Secondly, it provides evidence of accuracy to the interview. Known by qualitative researchers as "triangulation", ancillary information confirms interview material and affirms the memory and experiences recalled by the co-researcher (Denzin, 1970; Merriam, 1988). Finally, such material can act as a source of additional information, supplementing that which has already been offered and triggering new insight or memory on the part of the co-researcher.

When asked, several pieces of such information were offered by Co-researchers as part of the data collection. Photos, report cards, writing samples and school projects served to heighten my understanding of Co-researchers and their experiences. It deepened our relationships and the sharing of common experience and emotion. Though it was certainly not the prevalent means of data collection, it was an important and sensitive codicil to it.

The Pilot Project

Before attempting to interview an entire group of co-researchers, I conducted a single pilot interview. For this purpose, I choose a Co-researcher with whom I had a long history of friendship and trust and who was well-versed in qualitative methods. This session prepared me as an interviewer and my

questions as interview tools. It sharpened my skills and brought into focus the questions and issues likely to emerge from the interview dialogue. It highlighted areas of strength and weakness and allowed me to make mistakes, be nervous and overcome possible blocks to thorough and sensitive research.

The Co-researcher who participated in this pilot interview, offered comments and suggestions to supplement my internal review. This allowed me to understand how the questions, the format and my personal style, impacted on others. Since there was an overall sense of success from this session, I felt comfortable retaining the data which emerged and including it in my final product. The experience also taught me the value of asking all Co-researchers for their views on the research process. It became clear to me that each session was wholly unique and that my education and growth as a researcher was a life-long process.

Self As Researched

Certainly in order to be able to go out to the other you must have a starting place, you must have been, you must be, with yourself.

— Martin Bubuer

The choice to place my personal story squarely within my research was one that came about only after great inner-debate and difficulty. Though I was, from the start, in league with the ideology of qualitative research and many of its allied methods, I could not make peace with the idea that it was acceptable for one to place the self within one's own research. Examination of these strong feelings revealed to me that my hesitations were based on two related concerns. Firstly, though I could relinquish most of my quantitative background, I was still bound somehow to the notion of objectivity. I was afraid that I would lose my ability to act as an effective seeker of truth, if I was to be permanently bound up in my own issues. I worried that my research would not evolve into a thorough and informative search for the universal, but would instead become an engrandized exercise in self-therapy.

Related to this, I was concerned that having set a trend for myself as a researcher who included the self in an intensive manner, I would be cutting

myself off from the possibility of doing research in the future on themes that did not touch my life personally. Was good research only possible in areas where one has had intense personal experience? Do such experiences preclude the possibility that one could conduct effective research and be receptive to perspectives and information that differed or even disagreed with the personal?

Over the course of time, aided by much reading and debate, I came to see that these issues could be dealt with and realized the value in self-history as a form of legitimate research. I have learned from the subjectivists that the self cannot be erased in research and that to make attempts to do so, diminishes the possibilities of research. Almost every topic in human behavior inquiry will contain elements in it that relate somehow to the personal. Some will obviously be more direct than others, yet nonetheless as a member of the human race, there will always be common ground.

This meant that as a researcher, I was compelled to enter into an exercise of coming face to face with my subjectivity, before and during the collection of data and when evaluating and drawing conclusions from it. Rather than seeing this as an impediment to good research, I came to see it as a possible means of enhancing it. For, if I really understand my own perspective and experience such that it no longer blinds me to the messages received from others, then I will have gone a long way to reaching out to others and learning from them.

The goal was not so much to free myself from my perspective (I can never really do that), but to understand it and place it within the broad context of the stories I encountered. Choosing to do this, I believe, not only freed me from self-indulgent research, but allowed me to reach out to others in a uniquely receptive and understanding manner. This, I believe only enhanced, rather than detracted, from my research endeavor. Furthermore, it will allow me, over time, to search for many new, relevant and interesting research topics. I will, at every point, see myself as a partner in the research process, as one who has empathy for others but who can be open to information that is not my own or like my story.

In keeping with this insight, I have purposely chosen a topic of research that is fully personally relevant. I presented my own life-history within this context, as well as examined my produced Mandala drawing and ancillary materials, as part of the overall analysis of the data collected. This added my voice to the collective as well as presented a unique personal story, both of which were important to my research and its root epistemology.

Presentation and Evaluation of the Data

Once collected, the data were organized, evaluated and are presented in the following manner:

In keeping with my strong belief in the value of story as research, the life history of each participant is presented in abbreviated "portrait" format (utilizing selected quotations from the transcripts wherever possible). Concluding with my own auto-biographic sketch, each story is presented with the Mandala drawing and its accompanying description. Pseudonyms (Co-researcher chosen), were used for each participant and all institutional names were removed.

Following this, I have presented an evaluation of the themes that emerged from the interviews—the collective narrative or "mural". I endeavored to present, as fully as possible, the thematic material derived from transcripts, Mandala drawings and ancillary material offered by co-researchers. This process was a labour intensive effort, consisting of a continued review of material, the construction and reconstruction of tentative themes and commonalities and their repeated verification from within the data.

This exercise in intellectual "winnowing", endeavored to yield a concentrated set of information, representative of the collective. It has, I believe, resulted in an overview of common stories, experiences and emotions, both past and present. Taken together, this material provides a uniform and coherent "snapshot" of the group. It is hoped, that this offers insight into the feelings, functioning and experiences of graduate students with learning disabilities.

A more detailed outline of this process can be found in Chapter 5.

Ethics of Research

Qualitative methodologists are extremely concerned with issues of ethics in research (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Yow, 1994). This is natural, given the intense relationship that one enters into with a participant and the personal nature of the information gathered. Questions of informed consent, confidentiality and use of materials, play an important role in the development of any qualitative project (Punch, 1986; Renzetti & Lee, 1993).

As outlined above, I have taken steps to ensure the informed consent of my research participants. I offered them a concise outline of the project, its goals and uses. I detailed for them, their role in the research and the use of materials gathered from them. I did all that I could to disguise their identities and to the best of my ability, shielded them and the institutions in which they learn (or have learned) from exposure. A formal consent form was signed by both researcher and researched, as a means of contractualizing the arrangement between us. This form, allowed Co-researchers to withdraw at any time from the project (up until its completion), without any fear of reprisal or unauthorized use of collected personal material.

In compliance with the standards set by The Ontario Institute For Studies In Education and the University of Toronto, I was required to present my research proposal and associated forms to an ethical review committee. This committee, examined the procedures of my research and determined that there was little likelihood of negative impact on prospective participants. It was only after I received approval from this committee, that I formally approached possible research participants and began the process of negotiation and consent.

A Question of Validity

All research requires some form of evaluation, some measure of its goodness and usefulness. In the traditional paradigm, this is accomplished through mostly mathematical means, proving that the numerical claims of truth

are significant and that rigor is maintained. The process of ensuring rigor and significance has commonly been termed by positivistic research as "reliability" and "validity". By ensuring that reliability and validity are present, the objectivist reassures the research consumer, that the facts derived from the study are an accurate reflection of the objective and singular truth.

In the world of subjective research, such an assurance is antithetical to the purposes of human behavior inquiry and therefore a non-sequitur. A paradigm shift of such monumental proportions in the thinking and process of research (such as the one brought about by the qualitative methods), requires no less of a re-orientation in corresponding means of establishing the quality and usefulness of research findings.

To be sure, qualitative researchers are concerned with the goodness of their work and the results that it yields. It is imperative that researchers maintain a high level of ethical behavior during their search for information and that they present their findings in a manner that is honest and reflective of the data collected. In fact, it could be argued that since the fair and equitable treatment of research participants is fundamental to qualitative inquiry, the researcher is more likely to feel an innate sense of responsibility to accurately and honestly present research findings than would be the case if participants were more objectified.

Several authors (Merriam, 1988; Lather, 1986; Noffke, 1991) have grappled with the ways in which qualitative inquiry can best assure reliable and valid research findings. Most have concluded that the use of terms such as "validity" and "reliability" do not have a place within the qualitative paradigm, as they belong both conceptually and linguistically in the quantitative domain. Instead, they suggest an entirely new set of words and concepts that are in keeping with the goals and products of subjectivist research and which are in line with the epistemological and ontological assumptions behind this research.

Lincoln and Guba (1986, 1990) drawing on their own work and that of others (Cornbach, 1975; Jacob, 1988; Guba, 1981; Smith, 1987; Zeller, 1987), suggest that qualitative research needs to be judged in two phases, namely the process of research and the product of the inquiry. Replacing

"reliability" and "validity" are the more appropriate terms and concepts of "trustworthiness" and "authenticity". Has the research maintained a high level of rigor in posing the research question, collecting data and maintaining adherence to the stated epistemological assumptions? If so, then do the findings from this research come together to form an informative, even transformative set of information, that is of use to the research consumer?

In assessing my research, I utilized this dual tracked plan of process and product evaluation. Judging the process of my work involved the successful answering of the following questions:

- Were the epistemological assumptions underlying the purpose of the study clearly articulated?**
- Were the research design and planned questions consistent with these assumptions?**
- Was the manner in which co-research participants were approached and interviewed congruent with the philosophy of fairness, sensitivity and collaboration?**
- Was the researcher critically subjective in exploring existing bias and judgment in relation to the subject before attempting to obtain information from others?**
- Was the researcher able to be open to surprise and information that may not have necessarily supported the pre-existing, personally subjective material?**
- Was the research process collaborative and did it adhere to the philosophy of interview as dialogue and shared experience?**

In terms of judging the product of this research effort, the following questions were asked:

- Did this research present the personal, individual and collective accounts such that all three were clearly articulated?**
- Did the tone of the presented material contain in it elements of humility on the part of the researcher who seemed to enter into the research prepared to find the unexpected?**
- Was it evident from this material that the researcher maintained a high level of respect and care for co-researchers?**

- Did personal, pre-existing subjectivity seem to unduly influence the tone of the interviews presented or the reported collective, thematic knowledge?
- Does the research inform the reader and give insight into the condition of graduate students with learning disabilities in particular and the ways in which humans overcome adversity in general?
- Does the research possess a transformative quality to it, appearing to have contributed to the researcher, the researched and reader?
- Does this research appear to have contributed to the chain of knowledge in areas such as education, psychology and sociology?
- Does the research appear to be reflective of the researcher and the stated goals of the research?

As articulated in my conclusion (Chapter 8), it is my belief that I was able to answer these questions in a generally positive manner. I hope, that as the reader engages in my work, that they will use the above questions to determine its fitness and will judge it favorably. For I believe that the work of this project remained faithful to the guiding principals of the qualitative paradigm and to my goals as a researcher. Most importantly, I feel that every effort was made to remain faithful to the ideas and feelings of my Co-researchers who placed their life-stories and their trust in my hands. In the end, I regard this work as a positive reflection of me and my best efforts intellectually, emotionally, artistically and spiritually.

Conclusion

This, then, returns me to my original statement, that the choice of method, is the end-link in the chain of research design. I resolved to look at the experiences of graduate students with learning disabilities, because of my belief in the power of their insight and information. I chose to listen to Co-researchers in the manner described above, as I saw it as the best, most effective and least intrusive manner in which to approach this population.

I postulated that there was a story to be told and a lesson to be learned from myself and others like me. It is my belief that the resulting effort demonstrates the power of the individual and the struggles of this collective to succeed and achieve, despite significant, sometimes severe obstacles. It is my

hope that it can add to the knowledge of individuals with learning disabilities and offer guidance to those live in this reality as well as those who support or work with them.

"Emerging Patterns"

COLOUR PLATE #3

I do my best thinking in the shower. I think it is the combination of the warmth, the flow of the water and the time in isolation, but I am not certain.

I am drying myself off with an ornate towel when I see its patterns. This resonates with me and I rush back to my desk to complete the process of reading and re-listening to the interviews. What is it I sense here, what am I feeling? I think it is the first stirrings of cohesion, emerging patterns, that, though they feel tenuous, are nonetheless real and loosely formed.

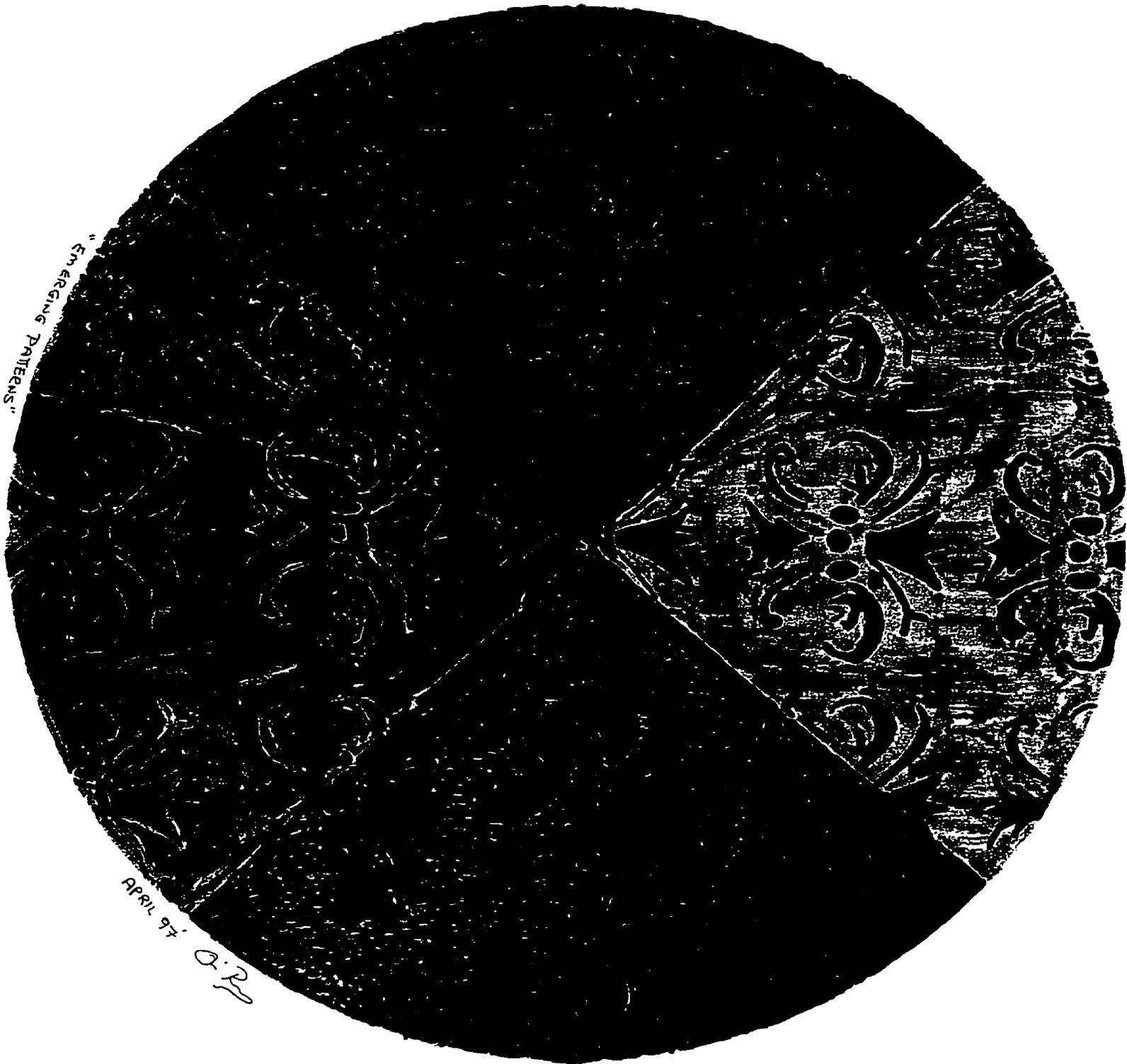
I take the design from the towel, this ornate and interesting detail, and I repeat it inside the circle until it is full. I realize that this is not even close to a final product, just the beginning of ideas and connections which are more than they have been, yet less than they will be.

As such, I create a set of patterns, interplays of colour combinations—some with greater contrast and clarity than others. There is not yet that unity, but there is something, a definite pattern.

This gives me great strength and invigorates me. It pushes me to continue this laborious, often overwhelming task of immersion in the transcripts, looking for themes, for commonalty, for connection.

It is there, I can see it. I simply need to let it form before me. So why does it not feel simple?

"EMERGING PATTERNS"



APRIL 97' Q.P.

CHAPTER 3

Converging Lines: A Review of the Relevant Literature

Learning disabilities in adulthood, affect each individual uniquely. For some, difficulties lie only in one specific functional area; for others, problems are more global in nature, including social and emotional problems. For many, certain functional areas of adult life are limited compared to other areas. Adults with learning disabilities are of average or above average intelligence, but intelligence often-times has no relation to the degree of the disability. Learning disabilities persist throughout the life-span, with some areas improving and others worsening. Although specific deficits associated with learning disabilities are real and persistent, such deficits do not necessarily preclude achievement and, in some cases, may have a positive relationship with achievement. In almost all cases, learning disabilities necessitate alternative approaches to achieve vocational and personal success .

-Reiff, Gerber and Ginsberg

Introduction

The experience of living with a learning disability can be said to fall somewhere between a polarity of two powerful forces. On the one end, there is a wholly negative existence, characterized in Kurt Vonnegut's nightmarish short-story Harrison Bergeron (1975). In this futuristic tale, society imposes upon all individuals a handicapping condition in the area of greatest strength, so that none can excel. This is an unbelievably painful experience, where the individual is keenly aware of innate but constricted ability. Yearning, yet unable to express one's true gifts fully, the individual is denied achievement and fulfillment due to severe, sometimes overwhelming impairments.

On the other end, there exists the possibility of a more positive state of being, exemplified in the qualitative writings of Oliver Sacks in books such as An Anthropologist on Mars (1995). In this work, Sacks outlines the stories of individuals who suffer from neurological impairments, yet find fulfillment and satisfaction, even if for the briefest periods. Despite enormous road-blocks, pathways to self-actualization are found and bridges to success built. In a moving tale of an artist who suddenly loses his ability to sense colour, Sacks chronicles the development of new artistic inspirations within the

monochromatic realm of the possible. This personal and artistic renaissance is an example of what Sacks states is the reciprocal relationship between individuals and the neuropsychological syndromes that affect them. It is not, as Sacks states, simply a matter of how the impairment impacts upon the individual, but also how the individual reacts and impacts upon the impairment.

The purpose, then of this review, is to highlight existing research pertaining to the effect that learning disabilities can have on an adult population and how, in return, individual adults conceive of and deal with the experience of living with learning disabilities. The relationship between learning disabilities and functioning in a number of areas will be explored. It is hoped that from this review, a clear understanding of the polarity between triumph and despair will emerge. In order to properly approach the specific population of the present study, it is important to understand clearly how learning disabilities affect the general adult population, as well as the ways and means which are used to overcome these difficulties.

The review is divided into several sections. Firstly, research outlining the scope and definition of various learning disabilities is examined. I believe that it is important to operationalize as concise and thorough definition of learning disabilities as is possible, so that a clear understanding of the phenomenon can emerge from both the literature and from the present study.

Following this, the effects of the various impediments outlined in the definition of learning disabilities on the lives of adult members is reviewed. Specific functioning in the cognitive/educational sphere, as well as the social/emotional realm, are separately covered to the extent possible, given the limited research in this area (Gerber and Reiff, 1991, 1994). A segment incorporating the experiences and needs of post-secondary and post-graduate students is included as a means of completing the backdrop to the present study.

A special section on resilience and learning disabilities has been included, as well as research highlighting successful adults in this category. This is done for two reasons. Firstly, since most of the research is fairly negative in scope, it was

felt that a more positive set of research was called for, so as to balance out the picture presented. I believe that it is important to place the struggle that learning disabled adults face in the context of the above noted polarity, so that it can be clearly understood that most individuals fall somewhere between the positive and the negative. Secondly, it seemed appropriate to incorporate a model of success and triumph into a piece that will essentially be examining the most successful of learning disabled adults within the educational context, as all participants in this study have reached the pinnacle of formalized education.

This review ends with a section devoted to the suggested direction for future research as posited by the authors of existing works. This is done in order to highlight the important place of qualitative research in the overall pattern of inquiry into this population and its experiences, needs and reactions. It is also presented as a means of shedding light on possible avenues of exploration into which the current study might well fit and serve to add to the general knowledge base on the population.

Adults and Learning Disabilities: An Ongoing Relationship

The phenomenon of children with learning disabilities has been well researched and documented over the past thirty years (Serebreni, 1991); however, the relationship that learning disabilities have with adults, has only recently become an area of interest to researchers and the general public (Gerber, Reiff & Ginsberg, 1988).

Gerber and Reiff (1991), state that attention to this population was drawn, for the most part, by non-researchers such as parents, students and governmental agencies, who began, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, to demand services and accommodation for learning disabled adults. This was essentially necessitated by the fact that school-age students with learning disabilities, who had been the focus of intense and continued intervention in previous decades, were now entering adulthood (Will, 1984). This population required accommodation in the higher realms of education, as well as the work-place, where they were now headed in increasing numbers (Gerber, 1981, 1984).

The urgency of this matter was further heightened by the passage, in the United States, of Public Law 94-142 in 1975 (U.S.P.L. 94-142), which guaranteed fair and appropriate access to educational services for all disabled children. This meant that there would be an increase of services required for a population that would emerge from the public school system and demand further accommodation in adulthood (Gerber and Reiff, 1994). Public service and self-advocacy organizations devoted to the well-being of learning disabled children, began, almost immediately, to call for action and research into the needs of the adult population (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 1987). Conferences and papers were presented (Cruickshank & Lerner, 1982; Gerber, 1983), and new educational models for adults began to be developed (e.g., Wiederholt, 1982). While all involved, agreed that action was to be taken, the scarcity of adequate research into the needs and definition of the adult population, presented a major obstacle (Gerber and Reiff, 1994).

In their 1991 review of the literature, Gerber and Reiff categorize the existing research pertaining to the long-term effects of learning disabilities into those conducted before and after the passage of U.S.P.L. 94-142. This is due to the fact that levels of service changed drastically with the passage of the law, therefore changing the levels of attention given to students with learning disabilities and their preparedness to enter adult life. Neither set of research, however, is seen by the authors as adequate to form a thorough understanding of the phenomenon. They do, though, begin to clarify the issues and make the point that learning disabled children do not "grow out" of their learning and perceptual difficulties or the implications derived from this in spheres of educational, vocational, personal or social functioning.

Silver and Haigin (1964) found that students referred for assistance at a reading clinic, continued to show evidence of difficulties in neuropsychological functioning (such as spatial and temporal organization) in adulthood. Adjustment into adult life was correlated with the severity of learning difficulties assessed in childhood. Balow and Bloomquist (1965) found that thirty-two adults who were assisted as children in reading clinics, did not seem to be helped by this experience and continued to exhibit signs of reading difficulty. This is a finding corroborated by the work of Hardy (1968) whose study followed forty learning disabled adults, comparing them to a control group of non-

affected subjects. Gerber and Reiff (1991), add that while these studies focus on the persistence of cognitive and educational difficulties, their findings also link the severity of reading difficulty with social and emotional problems.

Similar results in the cognitive/educational domains were found in longitudinal works conducted by Buchanan and Wolf (1986), Frauenheim (1978) and a follow-up study by Frauenheim and Heckerl (1983). Students tested as children and adults, continued to maintain learning and reading difficulties, despite the passage of time and in some cases, specialized educational training. Rowe and Menkes (1967), followed children labeled as "Hyperactive" (leading to learning difficulties) from 1937 to 1946, noting that not only did symptoms persist, but that severity was correlated with the later achievement of socioeconomic status.

Post U.S.P.L. 94-142 studies included in the Gerber and Reiff review, though still limited, appear to confirm the on-going nature of learning disabilities. Studies by Fafard and Haubrich (1981), White (et al. 1982) and Goyette and Nardini (1985), reach similar conclusions. All note that young adults with learning disabilities continue to exhibit functional weakness. This continued symptomatology comes despite increased services and accommodations provided to the population as a result of changes to legal precedent and educational practice.

Studies that post-date the Gerber and Reiff literature review (or those not covered in it), add to the volume of evidence suggesting a continued relationship between adults and learning disabilities. Research and reviews conducted by Lemke (1994), Telander (1994), Kroll (1984), Price (1988) and others (e.g., Shessel, 1995), consistently report that in almost all individuals examined, learning disabilities persist. As such, the claim made by authors like Gerber and Reiff—that though still rare, exploration of the phenomenon of adult learning disabled persons is an important and timely area of research—can be seen as valid. It would appear from the ever-increasing number of studies devoted to this area (though the theoretical and practical groundwork is far from complete), that pressure from students, advocates, educators and researchers for greater understanding and service is warranted, as difficulties endure.

As interest in this area grows, so does the scope of its findings and the understanding of the implications of adult learning disabilities. New research indicates, that more than sustaining itself in adulthood, learning disabilities may actually become more severe and pronounced. Gerber and his colleagues (1990, 1991, 1994) in their qualitatively based exploration of successful learning disabled adults, note reports by the population of increased or amplified symptomatology after high school. Minskoff (et al. 1988), compared high school and adult-aged individuals with learning disabilities and found that the adult group reported more severe difficulties in major areas of functioning, such as academic and learning skills, daily living aptitude and social ability. Minskoff (1994) theorizes that this may be due, in part, to the fact that high school students tended to under-report severity of symptoms due to their relatively supportive and protective environment, only to later realize the extent of their disabilities in the work or advanced educational worlds. As such, it can be concluded that learning disabilities may not reach their full impact until after adolescence.

Thus, it would appear from the literature that adults who were diagnosed with learning disabilities in childhood, continue to experience many of the difficulties associated with these conditions. It is also clear from the research that this effect is more than uni-dimensional, touching adult lives (as it did in childhood) in almost all areas of functioning.

Learning Disabilities: A Working Definition

Formulating a widely acceptable definition of learning disabilities is of great importance to those who study, diagnose and treat the phenomenon, as well as those who live with it (Hammill, 1990, 1993). Building a consensus on such a definition has, however, been somewhat difficult, as there are diverging views on the subject from all ranks concerned (Reiff, Gerber & Ginsberg, 1993).

The term "learning disabilities" was first coined by Dr. Samuel Kirk, in his book Educating Exceptional Children (1962). In this work, Kirk described a syndrome, whereby children of normal intelligence (or above), were performing at sub-normal levels academically, given their expected level of achievement. According to Hammill (1990), this definition was not found to be sufficiently

suitable for those involved in the work of treating and studying learning disabilities, such that over the next three decades, more than ten official definitions appeared in the literature. Most, however, did not introduce newer or more operational features. They tended to emphasize the discrepancy between academic potential (as measured by IQ and aptitude tests) and performance (Mercer et al., 1990)

Hammill (1993), reports that the 1977 United States Office of Education (U.S.O.E.) definition was by far the most important definition put forth, since it acted as the major source for funding and referral of students within the U.S. educational system. The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities—an umbrella organization representing many professionals and lay leaders within the learning disabled community—was, however, dissatisfied with the 1977 U.S.O.E. definition, seeing it as ambiguous and of little service to the affected population.

Reiff, Gerber and Ginsberg (1993), concur, noting that definitions such as the 1977 U.S.O.E. have been deemed incomplete. Most ignored literature calling for inclusion of important elements, such as social-emotional involvement (Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities, 1987). Many failed to conceive of learning disabilities first and foremost as a perceptual deficit, as posited by authors such as Cruickshank (1975). Those affected by learning disabilities, have also been displeased with the official definitions, as these have either equated them with the mentally retarded, or discounted their difficulties, such that it was almost impossible for them to obtain funding and assistance from official sources (Brown, 1994).

Since learning disabilities accounted for a vast majority of those children receiving services under the provisions of the special education laws in the United States (Patton & Polloway, 1992; Telander, 1994), there was great pressure to solidify a uniform definition (Rehabilitative Services Administration, 1989; Silver, 1988). Hammill (1990,1993) along with the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (1988) have examined a wide range of learning disabilities definitions and have derived a composite statement, based on majority inclusion of elements.

The 1988 National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities definition, supported by Hammill (1990, 1993) is as follows:

Learning disabilities is a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual, presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction, and may occur across the life span. Problems with self-regulatory behaviors, social perception, and social interaction, may exist with learning disabilities, but do not in themselves constitute a learning disability. Although learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (for example, sensory impairment, mental retardation, serious emotional disturbance) or with extrinsic influences such as cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction, they are not the result of these conditions or influences. (p.4)

Hammill (1993) states that this definition is as complete as possible, since it is both inclusive of all known learning disability symptoms and distinguishes them from all other syndromes. Though specific mention is not made of traditional terms such as "Dyslexia" or "Attention Deficit Disorder" (as noted in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV (1994)), it does include symptoms that might fall under these terms. Since the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities includes member organizations ranging from professional groups—such as speech and hearing pathologists and school psychologists, to self-advocacy groups—such as the Learning Disabilities Society of America and the Orton Dyslexia Society, it can be presumed that this definition is solidly supported. Hammill notes the fact that this definition, along with that of the 1977 U.S.O.E. serve as the most accepted and respected definitions of learning disabilities.

Despite the fact that Hammill (1990, 1993) claims wide-range consensus on the validity of his definition, there is disagreement on this point. Reiff, Gerber and Ginsberg (1993), state that it is based only on research dealing with children and does not take into account the needs of adults with learning disabilities. In addition, while it pools the thinking and opinion of those working with the population, it ignores the views of those who live with the condition. The authors state, that there is precedent for a model based on self-definition,

sighting, for example, the work of Schneider (1984) who examined adolescents' views of their learning disabilities. It is felt that such self-derived statements add clarity, detail and a sense of experience to definitions, such that they are of practical use to those who deal with the learning disabled, as well as the population itself.

Reiff, Gerber and Ginsberg (1993), qualitatively searched for a self-definition of learning disabilities, by interviewing a population of moderate to highly successful affected adults. From this group, a consensus model was developed, consisting of four major themes which can be seen to serve as a separate functional definition, or as a companion to the Hammill/National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (1988) statement. These definitive themes are: "(a) processing difficulties, (b) specific functional limitations, (c) under-achievement determination, and (d) learning disabilities as difference (p. 118)."

Processing difficulties were defined by the population as an interruption of normal information processing. Most felt there was a break or blockage in the normal channels of information processing in the brain, such that information is received through normal sensory channels, but is not relayed as such. A majority believed there to be some neurological impairment present, as opposed to a sensory malfunction. In addition, there was general agreement that this neurological difficulty was limited and separate from a global malfunction characteristic of mental retardation.

Functional limitations were defined by the population in a variety of ways, mostly dealing with academic issues. Limited ability to perform in reading, writing, spelling and mathematics were of greatest concern. Some respondents spoke of conceptual and linguistic difficulties. The authors note the fact that overwhelmingly, the population centered on learning related issues and not on social or emotional concerns (despite the fact that in their life-histories almost all noted social difficulties). Emerging definitions in the literature, uniformly include such concerns based on research into the population (Mellard, 1990; Rehabilitative Services Administration, 1989). The authors speculate that among this accomplished and successful population, social concerns may not seem as pressing as academic ones.

Under-achievement Determination was defined by the population as a discrepancy between potential and achievement. Respondents "felt that they had been held back in some form by learning disabilities (p. 121)." This perception exists despite the fact that the group was comprised of successful individuals. Nonetheless, the belief was, that what had been accomplished was not equal to what could have been, if the disability were not a factor. The group also stated, that achievement in their lives was uneven, with some areas at or near expected levels and others chronically below.

The authors wonder whether this pervading sense of under achievement was due to early academic difficulty, which was, in childhood, a large measure of overall success and may have contributed to feelings of generalized incapacity. Whatever the cause, this belief permeates the definition posited by the group.

Learning disability as difference was defined by the population as a sense of having needs and abilities distinct from the general population. It is suggested by the authors that despite feeling under-accomplished due to the disability, the condition may have contributed to great need for achievement and success, facilitating the development of innovative coping strategies. The response of the group would seem to substantiate this to a certain extent, with adults stating that they were not so much "dis-abled" as "differently-abled". Some saw the condition as a set of limitations that necessitated different strategies for success. Others, refused to view themselves as limited in any way, stressing only the individual variance inherent in them. Many, saw the disability as a limitation emerging not only within them, but with the educational system as well.

Though it is clear that disagreement continues to permeate the process of defining learning disabilities, the models posited by Hammill (1990, 1993) and Reiff, Gerber and Ginsberg (1993), do combine to form a workable operational definition. In examining the specific difficulties encountered by learning disabled adults, Gerber and Reiff (1991, 1994) suggest a dual track model, whereby cognitive/academic concerns, as well as the social/emotional impediments of learning disabilities, are examined separately. The following two sections of this review, examining the relevant literature on the nature of learning disabilities, conform to such a model. Utilizing this dual-tracked approach, will hopefully

provide a comprehensive overview of learning disabilities in adulthood. It is intended to serve as important background information to the present study and to the challenges that this population may be facing.

Cognitive/Educational Implications

General Considerations

Though the composite definition of learning disabilities presented above, along with evidence suggesting a life-long persistence of symptoms confirms the presence of learning difficulties in adults, a full understanding of the affect of this reality remains somewhat elusive. This is likely due to the fact that interest in the population is relatively new and that a wide range of research has yet to be completed (Gerber & Reiff, 1994). Nonetheless, there is an emerging picture of the impediments facing adults with learning disabilities. This understanding is derived from a wide variety of sources, including educators (Bingman, 1989), academics (Gottesman, 1994) and, most notably, the population itself (Gerber and Reiff, 1991, Reiff et al., 1995).

Hoy and Gregg (1984), Ross-Gordon (1989) and Telander (1994), review the literature surrounding the cognitive/educational difficulties experienced by learning disabled adults. All conclude that weaknesses persist from childhood and that they range in severity from negligible to significant levels of impairment. Several authors make mention of the fact that despite these sometimes onerous difficulties, many adults find strategies for survival and become successfully assimilated into normative work and personal lives (Barsch, 1981; Ross, 1987; Smith, 1985). Others, compensate for specific deficits by specializing in areas that minimize these skills (Johnson & Blalock, 1987).

Definition of skill deficits vary, though it would appear that there is general agreement that difficulties are found in areas of expressive and written language, non-verbal processing (Johnson & Blalock, 1987), mathematical skill (Hoffman, et al, 1987), attention (Smith, 1983) memory and perception (Reid & Hersko, 1981). Ross-Gordon (1989) divides these into two general categories, academic deficits and language and information processing difficulties.

Academic deficits are seen by Ross-Gordon (1989) as achievement weaknesses in areas of basic academic skills. Wolf (1986) reported that among a sample of learning disabled adults, 52% of males and 66% of females showed impaired written language ability as measured by the Woodcock-Johnson Psychoeducational Battery (Woodcock & Johnson, 1977). Perlo and Rak (1971) noted a continuum of language deficits, ranging from persistent spelling difficulties to virtual illiteracy among a group of learning disabled adults studied. Johnson and Blalock (1987) found similar results, noting the tendency of academic skills difficulties in mathematics as well as language problems.

Frauenheim (1978), found that achievement among adults diagnosed as learning disabled in childhood, remained well below average. Achievement testing noted the fact that grade equivalents for the population were all under high school levels, with an average grade equivalent in adulthood of 2.9 in spelling, 3.6 in reading and 4.6 in arithmetic skill. Deshler et al. (1982) noted a general plateauing of academic skills in learning disabled adolescents at a 5th grade equivalent in reading and 6th in mathematics.

Language and information processing problems are seen by Ross-Gordon (1989) as more general impairments in areas of normative functioning. Blalock and Johnson (1987), in their study of adults seeking remediation for their learning disabilities, found general reports of skills deficits in reading comprehension, written expression and mathematical ability. Clients showed signs of spelling and composition weakness, as well as disability in areas of verbal decoding and expression-"difficulty in word retrieval, syntax, pronunciation of multi-syllabic words, and morphosyntactic spelling errors" (Ross-Gordon, 1989, p. 11). Others reported general functioning difficulties in areas such as handwriting, directionality, coordination and organization.

Hoy and Gregg (1984), in the first of their seven-part series on the assessment and remediation of learning disabled adults, provide a detailed outline of symptoms in all areas of cognitive functioning. They generalize these into six categories of cognitive skills which can be affected by learning disabilities:

Attention: The ability to focus awareness. This includes being alert to a stimuli about to be presented, being ready to respond, focusing on the appropriate stimuli, sustaining attention for adequate time periods, and then deciding on an answer or action (Smith, 1983).

Perception: A continuous process of analyzing relations, sequences, classes, categories, objects, and symbol systems (Reid & Hersko, 1981).

Memory: The storage of information. Information may be stored for brief periods of time before it is integrated or forgotten. This is usually referred to as short-term memory. Long-term memory refers to storage of information for longer periods of time.

Symbolization: The process by which meaning is attached to words, gestures, and symbols, and by which something is represented by something else.

Conceptualization: The integration of new information with previous information to form new relationships and knowledge structures.

Metacognition: Knowing about knowing. This is awareness of how one learns. (p. 12)

According to Hoy and Gregg (1984), learning disabilities can affect adults in any of the above described areas. This would encompass almost all cognitive and academic functioning, as well as the skills necessary for daily functioning. Learning disabled adults "may not maintain attention, receive stimuli accurately (perception), remember (memory), attach meaning to symbols (symbolization), differentiate among and combine meanings (conceptualization), [or] understand their learning behavior (metacognition). " (p. 12)

Taken together, this research paints a wide and varied portrait of the individual with learning disabilities. Though there is a tendency to conceive of adults with learning disabilities as primarily male, young and deficient in academic and language related areas (Telander, 1994), research appears to suggest that this is but one of the many possible permutations. Learning

disabilities are heterogeneous, affecting a wide variety of adults in a multitude of overt and covert ways (Hoy and Gregg, 1984). What seems to unite adults who fall under the general rubric of "learning disabled" is a mismatch between intelligence and ability (Mercer et al., 1990) (though it is important to note that individuals with learning disabilities fall along a continuum of intelligence levels) and the perception that success is impeded by basic perceptual and performance skills. Severity, as with manifestation, appears to vary so widely, as to be practically individualized.

Post-Secondary Considerations

Despite the fact that learning disabilities present a potentially formidable road-block to academic success, more adults affected by it are enrolling in post-secondary institutions. Shaw (et al., 1991; 1994) report dramatic increases in the numbers of university students who identify themselves as learning disabled. Statistics taken between the 1970s and 80s, suggest a tenfold increase in first-year post-secondary students listed as learning disabled (Learning Disability Update, 1986). Henderson (1992), found that since 1985, the learning disabled population of American college freshmen has grown to almost 25%.

Shaw et al. (1991; 1994) provide a series of possible explanations for this dramatic increase. They suggest that legal pressure to provide special assistance to children with learning disabilities, has resulted in more students successfully graduating from high schools. Students now leave public school programs with mandated plans of future study. Mainstreaming, along with changes in teaching approaches, have fostered in students a sense of belonging in normative education, along with the belief that they can succeed in the post-secondary environment. More students are now trained in self-advocacy, study skills management, social skills and meta-cognitive strategies, such that they are better prepared for college and university. Availability of assistive technology—such as computers and tape-recorders—has increased the independence of students, allowing them to overcome many of the technical aspects of learning disabilities.

This deepening level of preparation, appears to have broadened the scope and changed the pattern of education sought by learning disabled adults.

Levels of enrollment among the population were, in the 1980s, weighted toward technical-vocational programs and non-degree two year colleges (Wagner, 1989). According to McGuire, Hall and Litt (1991), this trend has reversed itself, with more students enrolling in baccalaureate programs.

Thus, it can be said that legal and educational precedents have not only affected the lives of persons with learning disabilities prior to their graduation from high school, but after as well. Section 504 of the 1973 "U.S. Rehabilitation Act", states that colleges receiving federal funding must not discriminate against students with learning disabilities and must provide reasonable accommodations for them (Telander, 1994). As a result, Bursuck, Rose, Cowen, Azmi and Yahaya, (1989) found that more than 90% of schools polled, provided special services to students with learning disabilities in accordance with the law. Additionally, an almost equal number reported provision of services that went beyond the minimum standards set by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.

The impact of this new level of acceptance and accommodation is not yet fully understood, as few definitive studies chronicling the success and graduation rates of students with learning disabilities at the post-secondary level have been undertaken (Telander, 1994). One study, conducted by Vogel and Adleman (1992), examined the progress of learning disabled undergraduate students between 1980 and 1988 with mixed results. While the population did do better than non-learning disabled counterparts with similar entrance exam grades, their overall success rate was fairly poor. Grade point averages were reported to be a relatively low 2.43. Levels of failure for the learning disabled population stood at about 18%, while the graduation rate was a modest 33%. This comes despite the fact that students with learning disabilities took a significantly lighter course load than either average students or those non-learning disabled students of lower academic achievement, used as the comparison sample.

In the absence of definitive information, further support for the contention drawn from the Vogel and Adleman study (1992) that despite assistance, learning disabled adults are not succeeding at the college level, comes from statistics detailing numbers of students proceeding to higher levels of post-secondary education in the form of graduate or professional school enrollment. Figures from the 1987 Profiles of Handicapped Students in Post-Secondary

Education, report that the numbers of disabled students decrease at the higher ends of the learning spectrum. While 10.5% of undergraduate college students in the U.S. reported that they were disabled, figures drop to 8.4% in graduate studies and 7.3% in professional schools.

If, as noted above, more students are arriving at colleges and universities, having been prepared to face the challenges presented by their disabilities, and schools are, for the most part, providing services to them, why then is there evidence of only minor success and a lack of movement to higher levels of post-secondary education? There are several possible answers to this question. Firstly, it is likely that sufficient data is not yet available on the long-term effects of post-secondary assistive programs. Graduates of public school systems, who received intense services and benefited from legal and pedagogical changes, have not yet, for the most part, completed their education. Similarly, it is not yet known what the actual needs of these students are, as current services are based only on research and experience of the younger children who comprise this first generation of service recipients.

Despite the paucity of research in this area, there is some evidence to suggest that these first attempts at service provision may not be accurately meeting the needs of learning disabled adults. McGuire, Hall and Litt (1991), examined the instructional needs of learning disabled U.S. college students. Their study found that 60% of requested instructional time was focused on the development of study skills and written expression training. This can be compared with information derived from Bursuck Rose, Cowen and Yahaya (1989), stating that developing learning strategies was seen by only 34% of undergraduate institutions as the most important goal of their service provision, while basic skill remediation was the primary goal of only 13% of respondents.

Discrepancy between enrollment, graduation figures and the numbers of students moving on to graduate studies may already be seen as a result of a similar disparity between levels of mandated accommodation provided by post-secondary institutions and the actual assistance necessary for success. There appears to be a significant gap between what institutions offer students and what students feel is required.

In their study (evidencing compliance among most undergraduate institutions with Section 504 of the U.S. Rehabilitation Act) Bursuck, Rose, Cowen and Yahaya, (1989) note wide differences in reported goals of programs, which they claim has led to similar differences in quality of service. A majority of the institutions reporting compliance with the law stated that their main goal in doing so was not to provide students with specialized training or assistance, but rather a desire to fulfill the basic mandates prescribed by the Rehabilitation Act. The authors claim that programs seeing this as their primary goal were linked with relatively poor provision of services, lessening the likelihood that students would be continually monitored, provided with plans of study and offered the services of trained professionals.

Houck, Asselin, Troutman and Arrington (1992) found that students rated services and accommodations available to them at colleges and universities as significantly lower in perceived usefulness than did the faculty who devised and offered them. Furthermore, the authors note the fact that students continued to express concerns about their treatment at post-secondary institutions and the opportunities available to them for success. Faculty on the other hand, concluded that they were providing acceptable and reasonable assistance to students with learning disabilities. Faculty, however, tended to rate the likelihood of success among the population as lower than the students themselves and unlike students, favored limiting opportunities for choices of major subject.

Thus, it would appear that educational opportunities are not yet matched with the assistance necessary for success, and that as students reach higher levels of education, accommodation for them decreases. This becomes most clear when analyzing data from the first study to examine the availability of services to students at the post-graduate level.

Parks et al. (1987) requested information on services and accommodations available to students with learning disabilities from over 700 graduate and professional programs, with only 223 responding. Of those, less than one-quarter noted the existence of a written outline of services available to students with learning disabilities. This comes despite the fact that in the U.S., schools are required to provide such written information, under section 504 of

the 1973 Rehabilitation Act. Less than one half of the responding programs offered special accommodation for students with learning disabilities.

Parks et al. (1987) found that of the large percentage of graduate schools reporting no outline of assistance to students with learning disabilities, only 14.3% suggested that they would in the future prepare such a plan. Several programs (42.6%) claimed that they would offer diagnostic assistance to students who discovered that they were learning disabled while in the program. Others, noted the fact that they would allow some forms accommodation to students in their programs such as longer test times, alternate forms of test taking and extensions of assignments and program length.

It is important to note that 10.3% of graduate and professional schools stated that they would offer no assistance or accommodation to students with learning disabilities. As Telnander (1994) states "It is possible that some of the schools believed that a learning disability would negatively impact on the quality of professionals they train" (p. 23). This comes despite the fact that among those offering services to learning disabled, most felt that with assistance, the quality of their graduates was not compromised and that success was possible.

Parks concludes that the level of accommodation at the graduate level is so poor and in such obvious violation of the Rehabilitation Act, that students may have to take legal action as their only remaining recourse. This appears to have already begun. Mellard (1994) notes two landmark cases where graduate or professional institutions have been ordered to provide reasonable accommodation for students with learning disabilities who are otherwise qualified and who would not, if assisted "fundamentally compromise the essential aspects of the program" (p. 149).

This research, though relatively new and far from complete, points to the fact that a clear understanding of learning disabled adult students, along with adequate service provision at all levels of post-secondary education, are in their infancy. It remains for academics, advocates and the population itself, to harness the good intentions of society, the strength of the law and the power of education and research and use them to increase knowledge and service. As greater numbers of students pursue training at these higher levels, more will

become known about them and their needs. It seems clear from the research presented, that the first steps towards adequate service provision and accommodation of persons with a learning disability have begun in earnest. These efforts though, appear to be rudimentary, coarse and uneven. They require refinement, clarity and time—luxuries which current students cannot necessarily afford, but which they must provide.

Social/Emotional Implications

At first blush, it would seem somewhat misplaced to consider the social ramifications brought on by a set of difficulties that fall under the definitive heading of "learning". Yet, the research is quite clear in this regard stating, almost conclusively, that learning ability affects emotional and social skills development and that learning disability leads to a corresponding set of deficiencies in the social and emotional realms (Reiff & Gerber, 1989).

The first and most obvious social/emotional casualty of learning disabilities is self-concept (Brier, 1994; Chapman, 1988). Several authors, suggest that a view of the self that is positive, capable and resilient, may be correlated with academic achievement (Harter, 1990; Marsh, 1990; Vandell & Hembree, 1994). Failure in this area, can bring about great self-doubt, leading to the presentation of a self that is incapable, unlikable and unapproachable. As such, a negative vision of the self, projected inward by one set of experiences, transforms the inner sense of the self and leads to an overall negative presentation to others (Soares & Soares, 1983). This, then, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, as an individual presents a self that necessarily receives a negative response from peers and family (Reiff, 1987).

Though this vision of the self may not reflect actual performance or ability, its effect is, nonetheless, both powerful and long-lasting (Marsh & Parker, 1984). Given the fact that school and academic success play such a central role in the life experience of a child, it is no wonder then, that failure in this one area, leads to a conception of the self that is mostly negative (Gerber & Reiff, 1991). This cycle may become even more dangerous, as there is evidence that poor social status (which may be brought on by poor achievement) can then effect academic performance (Coyner, 1993; Strein, 1993).

Many authors find that low self-concept and self-esteem plague both children and adults diagnosed as learning disabled and that this has serious social ramifications. Schumacker and Hazel (1984), note that this deficiency leads to difficulties in socializing during childhood. Studies by Bryan (1976), Swanson and Trahan (1986), Bruininkis, (1978) and Rosenberg and Gaier (1977), serve to replicate and strengthen the statement that learning disabled children are less accepted and popular with peers. Gerber, Ginsberg and Reiff (1992) point to the fact that feelings of incompetence and stupidity frequently affect learning disabled children and adults beyond the realm of the academic, leaving them vulnerable and isolated in a social context. There is often no refuge from these feelings, even in the home environment, as parents and siblings tend to see the individual with learning disabilities as socially unskilled and awkward (Reiff, 1987).

Much as the studies which indicate the fact that children do not simply "grow out" of their learning related difficulties (Balow and Bloomquist, 1965; Gerber and Reiff, 1991; Silver & Haignin, 1964), it also appears that social impediments and poor self-concept, continue to plague individuals into adulthood. Price (1988), notes the persistence of low self concept in her review of the literature on the subject of adulthood and learning disability. Jarvis (1992) found that learning disabled adult students scored consistently lower on measures of self-esteem than their non-learning disabled counterparts . This is a view supported by Mellard and Hazel (1992), Sarcoglu, Minden and Wilchesky (1989) and Greg et al. (1992a, 1992b).

The effect of this self-doubt, poor self-esteem and poor social skills development, can have important and lasting effects on the lives of adults. Greg et al. (1992a, 1992b), note the fact that learning disabled adult students tended to differ significantly from the norm in personality patterns, as measured by the widely used Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (1991). In addition to self-concept difficulties, the population exhibited higher than average levels of depression, self-doubt and criticism, obsessive or fearful thoughts and a lack of self-confidence.

Similarly, Macenzie (1994), found higher levels of depression among college-age learning disabled adults, as compared with non-learning disabled peers. Hwang (1992) notes the persistence of learned helplessness among learning disabled adult students. Many of these difficulties affect the way in which learning disabled adults cope with stressful situations and succeed in advanced schooling (Hwang, 1992; Vanzant, 1991; Sarcoglu, Minden & Wilchesky 1989), vocational situations (Balock, 1982; Brown, Gerber, & Dowby, 1990; Patton & Poloway, 1982; Telander, 1994) and personal interactions (Spekman, Goldberg & Herman, 1992; Meyers & Messer, 1981; White, 1985).

It is not only poor self-esteem which brings about these social and emotional difficulties. A body of evidence suggests that a whole host of other maladaptive social behaviors contribute to the difficulties encountered by learning disabled adults. While some of these difficulties are related to issues of self-concept, others appear to be symptoms of the disability itself (Reiff & Gerber, 1989). Gerber and Reiff (1994) note six areas of common social perception difficulties which can be seen as part of the learning disability. These are:

- (1) The inability to make central inferences in social settings (Gerber, 1978);
- (2) less sensitivity to others' thoughts and feelings (Dickstein & Warren, 1980; Wong & Wong, 1980);
- (3) poor judgment of others' moods and attitudes (Lerner, 1993);
- (4) doing or saying inappropriate things (Lerner, 1993);
- (5) problems comprehending humor (Pickering et al., 1987); and
- (6) problems discriminating the response requirements in social situations (Larson & Gerber, 1987) (pp. 73-74).

Thus, it would appear that learning disabled adults are not accurately comprehending or enacting appropriate social cues or behaviors. As a result, individuals may present themselves as aggressive, hostile, insecure and frustrated (Wiig & Semel, 1976). Jarvis (1992) attempted to substantiate this claim, testing the social sensitivity of adults and adolescents with learning disabilities by presenting them with tape-recorded scenarios displaying a wide range of emotions. Learning disabled participants were significantly less able to accurately interpret the social situations and emotions conveyed in the scenarios as compared with non-affected control subjects.

The end result of this skills deficit is an overall sense of social isolation and dissatisfaction with social interactions. Gerber and Reiff (1994) report research indicating that learning disabled adults often feel dissatisfied with their social and familial lives (White, 1985). They may appear to others as overwhelmed and anxious (Johnson, 1981), over-committed, withdrawn, moody and ill-mannered (Rogan & Hartman, 1976, 1990). They tend to report feeling bored and frustrated with their social, recreational or leisure time (Gerber and Reiff, 1991).

As a reaction to the ever-increasing evidence that learning disabilities affect adults' social skills (sometimes severely), researchers have recommended that action be taken in this area. Brier (1994), Mellard and Hazel (1992) and Saracoglu, Minden and Wilchesky (1989) in their investigations into this phenomena, recommend programs of social skills training for the population. Rosenthal (1992) and Rosenberger (1991) present counseling models for social skills adaptation, as part of an overall therapeutic approach to dealing with the learning disabled. This would include bolstering self-concept and teaching adults to regain a sense of playfulness, said to be important in the development of social skill and vocational fulfillment. Despite these suggestions, however, there appears to be a severe lack of training in the area of social skills development (Telander, 1994) and few qualified individuals to carry out such training (Price, 1988; Shaw & Norlander, 1985).

Resilience and Success: Positive Profiles of Adults with Learning Disabilities

Despite the fact that learning disabled adults may face tremendous difficulties in areas of cognitive, educational, social and vocational functioning, they are not, by any means, a wholly defeated population. Research evidence suggests, that individuals with learning disabilities can and often do succeed in a wide array of fields and vocations (Telander, 1994) and that they can live fulfilling and productive lives (Ross-Gordon, 1989). Popular autobiographies attest to this (e.g., Schmitt, 1992; Simpson, 1979), as do reports that famous individuals such as Albert Einstein, Thomas Edison and Augustine Renoir, achieved greatness in spite of their learning impediments (Adleman & Adleman, 1987; Ross-Gordon, 1989). In fact, authors such as Gerber and Reiff (1991, 1994), have suggested

that learning disabilities can have the effect of adding to an individuals' creativity, drive for success and ability to achieve.

Examples of learning disabled adults who succeed, have begun to appear in scholarly literature as well as the popular press. As with all research into the lives and needs of learning disabled adults, this is a relatively new and emerging field. Werner (1993), traced the development of 22 children diagnosed with learning disabilities over a 38 year period as part of a larger longitudinal study on the island of Kauai. Evidence from this research, suggests that most of those with learning disabilities, successfully integrated into the community, completing their education, finding rewarding vocational situations and life-partners.

Similarly, a longitudinal study conducted by Bruck (1987), found that though learning disabilities persisted into adulthood, this did not significantly impair participants' abilities to find fulfillment in all areas of adult life. Examples of successful adults in many spheres can be found in the work of Lewandowski and Arcangelo (1994), Kloomak and Cosden (1994), Scott, Scherman and Phillips (1992) and Reiff (1995). A special edition of the journal Learning Disabilities: Research and Practice (1993), was devoted to the subject of resilience and learning disabilities, presenting a wide array of research pertaining to issue of success among the population.

From these and other examples, theories of success and the components that bring it about are emerging. Much of the groundwork for examining the success of learning disabled adults, comes from the general literature on resilience in children. The ground-breaking work of Garmezy (1971, 1976), examined the lives of children who proved immune to severe, sometimes long-term stressors. He posited a theory that such children maintained a high level of "invulnerability", due to the internal characteristics of the individual and/or as a result of positive external environments. Looking for what he called "protective factors", Garmezy (1983), stated that though not always effective, some factor or factors such as "attributes of persons, environments and situations . . . appear to temper the predictions of psychopathology based upon a person's at-risk status" (p.73).

Based—to a certain extent—on the theoretical underpinnings of this work, attention is now being placed by research, on the lives of successful learning disabled adults. Some authors focus on a single protective or causal factor. Several studies, for instance, have noted the connection between success and socioeconomic status. Learning disabled students from families with greater income and community standing were better able to cope with the difficulties presented to them, as they had access to tutors, specialized schooling, counseling and extra-curricular activities (Rawson, 1968; Silver & Hagin, 1985). These authors also suggest that parental involvement is increased in families of higher socioeconomic status. Macenzie (1994), in her study of depression and learning disability, states that socioeconomic status appears to have a protective effect, lessening the likelihood of depressive symptomatology (see also McKinney, Osborne & Schulte, 1993).

Other authors have noted alternate single factors in their research on success and learning disability. There is, naturally, a body of evidence suggesting that specialized training is key in the later success of students (Babbit & Van Vactor, 1993; Minskoff, 1994) Some authors, in contrast, feel that achievement in normative educational systems is more important. Vogel and Adleman (1992) state that the greatest predictor of academic success among learning disabled college students is prior experience in a college setting as well as regular course-work in English studies. Similarly, Rogan and Hartman (1990) conducted a ten year follow-up study of adults who had been diagnosed as learning disabled, dividing the group into those who had completed normative and specialized educational programs. Those who graduated from regular programs at the high school or college level, reported greater satisfaction in areas of independence, employment and marital status.

Another (though much more complex) emerging single-factor theory explaining the success of some learning disabled adults, posits a developmental causality. This theory, put forth by authors such as Spekman, Goldberg and Herman (1992, 1993) and Gerber (1994), states that learning disabled adults are, in effect, "late bloomers". Because of their perceptual, social and cognitive impairments, normal development is in essence, delayed. Success, in this model, is determined not only by action, environment or endowment, but by time as well. Since most of the studies involving learning disabled adults focus on those

in their 20s, it is thought that this developmental lag is missed and that a mostly negative picture emerges. Studies by Gerber and Reiff (1991), Gerber, Ginsberg and Reiff (1992), Werner (1993) and Werner and Smith (1982, 1992), which focused on a wider age range of learning disabled adults, have consistently reported greater success and integration into adult life.

Using the adult developmental theories of Levinson (1978) and Gould (1978), several authors have noted that resilience and success do seem to come with development and maturation. Basset, Polloway and Patton (1994), have suggested that it is important to consider adult developmental models, in order to fully understand the challenges that the learning disabled population face. These models state that traumatic childhood events may leave deep scars which can delay development and the transition from childhood to adult functioning. Gerber, Ginsberg and Reiff (1992), in their study of highly successful adults, note the recurring theme of pain and isolation due to early trauma, as a consistent part of the adult with learning disabilities' experience. Similarly, Levinson (1978) states the importance of leaving the family home as a means of establishing a new level of adult development. Several authors (Gerber and Reiff, 1994; Spekman, Goldberg & Herman, 1992) have noted a tendency among adults with learning disabilities to remain in the family home for longer periods of time, establishing independence at a later age.

While these single-cause theories would seem to hold great insight and validity, they are only a beginning. It would appear that as the literature concerning adults with learning disabilities grows in complexity and scope, authors are endeavoring to search for a more comprehensive and in-depth sets of factors, rather than isolating a single cause. The literature seems to note a trend toward positing a wider variety of possible causal factors in determining the success of learning disabled adults.

Polloway, Schwel and Patton (1992) surveyed 51 learning disabled adults and found three consistently stated factors. Respondents felt that the development of coping strategies, positive influence of supportive adults and positive educational experiences had accounted for their success. Werner (1993) sees a multi-factor model emerging from her longitudinal data. Dividing these into two general categories, Werner looks as so called "individual traits"

—such as temperamental characteristics which elicit positive social responses, efficiency, plan-fulness and self-esteem, along with "outside factors"—such as supportive and competent adult care-givers and opportunities for repeated attempts at mastery. These, she states, account for success in the lives of learning disabled participants.

A somewhat more detailed model of success comes from the work of Minskoff (1994). She posits a six factored understanding of success, with several sub categories. In her opinion, success is based on: 1) severity of the learning disability—taking into account such facets as general intelligence, special talents, language and processing abilities, academic skill, psychological fitness and vocational skills; 2) family Support; 3) socioeconomic status; 4) completion of high school; 5) quality of educational services at both the elementary and high school levels; and 6) quality of services available at the post-secondary level including special education, vocational training and psycho-social services.

Perhaps the most comprehensive model, outlining the multiple factors necessary for successful adult adjustment, comes from the work of Gerber, Ginsberg and Reiff (1992). In their qualitative study of 71 successful learning disabled adults, the authors note a complex and intricate model for achievement, generated by accounts of the population itself. This model focuses on the inner-process of the individual, thus de-emphasizing uncontrollable factors such as the nature and severity of the specific disability, level of individual intelligence or services received.

The authors divide the participants into two sub-groups, those whose lives fully embodied the model of success, and were, as such, "highly successful", and those who did so less, and were labeled "moderately successful". While themes and strategies were consistent throughout the entire population, it was the degree of adherence and applicability that distinguished those who were high achieving and those who were at the moderate end of the scale.

At the core of this theory, is the understanding that learning disabled adults succeed as they gain greater levels of control in their lives. Control would appear to be acquired through two distinct methods, termed by the authors as "internal decisions" and "external manifestations". Internal decisions include a

desire to succeed, goal orientation and the ability to reframe the learning disability such that both possibilities and limitations are adequately considered. External manifestations of this internal process included what the authors saw as "adaptability"—which included such factors as individual persistence, a set of effective, creative coping mechanisms, a "goodness of fit" with one's working environment and a good "social ecology" of supportive persons.

Control is seen by the authors as the "fuel that fired . . . success" (p. 479). After many years of failure, the population as a whole expressed an interest in maintaining a high level of control, seen as the only way to overcome the deficits and difficulties associated with learning disabilities. This sense of control was most tangible in the physical realm of the work environment, but it is the deeper psychological control which seems to be at the heart of the drive for success. In the broadest sense, the authors define this psychological control as "making conscious decisions to take charge of one's life (internal decisions), and adapting and shaping oneself in order to move ahead (external manifestations)." (p. 479)

The differentiating factor between those participants labeled by the authors as "highly" or "moderately" successful was the level and substance of perceived control which they exerted. While all participants equally sought high degrees of control in their lives, it was the highly successful group who attained it. Moderately successful participants, tended to seek control as a means of disguising their learning disability. The highly successful group, in comparison, were more interested in forwarding their lives and moving beyond their limitations, instead of hiding them or fearing that they would be exposed as inept or incompetent. This group was more likely to have a clear vision of where they were headed and less interested in self-protection.

Gaining this level of control, was seen by the authors as a two phase process, consisting of multiple sub-steps. Firstly, the adult with learning disabilities needed to make an inner-journey to confront and overcome the many negative feelings and fears brought on by the disability. This, the authors call "internal decisions", a process in which the individual conceives of the position and place to which they will aspire, carefully plan the steps necessary for its attainment, and the clear and realistic determination of what will and will not impede progress.

The first internal decision, the authors note, is the desire to succeed. It is this dream of moving beyond the limitations of the disability to a place of success and achievement, which seems to be the starting point for all those who overcome their learning disability. Those labeled as highly successful had the clearest sense of their desire, the most detailed portrait of their ideals. They understood that many individuals possessed such a desire and that despite the talent, determination and opportunity, some would fail. They were, however, willing to take risks. While some reported that this desire had been with them since youth, others noted a more gradual build-up after a tumultuous childhood of failure. In contrast, the moderately successful group seemed to have a poorly defined conception of their desire. It was less vivid, more hesitant and lacked the direction common in highly successful participants.

Once the overall desire for success is conceived, the setting of realistic goals is, according to the authors, the next step. The authors speculate that goal setting is necessary because it sharpens the image of desire and maps out, in several attainable steps, the path to its achievement. It also becomes an organic and growth provoking process, where attainment on a minimal level breeds feelings of adequacy and competence, such that more complex and difficult tasks can be attempted.

Differences noted in the goal setting behaviors of high and moderate achievers, appeared to be in the type of goals set and distractibility from them. Highly successful individuals appeared to set both long and short term goals. Moderately successful participants, on the other hand, were more likely to have only short term goals, operating on a "micro" as opposed to "macro" scale. Similarly, there was a distinct difference in levels of distractibility from goals, with moderates reporting more diversion on their road to success.

Having expressed the desire to achieve and having set out a goal plan for its attainment, the next and most important internal step posited by the authors, is the reframing of the learning disability. Accepting and understanding the disability as a part of the individual makeup, seemed crucial for later success. Those individuals who were realistic in their appraisal of both their limitations and their natural talents, were more likely to be in the highly successful group.

The authors divide this crucial process into four stages. Firstly, there is the need to recognize the disability and all it entails. The authors state that the individual must accept "that they did things differently and did not have to be like everyone else." (p. 481) This level of self-appraisal seemed to be a turning point for highly successful individuals, who came to see themselves as possessing instincts and insights which were unique and valuable to them.

Following closely to this recognition, was the process of accepting oneself as whole, complete and capable, despite the difference in learning style and deviation from the norm. For some, this meant sharing the nature of their learning disability as means of publicly deflating its overwhelming grandeur and fear. For others, the process was more personal and private a gradual de-vilification of themselves and their disability.

The final stage in the process of reframing, appeared to the authors to involve a deepening level of understanding with regard to the learning disability. Taking charge of their lives, meant for many, a journey of research and clarification. Knowing what it was that they faced, its nature, scope and makeup, seemed to be an important last step in the remaking of the disability into a issue of mere difference. Along with this, came the tendency (especially among the highly successful population) to display fewer feelings of self-pity and anger associated with the disability.

According to the authors, there seemed to be an aura of empowerment among those who had successfully completed the reframing process, along with the recognition that it was painful and life-scarring. There was not, the authors note, a sense of denial among the highly successful population, for most understood the ramifications of their disability. Rather, it was the belief that despite the lingering differences in style and ability and despite the pain and hardship which this entailed, the inner self was worthy and capable and the disability now viewed as a roadblock and not an impasse.

Unfortunately, the authors noted that among the less successful population, important steps in the reframing process were missed or not yet achieved. Thus, it can be said that a distinguishing factor lies in the ability of the

individual to face the pain and unfairness brought on by learning difference and complete the process of internal healing.

Having concluded the inner work of envisioning achievement and accepting the learning disability, the authors state that the next phase involves the external manifestation of skills and tactics which allow the individual to adapt and overcome. This too, is parceled out into smaller steps, based on the insight and information provided by the study population. The first of these steps is termed by the authors as "persistence". Persistence is seen as the external manifestation of internal desire—the almost unending drive to achieve and succeed, despite the obstacles which present themselves along the way.

Once again, the authors found that the distinguishing feature between highly and moderately successful individuals, was the level at which this trait was applied. All participants were seen to be persistent, as all had achieved despite their learning disability. Highly successful individuals, however, were more persistent, took more risks and were seen as more resilient. Conversely, the moderately successful group, seemed more guarded in their persistence, more conservative in their approach. They seemed less assertive and more fearful. While many recognized this as a weakness, they seemed incapable of acting with what the authors term as "tenacity".

Along with the drive and determination necessary for success, the authors noted the importance of carefully choosing an environment that leads to success. This "goodness of fit", appears to be a conscious choice made by individuals with learning disabilities to find the right blend of work demand and environment that would foster rather than hinder achievement. Finding work for which there was great passion and dedication, seemed, to the authors, to foster success. Similarly, it was important for individuals to seek employment and training in areas which would minimize internal deficits and optimize assets, so as to further negate the influence of the learning disability. Likewise, it seemed that situations where the individual with learning disabilities was in control, as in a self-employed or self-monitored position, was the option of choice.

Often, it appeared that the most highly successful participants, learned early on to create for themselves an environment where they could thrive and where they could find fulfillment and challenge. Moderately successful individuals on the other hand, seemed less in control of their work environment and less capable of minimizing the effects of their learning disability. As such, they were not always as passionate about their work, or as convinced that they were truly capable, contributing members of society.

Having spent a life time perceiving, learning and expressing themselves in different, sometimes unique ways, individuals with learning disabilities appear to do best when they can approach their work in an alternative manner. "Learned creativity", as the authors term it, is the ability to maneuver around the disability such that its effects are mitigated. More so, however, it is a means of creatively accomplishing, such that individuals not only work on par with non-learning disabled individuals, but are often able to rise above colleagues with unique perspectives and skills.

Firstly, this meant finding the best ways in which to lessen the learning disability. Highly successful participants reported using high and low-technology as a means of coping with learning and performance problems. Computers, tape-recorders, Dictaphones, mnemonic devices and organizational formats, appeared to be the weapons of choice in this battle for survival. Secondly, for many successful individuals, creativity meant going beyond the basics and on to new levels of efficiency and strategy. Anticipating potential problems, questions and scenarios—such that they would not only be less destructive, but more constructive—was but one example sighted by the authors. Ultimately, this led many in the highly successful group, to not only consider themselves as good as those they worked with, but often better, as a result of their ability to plan and conceive of creative solutions.

The final external manifestation of learned health among the population was termed by the authors as "social ecology". Learning disabled individuals, who were most successful, saw themselves as working and functioning both independently and as part of a team. Those in the highly successful group, often found mentors and teachers who could provide them with skill and insight not otherwise available to them as a result of learning impediments. Highly

successful individuals reported that they were keen observers, questioners and mimics, often taking as much as they could from those they trusted, respected and turned to for advice. In addition to those who could train and teach, highly successful individuals kept near them supportive persons who listened to and reflected back their triumphs and tribulations and who were loving, caring and considerate.

The distinguishing factor in this social sphere between high and moderate success groups, appeared to be the level and quality of teachers, mentors and supporters. The lower achievers, tended to either fear advice-givers or depend on them too much. They vacillated dangerously between misguided individualism and learned helplessness, such that they were either incapable of learning from others or unable to independently perform. Highly successful individuals, in contrast, were able to trust themselves and others. They often set up apprenticeships, asked others to co-author works and turned to spouses, family members or friends for comfort and support. It seems that this group was able to continue asking for assistance, while maintaining feelings of capability, worthiness and trust.

Certainly, the model presented by Gerber, Ginsberg and Reiff (1992)—though monumental—cannot be considered definitive. Though it would appear to be thorough and complete, it obviously requires further study. Its applicability to a lesser overtly successful population must be examined, along with a boarder population of learning disabled adults. Nonetheless, it does represent the first major step in the process of comprehending the factors and processes which account for success among the learning disabled population. Its strength lies in its completeness, complexity and step-by step approach.

The fact that its theoretical and practical grounding lies in the words and experiences of the population itself—extrapolated in a qualitative format—lends itself naturally to the work of this project. While it was not the intention of the present study to validate or replicate its findings, the Gerber, Ginsberg and Reiff (1992) study did serve as a road-map to the new ground and material derived from the unique population of graduate students with learning disabilities. Of course, the findings derived from the present study are examined in the context of this information and it has, in some ways, served as a means of

authenticating the theories put forth by the authors. This was not, however, the intention of the project, simply an outgrowth of it.

Toward the Future

It has been repeatedly stated by many authors that the exploration of the lives, needs and experiences of adults with learning disabilities is in its infancy (e.g., Gajar, 1992; Gerber and Reiff, 1991, 1994; Polloway, Schwel & Patton, 1992). Despite the fact that a body of research does exist, it can and should be considered an emerging field, with much of the evidence tentative and inconclusive. If research is an attempt to capture a snapshot of a population—so as to highlight its many beauties and birthmarks—the efforts made with this population, thus far, may be likened to a developing negative, with much detail and clarity yet to emerge.

The question of what to look at and how to do so is of great importance. Certainly, many authors would advocate a continuation of research exploring the symptomatology of learning disabilities as they manifest themselves in adulthood in the areas of cognitive, educational, social, emotional and vocational functioning (Bingman, 1989; Gottesman, 1994; Schumacker & Hazel, 1984; Swanson & Trahan, 1986). These individuals may wish to consider the various ways in which the population is distinct from others and ways in which to diagnose the syndrome. Others may wish to look at ways of remediating these difficulties and focus instead on effective techniques with which to assist the population (Brier, 1994; Mellard & Hazel, 1992; Saracoglu, Minden & Wilchesky, 1989). Another group appears dedicated to examining educational and vocational institutions, in order to assess their effectiveness in integrating the learning disabled population and their compliance with laws designed to assist those affected (Bursuck, Rose, Cowen and Yahaya, 1989; Parks, et al., 1987).

However, there seems to be an evolving trend among researchers to take a more holistic approach to the population, so that a more complete picture can emerge. This research bases itself not on the collection of numbers, test-scores or questionnaire responses, but on the words and stories of learning disabled adults themselves. It is research that believes that, in order for truth to

emerge, it must follow the lead of those being studied rather than attempt to lead them in order to substantiate hypotheses and theories. It postulates that truth is relative, contextual and in some senses limited—yet, presents important building blocks in the construction of knowledge and understanding. It is research that is generally grouped under the heading of "qualitative inquiry".

Several authors have made use of, or have called for the use of qualitative techniques in the investigation of the population of adults with learning disabilities (Eldredge, 1988; Geib, Guzzardi & Geova, 1981; Simpson & Umbach, 1989; Temple, 1988). Gajar, in her 1992 review of the literature concerning the population, stated that the advantage of qualitative research lies in its ability to generate hypotheses rather than prove or disprove them. She also asserted that such research is capable of uncovering a wide variety of variables.

Gerber and Reiff, perhaps the most prolific authors in the field of adult learning disabilities, repeatedly express the view that qualitative data is the most important means of understanding the population (1991, 1994). In fact, the majority of their contemporary work in the field consists of qualitative interviews with learning disabled adults (e.g., 1991, 1992). They state that qualitative research "allows adults with learning disabilities to tell researchers what issues are truly important and relevant." (1991, p. 13). In this way, the authors state, researchers can begin to uncover the experiences of the population, such that they can later examine larger groups in their search for more universal principles (1994).

Gerber and Reiff (1991) believe that qualitative research is an ideal means by which to explore previously unknown territory. Calling this research "inside-out" inquiry, the authors feel that it will ultimately lead beyond the mere description of symptomatology and will allow for a clear understanding of "what it is to be an adult with learning disabilities." (p. 13). By this, the authors contend that a full experiential account is the only means of truly comprehending the impact of a learning disability on the life of an adult. Sighting the work of Miles and Huberman (1984), the authors note the fact that qualitative data "are a source of well grounded, rich descriptions and explanations in local contexts." (p. 15). Along with providing explanations for

previously understood material, this research can "lead to serendipitous findings and to new theoretical integrations; they help researchers go beyond initial preconceptions and frameworks" (p.15).

Thus, it would appear that there is great support among the adult learning disability research community for projects examining the lives and experiences of the population using qualitative methodology. Through such research, the insights and issues already described will come to life, their meaning and implications understood and exemplified in a real-life context. Additionally, such research has the potential of uncovering new and previously unknown insight and information such that fresh avenues of understanding can emerge. Taken together with what is already known about adults with learning disabilities, such new work will hopefully strengthen the position of those who live with a learning disability and provide those who work with them, greater guidance and understanding of their needs, feelings and experiences.

Summary and Conclusion

The material presented in this review paints a portrait that is both interestingly varied and confusingly diverse. On the one hand, it is clear that learning disabilities are life-long and have lasting negative effects on adults as well as children. The difficulties brought on by the broad phrase of "learning disabilities" appear to have a wide sphere of influence, with impediments appearing in almost all areas of functioning. It might be natural to assume that such a disability is tantamount to a label of failure, a melancholic sentence of mediocrity, intellectual poverty and frustration.

However, it appears that though challenging (sometimes in the extreme) learning disabilities are not life-ruinous and can, in fact, spur the individual on to success and even greatness. If the many studies on achievement are to be believed, learning disabilities are serious impediments but not necessarily completely destructive. They can leave the individual with a great deal of pain, but can also foster in them the need to achieve and the desire to peacefully accept limitations and make the most of personal strengths.

This, as such, returns the discussion to its original point. Learning disabilities, as demonstrated by the literature, do seem to leave the individual to find a place along a continuum of success and failure, self-acceptance and self-rejection. As with all disabling conditions, it is not a lot that would be voluntarily cast or happily given. On the other hand, it does seem to have the ability to foster creativity and can be borne with much dignity, strength and inner-peace. In this way, it is much like other handicapping conditions and life events which affect a multiplicity of individuals. As such, the lessons of the learning disabled may have great bearing on the coping strategies and success of many diverse individuals.

However, it is important to remember that though the outcomes may be somewhat similar across the spectrum of crippling and handicapping conditions, this syndrome and its after-effect is unique and deserving of special focus. While it can teach a broadly relevant lesson on the existential resilience of humanity, it is important to look at it as its own set of variables and as a unique experience.

As such, it is the mission of this project to uncover the experiences of graduate students with learning disabilities as both members of a larger society and of a unique, triumphant and sometimes painful sub-classification. This will hopefully simultaneously provide insight into the specific experiences of the population studied, add information to the growing body of knowledge on the lives, needs and experiences of individuals with learning disabilities and exemplify the means by which persons with a challenging life-condition overcome adversity and achieve their goals.

"Cut N' Paste"

COLOUR PLATE #4

The final stage of analysis for me involved the creation of individual Co-researcher biographies. It was here that I engaged in the dual tracked task of representing each Co-researcher as an individual, while beginning to present the stories in a uniform format—a precursor to illustrating common themes and patterns. I found this task somewhat delicate, as it involved considerable editorial skill. Was I including enough information about each Co-researcher's experience and history? Did their voice come through adequately such that their individuality was maintained? Was it too much, too little, or just enough? Would they find my "take" on their lives to be respectful and accurate? Would an outside reader find it interesting?

I found it hard to let go of my old ally, the transcripts. Taking the hours of conversation and scores of written words and winnowing them down to a readable, concise document, seemed to be a risky venture. I had been playing in these large fields for so long, it was now time to represent them in relatively small and tight terms.

I reflected on what it felt like to do this, both electronically and personally. Since I worked largely on the computer, taking quotes and writing the biographies on the screen, I wanted to include this image as part of the Mandala. The mouse and the terminal were like the scissors and the glue which I was using to cut and paste the fragments of stories, turning them into a reasonable reflection of the whole. Inspired by an image from the artist Keith Haring, I placed the anthropomorphized scissors in the center. I did this to remind myself that I was not simply cutting and pasting anonymous text, but, was taking pieces of storied lives and making of them my own creation.

This was a very significant moment for me, for it represented a deeper level of cutting, beyond the physical or electronic act in which I was engaged. Symbolically, I was leaving the safety of the words given to me by my Co-researchers and was moving—alone—into a world of my creation. Guided by these words and by the work that came before mine, it was time for me to step out beyond the confines of the known and into a structure built and secured strictly by me.



"CUT N' PASTE"

APRIL 97 Q12

Sam's Mandala

COLOUR PLATE #5

Sam and I worked together on the production of her Mandala drawing, though it was far from a collaborative effort. I offered her technical advice on the use of paints and was then witness to an extraordinary process of artistic discovery. True to her personal philosophy of trusting her inner voice, Sam had, in a matter of a few hours, intuitively gained a feel for the watercolour process. Her dramatic image is, I feel, reflective of this wondrous process.

Returning to an old familiar image (and the theme of her triumphant high school valedictory), Sam chose to represent her experience with learning disabilities as an ascent upon a treacherous mountain. This time, however, she modified the image. Rather than portraying a human figure struggling to climb the mountain, she chose an image of a flying bird. Here was a symbol of her own emancipation, a testament to all that she had experienced and achieved in her life, despite the fact that her learning journey is far from concluded.

After completing the painting, Sam was inspired to write the following words:

Learning To Fly

Learning to fly means seeking the ultimate freedom of expression and creativity, despite being heavily restricted by one's inability to control one's cognitive processes in a responsive way. The struggle to go beyond the intrinsic barriers imposed by a learning disability is long and seemingly endless. It requires persistence, persistence, persistence. It also requires a belief in oneself (or the bridging of another's belief in you), emotional support, and learning to listen to your internal voices that direct you toward your life's path. The beginning of the journey is dark and murky, providing a perfect breeding ground for hopelessness and helplessness. This is where persistence and belief in your person become imperative, enabling you to rise above the swirling tides of thick, seemingly impenetrable clouds. Along the way, you need to seek out patches of light to hang on to; sectors of life where you achieve and receive emotional nurturing. Learning to fly brings with it the realization that the mountain is surmountable and the main barriers to success lie within you.

Sam I am

Sam was so pleased with the process of creating art, that she has decided to use it again in her work. Somehow, she felt that the creation of an image allowed her to organize her verbal ideas in a manner that is otherwise blocked by her learning disability.

LEARNING TO FLY



CHAPTER 4

Portraits: Co-Researcher Biographies

If I face a human being as my Thou . . . he is not a thing among things He is . . . whole in himself. . . . and fills the heavens. This does not mean that nothing exists except himself. But all else lives in his light.

— Martin Buber

"Sam"Background Information

Sam is a woman in her mid-30's. She is married and, at this point has no children. She is currently working towards a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology at a Canadian university, having already earned a Masters degree. She has a special interest in working with adults and children affected by learning disabilities, a natural outgrowth of her own journey as a learning disabled student.

Her journey took many years to unravel itself, as Sam was only diagnosed with a learning disability in her post-graduate years:

I'd gone back to do my Masters degree, and at the time I didn't know I had a learning disability. I knew that school was difficult for me and at times extremely difficult . . . [This,] combined with a week's seminar that I took on learning disabilities..[helped me] realize that . . . perhaps a learning disability was something . . . descriptive of me and my difficulties . . . [Following this experience,] I went to get tested.

Sam is the eldest of two children; her younger brother, she believes, is also affected by learning disabilities. Sam described her parents as "very supportive" of her in all areas of her life. "I always felt like I was special in their eyes . . . and I always felt that I was capable in their eyes." Yet, her parents seemed unable to be of much practical assistance to her: "I think that my mother perhaps may have tried to help me, but I don't think she knew how". Instead, Sam's parents were baffled by the apparent contradiction of a bright, interested and motivated student who seemed incapable of producing and working at a high level: "I don't think that they

ever understood me as a learner, any more than I understood me as a learner . . . [my mother] always felt like I was procrastinating in a sense. And I just couldn't do it."

Definition of Sam's Learning Disabilities

At first, Sam described her learning disabilities as primarily affecting her in three main areas:

One is the area of memory and memory retrieval; two is in the area of . . . writing text, composition of text; and three is the area of attention, which complicates those other two areas. So far those seem to be the three that I've discovered, but I haven't quite discovered how one impacts on the other[s] to any great extent—that's the ongoing process.

Later, she was able to articulate two other areas of difficulty that seemed to recur in the recounting of her learning experiences— that of verbal expression and comprehension:

I tend to lose my words a lot. . . . I don't remember names, I don't remember labels . . . If you ask me to describe a certain concept to you I couldn't describe it, yet what I could do is go out and apply that concept in practice. . . . So there's an expressive difficulty there which I've just recently begun to understand.

This aspect of Sam's learning disability seems less consistent and more dependent on her state of mind. It appears to fluctuate with mood and level of energy and may, in her opinion, be an offshoot of her memory difficulties. Though she often described the expressive difficulties she encountered in social and learning situations, at other times she felt herself to be "very verbal", a skill she has used in coping with her learning disability, as she could "talk my way in and out of something."

Much more consistent, is Sam's description of the slowness of her comprehension of concepts and sequences:

I have a really hard time with abstract material. . . . It is very hard to get it unless I really sit and think about it. . . . I used to be a voracious reader . . . but those were novels . . . I didn't have to get all the details. . . . I tend to have to read and re-read something to really understand, to digest it and to remember it.

This too, she attributes to her poor memory, though she acknowledges that it may be a difficulty in a category of its own. Clearly, the various facets of her learning disability affect each other and contribute to a sense of overall slowness in the integration and expression of material.

Functionally, these learning difficulties play themselves out in complex and often frustrating ways. Sam describes a feeling of "extreme difficulty" with the entire process of schooling:

I'm a very very slow worker. It takes me a long time. I think that any kind of writing is a very very tedious task for me and a very anxiety provoking task for me, and it is something that I worry about many weeks in advance. . . . I'm a slow processor . . . everything I do is in slow motion in many ways, so it's not that I can't do it, it just takes me a lot longer.

Sometimes . . . I'll read an article for class and then will go back to class and we'll discuss it. And I remember thinking "They've read a different article than I have". . . . And its really very strange, I thought I'd read it, I thought I had understood it, and yet people are talking about things that I don't remember were in the article, that I never got out of it.

Despite all of these difficulties, Sam sees herself as an essentially bright and capable person: "I feel like I belong in the world [of learners] . . . I love learning and certainly I know I'm intelligent." She believes that she possess the intellectual capacity to comprehend the material presented to her as a student and to make sense of it, integrating it into her writing and field work. Learning, for her, has evolved into a complex system of evaluating academic requirements and carefully calculating the steps necessary to fulfill them.

Sam is not, however, immune to feelings of inadequacy, despite her inner sense of confidence and strength. She reported feeling less capable, less accomplished and, at times, more like an impostor in the presence of fellow students and teachers:

I think in the overall picture, I feel like I belong . . . but on a day to day kind of mode, I don't feel that I fit in. . . . I constantly feel like everybody is better than I am, and I feel completely inadequate.

For many years, Sam could not understand why it was that she was unable to keep pace with her peers, something that frustrated and saddened her greatly. As she became more aware of her learning disabilities—their impact and the ways in which she could combat them—these feelings diminished to a certain extent. For Sam, though, there are still lingering doubts and feelings of envy that, for others, the act of learning and achieving seems so natural and easy, while for her it is often painful, tedious and hard-won. This is an old inner-battle for Sam, going back to her high school years, which she described as follows:

There were two sides of me. . . . There was the side that knew . . . intuitively . . . I was as intelligent as they were, but there was another side of me that felt so stupid. How could I bother to compare myself to these people, 'cause there they were able to do all this stuff that I just couldn't do. And yet I'm a very stubborn, determined person and I never let that defeat me, I always kind of pushed on.

Understanding and dealing with her learning disability is an ongoing process for Sam. From the general description of the main deficits that she noted above, Sam has been able to see that there are functional ways in which her learning disabilities affect her. In terms of her memory, she feels that there are times when information, particularly in the short term, is lost. This means that important facts and concepts must be learned and re-learned several times over, before it is retrievable. Once this learning occurs, however, Sam states that the information is accessible to her. This often necessitates great effort on her part:

I don't come across perhaps as really on the ball, unless I have over-learned the material and it's a part of me. . . . Maybe somebody will go and read 10 articles and I'll do 20 because I will approach a subject from that many different angles so that I really have a thorough but in many ways a broad understanding . . . just to be able to go on.

Similarly, Sam's writing projects require a tremendous amount of effort and patience. She described immensely frustrating writing sessions, where she seemed incapable of beginning the process of writing material which she has researched and prepared. Other times, she noted a sudden halt to her writing fluency, when an important word or concept seemed suddenly on the edge of

accessibility to her—in the corner of her mind, as it were, yet exasperatingly out of reach:

It hurts. Sometimes writing a paper, I will sit there and I will type two words an hour. And I will sit there for four hours to get one paragraph down . . . 'cause I'm constantly crossing out and writing and re-writing . . . I'm all over the place. . . . I used to go and sign up for every workshop you could imagine on writing papers . . . and none of them helped. And I thought I was a hopeless case . . . It's like the key was missing.

During our interview sessions, Sam experienced an extreme episode of this aspect of her learning disability. After having researched and integrated the material for a particular paper, she began the process of writing. This process was halted, when she "hit a brick wall", where knowledge and expression seemed inexorably separated. Sure that she had internalized the knowledge required for the production of the paper, it seemed that transferring this knowledge to an externally manifested format (verbal or written) was impossible. It took many weeks and much anxiety for Sam to complete this project. Though she ultimately succeeded in producing a work of high quality, the experience left her drained and frustrated.

Above all, it is a general feeling of slowness that appears to be the most difficult aspect of learning for Sam. Repeatedly, she stated that her ability to read, write and speak was as proficient (if not better than) fellow students, but merely coming at a different pace: "I don't do well with extreme time pressures. I think that time pressures, combined with the magnitude of work, really, are just what . . . tackle me . . . I'm a very slow worker. It takes me a long time."

Sam's Early School Experiences

School was always tough for me because there were so many things I couldn't do and I never knew why I couldn't do them . . . I don't remember that much of elementary school but, I remember just not being able to do certain tasks and having to kind of learn and then over-learn something . . . yet, everybody else seemed to be able to do it, and I couldn't. It never occurred to me that there was a good reason for it. I just thought I wasn't as smart as everyone else.

In recalling her early school experiences, Sam felt that she was somewhat at a loss. Very few of the details were accessible to her, but as we spoke, certain thematic memories did begin to emerge. For the most part, it was the issue of memory itself that seemed important, for it was this aspect of her learning that Sam remembered as being most troubling:

Everybody else seemed to remember names of actors and actresses . . . or names of songs. They remembered dates, they said, "Oh when I was four years old I did this and when I was six" — I didn't remember any of that. That's all this mush in my mind, its kind of like a blob.

When I asked Sam if she had encountered any difficulty learning to read, she recalled that the technical aspects of reading came quite quickly to her. In fact, reading was a source of great pleasure for her and her family: "My parents always read to me. I was always being read stories and I was always telling stories . . . I loved reading". It was, rather, the issue of comprehension that she seemed to recall as being different. Sam stated that early on, her teachers had told her that she was easily distracted by pictures and that she often used them as cues for comprehension, rather than the text itself. She noted that this continues to be a coping strategy for her. She prefers magazines such as Life and National Geographic which allow for learning to occur as much from the photos as from the words.

Difficulties in the areas of information recall and learning speed were also evident in the memories which Sam presented of her early school years. As described above, Sam stated that concepts and information often alluded her. While she felt intellectually capable and interested in the material, she seemed to be lost, as compared with her peers. Though little direct memory of this time period was available to Sam, the recollection of these feelings seemed to emerge strongly and remained constant as she told the story of her life as a learner.

Socially, Sam remembered that her learning differences lead to difficulties in areas of self-esteem and self-confidence:

My good friends were the kids who lived in the neighborhood, and it was really great. When I got to school though, I really had a hard time making friends. I just could never fit in, I was never . . . like the beautiful people . . . I was overweight

as a kid. . . . I was never included. And when I tried to include myself, people just left me alone. . . . I never felt I had confidence enough . . . to impose myself on other people. . . . I became very insular . . . that was my way of dealing with it. My escape was to read . . . because I could lose the pain of loneliness . . . or not being accepted.

All the friends I did develop were . . . very bright and they were always in the very bright class. . . . I was in the mediocre class and it was very frustrating 'cause I knew that I was as bright as they were. . . . I couldn't express my abilities.

While the pain of this experience was quite clear for Sam, it was the sense of survival that seemed to be her strongest memory of the period. She remembered wanting to succeed and learning, early on, to work towards the goal of being in an environment that would meet her need for intellectual challenge:

I was always a survivor . . . and even though it wasn't an easy survival, it still was in many ways for me a survival. . . . I'm a very stubborn, determined person and I never let that defeat me, I always kind of pushed on. I remember a teacher . . . put me into a low reading group, and I didn't want to be in that. . . . I worked hard to get into a higher reading group and succeed.

Sam recalled that one of the first means she discovered for success was to work at her own pace, utilizing her points of strength. In her reading groups she was able to select stories that challenged her and improved her reading skill:

I really liked the fact that I could choose my own books[s] and I could do it on my own. . . . (The teacher asked) "Are you sure . . . its gonna be really [difficult]?". . . . And I said "yes, I am sure" and I really pushed to do that.

Sam's High School Experience

Many more memories were available to Sam regarding the high school period of her life, as were the various emotions associated with these memories. As our discussions progressed, it became clear that these experiences were of great importance to Sam as a learner. It was during this time that she began to develop many of the coping skills which allowed for her academic survival and which fostered intellectual progress.

During this time, her learning difficulties continued to plague her and leave her with a sense of failure:

I'll never forget this. . . . I was in Science class . . . I was being taught about the concept of density of material and I didn't understand the concept. My teacher explained it to me five, six times, and I felt really stupid because he kept on explaining it to me and I didn't get it. . . . And he kept on explaining to me, and finally, after about, [what] must have been . . . seven, eight times I finally got it. But I felt so stupid that it took me so long.

Sam's memories of her learning difficulties during this period are now encapsulated in a general understanding of her learning disability. She recalled having tremendous difficulty grasping abstract concepts, composing essays and preparing for exams. Her study habits were poor, she stated, as she saw no benefit from advance preparation of material that would be inaccessible to her during testing situations. She remarked that the entire process of studying, exam taking and essay writing was "tortuous . . . it really hurt . . . and it still does."

At the same time, Sam recalled the beginning of an internal awareness on her part, that there were specific roadblocks to her advancement:

I once went to a guidance counselor and I was absolutely in tears. I said, "I just can't do the exams and I don't know why." I said, "There's something wrong and I don't know why". I said, "I know I'm smart, but I can't do these exams". And she looked through my files . . . and she'd say, "Oh, above average intelligence". And she'd say, "Well, I don't know", . . . pat me on the head . . . and send me on my way. And then when I got to CEGEP which is kind of like our grade 12 and 13, I again went to a guidance counselor in absolute tears, because I was . . . in sciences for a long time, and I couldn't do it. . . . The abstract nature of calculus and physics and chemistry and all that stuff just floored me, I couldn't get the concepts down, I didn't understand it. And I used to go to this fellow and we used to have these little talks and he did . . . career testing on me . . . and nobody figured it out. And eventually I just switched over to social sciences . . . and that was easier for me because it wasn't as abstract.

In addition to these painful memories, Sam also recalled her burgeoning coping skills which helped her navigate her way through high school and university. At first, she described them as rather crude:

I was already beginning to be resourceful. . . . I would cheat. . . . I would look at other people's papers, I would write crib notes sometimes.

I was very good in music. And because I was so good in music, my music teacher helped me get out of Geography. So even though Geography was a requirement, we said that I was needed to be in . . . the stage band, so I was exempted from Geography.

These early attempts at circumventing difficulties were later replaced with more sophisticated and effective strategies. These included a clearer sense of direction and goal setting, learning important study skills, learning to skim through dense theoretical material, and what Sam called "over-learning". The theme of passion seemed to be an important one for Sam, a part of her learning life that she felt was the most important coping mechanism available to her: "I've always been very passionate, definitely. Anything that I do, I'm intense, I have to do it to an extreme, and I love tasting things and learning things."

In fact, it was this passion which gave Sam her first tastes of success and served to balance out her mostly negative school experiences. Early on, it was her love of reading which allowed her to achieve a degree of progress. Later, it was extra-curricular activities such as music and sports, which gave her a sense of mastery and accomplishment. Academically, however, it was creative writing that proved to be the road to success and expression for Sam. Here, freed from the constraints of her memory and organizational difficulties, Sam was able to construct narratives which reflected her creative and intellectual selves.

At the end of high school, Sam composed a short story, which she later turned into a speech. The piece told the story of:

A group of people . . . who were blind or disabled or crippled or something like that, who had tried to climb up a mountain. And a lot of people gave up but . . . these people who really didn't have what most normal people had, they kept on . . . trying 'cause they wanted to reach the top of the mountain where there was this man [who] lived at the top of the mountain, and it was just beautiful up there.

To me, climbing up that mountain . . . was . . . how I saw life, it was . . . always a struggle . . . you wanted to get up there to this . . . guy (who) was just sitting up there in this magnificent palace.

The speech was so powerful that Sam's teacher nominated her as class valedictorian for her high school graduation. Chosen as a finalist by her classmates, Sam was tied with a fellow student whom she described as quite exceptional, "a concert pianist." Lots were drawn and Sam was chosen. "I still have the lot" Sam remarked quite proudly, it says "yes val" on it." Flashing a large grin, denoting her sustained delight after many years, Sam continued: "I went home and told my mother that "I'm the valedictorian!". . . and she was very pleased. To this day, I am very proud of that accomplishment."

Sam's Undergraduate Experience

After CEGEP I took a year off before going to university and I went traveling . . . because I just needed to get away. . . . There was always the understanding in my family that I would go and get a university degree. . . . Education was very important in my family.

Undergraduate was just a total nightmare for me. Every task was just . . . huge. . . . Getting through my BA was meaningless to me . . . in the sense that it was a means to an end. I had to do it. It was something like you have to get up and get dressed and shower and have breakfast in the morning. To me that's how I saw a BA—I had to just do it and get it over with.

Sam's mood and posture changed completely when we began to discuss her undergraduate years, her anger and frustration were palpable. Majoring in psychology, Sam had great hopes for her studies. What she found, however, was an environment that was not conducive to her learning needs and style. The overwhelmingly large size of her classes (she termed them "assembly line", with over 300 students per section) meant that there was no possibility of direct contact with professors for clarification or assistance. The importance of comprehending and memorizing basic concepts meant that Sam was continually at a loss when attempting to demonstrate mastery of the material. This, coupled with the tendency in such courses to require multiple choice or short answer exams, meant that few if any of her strengths could emerge, leaving her vulnerable to failure.

Such poor performance occurred regularly, despite Sam's attempts to improve her study skills and habits and fact that she put forth great amounts of energy:

I used to actually sometimes have study groups . . . where we'd study for an exam together, and I would be the one teaching everybody the concepts. I knew the concepts, I understood them all. It came to the exam and I got the lowest mark of all. I couldn't produce on the exams . . . I just never seemed to be able to produce in the way that I felt that I could produce. I looked at people, I compared myself to people, and I knew I was as bright or many times brighter than them. And yet they always seemed to get the high marks, and I didn't know why. I mean I just couldn't understand it. It was so frustrating, it really really was.

Yet, along with the frustration, there was a sense of accomplishment at having survived a system that to Sam seemed quite hostile. As with her earlier experiences, Sam began to recall the strategies that she employed to achieve success. She began to look for classes where there were fewer students and a professor who was open to discussion and mentoring. She found one such professor, who would later become her Master's thesis advisor. Once again, she recalled "cutting corners", stating that "I did what I had to do, even if it was, at times, unethical. It still bothers me that I had to do that."

Writing, though still a chore of ominous proportions, was made easier for Sam during this period in two ways. Firstly, she began to see the power of words as a means of bolstering a weak understanding of the material and concepts, as a means of creating density, or an a means of impressing professors. "I was a very good bullshitter, so I could bullshit my way through when it came to a written exam."

Secondly, Sam found that passion for a subject allowed her greater access to fluency of expression on exams and papers:

[When] I was 18 . . . I went to Florence and I saw Michaelangelo's David. . . .
[Later] I remember . . . I had to write this composition on Michaelangelo's David, and I was so passionate about it, . . . that I actually got a perfect mark on it. That's when I could . . . produce, when I could make some sort of a real life connection to it.

Sam graduated from university with a "B" level grade average. Nonetheless, she found the overall experience of her undergraduate years to be wholly negative. Sam left, feeling dejected and drained, to join the work force. "When I graduated, I vowed I'd never go back to school again. Screw this, [I thought] you know, I just got through it, I got out and that's the end of it."

Sam's Graduate Experience

Having completed a degree in psychology, showing an interest in work with children and adolescents, Sam began working in the field of child welfare. For several years, she worked with disturbed and challenged children, finding the work interesting, but lacking in fulfillment. Sam felt that many of the professionals with whom she worked possessed a narrowness of vision, yet, she was forced to acquiesce to their views due to their seniority or level of training. Sam often believed that changes were necessary in the care and treatment programs where she worked, but was acutely aware that she lacked the credibility to argue successfully for these changes.

Sam recalled that several factors impelled her back into the academic environment. She was becoming increasingly frustrated by the limitations of the work available at her level of training: "I just hated being where I was and . . . hit rock bottom. I just couldn't go on doing what I was doing anymore, I had . . . sunk very low. I knew I had to make a major change in my life."

Sam was encouraged by her parents to return to school, they: "planted a bug in my head about going back for a Master's, and I always used to say "Never". And then one day I said "Well, maybe." **Finally, Sam was persuaded to return to school when she was accepted by a professor who had taken an interest in her during her undergraduate years and for whom she had a great deal of respect:**

I always wanted to work with [this professor] who had always been somebody that I revered . . . He was just so dynamic. . . . And he was so bright, I would say he was brilliant in many ways. And I went back to speak to him, I kind of like gave it a try. And he said he'd work with me. And so I applied.

I think that he perhaps saw something in me that was a little bit different . . . there was passion there . . . I had some ideas. And he felt that he could work with that. I

remember actually overhearing the secretary for the program that I applied to, talking to somebody about this new applicant who had come into her office and said, "She's a little bit different, this one." 'cause of the . . . very strong background . . . I'd brought with me . . . which I think had a real appeal to him.

Several changes occurred for Sam as she returned to school for graduate studies. For one, she had a clear focus, a specific goal that allowed her to plan her learning and study objectives and tasks. Having already learned many of the basic concepts as an undergraduate, the program of study would allow her to deepen and strengthen her knowledge in the field. Furthermore, she had a solid basis of practical experience which served as a framework in which she could contextualize her theoretical learning. She had chosen to work with a professor who initially gave her a great deal of input and attention and in whom she placed a great deal of trust (though he would later prove to be most difficult and adversarial). Realizing that her studies would allow her the ability to create a life for herself that she saw as necessary and exciting, gave Sam a great deal of added impetus to strive for success.

As such, Sam adopted a new attitude towards her work and the effort necessary to succeed. No longer viewing her education as a mere hurdle or a painful "trial by fire", Sam began to treat herself and her studies in a very organized and serious manner. She sought to find more sophisticated ways to circumvent her learning shortcomings, giving up on simple "cheating" as a means of survival, "I refused to follow that avenue any longer". Instead, Sam saw the need to balance herself and her studies in order to derive maximum benefit from them:

I ate a very healthy breakfast, I went to sleep really really early, I came home and I studied for hours. I did all the things that I never did earlier. And it started working, for the first time in my life it started working 'cause I wanted it badly enough. The motivation was there, which kept me at that table working, doing statistics for hours on end, and I probably put in four or five times as much work as most people, my peers. But it didn't matter 'cause I realized that that's what I had to do. And it was the best thing that ever happened to me.

Sam stated that during this period, she began to experience herself in new and more positive ways. She became more confident in her ideas and experiences, contributing often to class discussions. Her writing took on a more

mature feel, as she was able to begin to focus on material that created in her the sense of "passion" that had brought her back to school. She became more sociable with fellow students during study and recreational activities. She also began to listen more to what she termed her "intuitive self". Listening to and trusting in the voice of her internal wisdom, proved to be an important point of growth for Sam.

Sam recalled an incident from this time, which she felt was representative of her new self as a student:

I remember a statistics exam, I remember looking over it at first and . . . the anxiety was absolutely overwhelming. And in fact it was a difficult exam—people ran out crying and they dumped it in the garbage and stuff like that. But then I forced myself to calm down and I forced myself to go through it and just do what I felt was right, and I never allowed myself to do that before because I never believed in myself before. And in fact I had one of the highest marks on the exam. And that was . . . such an interesting exercise for me because then I started to think, "Well, maybe I know more than I think I know."

While the old feelings of inadequacy did not disappear, Sam reported that while listening to her intuitive self, she began to confront the inner voice which repeatedly lead her to feel unequal to her fellow students and incapable of managing the material presented in her program. These feelings, Sam remarked, were difficult to overcome and plague her still, even though she has achieved a substantial measure of success and has progressed to the highest level of training in her field:

I never felt special in graduate school, ever. I felt more inadequate than perhaps special. There's a lot of very bright people out there, and I feel that they're all brighter than I am. And some days it comes through more than other days, but it comes through fairly consistently.

While her new attitude and corresponding work intensity began to bear the fruits of success for Sam, one area of anticipation failed to yield positive results. Her supervisor, in whom she had placed so much hope and trust, did not prove himself to be a mentor and guide. "He was quite an amazing and brilliant man . . . [yet] he was arrogant . . . and his arrogance came out with a vengeance towards the end. . . . There was a certain cruelty to him as well." **Anxious to retire and**

leave the country, he pushed Sam—often to the point of exhaustion—all the while complaining that she was a slow worker.

At the time, I was in the process of being assessed for learning disabilities and I tried to explain that this, in part, accounted for my inability to work as quickly as he would have liked. He said very pointedly that he did not believe in learning disabilities and could not accept that a person who produced the work that I did could have a learning disability. He seemed to think that I was feeding him a line.

In the end, Sam noted: "I was actually one of the first people to finish my thesis. I did it in less than two years." Though proud of how she handled herself in this situation and pleased with the results of her work, Sam stated that she remains angry with her advisor for the manner in which he treated her. She regrets that this aspect of her graduate experience left her feeling drained and demoralized.

By the end of her Master's degree program, Sam came to understand that many of the challenges she was facing as a student were a result of a learning disability. Sam noted that this connection evolved slowly and gained momentum only after an experience which she described as "epiphinal". For several years, her brother, whom Sam described as "very similar in our learning patterns", suggested to her that she might be learning disabled; " He planted the idea in my head that . . . [it was]a possibility." Lurking "Always in the background", Sam did not know what the concept entailed, to her it was simply "an abstract idea, one with little definition." To help clarify this, Sam decided to attend a week-long workshop on learning disabilities. The experience became a significant one for Sam, "One which changed my life".

I jumped at the chance [to attend the workshop] . . . I just had this really strong feeling that I had to do it . . . I remember sitting the first day in this course and we were getting an overview what learning disabilities were, and I was just bowled over 'cause they were talking about me. And it was just . . . so emotional, I remember a good part of the time I would sit there and I had this lump in my throat . . . I thought "Holy shit, this is me!" . . . I remember one woman coming up to me afterwards and saying, "Boy did you ask good questions" . . . I wanted to say to her, "It's because you were talking about me!"

I remember sitting at the back [of the seminar] and just feeling like I had to burst into tears and actually going into the washroom and just bursting into tears

because it was just so emotional for me, it was just so overwhelming for me, and I had no one to tell, I had no one who really understood.

Soon after this initial insight, (coupled with increasing pressure from the demands of her program), Sam approached the university for a formal assessment. Though it did not give Sam a complete picture of what was involved, it did, for the first time, provide her with a framework for understanding herself as a learner:

I felt validated for the first time. And then I began my journey to find out, because she didn't tell me exactly [what my learning disability entailed]. . . . She only told me [that] one aspect of it . . . [involved] memory. . . . She just started me off. . . . There's so many other things that are unanswered, and since that time it's been through my own learning process that I've begun to discover what I can and cannot do and why I can't do it.

Since the starting point of this journey, Sam's life has changed in many ways. She traveled extensively, an experience which she felt gave her a sense of inner peace, confidence in her skills and instincts and a greater ability to take risks. She has married, moved to a new city and has continued her education at the Doctoral level.

Sam specifically chose her Doctoral program for its sensitive treatment of students with learning disabilities. She became somewhat active in the special needs community of her school, networking with other graduate students with learning disabilities. Her own experiences have left her with an interest in learning disabilities and she plans to make a career in the field. Sam continues to discover new facets of her learning disability and the unique qualities that she possesses as a result.

The more I learn about [learning disabilities], the more I learn about myself. And, as I go about and assess other people, I also learn about myself as a result. And, I hope that in the process of my finding out more about myself, I will be able to help my brother find out more about himself, because he has very similar difficulties.

Sam has learned to work with her learning style and minimize the negative aspects of her disability. She specifically chose a doctoral stream that

would allow her to demonstrate her field proficiency in forms other than a time-pressured, written exam. She has devoted herself completely to her studies, minimizing distractions. Since the time of our interviews, she has moved from the classroom to the field as a researcher and clinician. These have brought many challenges to Sam, both in terms of conceptual integration and the pressures of time which plague all professionals. Thus far, she appears to be coping with the stress and demands of her life and is positive that she will succeed.

Thus far, Sam's experience as a Doctoral student has been a positive one. She feels more proficient at expressing and utilizing concepts with ever increasing sophistication. She is challenged and stimulated by her learning environment and by the individuals (students and teachers) in her program. Sam's well developed self-sufficiency and motivational skills have proven to be very useful as she deals with the demands and rigors of Doctoral work. Her new advisor is better aware of Sam's skills and limitations as a worker, leading to a healthier relationship.

Yet, from our discussions, it is clear that the experience of learning disability has left permanent scars for Sam. She continues to feel doubts about herself and her abilities. She finds it difficult to escape the temptation to unfairly compare herself to fellow students, next to whom she sometimes feels unskilled and lacking in accomplishment. She often feels unfairly burdened by tasks that, for others, are commonplace and simple.

Sam is not, however, disposed to unbalanced feelings of self-pity or loathing. She is able to see that her learning style has given her the opportunity to shine in ways that others cannot. In comparison with other students, Sam feels that "Perhaps I might . . . [be] . . . wiser than them." She is proud of her intuitive self and the insightfulness that years of introspection and self-discovery have brought to her life. Sam has experienced and explored the world and herself in many unique and intense ways. She and continues to view her existence as a journey towards new discovery and achievement.

Noah's Mandala

COLOUR PLATE #6

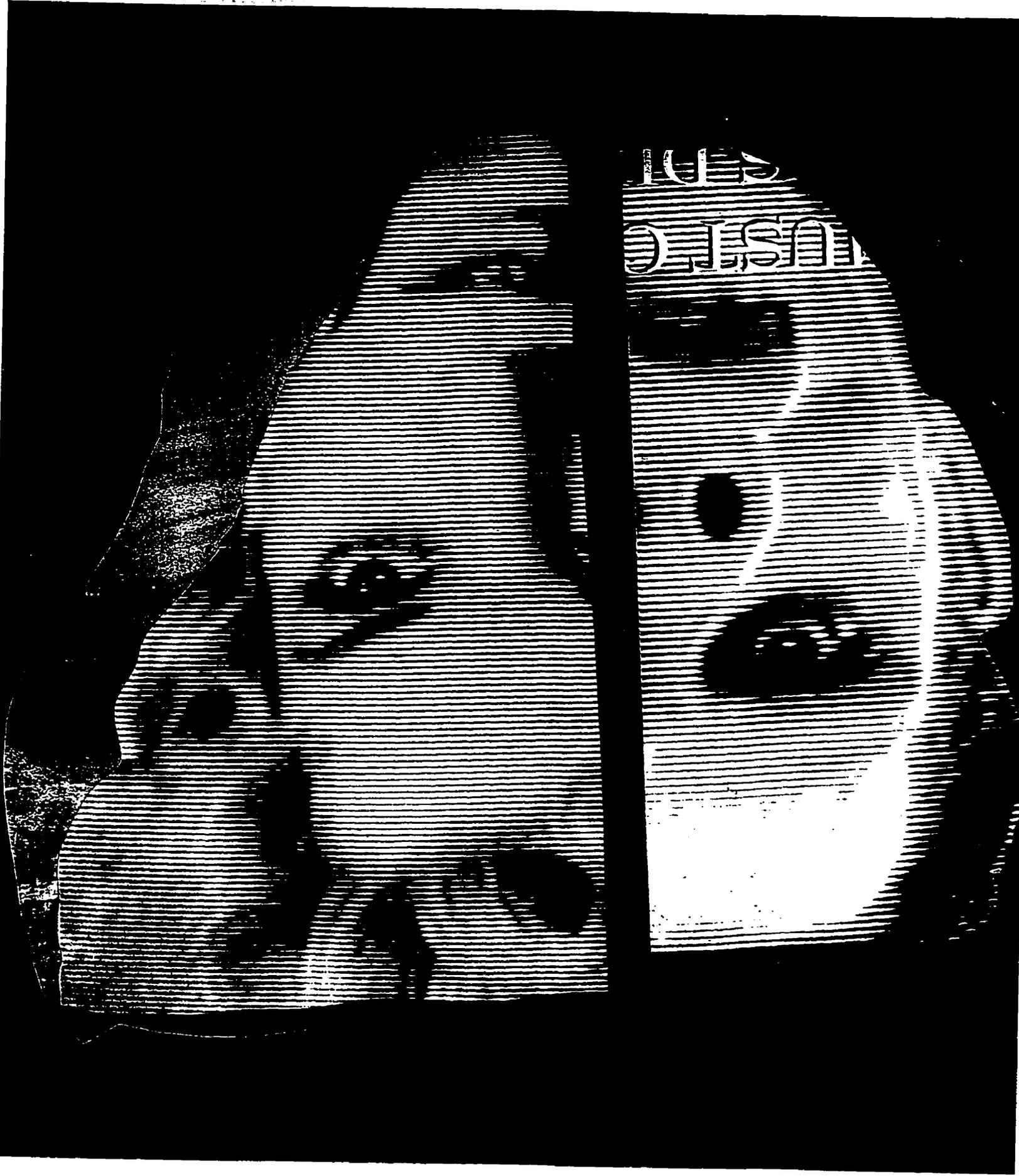
Noah chose to collaborate with me on the creation of his Mandala. When I asked him to think of an image describing his learning experience, he responded by saying that an episode from the television series "The Twilight Zone" best symbolized his feelings.

In this episode (entitled "In the Eye of the Beholder"), a woman sits bandaged in a hospital room while her doctors and nurse (seen only from the back at first) uncover her face. We are told that she has had many plastic surgeries in order to make her face "more normal" and that if this attempt is unsuccessful, she will be sent to a colony for disfigured individuals. Once removed, we see a beautiful face, though all around her react to it with shock and horror. Shown a mirror, the woman screams in terror at the apparent failure of the surgery. It is only then that we see the faces of those around the woman—they are what we would consider to be hideous and malformed. The woman lives in a world where her face is ugly and where conformity to a grotesque aesthetic standard is ruthlessly imposed.

Noah found a book of photos from "The Twilight Zone" and I worked on using images which would symbolize the metaphor he had chosen. After an attempt on my part to include many images and words from the script in the piece, it was decided that we would use only two half images, a profile of the woman and her doctor. It was our feeling that such a contrast would make the point and illustrate the contrast between the beauty and the hideousness of the characters. The roundness of the faces was also seen to fit best into the shape Mandala circle.

Noah said very little to me about the meaning of the piece and how he felt it reflected his life and struggles as a learner. Having chosen such a powerful fable and having utilized the starkness of the images, I understand that he found no need to elaborate. I am still shocked every time I see this Mandala.

1957
1958



LES
LES

"Noah"

Background Information

Noah is a man in his late fifties. He is married and is the father of five children. Noah has several professional designations. He is a full-time professor at a large Canadian university, where he has been teaching Judaic and Religious studies for thirty years. He is an ordained Rabbi and functions as a community and ritual leader on a part-time basis. In addition, Noah has trained as a pastoral counselor, operating a part-time practice in family, marriage and individual therapy. He is also a therapist educator, instructing and supervising in a local pastoral counseling program.

Noah recalled that from childhood, he and his family were aware that his learning style deviated from the norm and that often his intellectual interests and capacity did not match his academic performance, which was generally poor. It was not until he was in graduate school, however, that he came to understand the etiology of these difficulties:

I took my son for an eye examination 'cause he was having difficulty learning, having problems in school, and we thought it might be his eyes.. And on the back of the line was the sister of a close friend of ours who had just gotten her Masters degree in resource work.. I began to explain to her why we were having my son's eyes examined, and she took out a piece of paper and a pencil and had him do . . . certain kinds of things. . . . And she said to me, "Have you ever heard of learning disability?", and I said "No, what's that?", and she said "Have you ever heard of Dyslexia?", I said 'no, what's that?' And she began to explain it to me. And she said "My guess is that the doctor will tell you there's nothing wrong with his eyes, he's learning disabled."

As I began to talk to her more about learning disabilities, I realized, for the first time, that I wasn't lazy and that I wasn't a lot of things, that I was learning disabled. That was, sad to say, a very significant day for me—maybe it was the most significant shift in the whole thing—'cause for the first time I had a frame of reference to understand what was happening with me. . . . By that time I had finished seminary, and that made me realize why I had so many problems in the seminary.

Prior to this, Noah believed that most of his academic difficulties were due to laziness on his part. As a child, a psychologist had told his parents that this was the case, since intelligence tests revealed that he was well above average. "The only way I knew of dealing with that was . . . [how] my mother had dealt with me, and that was to push harder."

Noah's parents believed that he was a capable learner, despite the repeated attempts by teachers to have him classified as a slow or even retarded student. Noah's mother felt that it was her responsibility to show confidence in him and push him to achieve. "She said the real issue was one of self esteem, that if we could build my self esteem, ultimately things would fall into place." In Noah's eyes, these assumptions took on both positive and negative connotations for him. He internalized his parents' confidence in him as a learner, which inoculated him against years of criticism and ridicule from teachers and fellow students. At the same time, however, their attitude solidified in him the conviction that success evaded him due to an internal lack of motivation and effort. This remained a constant theme for Noah, despite the fact that he acquired functional literacy in several languages, earned advanced degrees and achieved a high level of professional success.

Definition of Noah's Learning Disability

I guess the first thing about my learning disability is that..it's never been formally diagnosed. And I'm not sure that I have a total handle on the whole thing, exactly how it operates.

As with most students of his generation, Noah did not benefit from an educational system that understood or diagnosed learning disabilities. Through his son's experience, as well as a careful examination of his own skills relative to the expectations which educational and academic systems have placed on him, Noah has been able to isolate the symptoms of what he now understands is a learning disability. From this examination, Noah has come to see himself primarily as a Dyslexic, having difficulties in reading, writing, mathematics and directionality. He is prone to letter and number inversions, substitutions or exclusions. Additionally, he reported attentional difficulties, poor hand-eye and motor coordination and weak visual-spatial perception.

I don't read quickly. I'm not even sure how I read, exactly. Sometimes I look at words, I don't know what they are at first. . . . For a long time there were a lot of words that I knew orally that I didn't know in writing.

At this point in his life, Noah is a voracious reader. Though his reading speed is still hampered, his ability to handle even complex material is uncompromised. He reported choosing readings very carefully and economizing, such that only the most important parts are covered. He is prone to errors in reading material out loud, an activity frequently required of a professor and rabbi and a skill which was important in demonstrating competence as a rabbinical student. Similarly, Noah has a great deal of difficulty reading hand-written material. He routinely informs his students that he can only accept assignments that have been typed and is open with them as to why this is the case.

I sometimes find..I have the roadblocks in writing. There are just times when I will write things and it will all come out wrong. When I write by hand, very often..I will invert words..in the middle of the flow.

Sometimes I invert the letters. Took me a long time to learn to spell "believe"..with the "i" and the "e".. I tried learning the rules but I all got fouled up, it all got confused in my brain.

It appears that sometimes the harder I try..the more mistakes I make . . . Tiredness affects it. If I'm rushed, that affects it. If I'm anxious, that affects it. Sometimes I write and I feel I want to say it and it doesn't come out, doesn't go anyplace. I don't know why.

I have gotten to the point of . . . asking my students sometimes, "How do you write that?" . . . For the longest time I've been telling people I'm learning disabled. Everybody always laughs, but I say "No, you can't always count on my spelling." Sometimes I'll lose a word, I'll just turn around to the students and say "How do you write that?"

Throughout his career, Noah has attempted to circumvent the difficulties caused by the writing aspect of his disability, with little success. Dictating material proved unsatisfactory for him, as he found that his verbal patterns did not translate well into written form. This was attributed by him to the "complex"

and "convoluted" nature of his oral presentations. He has been unable to learn to type or utilize the computer, due to his extremely poor visual-motor coordination skills. He has even found the process of hand-writing material that is then typed and edited to be arduous. This is largely due to the fact that he cannot easily correct mistakes and re-write text, as a result of the slow speed of his reading and his poor technical skill as a writer.

Since he is a teacher and an academic, this aspect of Noah's disability has proven most detrimental. Repeatedly in our interviews, Noah would make mention of how this skill deficit has personally and professionally impoverished him and appears to be the one area where he holds the greatest amount of regret. "I find it very frustrating, very inadequate". He noted the fact that much of his early work as an academic in the area of Judaic studies rested on certain assumptions which he was the first to assert and which have subsequently been substantiated by others. He felt, that if he had been better able to conduct research and present his ideas in written form, he might have made a more sizable contribution to the literature in his field.

As a rabbinical and doctoral student in the field of Judaic Studies, Noah was required to acquire facility in several different languages. Early on, he learned to read English and Hebrew Characters (used in the study of the Yiddish language) with great difficulty. The directional conflicts inherent in these two systems compounded difficulties with reading and writing. In adulthood, he furthered his skills in English and Yiddish and attempted to gain basic mastery of Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic and German, all of which were essential for studies in his field. As with his weakness in written forms of language, this became a significant impediment for Noah in his desire to further his career as a researcher in Judaic Studies:

I realized, as time went on . . . that I would never accomplish in Jewish studies what I would want to accomplish because I would never be able to read that way. The language would always remain an obstacle that I could never overcome, that as much as I would try, I would never gain the kind of fluidity that would be necessary to [succeed]. It took a while for me to kind of come to that conclusion. . . . It was not only that I started late—'cause I knew people that had started late

and done very well—but that the kind of process, learning disability, made it near impossible for me to get a mastery of language that would be necessary to do Jewish studies well, like some of the other people had done well in. Therefore, I would have to either (which I did for a long time), feel inferior, or ultimately move in another direction. So I ultimately went in another direction.

Throughout our interview sessions in which he discussed his skills and weaknesses, Noah noted the fact that his learning disabilities have excluded certain possibilities in his life, particularly as an academic researcher; however, they have also helped him to focus on his unique talents as a creative thinker and presenter. This process, he felt, though painful at times, had shaped him into the person that he is, with the talents, skills and curiosity valued by him and others. Whereas he might have once dreamt of achieving scholarship at a high level, he realized that the price to pay was beyond him, both in terms of skills and attraction:

I defined the situation as real and therefore it was real in its consequences. I think it may have been very realistic on my part to say that I would never be able to have the kind of language facility that was necessary to do textual work on a professional level, on a level that would be significantly academic. There was a rapidity which was missing which I couldn't do, which I still can't do. So I think it pointed me in another direction, and that was the direction of my own creativity.

Noah's creativity seemed to him to be linked with his learning style. He viewed it as an extension of his limited attentional capacity and felt that it has given a high level of curiosity and an ability to view the world in an alternative fashion.

In addition to his skills as a creative and lateral thinker, Noah noted the fact that he has always been able to present well as a speaker:

I learned to speak well long before I could write. People were always impressed by how I could speak. As a kid, I would do presentations for the Scouts or whatever it was, and I was always the one who would get up and speak. And people were always saying, "Gee how'd you learn that?", I was so very good. So obviously there was an oral facility which you might see as compensatory.

These skills have earned Noah a reputation as a distinctly effective teacher and preacher. In a recent discussion with a colleague, I was told that Noah's style of presentation and classroom assignment were considered by both students and faculty to be unparalleled in their creativity and thoroughness. This colleague noted with regret the fact that Noah would soon retire, as she felt that no one else would challenge students in such a manner.

Whereas the struggle to come to terms with his learning disabilities might have left him feeling inept and incapable, Noah has used the process to closely examine himself and find within him passions and skills which are more suited to his needs. Though it is clear that Noah's journey as a learning disabled student has brought him moments of intense pain and disappointment, the overarching presentation is of a man who is at peace with himself.

Capitalizing on his strengths rather than his weaknesses, Noah has developed a diverse set of interrelated interests. His abilities as a teacher, lecturer, therapist and clergyman have given him a sense of accomplishment and proficiency in a variety of settings. Seeing his learning disabilities as a series of waterways has convinced Noah that he must allow his talents to flow in their intended direction, accepting their course rather than fighting to divert or obstruct them in favor of a more conventional path.

Noah Early School Experiences

School . . . I would say ages four to thirteen . . . was the most horrible experience of my life. . . . To the best of my knowledge there was no positive feedback in school, no one ever raised the question as to how come I could do that well in current events but I couldn't read the paper.

Noah recalled this period as being particularly traumatic. There was much illness and death in his family, causing stress and sadness for Noah and his parents. Caring for ailing relatives meant that Noah's parents moved the family numerous times. In one year, Noah was enrolled in five different schools. This stressful backdrop served to exacerbate difficulties emerging in the classroom.

At first, Noah remembered liking school. "It was kindergarten, I loved playing, I loved toys, I loved crayons, I loved paint, all that kind of stuff"; **however, once in an elementary classroom setting, Noah began to struggle with basic reading and writing skills. He recalled having extreme difficulty in learning to write certain letters and numbers.** "Penmanship became an issue. And I couldn't really learn cursive writing." **His reading level was poor and remained so throughout his elementary school years.** "We were always in reading groups and I was in the bottom of the whole thing."

These weaknesses were further complicated by the introduction of the Yiddish language in an after-school program, since it was written in Hebrew characters and read in an opposite direction. Yet, Noah loved this aspect of his learning and wanted to remain in the program. To help him in this area, Noah's mother began to learn Yiddish.

In those early years, Noah remembered the emergence of his attentional difficulties. His teacher reported that he was often unable to maintain focus in the classroom."She once told my mother that even though I'm there, I'm not there." **He recalled having little motivation to remain focused, as he felt completely unsuccessful and had little investment in the learning:**

I couldn't write, I couldn't read, I couldn't do arithmetic. So there was nothing there. . . . I couldn't do sports. I was the last guy anybody wanted. And I was poor at spelling bees which were very common in those days—every Friday we had a spelling bee. . . . I couldn't sing so I couldn't be in the choir.

Socially, Noah remembered being an outcast. In an era when ethnic segregation was the norm, most of his Jewish peers were more successful than he was and were not interested in socializing with him. Fellow students in his reading group tended to be from other cultures and likewise isolated him. He recalled being a very timid person. ."My technique for so long was to call little or no attention to myself." **This resulted in the development of a very poor self-concept, which in turn aggravated his social difficulties.**

In order to cope with such a negative scenario, Noah began to experience psychosomatic symptoms which allowed him to avoid school:

I remember . . . I had more sprained ankles and wrists and headaches and stomach aches . . . I'd go home for lunch . . . I would trip on the way home from school and sprain my ankle, I wouldn't have to go back.

As a result of his general lack of achievement and apparent lack of interest, Noah's teachers labeled him as a slow learner:

Things got so bad someplace around grade four or five that . . . my mother, in consulting with the teachers, actually almost came to [the conclusion] that I was mentally retarded. And they were gonna put me in a special class [for] kids who were "dull-normal", you know, they were the 98 IQ-ers or something like that . . . My mother wanted to do it 'cause it would have gotten me out of a lot of stress. . . . My father wouldn't allow it. My dad was not particularly involved in the day to day operation of my life or the life of the house but when my mother discussed it he just refused to allow it to happen.

Noah was saved from this labeling and the permanently negative effect it might have had on his life by three important developments outside of school. Firstly, his parents (his mother in particular), gave him as much attention, assistance and encouragement as was possible. Secondly, he discovered the Boy Scouts, joining a troupe at age ten. In the Scouts, Noah was able to gain important social skills, achieve a sense of mastery and improve his reading and motor coordination. He recalled that the Scouts "turned my life around" in several important ways:

First of all it was a very well defined environment, and the rules, the social rules were very clear. And there were very specific tasks that you could do. And also there were books that you had to read to go from rank to rank. And I was really very highly motivated to read the books; therefore, if I had to read it, read it slowly or whatever, I read it. And read it again.

His interest in the Scouts grew to the point where he asked his parents to send him to their special summer camp, despite the fact that it was beyond their financial means. Seeing the positive impact that it was having on him, they agreed. Noah loved the environment, it gave him a fresh start. "I had no reputation. . . . No baggage." It also helped his acquire further skills and development which improved his overall sense of self:

Physically, I shed a lot of weight in camp and I got taller . . . I remember I came home and of course when I came back, having been at Boy Scout camp, I had all sorts of skills that none of the other kids had. So that made me a leader . . . I always had a persona in Scout camp, which I had no place else.

I became very interested in things Jewish at camp. . . . there were services every morning and there were of course services on Shabbat, and there was a Scout Jewish studies program that you could enroll in. And I went to all the stuff. I read all the materials. I remember spending hours learning. . . . One of the things you had to do to get to the first step in this program—it was called the "Aleph Award"—[was] to memorize the Ten Commandments. I had never successfully memorized anything in my whole life. I remember once trying to memorize a Walt Whitman poem and I just couldn't do it. But I wanted this Aleph thing so much, so I spent a lot of the time memorizing the Ten Commandments.

At about the same time, Noah began to show unique talents in his after school Yiddish program. His teachers noted that, despite his poor reading and writing skills, Noah was able to demonstrate a high level of intellectual curiosity, particularly with regard to Jewish history and current events. A keen audiophile and a growing interest in Judaica had suddenly given Noah new information and insight. This, in turn, helped secure a special status for him in the classroom. His teacher enrolled him in a city-wide Jewish history exam, for which he spent many hours reading and preparing. After several attempts at the exam, Noah placed second.

This experience, along with his continued involvement with the Scouts, helped Noah to achieve new levels of academic progress. The reading required for his extra-curricular interests ameliorated Noah's skills dramatically:

When I was in elementary school up until I was in grade eight, I read at a significantly lower level. . . . When I entered grade eight, I went from probably a grade two reading level to a grade eight [level]. . . . I took diagnostic exams [and], I remember the teacher announcing certain people had done amazingly well—I was one of them.

At the same time, Noah's confidence and verbosity increased and he began to demonstrate greater overall proficiency. His dedicated reading of history and radio listening skills allowed him to contribute to class discussions.

His developing love of Judaic studies and his growing leadership in the Scouting movement gave him purpose and focus both in and out of school.

Noah's technical skills, however, had not improved at the same rate as his intellectual curiosity. He remained a slow reader, poor writer, speller and math student at a time when these skills were considered paramount:

I wanted to go to high school. The problem with going to high school was that I was such a piss poor student. They wanted to put me in a vocational school and I wanted to become a rabbi, which was a real problem for all of my teachers as well as my parents. . . . A rabbi has to be a person who is educated, how could you educate a guy who can't read?

Noah's High School Experience

Despite his parents' fears that he would again fail and over the objections of his teachers, Noah began high school and continued to pursue his goal of becoming a rabbi. His parents could not understand his interest in Judaic studies "In those days, you know, a nice boy from a lower middle class Jewish family to become a rabbi was ridiculous; a doctor and a lawyer, not a rabbi." **They nonetheless assisted him in pursuing this by enrolling him in Jewish studies classes. Despite the strains of learning in both environments, Noah managed to progress.** "The first year, I did relatively well, for me. I didn't do super but I did better than pass."

Noah attempted to combine his interest in Judaic studies with his secular education, by attending a private Jewish day school. This, however, proved to be too difficult for Noah and he soon returned to the public school system supplemented by an after-school Hebrew program.

In school, Noah continued to exhibit symptoms of his learning disability, which remained generally understood to be either a sign of intellectual weakness or lack of effort. Often, his ability to present verbally in class allowed him to progress despite his extremely poor written presentation.

When I asked Noah if any teachers had been able to assist him in seeing patterns of weakness and strength, he recalled several positive incidents:

There were a number of teachers who seemed to respond, who kind of encouraged me . . . intellectually. The Hebrew teachers were always very encouraging because they knew I was interested in the rabbinate. There was an English teacher who was an aspiring actor but had to teach as a day job. . . . At the end of the term he came over to me and said, "Well you know, I gave you 85 although your marks only came to 79, because you made such good contributions in the class, and you should really stick with it, you really have good things to say."

. . . [One] teacher was interesting because she gave me two grades. She marked me on content and she marked me on language. She said that the content was obviously very good and . . . was the first person who kind of pointed to that.

Despite these encounters, however, Noah remembered that teachers were generally hostile and adversarial, mostly because they could not understand why it was that his spelling and penmanship were so poor—skills which at the time, were considered vitally important. Noah recalled that at the end of high school, he took a preparatory course in English writing. After struggling to succeed, his ability to enter university and rabbinical school rested on passing the "Regents" exam in the course. The teacher, who did not think that Noah was qualified to be in the course because of his poor skills, disliked and discouraged him whenever possible:

A couple of days before the end of the term she came over to me and she said to me, "You're not gonna pass; there's no way you can pass those Regents Exams in English." So I was petrified 'cause I felt that if I flunked the Regents Exam [I would not graduate]. I had already gone for one of those high school interviews for rabbinical school. And they were very inviting. . . . I got a letter saying that I would be considered to be a pre-rabbinic student . . . I was almost there.

I wrote the exam, I picked out a subject that seemed to be something I knew something about. And I made my outline . . . I wrote the essay, and I had no way of knowing how I'd done . . . The marks were due back in 72 hours. . . . On the day . . . I walked up to the door, and I got 69 (with a passing point of 65). . . . And I ran to the phone to call my mother to say that I had passed and that I would be graduating, 'cause I was petrified that I wouldn't graduate and that my whole life would be down the tube.

[Later] I passed [the teacher] in the hall, she said "you know you passed, but I don't know how you did it". . . . If that were one of my students, I would probably

have gone over and put my arms around them. She somehow.. seemed.. mad at me that I had passed.

I graduated, and then I went off to university. I was accepted at university as a probationary student.

Noah's Undergraduate Experience

University was the [most] incredible experience of my life.

Though he had successfully passed high school, Noah's grades did not allow him to be accepted as a subsidized day-student into the city university system, the path required by most lower middle class students who could not afford private college tuition. Rather than allow him to attend night school, Noah's parents agreed to send him to a private university. This, they felt, would allow Noah to be in an environment that would encourage his development and maximize his chances for success.

At first, Noah faced challenges similar to those he had in high school. His required courses in English and mathematics were "my nemesis" and were passed with great effort, in some cases requiring repeated efforts (he noted that he took a geometry course four times). As soon as he was able to choose courses where his verbal skills could dominate and where his facility with ideas could be demonstrated, however, he began to progress at an unprecedented rate.

Noah soon developed a reputation as a bright and capable student, bypassing his technical difficulties wherever possible. "My mother was a professional typist and she'd pick up some of the simple spelling errors." He attributed his rapid success to a variety of internal and external factors which developed in his undergraduate experience:

I was in an academic environment that appreciated creative and more theoretical kinds of thought. . . . Once I got past the required courses and composition writing, what happened was that I took courses that were on a more theoretical basis, where interpretation and theory were very much more valued I was . . . rewarded for it.

Also, I think the truth of the matter was that I learned something about organizing my thoughts. And one of the things I started . . . was to make outlines. I started taking my notes that way. And then . . . I would outline everything. I'd outline [my papers]..even when I wrote exams. In fact, some of my friends used to tease me about it, that even when I called on the telephone I always had an outline. Even today, when I speak.. in my teaching I do that without notes, I think I do a fairly good job . . . [because] I try to organize, to keep it like a picture in front of my mind.

Noah recalled an incident where he had studied with great ferocity for an exam in philosophy. Seeing that he had scored well below what he had hoped, he sought out the professor and challenged his narrow interpretation of what was correct, pointing out multiple means of approaching the question. The professor was so impressed with Noah's thinking that he revised the grade and encouraged him to continue in the field.

"I had this romance with philosophy . . . I was a whiz kid . . . considered one of the leading intellectual lights in the university . . . the leading philosophy student." **Noah found, suddenly, that he was valued for his ideas and that through this, he was finally able to overcome the limitations placed on him by his learning disability. His near-perfect grades and rapport with professors convinced him that he was a solid thinker and a capable student, for the first time in his life. As his undergraduate years ended, Noah began to reconsider his plan to enter rabbinical school, since he had apparently found his academic niche as a philosopher.**

After receiving offers from several graduate studies institutions (including an "Ivy League" school), Noah decided to accept a full scholarship at a University in northern New York. He put rabbinical school in the background, in order to experiment with philosophy at the graduate level.

Noah's Graduate Studies Experiences

Graduate studies in philosophy proved to be an inappropriate environment for Noah on several counts. Though he was considered a very bright student, Noah remembered that his style did not match that of the program:

They were looking at me as a good candidate for a professional: Could I read well, could I write well, could I get my papers done on time? . . . There was a rigor there that was not me. . . . Although I prided myself on being an intellectual and being rigorous in thought, I really wasn't rigorous in thought—that wasn't my major thing. My major thing was much more creative and much more suggestive than definitive; I was much more right brain than I was left brain.

Noah's learning disabilities also hampered his progress. Reading vast quantities of philosophical text proved to be laborious and time consuming. Written work remained poorly presented, with no editor or typist to mitigate weakness in this area. After only one semester, Noah and the graduate school mutually agreed to terminate their relationship. The school offered Noah the opportunity to complete the year and earn a Master's degree, an offer which he declined. Instead, Noah opted for a shift in his focus and moved directly into the predatory year for rabbinical training at a seminary in New York city.

Noah remained in rabbinical school for six years, during which time he married and fathered his two eldest sons. Noah's memories of this period are bittersweet. Though he loved the subject matter and the environment of religious observance, the technical skills necessary for Judaic studies proved to be as elusive as ever. Noah recalled that Rabbinical School "was almost like being back in elementary school, because it was all the language things. It was recitation, reading out loud . . . spelling."

"I knew almost from the beginning that the seminary wasn't my place, it was something I'd have [to do] . . . I wasn't the star that I was as an undergraduate." **Rather than accentuating theology and philosophical discussions, the Rabbinical School program focused on textual learning, particularly that of the Talmud. Learning to read and write with proficiency in several different languages (necessary for Talmudic text study), proved to be a challenge of monumental proportions, requiring most of Noah's efforts:**

I would just sit and work ten, eleven hours a day, read mostly Talmud—it was my major, that was the big thing to make the breakthrough . . . I would go word for word in the text, make sure I knew every word. Then I would try to put the words together so they made some . . . sense.

In order to prepare well, I would need hours worth of work in language, which I really didn't have 'cause I was busy working and trying to raise a family, be a husband. It was very difficult for me. It was like constantly living under a pall of anxiety because I knew that Monday would come, I'd have to go back to school.

Noah received little help and encouragement from his instructors, some of whom were overtly hostile. "I had one professor who constantly made fun of me and . . . felt I shouldn't be in rabbinical school . . . There were a lot of stories like that . . . He was . . . particularly nasty. Others were less so."

Despite the hardships caused by his learning weaknesses, Noah persevered. Often, he noted, he was able to exhibit talent in class for his creative thinking and verbal skills. This, he believed, helped to keep him enrolled in the program, despite his obvious difficulties with reading, writing and recitation and the negative attitude with which his teachers often greeted him.

I never lost interest in the content of the material, and I still did a certain amount of [extra curricular] reading and studying on my own. . . . But it was a very difficult time, it really really was . . . It put a lot of strains on the relationship [with my wife]. . . . I was trying to make a living and trying to keep up with school. It was very difficult. The last couple of years in the seminary were probably a waste. I guess I learned something, but I think it plateaued at a certain point, and that law of diminishing return set in.

By the end of his rabbinical training, Noah had managed to gain the basic skills necessary to complete his requirements. In fact, his diligence, along with his skills as a philosopher and speaker earned him a prize for the study of Talmud. This award was particularly significant for Noah, as it represented his victory over difficult, unpunctuated and non-voweled text written in two languages using two different letter systems. Other awards in homiletics were less important, as they represented skills which Noah felt were intrinsic to his makeup and did not require intense effort on his part.

After completing his training as a rabbi, Noah carefully considered his future. Rather than working primarily as a pulpit rabbi and engaging in further Talmudic interpretation, Noah decided to pursue his love of theoretical and

philosophical learning by enrolling in a doctoral program and beginning a career as an academic. He moved his family to western Canada, where he took up teaching at the university level, securing a tenured position in the Judaic Studies Department. At the same time, he began the requirements for a doctoral degree.

Noah spent close to 15 years in his attempt to complete a doctorate. Most of this time was devoted to the painfully slow effort of research and writing. During this period, Noah was heavily engaged in the development of his career and with parenting. Struggling to find a project that captured his imagination, Noah experimented with several options for study and writing. Each time, he found himself hampered by his weak reading and writing skills. Struggling to complete his dissertation and satisfy a temperamental, critical thesis advisor made for slow progress.

As his difficult thesis journey unfolded, Noah looked within himself in order to find areas where interest and skill intersected. He discovered that rather than being a traditional Judaic Studies scholar, he was more of an "anthropologist" enjoying the study of human beings—their stories, myths and behavior. Living in Jerusalem during his sabbatical years convinced Noah that his passion lay in this area and he longed to write about the Hassidic world in which he was a participant-observer. "But I didn't know I could do that."

Instead, he focused his attention on his students, developing innovative courses and assignments. These courses consisted of lectures exhibiting his passion for religion, anthropology, history, art and folklore, along with assignments which were creative and demanded both academic skill and personal insight. Though he was criticized by some colleagues for his unusual approach to subject matters and for his lack of publications, Noah once again persevered. Later, he diversified his teaching subjects, moving to a wider pan-religious focus and leaving his original department. In this new environment, his creative lecture and work style was rewarded, earning him respect with his colleagues and popularity among students.

In addition to his academic career, Noah developed himself as a rabbi. Utilizing his skills as a teacher, theologian, pastor and counselor, Noah

successfully launched several secondary careers. He became an active religious educator, occasional pulpit rabbi and community leader. He engaged in inter-faith dialogue and acted as a spokesperson for the Jewish community. At the same time, he developed an interest in family, couple and individual therapy, as part of an inter-faith pastoral counseling program. Here, Noah found a means of satisfying his passion for the study of human behavior. This time, however, he was able to not only passively observe, but to have impact upon human lives in a significant manner as well.

Graduate studies ended for Noah as mere formality. Whereas it was once an important stepping stone for the development of his career as well as a personal statement of his ability to conquer adversity and prove himself a worthy and capable intellectual, his studies soon faded into the backdrop of a career that was established and a sense of self that had long since been fueled by other endeavors.

Letting go of the notion that intellectuality depended on academic success, was not an easy process for Noah, causing him great pain and self doubt. It became clear to him over the years, however, that his weakness as a reader and writer (now understood to be the result of a learning disability and not, as it had once been assumed, due to laziness or stupidity) did not invalidate him as a thinker or a teacher, nor did it impede his ability to impact upon the world with his ideas and skills.

As his primary professional career draws to a close, Noah reflected that somehow he has always managed to not only survive, but to prosper and grow. When I asked him to comment on his success, he stated that his development had been "photo tropic." This term, a botanical reference, notes the fact that plants tend to grow in the direction of sunlight. Noah feels that his life has been a series of photo tropic episodes in which his development has occurred in response to events and circumstances which proved to be either promotional or prohibitive.

As such, Noah has learned to accept those things which he cannot do, even if they would seem to be important to his work or sense of self. Rather than dwell on his weaknesses, he has either managed to conquer them, or leave

them behind, moving on to areas of greater interest and smoother acquisition. Either way, Noah has learned to create out of his often frustrating situation, a life of accomplishment, success and most importantly, contentment with his unique lot in life.

Manya's Mandala

COLOUR PLATE #7

Manya's piece differs from all the others in that it is essentially an image of words. This seems congruent with Manya's world as she is a writer and a lover of words. When I received this Mandala, Manya sent me the following E-mail to describe it:

What I have done:

I start in the center with ME!

Radiating out from there are some of the nouns that describe me most strongly: mathematician, masseuse, dancer, slut, writer, mother goddess, Jew, macher [yes, that's Yiddish], questioner.

In a secondary ring, are words that describe what I do: learner, student, teacher, dyslexic, strong woman, queer, story teller, poet, mentor, crosser of boundaries, changer.

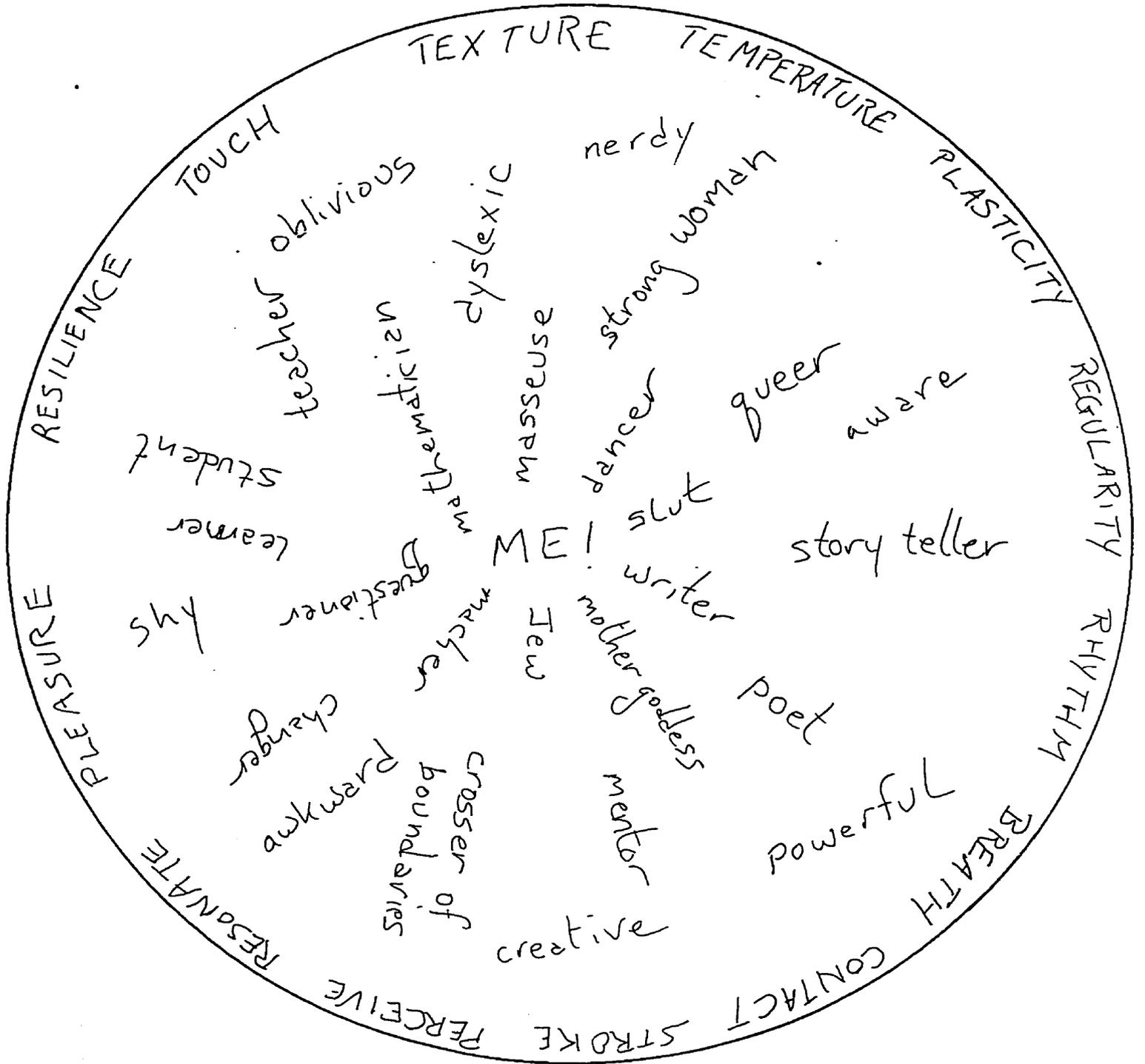
Beyond this, not radially, are adjectives: shy, oblivious, nerdy, aware, powerful, creative.

Finally, ringing the outer edge of the mandala are words about my connection to the world: touch, texture, temperature, plasticity, regularity, rhythm, breath, contact, stroke, perceive, resonate, pleasure, resilience.

How does this reflect my LD state? In subtle ways. There is the most obvious, the "dyslexic." There is the obliviousness, played out most strongly in my unawareness of the visual. There is the unusual variety in my interests and abilities, the fact that I am not constrained by "left brain" or "right brain" boundaries. There are the ways, socially and intellectually, that I cross over, in gender, sexuality, age—I have been a professional mentor since I was 19 or 20, for instance—and perhaps class, though that isn't so immediate to me. (I show my privileges of race and class by the fact that they seem unimportant to me.)

I was tempted to go back and sort things more, but I like the chaos of my first draft, the adjectives oriented differently than the nouns, the almost even circle of aspects of touch. (I left out taste, though.)

So this is a snapshot of me, on a good day, at the beginning of what promises to be a good semester.



"Manya"

Background Information

Manya is a woman in her mid 30s. She is partnered and has no children. She works as a professor of computer science and mathematics at a university in the Southern United States. Before that, she attended an Ivy League undergraduate program and completed a doctorate in her field of computer science mathematics.

Manya is the only child in her family. She grew up in Manhattan's Greenwich Village. There, she reported, she was exposed to many different types of individuals and experiences. She was a very independent, resourceful child and was given much room to explore both herself and her environment. Manya places great value in this period of her life, as she feels that it helped instill in her a sense of freedom and a taste for adventure.

Manya believes, that because she was bright, verbal and perspicacious, her learning disabilities were not easily detected:

It didn't occur to me that it was a learning disability until I was in college, and back at my shul (synagogue) I'm talking to a high school student over the oneg (refreshments), who was talking about getting a free subway pass because he was dyslexic and I said "Oh what's that?" And [I] stood there thinking "Yeah, me too. Yeah. Yeah, I do that." And gradually [I] looked for the patterns in this [my learning], recognizing the patterns as a phenomenon.

Clarification of her learning disability did not occur for Manya until she was in her post-doctoral years. By helping a student diagnose learning difficulties that seemed similar to her own, Manya came to see herself as learning disabled. Since then, Manya has been searching for a more precise definition of her disability. Recently, she asked to be tested as a means of providing herself and her employer with an understanding of her skills and deficits. Scoring well above average in all tests of intelligence (in the "Very Superior" range), made it difficult for a psychometrician to measure, define and contextualize Manya's learning disabilities.

While no evidence was found for organic brain dysfunction in her neuropsychological evaluation, Manya's psychoeducational test results did suggest the presence of learning disabilities. A significant discrepancy between her verbal and motor-spatial skills, along with the presence of weaknesses in several others skills areas (which would seem incongruent with her overall level of functioning), are indicative of this.

Definition of Manya's Learning Disability

Overall, Manya describes herself as "Dyslexic." Specific symptoms of this broad definition include: poor directionality, poor technical writing skills, number, letter and symbol sequencing difficulties and poor visual learning.

Functionally, these problems affect Manya's daily living in various ways:

I can't keep a map in my head at all. Pieces of it rearrange . . . if I've memorized the order of streets I will flip east and west. . . . I'm not sure I can draw the upstairs and downstairs of my house correctly so they match up with each other, and I've lived here for three years. When I walk out of the building I don't know which way to go.

I can't remember phone numbers, I rearrange them. . . . I can't remember names, . . . I have trouble learning them and the ones that I know, even the ones that I know intimately, are sometimes just not there, I can't find them in my head.

I'm very bad with language, I'm very bad with hearing and repeating things. . . . When I'm . . . tired . . . random words get replaced by other words. Usually the same part of speech . . . I'll say . . . "look at that bird there". And I'm pointing at a hose. Something completely unrelated, as far as I can tell.

I am not very visually observant. . . . When I go to meet somebody at the airport I'm often afraid that I won't recognize them.

As Manya is a mathematician, some of these symptoms have proven to be serious impediments. She reports that she has "a great deal of trouble with arithmetic." This means, that when Manya attempts to do basic arithmetic calculations, she often makes small but significant mistakes. Her psychoeducational report states that "She cannot use a calculator . . . because she cannot transcribe the numbers accurately. When working math problems,

she may change signs, get numbers out of order and have direction problems when sorting numbers." Manya summed up her frustration in this area by stating "I'm a mathematician and I can't even add up the bill at a restaurant."

Similarly, Manya reported that her writing skills are affected by Dyslexia. Errors in the technical production of writing mean that she tends to reverse, drop, substitute or repeat letters and words. She has a great deal of difficulty composing mathematical "proofs", the formal means of presenting ideas and formulae in her academic discipline. "Writing technical papers . . . presenting the material in a way that most people can read and follow", is a great challenge and a source of frustration for Manya.

Manya feels that she does not lack the ability to generate new ideas and formulae, rather, she states that "it's a problem in organization." Though she is able to produce and publish material in her other life as a fiction writer, "which is more or less stream of consciousness", the issue of writing technical works continues to be a challenge for Manya. "I really haven't figured that one out at all, that's a more specialized problem." The pressure brought on by these difficulties is compounded by the fact that as an academic, Manya's worth is measured in the number and caliber of such professional publications.

Equally troubling for Manya is the fact that her learning disabilities affect her work as an educator. From her first days as an instructor, she found that she was prone to err in the presentation of material. This was particularly noticeable in work that was written on the board. Manya recalled preparing and displaying a particular lesson completely reversed, only to have it corrected by her students. At present, Manya is able to explain to her students that she is Dyslexic and can ask them to assist her in the process of "proofing" her work as she writes it on the board. Early on, however, this was much more devastating for Manya:

When you're up there in front of the students and you're only a few years older than them, and you're desperately trying to feel a sense of authority, and you do something really stupid, half of them are lost and the other half are pissed off. And you feel like you're never gonna have authority. And then you get angry and get nasty at the students because you're feeling challenged, and it gets really ugly.

I taught calculus for four years . . . which I hated [because] I had problems with the algebra and the arithmetic. [I] finally learned how to be careful, learned how to involve the students in checking my work at the board. But it was often very embarrassing.

Be it in the area of writing, teaching or presenting, Manya has struggled to free herself from the notion that her constant technical errors are caused by flaws in her basic character. Rather, she has come to accept that factors external to her innate intellectual capacity, or her personal work ethic, are at fault. This distinction is helpful, but does not always alleviate the stress brought on by her learning disability:

There are things that I can't do, that I cannot be consistent about. And it took a long time for me to understand that arithmetic was a dyslexia thing, as opposed to sloppiness—that was the big word, not lazy, but sloppy that was always applied to me.

Having this notion of being dyslexic explains why I can't do things and why some things are very hard for me. I don't like the idea that I can't write a good technical paper or write a good proof because I'm stupid or lazy. It makes me feel very insecure, very inadequate and very angry. But if I'm dyslexic, at least then I understand why this is a painful process. . . . It's not impossible, if I work long enough and get enough feedback I can do it.

Interestingly, Manya's main hobby is that of folk dancing. The type of dancing that she prefers requires her to be skilled at memorizing and enacting sequenced patterns in particular directions. At first blush, this would seem to be an area affected by the symptoms that Manya described as part of her Dyslexia and, therefore, not a pastime at which she would excel or feel comfortable in; however, Manya is a very good dancer and it is a hobby which seems to have great significance for her.

Several times during our conversations, Manya discussed the apparent contradiction between her learning and performance skills in the classroom and on the dance floor. For Manya, it seemed that learning style was of great importance in explaining her performance ability as a dancer. Manya stated

that she is a "tactile learner". This means that she is able to comprehend and enact learning that has its input origin in touch and movement:

Vision stuff is much less interesting to me than tactile. . . . If I've got my arms around someone I know whether I have [held them] before [that is what I use to recognize people]. And that comes up in dancing. I know how they [my dance partners] move, I know the[ir] texture, solidity, stuff like that. It's more interesting to me . . . the information [memory of them] is more accessible, I can use it better. And I use visual input to interpret and to guess what the tactile stuff will be like.

Manya explained that for her, there are differing types of knowledge and learning. Dancing, she noted, requires knowledge that is, as it were, stored in the body and not in the mind, where it might be more affected by Dyslexia:

I can dance, although a lot of . . . folk dancing is very directional, because I can remember it in muscle patterns, in movement patterns. If I consciously think about what I do, I stick out this hand or that hand, (or I try and remember) which one's my left , I get lost.

In fact, when I'm doing country dances, I often end up dancing as a man because I stop paying attention. That's more familiar, and I'm quite strong in my lead, so I can have this whole ripple effect in a dance that several people will end up with switched gender and switched partners because I've forgotten, and started leading somebody else.

Manya's Elementary and High School Experience

Manya's memories of her early school years are, for the most part, wholly positive. During this period, there was little indication that learning disabilities were affecting her in any substantial manner. This would appear to be due to the fact that Manya's overall intelligence was so high and her progress so rapid, that any difficulties were easily hidden, compensated for and did not interfere with her basic learning. She recalled that in:

First grade I was sitting in the back corner with a couple of kids playing with the fourth grade or the second grade flash cards 'cause . . . we'd already figured out everything they were gonna teach us in math. By second grade I was reading the fourth grade reader. This was not a problem.

Manya remembered learning to read easily and well before her formal schooling began. This, she believed, was a result of " . . . hanging around with girls a year older than me . . . hanging around with parents . . . living in an apartment where every room had books, even the hallways and the bathroom." Literature and literacy, which were of great value in Manya's childhood, continue to be of enormous importance to Manya, both as a consumer and producer of written works. Reading even took on adaptive dimensions for Manya, as it helped her with directional orientation. "I figured out left and right by the way I moved my head to read"; however, when Manya learned to read Hebrew (which reads right to left), this method lost its usefulness.

Manya's first memory of any learning difficulty came when she was in junior high school:

I do remember some point when we were doing long division in school, which is seventh or eighth grade . . . I remember that I had the whole concept down and I could write it out fine, but I couldn't get the right answer. This came up on a test. And the teacher couldn't . . . figure out why I didn't get the right answer so she gave me credit. And I finally found an addition [error]. And it seemed very odd that I had this whole concept of long division which was the hardest thing they'd thrown at us, but I couldn't add . . . two single digit numbers.

The issue was neither clarified for Manya in those years, nor did it emerge as a real challenge for her at that point. Soon after this incident, Manya was moved to a school for gifted girls. Here, her overall intelligence and independence, coupled with the relative freedom of the environment, continued to allow her to override any learning disabilities which may have otherwise affected her:

From eighth grade on, I did not attend a math class for a full semester. I would go to a next level math class because I got bored. I would not hand in homework, I would sometimes fail tests because I hadn't gone to class. I just went often enough, the minimum amount, to learn the ideas. And I remember more than once being told, "Oh there's an exam tomorrow". I went into the exam, looked at a question, figured out the ideas that were behind the question, and answered it without any benefit of book or teacher. I was . . . gifted, and I was allowed to get

away with this, so I didn't have the drilling that would have shown up the basic problems.

Manya's difficulties with directionality remained similarly unnoticed in the urban environment of her childhood:

The rectilinear part of Manhattan is easy. The streets are numbered and the avenues are numbered, and I took familiar routes. I grew up in Greenwich Village and I didn't know where places were. I would know that there was a shop kind of thataway, and I would wander around fairly aimlessly, and sometimes not find what I was looking for, because in the Village the streets are not necessarily numbered. . . . If they're numbered they're not in order, and they're not at right angles, they're not rectilinear, right angled. So I considered it a virtue to get lost in the Village because there was so much interesting stuff that it never occurred to me that it could be a problem. I considered it a good thing, and never tried to fix it.

One area where Manya did recall experiencing some difficulty, was in the sphere of social interaction. Some of this self-described awkwardness seems to Manya, to have been affected by her Dyslexia. In hindsight, she recalls missing many social cues and experiencing confusion in this realm similar to other Dyslexia related perplexities. Manya additionally feels that her bisexual nature is an extension of the overall disorientation caused by Dyslexia.

Manya's Undergraduate Experiences

Manya's general giftedness in academia lead her to acceptance as an undergraduate student at one of North America's most famous colleges. This, so called "ivy league" school, demanded much from Manya and it is there that she decided to pursue work in mathematics, a discipline that had first interested her in high school. It was also the point at which she discovered that her love for this type of learning was hampered by technical difficulties which seemed incongruent with her overall intellectual capabilities.

Undergraduate education was "a shock" for Manya, in many ways. Whereas in high school, Manya was "perfectly happy to let some ideas go by. . . . As long as I kept learning new cool stuff, I didn't care that I learned every bit of it", college was much more rigorous. Attendance, homework, and full comprehension

superseded general performance. Demonstration of competency in the field required that Manya attend to details. "I couldn't formulate correct proofs. There's a very formal way of presenting ideas in mathematics that I could not figure out how to do."

Through a combination of what she described as "learning disability and arrogance", Manya began to experience great difficulty at school. Her old methods for successfully maneuvering in and around course work no longer proved successful. She attempted to take courses which required her to have knowledge and experience that she lacked. She began to make increasingly more frequent errors in her work and was not seen as competent by peers and professors. The fact that she was forced to work for up to 15 hours per week in addition to her studies, meant that she did not have time at her disposal to prepare and perfect learning and skills and compensate for difficulties.

As a result, Manya began to receive very poor grades, even failing a semester of mathematics. This sudden change in her performance left Maya with much anxiety and feelings of inadequacy. Partially, she became aware for the first time, that there was a gender bias in mathematics. Women were an extreme minority and it was clear that men were more successful and supported in the field. Beyond this though, she began to experience doubts about her ability to succeed, a first in Manya's otherwise remarkable career of achievement. "I did think that I was not as bright and not as gifted as the boys and a couple of women around me."

From her second year of college onward, Manya recalled feelings of inadequacy surrounding her learning:

I think that there were things that were painfully difficult for me, that came easier to my classmates. . . . There was one class that I took where I did not understand any of the basic ideas until much later. . . . I felt that I was very slow at the time, and my professors told me so in so many words, and they told me that I would fail.

Learning difficulties were not limited to Manya's work in mathematics. Manya recalled wanting to learn languages and entering them with the same naive expectation of immediate success : "I heard that Nietzsche and Freud wrote

puns, and it didn't occur to me that I was never gonna be good enough at German to understand puns. So I studied German, painfully." **While she was not particularly successful in this field either, here Manya was able to hide behind her verbosity and intelligence to a greater degree:**

[I] ended up spending one semester engaged in a dialogue with the teaching assistant about etymology . . . instead of practicing the language. Completely subverted the class. It was typical of me. . . . I used to take over the discussion sections in my English classes. I subverted the German class, and I couldn't do a damn thing in the math class, and it annoyed me.

At the same time, Manya was discovering new facets of her learning disability, though it was not until her post-graduate years that she became fully cognizant of this label and all that it entailed. She realized that beyond missed concepts (which she could, with some, effort grasp), she was incapable of certain routine and seemingly simple mathematical calculations. She began to notice that she was severely directionally challenged, living in an environment, for the first time, where there were few clear cues and little value in aimless wandering. She counted on dorm-mates to assist her in finding everything from campus buildings to her meal pass. She also experienced great social difficulties at her very conservative and self-engrandized college:

I found it racist, classist, sexist, homophobic . . . I just didn't fit in, politically, socially. I thought math classes were for girls and evenings were for hanging out with boys. I was in a girls' dorm and often the only girl in my math class.

Overall, Manya recalls her undergraduate years as the most difficult ones in her learning life. The combination of a confusing physical environment, arduous learning and social incongruity, changed Manya's understanding of herself dramatically. Where she once saw herself as gifted, talented and able with ease to maneuver through life in an academic environment, she now found herself strenuously challenged. She began to experience herself as limited and somewhat ineffectual. Her learning disabilities, once masked or taken for eccentricities, were now beginning to impede her progress. From her description of those years, it seemed that Manya was headed for failure, for the first time in her life.

In the end, it was the threat of failure that fueled Manya's drive to overcome her limitations and succeed in her chosen discipline. Several instructors in her mathematics, arts and social sciences courses discouraged Manya from pursuing a career as a mathematician. This, she took as both an insult and as impractical advice. When I asked her why it was that she remained so determined to enter the field Manya replied:

It was having an English teacher ask me why I was wasting myself on mathematics, and having a social worker tell me that I'd really be very good at social work, in 1979 or '80, when there were no jobs in social work, when the local battered women's shelter had a thousand applications for director. And she was telling me that I would really be very good at social work, why didn't I give up this nonsense of mathematics. That made me decide I was not going to give up.

Though her love of mathematics was diminished by a mostly negative undergraduate experience, Manya remained steadfast in her determination to remain in the field: "I was dammed if they were going to stop me." In hindsight, Manya believes that this was the best decision for her, as she truly loves and feels at home in the world of mathematics. For her, it was a matter of placing herself in the best possible environment, minimizing the deficits of her learning disability and re mediating lost material or skills which proved to be the key to her success:

When I got to graduate school and was not in a hostile environment, and started going back and learning some of the things that I should have learned, to take the courses that I took . . . I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. I could do the mathematics in grad school, and I fit in socially.

Manya's Graduate Experience

Manya undertook her Doctoral studies in the Mid-Western United States. It soon became clear to her that she was simply missing too much of the material in pure mathematics for her to succeed in this discipline. Frustrated, she felt at a loss and unable to do the work in her chosen field:

I had given a seminar in the math department and felt terribly embarrassed about my ignorance; it had been a disaster. I went to my math department advisor and I

said "I'm terrible, I'm useless", and he said "why don't you go talk to that computer scientist, she always cheers you up."

So I walked into the computer scientist's office and she said "Oh Manya, here's a problem" . . . and she wrote it on the board and three hours later took me out to dinner. And we came back and worked. And we did that all week. And we sent off an abstract, and . . . it looked like a really good breakthrough on a problem that had been around for about ten years. I went to a conference, people were asking me about it.

Thus, Manya moved into the area of computer science mathematics. She became very close with her advisor, who valued her, though could not understand Manya's uneven performance:

My advisor found it bizarre that I couldn't write a good proof, and yet could get some of these detailed things she couldn't get. She thought I was very smart and she did a lot of rewriting for me, and would get furious at me.

Soon, Manya began to see herself as a capable mathematician and computer scientist. She recalls the graduate school years as generally successful ones. This, she feels, is due to her mostly positive interactions with professors, with whom she identified or connected with on an intellectual level. One such professor, whom Manya described as "one of the brilliant minds in the field", seemed to share with her a similar approach to mathematics, validating and influencing her greatly. Another "brilliant woman. . . and total space case", served as a role model for a theoretically sound but technically weak mathematician:

[She] once started a lecture out, "Let X be a space, call it Y ." . . . She would forget the definitions of the mathematical object she was working with. You'd ask her [a question] and if she hadn't just been thinking about it you'd have to tell her again. . . . She taught a course that I took on how to solve problems. And she presented her solutions in the way that she had come up with them. The best part of the course for me was getting half a step ahead of her, and believing, yes I could solve problems.

That helped tremendously, having this completely space cadet professor, and having a professor, the one who was my advisor for a while, who was not a space cadet—who writes beautifully, who presents everything absolutely slickly. The combination was what I needed.

A new and "most difficult" area for Manya to tackle and perfect as a graduate student was that of teaching. Manya felt that "I had to learn how to teach. And I had to learn how to generate authority." This was hampered for Manya by several factors, one being her age. When she began teaching, she was very young sometimes younger or not much older than her students. More importantly, Manya felt that her learning disabilities acted as serious impediments to her image of proficiency and authority. Errors in presentation left Maya looking foolish and out of control in front of students. She recalled one such incident where she made a sizable blunder in the demonstration of material:

It was a disaster . . . the bright students in the back started noticing and pointing it out because they were aware it didn't make sense and they were confused. And I tried to unravel it . . . and ended up taking the rest of the lecture trying to fix this one damn example, and not being able to do it. And getting to the point where I was standing there with the marker and the transparency, no idea where anything went, which way was left, which way was right . . . I got to the point where I was standing in front of the class and the only thing I could focus on was [saying to myself] "I'm not going to cry."

Since then, Manya has learned to generate authority and teach with greater clarity. She is honest with students about her Dyslexia and enlists their help in correcting her work:

I go in the first day and I say I'm dyslexic. This means that anything involving arrows is a problem. This means that I will sometimes know perfectly well in my head what I mean, and write something completely different down there. I tell them that pluses and minuses . . . are one thing I do wrong, that my arithmetic is bad . . . And I teach them how to politely point out that I've made a mistake. This is very important, especially in places where politeness is a necessity or a virtue to the students. I teach them very explicitly to say, "Are you sure?" Or, "I don't understand". Or, "I don't think that's right." . . . I tell them that if they simply copy, it won't work, they won't learn . . . they will go home with gibberish in their notes. And that I expect them to be involved in the process of a lecture. And that helps me, it's the only way I can do it.

But it also, I think, really helps them. It's bad for the students who can't think in real time, who can't think as fast as I present things. . . . I've had some students that I'm simply disastrous for . . . I've also had students who take me seriously

when I tell them they have to copy over their notes, and come back the next week with corrections. And that's cool.

Understanding and dealing with her learning disabilities is an ongoing process for Manya. She continues to experience not only the primary technical symptoms of Dyslexia, but also suffers from the secondary emotional conflicts which often accompany it. She retains an inconsistent sense of self-worth and fairly regular bouts of self-doubt. She often finds that success does little to bolster her confidence, but that failure is seen as proof of her incompetence. Writing, presenting and publishing material remain areas of struggle for Manya, a source of both much accomplishment and great consternation.

This conflict notwithstanding, Manya has achieved much as a professional and has earned a reputation for operating in a unique fashion. In large part, this is due to the fecundate efforts which she puts forth, in order to minimize the effects of her Dyslexia. She makes use of her students in avoiding classroom errors, and in the process teaches them vigilance and organizational skills which other professors might not. She writes her professional publications with co-authors, combining her skills as a lucid, creative thinker and theorist with their proficiency at articulation and composition.

Manya balances the stresses of her professional life and its constant need for added rigor with activities offering a sense of relief and alternate accomplishment. This allows her to achieve success in a broad range of areas, while she continues to work toward her ultimate goal of tenure. While tenure is not yet assured, it seems clear that Manya has made a competent start to her career as an academic, theorist, writer and professor—despite the fact that her learning disability is centered in skills required for success in these areas.

Kit's Mandala

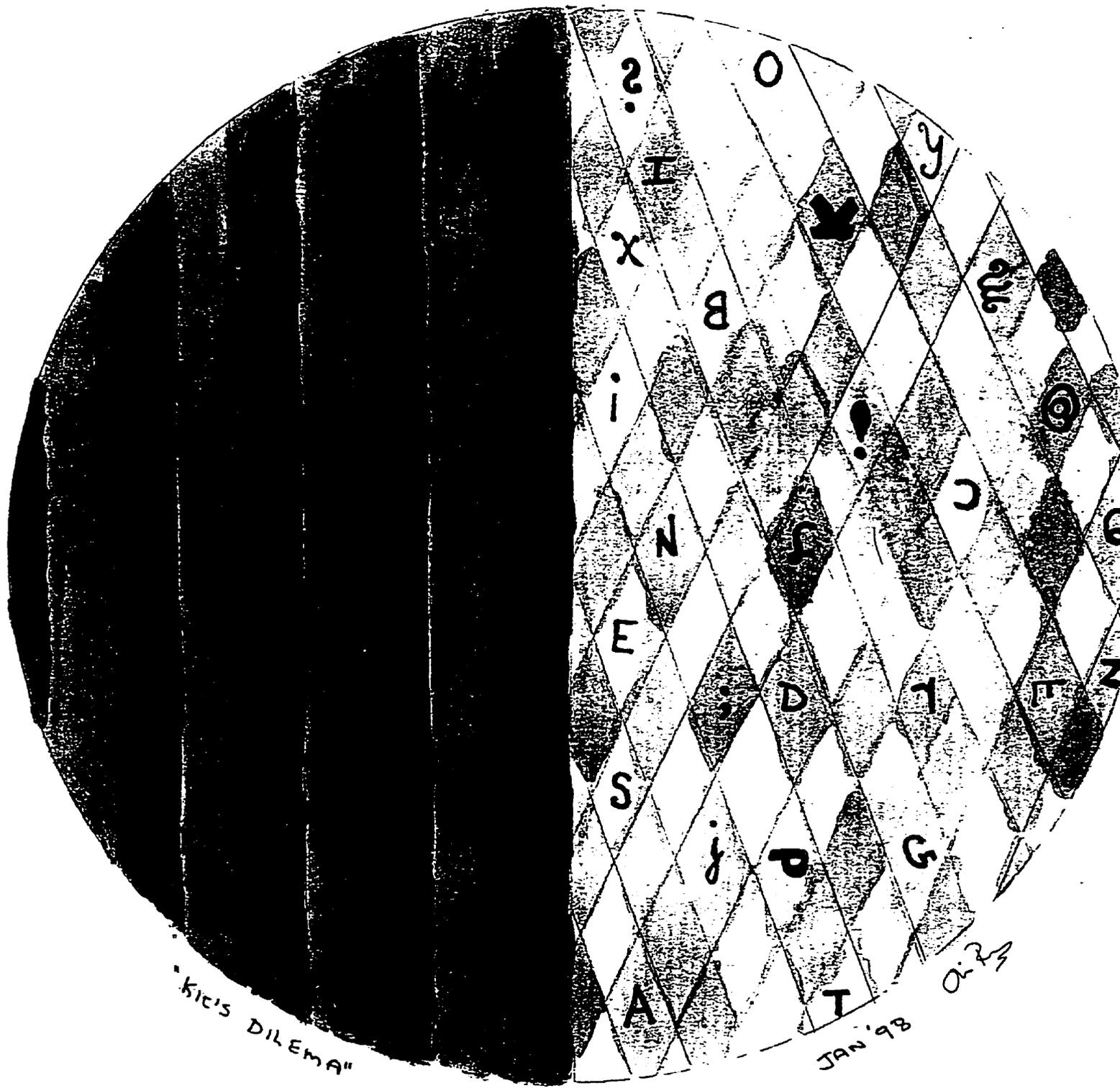
COLOUR PLATE #8

Kit declined to participate in the Mandala portion of the interview process. As such, I created an image that reflected my overall impression of his learning experience.

I chose to focus on what I termed "Kit's Dilemma", namely, the extreme incongruence between Kit's mathematical skill and his ability to express himself in the written format. From all reports, Kit is an extremely talented and creative mathematician. His grades at all levels of study reflect this. At the same time, however, Kit is severely hampered in written expression, having failed at most attempts to pass courses in this area, despite tremendous effort of his part. This dilemma became most ruinous when, Kit was suspended from his first undergraduate program for failure to pass the basic literacy requirement (with an otherwise near-perfect grade-point average).

Kit's mandala is separated into the two major halves of his learning life. On the left is his mathematical life, coloured in cool hues of blue and green. Symbolizing the natural course of water, the numbers, formulas and calculations flow easily for Kit in an orderly fashion. Facing this on the right side, is a representation of Kit's written world. Here, I chose to use dull browns and gold, representing the mud-like consistency with which Kit's skills in this area have developed. The written characters are isolated from each other—in stark contrast to the linear connection of the numbers. In addition, they are jumbled in a chaotic mess, inaccessible and disorderly.

For me, the pain of Kit's story lies in this dilemma, it is this dichotomy which lead to a learning life of great confusion and struggle. Knowing that Kit has worked diligently to live his life such that his strengths became valued assets and his weaknesses mere inconveniences, was most inspiring to me. In the time since we spoke, Kit has taken many steps towards creating a career for himself as a mathematician and has learned to work around the adversities caused by his learning disability.



"KIT'S DILEMA"

JAN '98

ai?

"Kit"**Background Information**

Kit is a man in his mid-twenties. He is currently completing a Master's degree in mathematics and computer sciences at a university in the southern United States. Upon completion of this degree, Kit is due to enter a Doctoral program at the same university.

Prior to his graduate education, Kit attended two undergraduate institutions in Canada. At the first, Kit was able to achieve a measure of success, attaining a relatively high grade point average in his field of study; however, the university required that he pass a series of writing courses, something that he could not do, even after repeated attempts and requests for assistance. As a result of these failures, Kit was suspended from the first university. Subsequently, Kit was diagnosed with a learning disability, which explained his uneven pattern of achievement. It was suggested to him that he attend an institution which made accommodations for students with learning disabilities. This move proved to be most beneficial to Kit, who then completed his undergraduate degree and was recognized as a talented mathematician.

In retrospect, Kit realized that he had suffered from learning disabilities most of his life. The fact that he presented himself as a generally intelligent and capable individual, can be seen as one reason for the failure of his teachers to recognize his difficulties. Upon receiving diagnosis, Kit was surprised at the extent of his disability and the work that he had already done intuitively to offset it:

[the] assessment was that I had compensated for a large portion of my learning disability. I mean people with Tourette's Syndrome are supposed to have problems with arithmetic, and I'm better than most people at arithmetic, but what she (the assessor) thinks is that I've just sort of subconsciously developed coping strategies for a lot of these skills in that, and verbally, reading wise, I developed the coping strategies, sort of naturally without anyone assisting me. [It is only] the writing coping strategies I've never developed.

Overall, Kit recalled that he was always a bright and accomplished child and that learning problems did not appear until later in his life:

I could read before I started school, fairly well. . . . And tell time. . . . I don't remember having any difficulty learning to add or subtract. So I didn't really start having any difficulties at school 'til about grade three, when I started having a lot of difficulty learning how to spell.

After the third grade, Kit's skills deficits began to affect his learning with increasing severity; however, his overall above average intelligence and aptitude for sciences and mathematics, left him and his teachers convinced that he was simply not applying himself to his work in the affected areas. Such accusations would follow Kit until his diagnosis and continue to affect his sense of self and his learning.

Definition of Kit's Learning Disability

In 1991, Kit participated in his first (and so far only) assessment for learning disabilities as part of his move to a university that was specially suited to students with such difficulties. He was told that his learning problems stemmed from a mild form of Tourette's syndrome, a neurological disorder known most commonly for its motor and vocal spasms, or tics. Awareness of and research into Tourette's has increased dramatically over the past decade, and it is now known that it can produce learning impairments which are functionally akin to Dyslexia and Attention Deficit Disorder (Burd, 1992; Harris & Silver, 1995; Lerer, 1987).

Kit's understanding of his Tourette's Syndrome suggested that it interferes with his learning in a limited fashion. Most clearly affected is his ability to present himself in writing "I can't . . . spell . . . very well and I do not spell within my vocabulary. I tend . . . [to] try to use big words that I can't spell. I have problems with grammar and organization." Kit is able to conceptualize his ideas well, but his organization and presentation of verbal concepts remain compromised. Thus, his written work appears sloppy, ill-conceived and hastily constructed, even if much time and effort have been put forth on his part. Such difficulties are complicated by the fact that Kit appears exceptionally bright and well versed

when he presents concepts in the mathematics and sciences. This furthers the impression that he is simply careless and inattentive in his writing.

These symptoms continue to be an area of much consternation for Kit. Though he is now solely focused on his field of expertise, written skills continue to play an important role. While much of his time is spent in creating theory using numbers and mathematical concepts, to succeed as a mathematical academic and researcher, Kit must present his findings in a clearly organized and articulated manner. This means that in class he must be able to write on the board and take notes in a clear, concise fashion. Out of class, he must be able to write with lucidity and efficiency. This is of particular importance when he attempts to have his work published, a necessity in academia. It is also important that Kit develop verbal and organizational skills which will allow him to become an effective lecturer and educator.

In addition to his major deficit, Kit reported several ancillary symptoms associated with his Tourette's Syndrome, which act as learning disabilities. He stated that his ability to remain focused was somewhat limited and he has been told that this is a mild form of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). "I notice that as with ADD, I fiddle a lot." Additionally, Kit's frequent arithmetic computational errors are seen as stemming from Tourette's Syndrome. This, however, did not seem to bother Kit as much as the other symptoms:

Problem is a relative term . . . I can do mathematics much faster than I can add effectively, so I occasionally make mistakes which propagate through things. If I'm just doing simple stuff, I can be as [or] more accurate than most people, and faster too. . . . [Besides which] I'm in a mathematical field and mathematicians are notorious for being lousy at arithmetic.

While Kit remained generally philosophical and apparently accepting of his learning deficits and the difficulties which they have caused him, it became clear as our interviews progressed that there has been a great emotional toll paid as a result of this experience. At all levels of schooling, his poor writing skills were dismissed as symptoms of inattention and sloppiness rather than uncontrollable difficulties: "[it was] Sort of a running theme—the majority of people just told me to work harder, and try to overcome these things."

As we began to discuss the story of his learning life, Kit exhibited more emotion as he recalled the frustration of being an intellectually gifted but technically weak student. His self-esteem, social standing and self-concept all appear to have suffered as there began to be an increasing discrepancy between his potential and actual achievement. One emotionally charged theme to emerge from our discussion was the negative impact that learning disability had on Kit's relationship with his parents. Kit stated that, as a result of his parents' assumptions that his learning difficulties were due to lack of effort, he is still not close with his father and that some anger remains surrounding his school years. He noted with some irony that when he was diagnosed with a learning disability, his father, too, was seen to have a form of Attention Deficit Disorder.

Kit seemed to have dealt with emotional strains of his learning disability by focusing on his considerable talent as a scientist and mathematician. By specializing his knowledge and putting his energies into areas where he could achieve success with relative ease, Kit managed to maintain a sense of dignity and self-worth. Thus, while he was often unable to keep pace with fellow students in areas requiring him to write with efficiency in spelling, grammar and organization, he stood out as an excellent mathematics and sciences pupil. Work in the liberal arts took many frustrating hours, resulting in little success. In mathematics and sciences however, things were quite different:

One of the things that I . . . discovered . . . was that one or two productive hours for me can be a whole week for someone else. . . . And most of that time would be spent on semantic details like wording and editing. . . . making sure all the words were spelled correctly.

Kit's Early School Experiences

Though able to read at a much faster and more sophisticated level than his peers, Kit began to fall behind in his writing in the third grade. While he described school as somewhat "boring" and "slow" due to his advanced interests and skills, he also recalled those years as being full of "frustration" and "fear".

Writing, already a difficult task for Kit, became even more complicated in the fourth grade when he broke his arm and was unable to write for some time.

This, along with his reported weakness in hand-eye coordination, left Kit with writing that was illegible and often criticized. To compensate for this, Kit would write slowly and deliberately, which was helpful for his penmanship, but detrimental to his compositional skills. "I think very quickly, and then what I have to do is struggle to remember what I thought and put it down. And running slow belabors this and then I get distracted and do [other] things."

As he progressed into the higher grades of elementary school and into junior high, the gulf between Kit's writing skills and his overall learning ability began to widen. In those years he read voraciously, particularly in the sciences, where he was already learning at a university level in areas such as nuclear physics. Yet, his organization, composition, spelling and grammar remained well below average. In the sixth grade Kit was found to be functioning at a second grade level for spelling. He recalled that his report cards contained "Two halves..the half where I got the top grades and the half where I got the bottom grades."

In junior high school Kit began to receive some help for his writing in newly formed special education classes and was placed into an enriched learning program to better meet his intellectual needs. It was here that he discovered the computer, a newly evolving technology in schools and one that would alleviate some of the difficulties caused by his poor penmanship. Kit recalled with some frustration working in these classes to improve his writing "Spending two or three hours writing a copy that was only marginally more legible." He regarded the assistance received during this period as marginal and largely ineffective.

Kit's years of elementary and junior high school were remembered as both difficult and sad. The constant struggle to maintain an interest in a level of learning that was too slow for him, coupled with his inability to perform well on written tasks, left Kit with little investment in school work. Socially, Kit was unsuccessful and there was much acrimony between him and his peers. "I came from a totally different sort of culture, so I was quite an outcast there, basically to the point of physical violence." Out of class, Kit found no interest in extra-curricular activities and had no real social circle.

Unmotivated, bored with his studies and unable to reach out to peers for companionship and support, Kit turned his attention to reading. He developed a passion for science fiction novels. He also turned to television for entertainment and learning:

I . . . watched a lot of non-fiction television. The university . . . had lectures on Saturday mornings so I'd watch them occasionally. Not that I think I understood very much, but I do remember watching them and actually being sort of intrigued by biology dissections.

Kit's High School Experience

In high school, Kit reported an improvement in his overall situation. His science classes began to engage and challenge him and his motivation increased. He developed extra-curricular interests in music and drama and did not seem to clash as violently with his peers. Concurrently, Kit began to develop compensatory strategies to ease his writing difficulties. First, he learned to type and can now "type faster than I can write." He then learned to pace himself, giving less time to areas of strength and concentrating on his weaknesses:

Starting in high school . . . ninety-eight per cent of my effort would be in English. . . I didn't have to do homework in any other subject. . . In English I had plenty of time. . . If this was a major project, I would check every word and type in everything very carefully at maybe four or five words a minute and spend a huge amount [of time].

Near the end of his high school years, Kit benefited from two additions to the learning environment. A home computer was introduced, substantially improving the technical aspects of his writing. At school, he began to attend a writers workshop as part of his English course and was taught to write with greater clarity and organization. While this remained a daunting task for Kit, the repeated drafts which were submitted as part of the class, did help him develop rudimentary skills as a writer.

Though he managed to successfully complete his high school studies such that he was eligible to attend university, Kit remained deeply scarred by his experience as a student. While he knew he was brighter than other students

"who went on to become construction workers" **his grades did not reflect this, even with increased effort.**

Kit's teachers continued to assume that his learning deficits were due to laziness on his part, despite the tremendous energy that he exerted in passing his English studies courses. His parents concurred with this opinion to such a degree that Kit removed them from his learning process as much as possible. "In grade 10, I just stopped showing them my report card. I got fed up with being belittled and yelled at because I wasn't doing well in school, so I just didn't bring my report cards home." **As he recalled these events, it became clear that the pain caused by his parents lack of support and understanding was severe, remaining unresolved and unhealed as a wound.**

Kit's Undergraduate Experience

Kit entered university in his home town and immediately began to take courses which reflected his strengths. "I sort of got interested in general science, so I took two . . . [levels] of math, physics, chemistry." **In these courses he achieved very high grades, described as "straight A's". Though he recalled being challenged by these courses, none were strenuous** " No, I wasn't working that hard. For chemistry I had to start two or three days before it was due, do some prep work. For physics and math I could start the day it was due."

At the same time, however, Kit was battling with his university's English writing requirement. This requirement stipulated that if a student entered university with a low grade on the provincial high school proficiency examinations, s/he would be required to either complete several courses in the English department, or attain a passing grade on a special effective writing examination.

Kit was unsuccessful in his repeated attempts to pass either of these prerequisites. He failed the effective writing examination and was forced to enroll in English department courses. At first, he chose a course with heavy reading requirements, thinking that his skill at reading would mediate some of his writing difficulties; however, he was unable to organize and present an

analysis of the course texts beyond the level of simple comprehension. "I can read. I enjoyed the books, but the required interpretation I didn't like."

Realizing that his inability to succeed in the English courses was a burgeoning into a serious impediment to his progress, Kit decided to turn to the university's "Effective Writing" consultant team for assistance and advice. This, however, had further negative consequences for Kit, who felt that the system betrayed and victimized him:

[Going to] the effective writing people . . . was not an effective way to get help. I later figured out that they . . . couldn't teach English. . . . They were really overworked. And I had to fight to keep going to see just one particular person. . . . If I [ended up] going to different people, I got told "black is white" and the next person told me that "green is white" . . . I just got confused and tied in knots.

These people who know nothing about your field and who have very limited vocabularies and very poor skills . . . judge how other people write. The classic example I give of this was, [when] I went to someone and she accused me of using a word that I didn't understand. And the word was "vacuous" . . . She [asked] me the definition of that word. And I said, "emptiness", which [she claimed], was wrong. So we looked in the dictionary and the dictionary said "of or pertaining to a vacuum". "See, [she exclaimed] you're wrong! You're completely wrong, you misused it . . . you don't know how to do anything."

By the end of his first year of university level studies, Kit recalled that his difficulties with the English writing requirement "frustrated me, and I got depressed and I stopped working." His grades in science-related courses suffered and he was no longer at the top of his class. The university allowed him to register for only one course the following year, another English class that would determine his ability to retain his student status.

Despite the fact that Kit "put all my energy into this English course", he was not able to succeed. Again, he tired turning to his instructor for help and advice, but was not given clear feedback or direction. "I'm told it's my spelling? No it's not my spelling. It's how my writing looks. No it's not how my writing looks. It's the way I organize paragraphs. No. It's the way I try to organize everything on the page."

When Kit complained that he was not receiving adequate assistance, it was suggested that he participate in a new program using computers to word-process. While he was able to overcome almost all of his technical errors immediately, the program still did not help him address the issue of his organizational and compositional difficulties. "This was obviously not developing [the] skills I needed to learn. . . . I ended up getting a D on the course."

As a final gesture, the university allowed Kit to attend one more full semester of school, on the condition that he finally pass an English writing course. Once again, Kit received top grades in his field, but could not pass the English requirement:

I try taking the half course. And what the guy wants is completely beyond me, I have no clue what he wants, I can't track him down, I can't get any sort of feedback from him. . . . I'm basically barred from university unless I can pass the exam. So I end up trying to study for this exam and I don't even end up taking it, I know I'm not gonna pass.

At the end of his second year, despite a nearly perfect grade point average, Kit was forced to withdraw from university. Disconnection from the studies he loved, along with the fear that his future career plans would never be realized, caused Kit to plummet into a spiral of depression and self-loathing. After a two year period of "doing something like being a janitor, and selling vacuum cleaners . . . my dad threatened to kick me out. So then I ended up going to Ontario. And my aunt pressed to have me tested for learning disabilities."

The move to a new province, along with a new understanding of himself as a learner, created a positive shift in Kit's life. He was accepted into a university that specialized in assisting students with learning disabilities. Once again, he was at the top of his class, and achieving a reputation as a solid thinker and mathematician.

It was in this environment that Kit developed several important skills which would allow him to achieve a high degree of success. Firstly, he began to take full advantage of computer technology, not only as a scientific tool, but as a communicational assistive device as well. Kit found that ridding himself of the need to present his work in handwritten form gave it greater clarity and

acceptance. Additionally, he found the ease and rapidity with which he could edit and re-edit his work added to the organizational and conceptual quality of his writing and mitigated interference from his poor attentional skills.

Kit also learned that he could reduce the negative impact of his learning disability by working in a pair or as part of a team. This allowed him to contribute his advanced knowledge, skill and creativity to a project and in turn to receive feedback, guidance and technically sound presentational quality.

The most important development to occur during this period, however, was Kit's discovery of his first real mentor. Meeting this professor and receiving from him much challenge and attention, proved to be a transformative experience for Kit. Describing this relationship as both friendly and tutorial, Kit learned to see himself as capable, worthy and unique. The two men shared much in common, both in and out of the classroom. In addition to work-related supervision, the professor introduced Kit to the society of mathematicians and computer scientists who subsequently formed the nucleus of his social circle. Such contacts continue to be of great importance to Kit, who described his social circle as a place of comfort, a forum for recreation and learning.

Additionally, it was this professor who suggested that Kit consider attending graduate school, introducing him to the woman who would become his graduate advisor. This idea appealed to Kit, who felt that though his computer science skills were more than adequate for the business world, his general disposition and lack of entrepreneurial interest meant that he was likely better off in the world of academia. Soon after completing his undergraduate degree, Kit moved to the Southern United States to begin his graduate training. There, his new advisor continued in the tradition of his old mentor, introducing him to the social as well as intellectual life of the community and welcoming him into the circle of mathematicians and computer scientists.

Kit's Graduate Experience

When Kit and I conducted our interviews, he had just completed the first year of his Master's degree. We therefore focused much of our conversation on his early involvement as a graduate student and the feelings he had entering a

new learning environment. Given the generally negative tone of his earlier academic experiences, it was clear that such a move had come with a measure of anxiety and fear.

When I asked Kit to discuss some of his concerns surrounding entrance into graduate school, he sighted three primary areas. Firstly, he felt somewhat nervous about the high level of expectation and sophistication inherent in graduate school:

The whole research thing was really scary. I mean, when you look at a problem in the textbook, for the most part these problems have been solved, you know their solutions. One of the things that comes apart [in graduate school] is that some problems don't have solutions. These are things people haven't done before.

Kit's fears surrounding the complexity and importance of his work seemed quite justified, as the field of mathematics often tackles uncharted territory. Psychologist and creativity researcher Howard Gardner has stated that of all the humankind's discoveries, those in the field of mathematics contain in them the greatest potential for immortality. This is because, once a mathematical principal is discovered and verified, it is a truth that lasts forever (1993b).

The second concern which Kit voiced, centered on the question of his relative merit as a graduate student. He had now moved into a world of specialists, a world where he was no longer the brightest, fastest and most capable in his field. In undergraduate "I was the top of the heap . . . 'cause I [was] the only person [who] cared to climb." In graduate school however, he saw himself as "bottom of the pile . . . the youngest academically, and physically too . . . I'm behind everyone else."

The third area which concerned Kit, had to do with his learning disabilities and the effect that they might have on his ability to succeed in a graduate environment. Weaknesses which had hampered him in the past, particularly his writing skills, took on a more important role as he began to present and attempt to publish his research work. The new role of teacher also offered potential challenges for Kit. "That's a tremendous amount of responsibility. . .

. Here's a bunch of people, you are responsible for shaping their minds. And that's a very complex task." **It was unclear to Kit whether his teaching ability would in any way be compromised by his learning disabilities. It seemed logical to him that there would be some interference, since several of the primary skills involved in teaching (such as written communication and organization) were affected.**

Throughout his first year as a student, Kit faced these challenges and began to create for himself pathways around his difficulties. Having a greater understanding of himself as a learner and a language with which to describe his learning disability, meant that he could articulate to professors, peers and potential students, why it was that his in-class spelling and non-computer generated writing were so poor. He collaborated with fellow students and his advisor on several projects in order to ensure that written presentations were not solely his responsibility: "It's somewhat easy to find symbiotic relationships or group projects that people are willing to [collaborate on]. . . . [I will say to them] 'You don't trust me to do the writing, that's fine, I don't trust myself to do the writing, you can do it'."

Having an advisor who is also learning disabled, has been tremendously important to Kit. She has supported Kit in his efforts to learn to work around his difficulties while consistently challenging him to maintain a high level of excellence in all areas of study. He, along with all of her graduate students, is encouraged to perfect and practice organizational and presentational skills before attempting to publish or teach:

One of the things she really concentrates on among her students, is good talks. . . . She really stresses that this is an extremely important skill for anyone in the academic field, and, . . . if you're in business, . . . good presentation is . . . probably one of the most important skills anyone can have. So she has worked with it and I've started developing those skills more.

Not only has Kit's advisor been understanding of his learning difficulties (and has encouraged him to work toward remediating them), she has even helped him to see that there are skills which his special learning style offers as an advantage:

One of the things we discovered that I can do better than most people is actually go to a conference and sit through and watch every single 20 or 30 minute talk for days on end . . . and remember a good portion of them and think about them while it's going on. That's an unusual skill I'm getting better at.

As his first year of graduate studies unfolded, Kit began to find a place of comfort for himself in the world of mathematical peers. He concluded that, even if he was not at the top of his class, he was nonetheless a gifted and talented mathematician and student:

Probably among the graduate student population I'm about 80th percentile, among people at my undergraduate school I was about 100th percentile, among mathematicians I'm about 40th. . . . I was sort of upset about that from the beginning until I suddenly realized that all mathematicians are brilliant. Being a dumb one . . . you're still brilliant!

As we reflected on the progress Kit had realized thus far in graduate school, I asked him to discuss his future challenges:

There's a couple challenges that [are] sort of coming along. There's a series of exams to demonstrate that you have a sufficiently broad horizon and they are somewhat challenging. . . . Learning to read technical reports, I'm still not that good at it yet, I'm not sure how much I'm going to improve. . . . There are time management skills.

In the time that has elapsed since our interview, Kit has reported continued progress. He and his advisor have completed several projects and have made plans for further research. Funding has been secured for his continued work in the graduate department and it now seems likely that he will be able to move on to the Doctoral level. Kit seems to have integrated himself into his department and into the community of mathematicians and computer scientists. When I visited him, I observed his skills as a card player and a budding folk dancer.

Our conversation was a first for Kit, he told me that he had never really discussed his learning experiences and the effects that his Tourette's-based disabilities had on his life as a learner. It was clear that his journey was one of

both survival and anguish, it had empowered him and yet had left him with feelings of sorrow, self-doubt and anger.

Though not apparently disposed to emotionally oriented discourse, Kit was able to express his feelings along with his thoughts and memories. It became evident that his inner sense of confidence and belief in himself as a learner had sustained him through many difficult moments, even when no one else seemed to share his belief. It was this conviction that appeared to have given him the strength to repeatedly and tenaciously break the institutional barriers which stood between him and his love of learning. Kit's steady and continued progress as a graduate student stand as proof that he belongs in an academic environment, despite the fact that many times he was declared incompetent or unfit to be part of such a world.

Sandy's Mandala

COLOUR PLATE #9

After completing her Mandala, Sandy informed me that it had been a difficult task for her, as art "is not my natural form of expression." Yet, Sandy felt that the experience was a good one for her and much as she felt challenged by the interview process (and indeed by seeing herself as a person with a learning disability), she felt that the creation of a Mandala was "cathartic" and "therapeutic".

Sandy chose to work in watercolour, both because she felt that it would allow her "artistic expression to come through" and because water was conceptually central to her piece. She described the scene she had painted as follows:

A landscape ...a river flowing into the sea....It's taken from above [as if] you were over the sea in a plane looking [down]. You can see mountains and different land forms and there's [a] sunset or rise.

The idea is that one must traverse bodies of water, such as this river, in their life. But there's no bridge, you see, in this picture. People who don't have a learning disability have bridges that are connected. The people who do have a learning disability have to traverse from one side to the other, but they have to find different ways of crossing the water.

[There are] different adaptations that you would make to cross that river, [in order] to do the ordinary things that one would do in life....If you don't, if you just stay in this one little part, your life is not going to be as full.

Sandy went on to describe in detail the richness of the landscape—teeming with life and potential. She metaphorically offered a myriad of ways in which an individual could make the crossing into the realm of knowledge and education, as well as the potential challenges and roadblocks they might face.

Sandy chose this image, because " I felt that it allowed you to put whatever kind of interpretation in." Ultimately, Sandy felt that the image represented her general understanding of life: "All of the good, the bad and the ugly. [All] the wonder and love and all... the good [that] comes from hard work, determination and perseverance."



"Sandy"

Background Information

Sandy is a woman in her mid-thirties. She is single and at present has no children. She is both a teacher and a graduate student. When we conducted her interviews, Sandy was preparing to teach a first grade classroom, a new experience for her, as she had mostly worked with older children, especially those with special needs. In addition to this work, Sandy is enrolled in a Master's Degree program, specializing in Educational Philosophy. Though slowed by the need to work and by the constraints of her learning disability, Sandy is hoping to complete her degree within a few years. She may then consider continuing on to a Doctoral program.

Sandy's history as a learner is typified by consistent change. Her father, an engineer, moved the family several times and Sandy's childhood was spent in the Caribbean and in Northern Ontario. Sandy herself continued in this tradition, moving several more times in her adolescence and early adulthood, before settling in her present community, a large urban Canadian centre.

From our discussions, it appears that Sandy's internal learning journey was likewise one of much change and growth. Though she had "identified myself as a person with a learning disability for a long time" and had been assessed as such by a professional in her early years, Sandy received no formal remediative assistance. Instead, she struggled to understand herself as a learner, methodically working to minimize areas of weakness while allowing her strengths to be noticed. As a result, she has constructed for herself a set of coping mechanisms involving her own strategies as well as assistance from friends.

I first heard about Sandy from a Special Needs Counselor, who glowingly described her as a "survivor", a graduate student who had circumvented the effects of Dyslexia by assembling a network of friends who read to her. The counselor had met Sandy when she first appeared at the Special Needs Office, a service that Sandy had discovered in graduate school from a professor who knew of her difficulties. Though Sandy found it comforting to know that there

were other students in situations similar to her own and that help was available, she did not avail herself of its services. Given the bureaucracy that she encountered, along with the limited, slowly delivered and rapidly diminishing services offered, Sandy felt that her personal system was more efficient and beneficial.

When we began to speak, Sandy seemed somewhat uncomfortable labeling herself as "learning disabled", though she expressed no discomfort in acknowledging her difficulties as a student. By the end of our interview sessions, she explained to me that she was becoming less bothered by the idea that she was a person with learning disabilities and why it was that she had thus far resisted labeling herself:

I was uncomfortable with calling myself learning disabled, 'cause I didn't perceive myself that way. I've always been comfortable with myself all my life . . . I have been adapting since an early age . . . this is not something new. And I don't go around thinking "Geez, if I didn't have this learning disability I'd be different". It just is.

Definition of Sandy's Learning Disability

My brain works a hell of a lot faster than my motor skills or how I can translate things to paper or to computer. And even though I've got it correct in my brain somehow, and I don't know how, it just doesn't come out the way I want.

Sandy can best be described as a "classic" Dyslexic, as she exhibits a set of symptoms most commonly associated with this syndrome. As such, she has difficulty with reading, writing, mathematical skills, hand-eye coordination and sequencing. She tends to reverse or substitute letters, words and numbers.

I have tremendous trouble reading beyond the basics . . . sometimes it takes me two months to read a book, or more . . . I can listen to vast quantities of things and take in a tremendous amount. But if I have to read it myself, I usually end up falling asleep within 20 minutes, that's my coping mechanism.

Writing is more problematic than reading . . . I'm a good writer. I have good writing skills, I have good style . . . [but] my penmanship is poor . . . No matter how hard I try, there is always a mistake in my writing somewhere. [It] Drives me nuts. . . . sometimes I use the complete wrong word and I haven't realized it

because in my head I used the right one, but in the text I've used the wrong one but I don't see that. Instead of "going", it's "doing". Instead of "the", it's "of" . . . all that kind of turning things upside-down, which, if I do that in a sentence, makes no sense.

I found that in math, [something] I was once good at as a young person in school, all of a sudden I was getting answers wrong because I'd copied them down wrong, I'd turn numbers around. Even in my date book today, I'll have somebody's phone number and I'll have the numbers written down wrong.

Left from right is still a difficult concept . . . For years, the only way I knew my left from my right is 'cause I have a writing bump on my left hand . . . I'm also left-handed, which, upon my reading about learning disabilities, there happens to be a correlation.

This learning disability dysfunction plays a part in my motor control . . . to this day, I have never connected a baseball bat with a baseball!

From this description, it became clear that Sandy's everyday life was affected by her learning disabilities, especially since so much of her time was spent in academic environments. In order to navigate around this, Sandy amassed for herself a complex set of skills and support networks which allowed her to function and progress. She learned to make use of non-traditional learning methods—reading reviews, short articles and outlines, or listening to the radio—as sources of information. She utilizes technology as much as possible, stating that "my life has improved a thousand percent since the invention of the personal computer. It has allowed me so much more freedom than I ever had before."

Sandy stated that much of her success has come from "knowing how to work a system", something which she claimed to have learned "very early on". In each course she took, she carefully calculated the steps necessary to complete reading and writing assignments and to prepare for tests and exams. She learned to be "aggressive" and to overcome feelings of intimidation when it came to dealing with instructors. She frequently asked them to shorten or modify reading lists, such that she was only responsible for the most essential pieces. If all else failed, she noted, "I am the greatest bullshitter you have ever met in your life. I

can sit in tutorials and you can think that I've read all kinds of stuff and I haven't read squat."

Perhaps the most important coping skill that Sandy developed was the use of friends and colleagues. Sandy's network of readers, editors and study partners was extensive. When in school, she carefully orchestrated her assistants so that no one person felt overburdened or imposed upon. Such a system has proven quite useful, though Sandy conceded that it was not perfect:

I'm not independent in that respect, and sometimes it can be scary because when the people you depend on aren't available . . . you end up sort of hanging from the meat hook again and going, "Okay, now what do I do?" You're just sorta swinging there and you think "Oh God, somebody get me down, please." All the content is there, but the finished product can't be revealed until you can get some help. So that is reality. And it's not necessarily a terrible thing, because most of the time I'm very lucky, I have a network of people who are super.

When I asked Sandy how her learning difficulties had affected her over the years, she reflected that it was, at times, frustrating and annoying; however, she did not seem to feel that her life was overly difficult, despite the obvious severity of her learning problems and the constant effort required by her to complete basic tasks. Instead, she preferred to frame her learning disability as a manageable set of problems which simply needed understanding and strategize. She appeared to have been protected from feelings of self-doubt and resignation by the manner in which her parents approached her difficulties "They knew that I was bright and could achieve. . . . And they very quickly, got into a "solve" mode." Sandy internalized this attitude, seeing her learning disability as a set of stumbling rather than road blocks—always challenging, but always navigable.

Sandy's Early School Experience

I first went to school in Jamaica and I did kindergarten and form [grade] one. At the end of form one, my parents knew that there was something not right. And so when they moved to Guyana where they had a different school system . . . I repeated grade one.

I had tremendous trouble reading beyond the basics. I could read the basics . . . as early as anybody else could. But the reason I found out I could read that was that I'm bright and I memorized it. But as soon as the vocabulary increased, all of

a sudden it was too much for the memory to handle and I had memory overload . . . I don't decode in the same way as other people. I sort of take Polaroids of it, pictures.

Much of the information that Sandy conveyed about this period was a reconstruction based largely on family story rather than personal memory. She was able to recall her teachers and the fact that the early ones were kinder and gentler than the ones who followed:

[My first grade teacher] was this princess teacher. I have no other memory, no memory of learning anything, but I remember she was just nice. Then, when I got to grade three, this is when I started having memories of actual learning and disappointment and not being able to keep up. I remember Miss W., she had to be the biggest bitch that ever walked the face of this earth. She was from England and she was a horse, I'll tell you. Oh! She tied my hand behind my back, my left hand, 'cause I was going to learn to write with my right hand. No way in hell. No way in hell. She was so horrible, she used to walk up and down the rows with a ruler and whack it on the desk. She was just a wretched human being. And I remember feeling that I wasn't accomplishing.

By the time she had completed the third grade, Sandy's parents asked to have her assessed, as they were convinced that she was not performing at a level that matched her interest and intelligence. Sandy recalled being tested in Florida where her family had moved for a short interval. "I put all the little blocks in the round holes and all those things." Her mother did not explain to her that she had a learning disability and Sandy was not certain that such a label was ever formally given to her. She simply was told "You have trouble reading Sandy. You have to go to the special school to see if they can help you."

This, however, was not to be. Sandy's family moved to a small town in Northern Ontario and she was placed in a regular public school. She recalled the shock of this move, along with the burgeoning effects of her learning difficulties:

Everything was brand new, including Miss C. with her different colour panties for each day of the week 'cause she wore such short skirts that . . . (laughter) you knew it was Monday when they were pink. Anyway, that was when the nightmare started. And I say nightmare because a lot of emotional trauma happened from that point on. I remember the first day of school, we went in, we had to write a

story about our summer experiences. I wrote about fishing, I think it was. I had caught a baby alligator in the Esquiaux River the last time I went fishing and of course I wrote this in my very badly spelled writing and she said I was a liar and made me stand in front of the class. And that's how it started. And then I was in the brown group.

The "brown group" was for children who were slow readers. Over the years, the brown group came to symbolize, for Sandy, the repeated attempts she felt were made to deny her fair access to learning that was appropriate, challenging and rewarding. Despite the fact that her reading and spelling skills were slow, the system that Sandy had come from did give her a higher level of overall academic knowledge. This, along with the fact that she was generally more intelligent than her peers, left Sandy feeling out of place in the brown group. "They were dumb. I mean, really dumb. Oh I felt terrible. I was so bored. I had nothing to say to these people. And I thought I'm going to go crazy."

That first year in Northern Ontario was remembered by Sandy as one of her worst. She attended "remedial" reading skills classes "in some sort of closet", where phonics were reviewed repeatedly with little effect. In her regular class, Sandy did all that she could to escape the "brown group"; however, she was not able to succeed and soon began to lose interest in her studies. The school decided that she was not progressing and recommended to her mother that Sandy be sent to a special school "for retarded kids". Enraged by this suggestion, Sandy's mother began to work with her after school on an intensive basis. When this proved to be stressful on their relationship, a retired teacher was hired to tutor Sandy.

It was at this point that Sandy recalled consciously deciding, for the first time, to take control over her educational experience. She realized that, like her sister, she was different from her peers and teachers, "having the insight, the vocabulary and maturity that a lot of kids didn't have, because of traveling, because of my parents." This sense of worth and value proved an important turning point for Sandy. She decided to prove herself to others and developed a determination that would help get her through all levels of education. "I got a chip on my shoulder. And I think that a phantom chip reappears every once in a while."

This determination proved to be very important for Sandy. At first, Sandy recalled pushing herself to succeed in order to "prove" to her teachers and principal that they were wrong in wanting to place her in a special school. Soon, however, she developed a love for her studies and a momentum that propelled her:

Finally achieving for myself and not having to prove anything, but to achieve for normal reasons because I'm striving for excellence, because I'm striving to learn, because I want to be an active and a good participant . . . Those are good reasons for achieving.

Though her attitude and determination had improved, Sandy was not free of her learning disability, nor was she able, yet, to circumvent its effects on her achievement. She recalled failing a history course in the fifth grade. "I remember [the teacher] saying that he knew I understood the content, but the reality of what I had produced was so poor that he could not pass me." Nevertheless, Sandy managed to complete her elementary school program and graduated from junior high school with honors.

Sandy's High School Experience

The major thematic thread running through Sandy's recollection of her high school years, centered around the notion that to succeed, she began to learn to manipulate "the system". She recalled developing strategies which would allow for her learning disability to be masked or minimized. Some of these skills were more scrupulous than others. Most, however, were effective:

I learned all kinds of adaptive techniques, I learned to lie [for example] saying you've read a book when you haven't, lying about things that you do, don't do, whatever, to achieve. I also learned the game of buying a friend . . . it's a type of defense mechanism.

I never cheated, I never copied somebody's [work], but I learned to listen to the bright kids in class. I watched how they did something, I watched how they set up their notebook. And I learnt that neatness was half the trick. I learnt tricks of the system.

I learnt to be an auditory learner, even then, listen to what the teacher says . . . [and] you don't have to read the instructions, then you've got more time to do the

content. I started paying attention to the phonics that I was being taught, to the decoding and encoding and all this kind of stuff which helped.

I also discovered that I was a good orator and that if I answered the questions in class and I participated fully in the class, chances are my marks were gonna go up and if my written work was lousy it was going to moderate it. . . . It proved that I was smart enough, I was not in the lower ranks.

One of the other important discoveries that Sandy made was public radio. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), provided her with programming on a wide variety of subjects ranging from current events to literature and the performing arts. Listening to the CBC satisfied Sandy's thirst for knowledge and served as a necessary substitute for books which she could not easily read. It also provided useful information for her to present in class and added to her much desired reputation as a bright and capable thinker.

Of all the weapons in Sandy's arsenal of coping strategies, the one that seemed to emerge as the strongest and most consistent was the support and encouragement she received from her parents. In high school, Sandy's mother would assist her by correcting her spelling and her father would listen to the radio with her and discuss the ideas and information. She learned, from her father, that he too had failed several subjects at school, but had nonetheless completed his education and training and had achieved success professionally:

They never gave up and never stopped reading to me at night. And I must say, between the radio and my mother reading to me, I think that's what bored into my soul the love of words, of literature, of learning, of information. So I had something to strive for . . . [the idea] that there's this magnificent world out there, that if you get these skills, you can be part of [it].

My parents never said to me, "Sandy you're going to university". It was implied in their lifestyle. I just knew I was going to take academics . . . It was the pursuit of knowledge. I just knew that was me.

Sandy noted that this was the time in her life when she began to love learning and found in herself a determination to succeed, even if it entailed a tremendous amount of effort and emotional control on her part. She recalled a particular class, where for the first time, she was given the opportunity to delve into subject matters with intensity. This excited and intrigued her and gave her

the impetus to take further steps towards academic success. This was also the first time that a teacher had plainly and clearly offered instruction on the mechanics and construction of an essay. Like many students with learning disabilities (and indeed many students in general), Sandy had not been able to learn these skills incidentally and required explicit instruction.

Sandy recalled her first experience in this new modality, when she attempted to follow the teachers instructions and complete an essay:

I worked hard . . . I wrote the essay. I got the essay back, and I failed it! Omigod! And instead of running and hiding, I plunked the essay on her desk and I said, "I shouldn't have failed this essay, what was wrong?" And she said that I'd made too many mistakes in it . . . Spelling and grammar and run-on sentences and my little words were turned upside down and I just didn't proof it. . . . I hadn't correlated the material right and that I could do it over again.

And I said "Okay, I'll rewrite it." I did. And I got an A. I've never forgotten how she taught me.

Near the end of high school, Sandy realized that she wanted to attend university and that she was not getting the assistance necessary to achieve a sufficient grade point average. She and her parents decided that a boarding school, away from her home community, might offer Sandy a better chance to succeed. It was here that Sandy discovered the idea that she could trade information and expertise with others. A fellow student from Hong Kong tutored Sandy, allowing her to pass her mathematics requirement, in exchange for English language assistance.

Sandy's determination was as strong as ever. She recalled being asked to leave a class that was necessary for university entrance:

I remember Miss B. who told me to leave the grade 13 math class because I was going to fail. "Sahndy dahling, I think you should go to the guidance officer and go and find another clahss that would be bettah for you." So I went down there, sat there for a minute, thought "Fuck you", walked back in and she said, "So Sahndy, you're back. Why is that?" "Because I'm taking this math class, Miss B., and I'm going to pass." "Oooh, well good for you, deah."

DID YOU PASS? Mm hm, of course I did.

Socially, the environment of the boarding school was only slightly more beneficial to Sandy. At home, she was "a recluse", feeling different and out of touch with her peers. Here, she was finally with friends who had traveled and were interested in the things that Sandy found exciting; however, her boarding school peers had been together for many years and were suspicious of her as an outsider. Sandy began to organize a social circle for herself, comprised of other girls who were fellow "outsiders".

Despite the many hardships and challenges which faced her as a student, Sandy completed her high school diploma and entered university. She had amassed a significant number of skills and techniques and had never lost her determination to succeed.

Sandy's Undergraduate Experience

Sandy's recollection of her undergraduate years were generally more positive than her high school experience. Again, she realized that her weaknesses could be mitigated by learning to maneuver and even manipulate "the system", which she saw as largely adversarial. This time however, she developed a set of powerful allies who would help her in her struggle. These were her peers, who for the first time were a central part of Sandy's life:

[In] university, my world changed. I was the belle of the ball. I was the social convener, social leader, I had an entire group of friends. In that sense I commanded them if I wanted to. Oh, there was the pub and there was Toby's [a local chain restaurant]. You know why Toby's has cheese on its fries? 'Cause we invented it. No, no kidding.

At first, the work-load at the university level was overwhelming for Sandy. "I was the kid who was up 'til three o'clock in the morning.. because I couldn't get the stuff done otherwise. " She soon became cognizant of the fact that she required assistance in two primary areas—the technical aspects of her writing and her reading assignments. To help with her writing, she hired an editor/typist:

Who's still a friend of mine, who was desperate for money. She had to be desperate to type my essays . . . I didn't have a computer at that time, computers were still [rare] . . . [so] I wrote my essays out by hand, all the quotes, all the footnotes, everything.

Hiring an editor/typist proved to be a very useful strategy for Sandy, who, for the first time, was able to have her ideas presented in a polished and perfected manner.

Reading remained a source of constant stress for Sandy. Try as she might, she simply could not increase the speed of her reading. In order to compensate for this, she asked a friend to help her out:

I had this one person in our group, a friend, who was in a couple of my courses. . . . And I said "Hey D., have you read such and such?" "No." "Good, you're gonna read it to me". He was the first one, and he came to my room and I sat him in a chair and I had my book and my highlighter and my pen in my hand, and he had a book and I said "Okay, commence". I just said "Oh, I'm a really slow reader, I just can't get this all read. Read, out loud." And he would.

At the same time, Sandy developed several other strategies which allowed her to keep pace. She learned to scrutinize her course reading lists, choosing only the most essential features. When researching material for essays, she was organized and learned to make use of reviews and condensations. In addition, she made the most of her speaking and listening abilities, attending lectures faithfully and establishing a reputation as a bright and articulate classroom participant. "I could be dying, I would never miss a lecture -because that's where I got my information. . . . And then I'd regurgitate it in an exam."

Despite the fact that Sandy was finally able to achieve that which she had always aimed for and was living a life of relative success (both socially and academically), she began to see that her learning problems presented serious impediments to real accomplishment:

I had decent marks. But, I would have had much better marks if I did not have this condition. I would have been a much better student and I would have accomplished much more . . . I'm sure that I would have been a straight A student, which I wasn't.

When I asked her to clarify for me what it was that she would have done with her life, had she been able to, she replied:

At one point [I] very much wanted to be a lawyer. And I took courses in my undergrad that would facilitate that too. [But] I didn't do it.. I ..now realize that if I'd got some help, I probably could have written my LSATs differently and got a much higher mark than I did. I mean I didn't do terribly but I didn't do brilliantly either . . . I wrote it three times.

But then I got scared, and I must admit I'm a little ashamed of myself for this because it's one of the areas in my life that I backed down and I sort of gave up, I let the dream.. go. I got scared because I thought to myself, "Sandy, you cannot possibly read and accomplish the things that you have to do to be a lawyer. You cannot possibly article and be that whipping slave that they make read volumes and volumes and volumes." I realized that it wasn't that I couldn't understand it, I certainly could understand it, no problem. It was the volume.

Also ..I had nightmares about being somebody's lawyer and not reading that one brief or that one whatever and they're in jail and their whole lives are changed or somebody's child gets taken away from them or whatever it is, and it's because of me, because I didn't do a thorough enough job, because I could not get through the volume. And it really scared me and I backed away.

I would say that if I did not have a learning disability I would be a lawyer today.

Instead, Sandy completed her university training and went on to teacher's college. Here, she felt that she could accomplish and contribute to society. "I'm a good teacher, I'm good at imparting concepts, connecting them in words [and] graphical pictures." **When I asked Sandy if she had any regrets about choosing the teaching profession, she stated that she did not, as she felt that her work, particularly the work she had done with immigrant and learning disabled children, was important and rewarding. When I asked whether she regretted the decision to drop her pursuit of a legal career, she noted that "regret is too strong, I had twinges."**

Teacher's college was a rewarding experience for Sandy. She found herself adept and skilled in the field, able to produce work that was recognized for its quality. Since she had already discovered the computer as a tool for

editing her work, she was able to demonstrate proficiency in this area too, adding to her success. She noted that some of the writing which she had produced as a pre-service teacher was published by one of her professors. This made her realize that she was a good writer and thinker and that "I do have a learning disability but I know how to cope with it."

As we reflected on this period, I mentioned to Sandy that in my opinion, she had struggled successfully to overcome the effects of her disability. She looked at me, quite puzzled, and replied:

It's funny that you say "struggling". I never thought of myself as struggling, in that respect. I did what I had to do. I knew it was hard but I didn't think of myself as this struggling person.

Sandy's Graduate School Experience

Graduate studies added new levels of pressure and challenge for Sandy. The theme that most clearly emerged from her recollection of this time in her life was that of self-definition and acceptance. Sandy struggled to keep her learning difficulties hidden, fearing that exposure would label her as a less competent, accomplished, or less capable student. This fear was mitigated by a growing need to identify herself as a learning challenged individual, in order to obtain the assistance necessary for her to balance her life as a student and a professional. This was largely due to fact that she could no longer invest all of her time and energy in school work and did not have as much access to readers and editors.

Though she enjoyed teachers college, Sandy felt that it was not an "intellectual experience" and almost immediately missed the academic world. Once in the field, she found teaching to be rewarding, but similarly lacking in intellectual stimulation. It became clear to her that such stimulation was a crucial part of her existence and that she needed to re-enter the world of academia as a graduate student.

Sandy began her graduate career in a Master's level program of Mediaeval Studies, but did not complete the degree. "I ran out of money . . . I lost

the momentum, which is strange for me because usually I'm the person who when I start something, even if I have to come back to it ten years later, I finish it." **Several years later, she began a second Master's degree program, this time in the field of Educational Philosophy. It was this program of studies which she was pursuing at the time of our interviews.**

When I asked Sandy what differences she felt existed between her graduate and undergraduate courses, she focused not on the intellectual challenge, but on the amount of time and energy required of her. For Sandy, working full time as a teacher and taking courses as a graduate student was a difficult mix, since both required much of her attention and effort:

When you're a teacher you're also a performer. You have to be prepared and [work] must come first. I do not recommend taking anything part time. It is not something I like, I don't switch modes very easily. I find it very hard, very draining on me to do that . . . I have felt more keenly my chronic disability now than I ever did..

Despite the fact she was having difficulty managing her time, energy and the amount of material required for her courses, Sandy was hesitant to speak with professors to explain to them that she was learning disabled. She was much more accustomed to "working the system", obtaining her own assistance, and minimizing her difficulties without acknowledging her weaknesses. She saw no value in labeling herself or asking for assistance based on her learning disabilities. Though she was a special education teacher who often accommodated students in her schools, she was not aware of the fact that such accommodations might be available to her in a graduate setting.

It was not until she was asked to recount her life as a learner as part of an assignment for a course, that Sandy discovered the world of special needs for post-secondary students. The professor who read her story, suggested that she speak with the special needs office of the school library in order to access the technological assistance available to students with reading difficulties. This was not a good experience for Sandy. She was asked to justify her need for services, to undergo testing and to accept a label that she was not yet comfortable with. Nonetheless, she persisted and began to explore the options available to her.

Unfortunately, Sandy found that this assistance could not meet her needs. While she had hoped that talking computers and text scanners would increase her productivity and decrease her dependence on friends, she found them to be insufficiently developed and time consuming. Scanning documents took many painstaking hours and talking computers required perfect copies in order to read error-free. Taped material was similarly difficult for Sandy to adapt to, since she was accustomed to the social interaction that came with reading, using it to remain focused.

I'd put the tapes on and promptly fall asleep, just like I would if I was reading it myself. . . . I left it, I said "Forget this, I'm just gonna go back to the way I did it, I'm gonna go back to getting my readers."

In class, despite the many difficulties she was facing, Sandy was happy. Her need to learn and to be in an academic environment were strong inducements for her to remain in the program and to discover new means of circumventing her weaknesses. She did not allow her self to feel less capable or accomplished than her peers, even if was clear that others were better read. She continued to ask teachers to prioritize readings, using time pressures and professional obligations as justifications. She made use of her talents as a thinker and speaker and enjoyed the freedom that graduate courses gave her to explore areas of personal interest.

Our discussions highlighted the evolutionary process that graduate school had forced on Sandy with regard to her self-definition. While she remained somewhat reticent to fully label herself as learning disabled, the difficulties of her situation increasingly made such an acknowledgment necessary.

I don't want to walk into a professor's office the first day and say "Well I'm an LD person and I need special dispensation." [Yet], part of me says, "Why not?" I mean that's a fact. "Stop hiding, stop doing everything for yourself, you don't have to be superwoman. Go in there, say "Look, I'm a good student but I got a learning disability. That means that considering my work obligations I'm gonna need more time to do this." But I haven't done that.

I'm very much feeling that I've come to a point where it's a make or break time. And I'm going to have to re-evaluate and make thrusts in different directions that I haven't done. So it's a new experience for me and I'm just getting my feet wet, paddling through the water, hoping that there isn't a cliff for me to fall down.

By the end of our interview sessions, Sandy expressed a growing comfort with the idea that she could identify herself as learning disabled and ask for help both at work and at school and still be considered a capable, independent worker. In the months that followed, she used this awareness to ask for the things that she needed to succeed and was largely able to obtain them. She received funding for a computer to use in her classroom and for her studies and was granted professional leave in order to complete her courses and begin writing her thesis.

When we last spoke (some ten months after the completion of our interviews), Sandy remained optimistic that she would complete her degree. Financial, professional and time constraints, along with her desire to start a family, may prevent her from pursuing a Doctorate, though she has not ruled this out as a possibility.

Though her graduate studies have thus far been stressful, Sandy appeared to have accepted this as part of her life, with little regret or self-pity.

I believe very strongly in the power of one's personality and what they choose to do with adversity or disadvantage. . . . I think very much that the same would apply to a person with a learning disability. You have to choose to slug it out; you have to choose to succeed.

Throughout her years as a student, Sandy maintained an attitude that was positive, realistic and optimistic. These are traits that have served her well and will likely continue to assist her in school, work and life in general. They have allowed her to overcome the obstacles placed in her way by learning disabilities and by teachers or institutions which might have otherwise prevented her from obtaining the level of education and professionalism that is so important to her.

Avi's Mandala

COLOUR PLATE #10

For my Mandala, I chose my earliest and most persistent metaphor for learning disability—my eyes. I can vividly remember my father taking me to the eye doctor at age five, theorizing that my reading difficulties were a result of poor eyesight. As fortune would have it, it was in the ophthalmologist's waiting room where we met an old family friend who had just completed advanced training in the then very new area of learning disabilities. This eventually led to my first diagnosis and the many adventures in remediation and accommodation which followed.

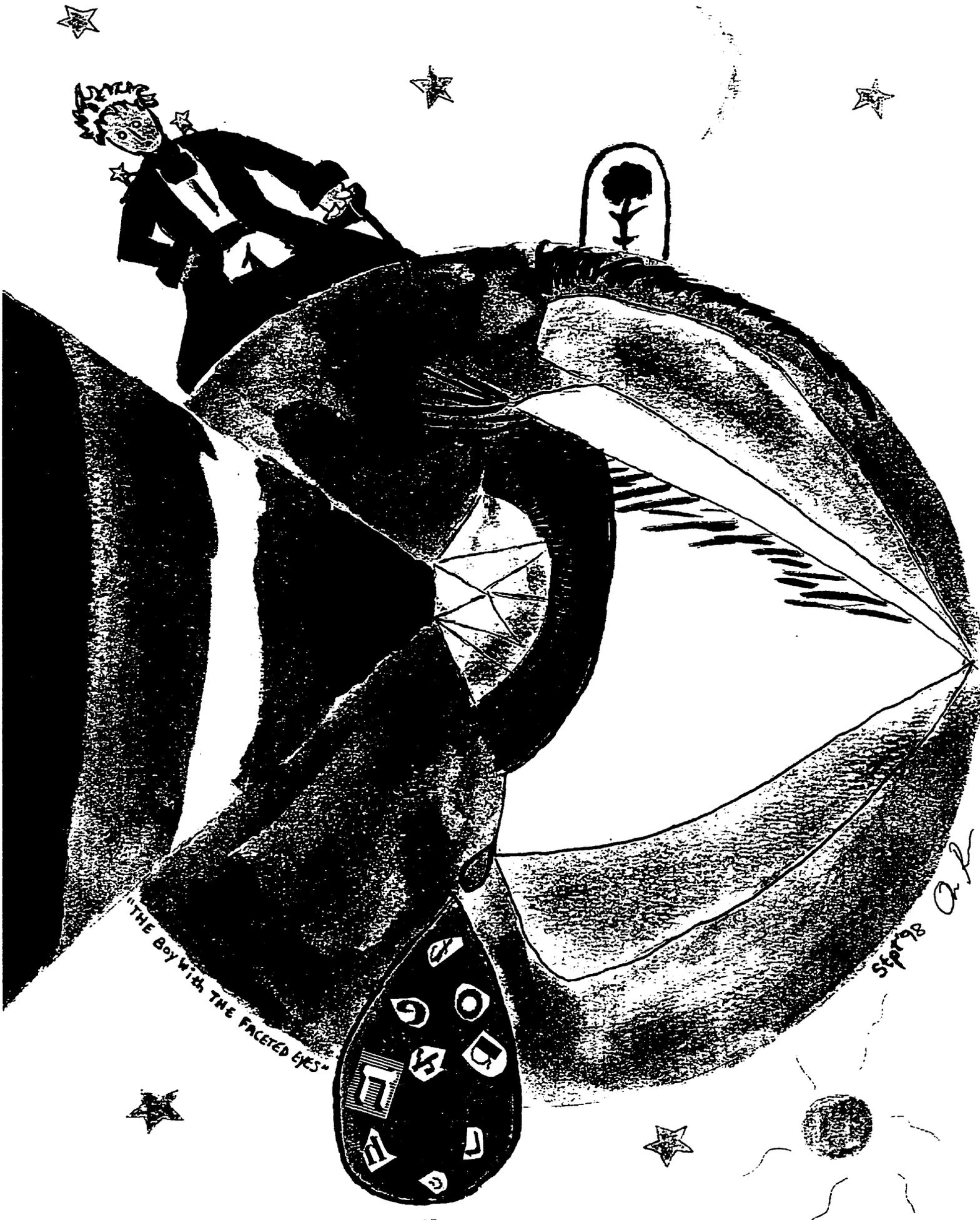
My parents, not wanting me to feel limited by the label of "disability", did not inform me of this diagnosis until I was an adolescent. As such, I had only the vaguest idea that something was different about me. Again, I focused on my eyes as an explanation for my difficulties. I can remember several instances where I pleaded to have my eyes re-checked, as I was certain that something was making me see things differently.

I now realize that on some level, this is true, I do see things differently. I choose to conceptualize this for myself by saying that I have "faceted" eyes, that is, I feel that I both take in and express my view of the world in a manner that is somehow different, multivariant and multifaceted. It is a way of life that has brought me extreme pleasure on the one hand and great pain on the other.

In my Mandala I chose to represent this in two central ways. The iris of my eye is crystal-like, it is faceted. Emerging from this (or perhaps entering in) are a rainbow of colours, reflecting my many interests along with my self-perceived divergent thinking style and creativity. Leaving my eye are the tears of frustration, sadness and anger at being unable to make use of the written word in a manner that feels complete and unconstrained. I have placed both Hebrew and English letters (the languages in which I function) reversed in the manner most typical of Dyslexia. The letters make up the word "other" in both languages.

Also included in this piece are images from the allegorical "children's" tale "The Little Prince". The prince, with his nobility, dedication, purity, vulnerability

and strength, has been an internal image for me throughout my life, ever since my mother first read it to me as I entered the first grade. Knowing what my parents did for me in order to make life with Dyslexia tolerable, safe and exciting, I often feel that I was like the little rose, covered and protected, allowed to grow to full potential. The stars and planets represent my family, the bedrock around which I grew and learned to accept myself for all that I was and was not.



"THE BOY WITH THE FACED EYES"

Spring 98 A.P.

Avi
My Story

Background Information

I am in my mid-thirties. I am currently completing my Doctoral degree in Clinical Psychology at a large Canadian University. Prior to this, I received my Master's degree at a university in Western Canada, and completed my undergraduate degree at Universities in Canada and Israel. In addition to my graduate studies, I work with a synagogue organization providing informal educational programming for adolescent members of congregations. In addition, I am a religious educator teaching in a classroom setting to child and adult populations. Active in my faith community, I am involved in several alternative Jewish worship communities.

I was formally diagnosed with a learning disability at the age of five, though this information was made known to me only in adolescence. My parents felt it best that I attempt to resolve my difficulties without a label that might otherwise leave me feeling limited. Despite the fact that I did not possess this information, I can recall always being aware of the fact that my learning style was different from those students who seemed intellectually curious and with whom I felt an affinity. Likewise, I felt out of place with those students who seemed to lack basic skills and learning capacity, with whom I shared reading group time and grade-point levels. I remember thinking that there was something wrong with my eyes, as it seemed to me that I never able to see things correctly.

It is this feeling of non-belonging that would become the major theme of my years as a student. While I always felt like a bright student—I loved learning and discovering new ideas and information—I could rarely achieve at a level that was satisfactory. This led to intense confusion and to a self image that was skewed—sometimes I believed that I was capable and accomplished; often, however, my lack of success left me with the impression that I was lazy or inept.

Later, as I was able to understand why it was that I was weak in certain areas and came to better understand the ways in which to compensate for

these limitations, I was able to succeed at a much higher level; however, those old feelings of ineptitude crept up on me no matter what I accomplished. Somehow, I suspect that they always will.

Definition of My Learning Disability

I can best be described as a "classic" Dyslexic in that I exhibit the traits most often associated with this syndrome. I am prone to reversal of letters, numbers and directions. Since I have always read and written in languages which run in opposite directions, I am frequently confused. I can recall sitting in class desperately trying to remember in which direction a particular language was written. I continue to experience this confusion in my adult life in everything from writing to driving directions. To help alleviate this, I often wear a piece of jewelry on my right arm to remind me of directions.

My greatest difficulties lie in the areas of reading, writing and arithmetic. Acquiring and utilizing these has been and continues to be a struggle for me. My reading speed is extremely slow, necessitating the use of spoken word recordings for written material of any length. My hand-writing never developed beyond a basic level and as such I print for legibility, with only slightly better results. Spelling, an early nemesis, continues to be a mystery to me. While I now use a computer for most of my writing, it amuses me to see that I still reverse letters or whole words and utilize multiple spellings for a single word. The computer (at this point an extension of myself as a communicator), allows me to view these errors with a sense of detachment and not with shame or anger, as was once the case.

Mathematically, I was never able to progress. Though I can recall enjoying the challenge of mathematical learning and am still intrigued by its beauty and design, it remains a nightmarish mystery to me. Number reversal, the inability to line columns properly and general confusion with written material, leave me incapable of all but the most basic of skills. Even with the assistance of a calculator, I am always checking and re-checking any computational work for the multiple errors that I am prone to. Thankfully, very little of my daily life necessitates mathematical skill; however, in my work as a

psychometrist, haste and exuberance have caused me to make very apparent and very public calculation errors, causing me great embarrassment and stress.

In addition to the main features of my Dyslexia, there are a set of secondary symptoms which have always created obstacles for me. My hand-eye coordination is extremely poor, affecting many tasks and endeavors. Growing up in a world where sporting activities predominated among my peers, such a weakness proved to be a social as well as technical disadvantage. My poor gross motor skills have sometimes taken on laughable proportions. In high school, there was a set of stairs that I never quite managed to climb without at least one tripping episode. When that building is torn down, I plan to stand outside and applaud. As an adult, I have settled for a comfortable existence as a "klutz". My child psychotherapy clients (with whom I work in play therapy) have, over the years, taught me many sporting skills and have enjoyed their natural advantage over me.

Added to this, I often experience a mild attention deficit. I am prone to find so many things interesting that I cannot concentrate on any one for very long. I have worked out study schedules based both on my limited reading capacity and my need for frequent breaks. Since so many of my learning tasks require added and intensive effort to compensate for other areas of weakness, this aspect of my personal style can be frustrating. Motivation, timing and personal forgiveness are all required, as is an accepting and accommodating sense of self. This can be a rather tough order to fill, as like most people, I am my harshest and least forgiving critic.

Though my learning disability has caused me great strife, pain and anxiety, I cannot say that it is without its remediation qualities. It is my belief that much of what I value in myself has come to me, directly or otherwise, as a result of my Dyslexia. I can see that my creativity, passion, ability to manage my time and efforts and my drive to succeed, all have roots in my experience as a learner with a unique style. If a "cure" were ever found for Dyslexia, I am not sure that I would take it. For, despite all that it has taken from me, this syndrome has shaped me and my view of the world in a manner that I have come to accept and to value.

The one area of learning disability that continues to cause me the greatest sadness and sense of loss is reading skill. For as long as I can recall, I have always been in love with words and the images that they evoke. For almost as long, however, I have felt helplessly barred from this world, as it is simply too painful and too slow for me to read text. The act of reading, so filled with promise and excitement at its beginning, ends for me in an exhausting sludge of mixed letters, misread words and painful abdication. The overall sensation is one of resignation, the slow draining of energy and enthusiasm which greeted the never-finished text.

Growing up in a household where almost every wall was covered with shelves of books and where almost all of the people who lived and visited there were avid readers, writers and lovers of ideas hidden in books, made for both an exciting and excruciating experience. Often, those shelves felt like prison walls to me, as they kept their secrets hidden behind bars of printed lines. Sometimes, when no one was looking, I would take these books off the shelves and flip through them, vainly hoping that I could absorb some of their magical thirst-quenching knowledge.

As an adult, I discovered that reading did not necessarily have to involve the printed texts that were so limiting for me. I found a world of literature that was recorded for people like me. In a very short period of time, I have become the reader (or rather listener) that I always dreamed of and I have begun to make up for years of slowness. Yet, this technology is as limiting as it is liberating. Since it is expensive and time consuming to produce, many book titles are not available and may never be. The thought of this limitation continues to plague me, even as I make my way through material that I have always wanted and need to read. It is my hope that the future will allow me to find the works I seek and that the ever crumbling funds available for services such as those that record books, will not erode the progress that I have finally managed to achieve.

My Early School Experience

I began my formal education in Israel, where my family lived during my first two years of schooling. At that time, my parents began noticing that I was

not growing out of my tendency to reverse letters and numbers and that my reading was developing at a relatively slow rate. Once it was established that such weaknesses were not due to the process of language acquisition (I had just learned to speak Hebrew), it was suspected that there might be some difficulty with my eyesight.

A chance encounter with a family friend, a special education trainer, in the optometrist's waiting room, helped my parents find insight, direction and support. It was at that time that they discovered the idea of learning disabilities and the syndrome known as "Dyslexia". Following the eye exam (which of course revealed no abnormalities), I was tested by an educational assessment team, headed by our family friend.

I was, most likely, one of the first students to be diagnosed as Dyslexic at an emerging teacher training program in Jerusalem. Not only did I receive state-of-the-art diagnosis and remediation, but I was also called upon to act as an example for pre-service teachers. I remember standing in front of a lecture, drawing and writing on a board, obviously in the wrong direction. I was six or seven years old at the time.

Once diagnosed, I was provided with intensive assistance both in Israel and in Canada, where my family settled. I recall my early school experiences in Israel as rather placid, without great trauma or difficulty. I have no memory of feeling less than capable and, though I was tutored in both English and Hebrew reading, this seemed quite normal to me.

The transition back in Canada, however, proved to be much more stressful and left me with many difficulties, some of which I still do battle with. Since I studied in a Jewish school where the day was divided between Hebrew and English language instruction and since, in the third grade, I was both fluent in Hebrew and illiterate in English, it was felt that the best course of action was to place me in grade levels that matched my skills. Thus, I was placed in a grade below my peers for half the day and a grade above for the other half.

This move proved to be a disastrous for me, particularly in the social sphere. Being an outsider to begin with, I was never really considered a peer by

any of my classmates, who saw me only for half of each day. Given that I was either farther ahead of the class, or far behind, meant that few could relate to me. Added to this were the differences between the local community and my family, my lack of physical coordination and my growing interest in art and theatre. From elementary school until I left for a second round of learning in Israel, I was considered to be the consummate outsider, the marginalized but rarely forgotten "other". This was, to say the least, a distressing experience.

As a student, the situation was equally bleak. In both classes, I was increasingly feeling the effects of my learning disability. While I could speak both languages fluently, my reading and writing skills were extremely weak. My school was populated with many older teachers, none of whom were familiar with the concept of learning disabilities. They simply saw me as a likable, talkative, slow student, who never somehow managed to work up to his potential. Looking back at old report cards, it is clear that this theme was consistent. Potential, as exhibited by my verbal capacity, seemed never to be actuated in written work.

Though I loved learning and the classroom environment, I can recall that school was a most anxious experience for me in those days. I dreaded spelling and math quizzes, spent frightened moments attempting to prepare for oral reading exercises, and many hours trying to read and write homework assignments. Teachers in those years ranged from nasty to piteous, either criticizing me harshly and incessantly, or allowing me to slip through the system with little or no assistance.

My response to the stress of this environment was predictable. In class, I would daydream and engage in artwork. Fearing exposure and the ridicule that was common, I would pretend to be confident and rarely asked for assistance. Occasionally, I complained of phantom aches and illnesses in order to avoid attending school. My motivation suffered tremendously from a lack of tangible reward and my willingness to work slowly diminished. It would be many years before I was willing to give schoolwork the effort it required.

The responsibility for assuring that my learning was properly managed fell to my parents, who arranged for tutors and reading specialists. My parents

also took seriously my emotional well being, organizing activities that would allow me to express myself and feel competent outside the classroom. Each week, I attended art and drama classes. This not only gave me a period of positive achievement, but also helped to develop hand-eye, motor and reading skills in a pleasant and rewarding environment.

My High School Experience

At the end of my elementary school years, it was decided that I should be placed with my peers in one grade level. In order to accomplish this, I agreed to spend the summer making up a grade with a tutor, and to repeat a year of Hebrew studies in an advanced class. While I was happy to undertake these moves, they did little to solve my educational and social difficulties.

The first years of high school are remembered by me as particularly painful. Unable to relate to peers who had long since formed as a group and unable to keep pace with the reading and writing of the classroom, I was thrown further into depression and self-hatred. Had it not been for my extra-curricular activities, I might not have survived that period with any sense of self-worth. In the world of the arts, I was a different person, confident, successful and content. In school I was quiet, hated for my differences and unable to achieve a sense of mastery.

Looking back, it seems that what I really lost in those years of study were the development of skills which most students acquired incidentally. Effective study habits, note-taking skills and essay construction were always implied but never explicated. Lacking in these important skills meant that weaknesses in spelling, math and penmanship were exacerbated. It pleases me to see that in today's classroom, high school teachers spend time with both learning disabled and non-challenged students in developing these. Since incorporating them into my study routine, I have become a more effective student and better able to control for my difficulties.

It was during this period of time that my parents informed me that I had a learning disability. Apparently, an article in the local paper discussing the subject, along with the story of a boy my age who, so frustrated by his Dyslexia,

had committed suicide, had convinced them that it was time to have me understand myself in a more complete manner. Knowing that there was a rational explanation for my weaknesses and that I was not just stupid, opened new doors of acceptance and understanding. Suddenly, all of the pieces of my learning life fell into place and I felt strangely whole and at peace. At first, I resented my parents for hiding this information from me, since knowing it was such a relief. Later, I came to see that they had done what they thought was best, especially since there were no real role-models or road-maps of what to do and how to do it. I also realize that developmentally, they had correctly targeted the appropriate age for me to understand my difficulties and begin to take responsibility for them.

At the end of my junior high school years, I was taken to Israel by my family for a year of study. The question of my education for the year, presented my parents with a challenge. My Hebrew reading and writing were so poor that I could not keep up with the advanced Israeli high school curriculum. A short and disastrous attempt to place me in a British-style boarding school ended when I approached the headmaster and carefully explained to him my learning difficulties and the reasons why my needs could not be met by his program.

Subsequently, my parents placed me in a school based on the "Summerhill" model. This so-called "free-school" was a unique experiment in democracy and child-centered education. Students were responsible for their attendance at school, for choice of courses and for the completion of assignments, with little overt pressure. Exams and grades were optional features for those who wished to attend university. Classes were creative and covered a wide variety of subjects in literature, language and the arts. Administration, course design and student admissions were handled by a committee, equally represented by students and faculty.

I flourished in that environment. I loved the arts and drama courses and the freedom to take my education in whatever direction I desired. I painted, acted, sang and debated with a freedom and ferocity that remains unparalleled in my life. I especially remember my English writing class, where for the first time, my skills as a writer superseded my poor spelling and handwriting. Success in this area lead me to look for a typewriter. My first self-initiated

adaptive strategy was lovingly executed on a machine that was as old as my grandparents. Suddenly, I went from feeling like an illiterate to an aspiring writer. When I told a family friend that I wanted to write professionally but could not spell, she commented that an editor could alleviate my difficulties. It is a comment that I have never forgotten and have since used well.

While in this program, I realized, perhaps for the first time, that my education was my responsibility. Seeing that the program lacked in certain areas, I began to organize extra-curricular studies for myself. I registered with the Canadian government for a correspondence course in mathematics. At the same, time I began a weekly program of Judaic studies with American rabbinical students.

Back in Canada, my high school years ended with excitement. Though I was never able to achieve in that environment what I had in Israel, I had regained enough self-confidence to complete my courses and maintain a sense of worth. I was surprised to learn that none of my teachers knew that I was learning disabled and began to disclose to some. This opened some doors for limited accommodation though they and I still did not know what I needed to in order to succeed. For the most part, however, they remained unsympathetic and often adversarial, seeing my weaknesses as stemming from a lack of effort and organization. One teacher remarked that given my skills at memorizing and discussing Shakespearean material, it was pathetic to him that I should make excuses for my poor written work.

Socially, my situation improved considerably and I was accepted by my peers. At the same time, I began to take a leadership role in my synagogue's youth program, a role that I remain in today. I used my new found social status to observe and discuss with friends the habits and skills which allowed them to succeed. I imitated their behaviors carefully and made mental notes on their strategies and schedules for test and paper preparation.

I graduated high school in a class of students who were extremely bright and achievement oriented. Though my success was comparatively modest, I left high school feeling as though I had conquered the world. I was particularly overjoyed to have been placed on the honor role for Judaic Studies, as it

represented a further exoneration of my abilities. Today, the school system I attended boasts of my success, along with that of my classmates, as a testament to their pedagogical superiority, even going so far as to publish reports of our university grades in the local newspaper. I resent the use of my achievement for this purpose. It is my feeling that I was able to succeed not because of my educators' efforts, but despite them. I feel that it is my parents who are primarily responsible for my survival in that environment and I am grateful to them for their love and support.

My Undergraduate Experience

I began my undergraduate studies, as I always seem to, in the State of Israel. Traveling to Israel for a year of academic and leadership training proved to be instrumental in my journey of self-discovery. For the first time, I found that I was as capable and bright as my classmates, even the most accomplished. My background in Judaics, along with my never before understood talent for following and memorizing lectures, meant that I was the one who was counted on to prepare the group for exams. I utilized the skills and techniques that I had observed in my former classmates with much success. In one year, I had gone from moderate to high achiever, attaining grades at a university level that were never possible in high school.

Upon completing my year in Israel, I enrolled in an undergraduate-only university in my home town. This small institution was the perfect setting for me to hone my skills and develop new ones. Professors lavished time and effort on undergraduates, especially those who showed promise and sought their guidance. I was, almost immediately, spotted by several instructors as a promising and hard-working student. I was interested in studying psychology, but was enticed into the history department by the support and encouragement they offered. I found the study of history to be fascinating and I enjoyed its story-like qualities. I merged this with my passion for art and began to specialize in the history of art.

I consider this to be the point at which I truly discovered myself as a student and a thinker. I began to take seriously the idea that my learning disabilities required added and concerted effort on my part, in order to

circumvent their deleterious effect. I selected courses with great care and timing. I scheduled my study and recreation time in order to allow for advance preparation of reading assignments, exams and papers. All written work was given to typist-editors and no exam was written without an explanation to the professor as to why the penmanship and spelling would be poor. I became a devotee of lectures, faithfully attending and recording them with precision. I organized study groups and discussed material with as many dedicated classmates as possible.

My undergraduate years ended with a level of success that was as exciting as it was unexpected. Despite the fact that I was achieving in course after course and awarded prizes and scholarships for my efforts, I remained internally skeptical about the possibility of continued success. The vision of past failures and the voices of harsh, critical teachers echoed in my mind. Rather than looking at my success as a newly turned corner, I insisted to myself that it was a momentary phase. Unable to shake off the demons of the past, I paused for careful planning before taking fearful advance in my academic career.

My Graduate Experience

After completing my first degree, I was faced with important and difficult decisions. I had always wanted to study psychology, but had not done so, as I felt more comfortable and better supported in the History department of my university. It did not seem prudent for me to continue in this field, as I was told that it held limited professional potential. In considering a career, I narrowed my choices to psychology and the rabbinate. I had always shown skill as a Judaic studies student, had a great love of my religion and enjoyed public speaking, ritual leadership and teaching. I had also always enjoyed work with children and was keenly interested in their development. By the time I finished university, I had considerable experience as a religious educator, child-care worker and recreational programmer, having worked steadily throughout my student years.

I decided to take time to engage in Judaic studies in Israel. Over the course of a year, I attempted to study in several institutions in Jerusalem. While I enjoyed the philosophy of these studies, the dogmatic nature of those with

whom I studied lead me to dislike and fear that environment. Additionally, the technical skills necessary for the study of many Jewish texts, seemed illusive and unnecessarily difficult. I had recalled that my father, who was also Dyslexic, had a great deal of difficulty in his rabbinical studies for the same reasons.

After returning from Israel, with offers of admission to two rabbinical colleges, I felt lost. I could not decide whether my love of Judaic studies was powerful enough to help me withstand the pressure of acquiring reading and writing skills in several languages. This, I feared, would send me on a downward spiral of shame and doubt, similar to years past. On the other hand, it seemed equally difficult to enter a training program in psychology that would demand reading and mathematical skills at a level that might prove problematic for me. Additionally, It was well known that Psychology programs accepted a limited number of highly accomplished candidates. I remained skeptical that I could be considered such a student.

Two years would pass before I summoned the courage to decide. In the end, I entered psychology through the educational field, where I felt most comfortable and experienced. I knew that the psychology that I would practice would somehow involve educational components and so I set about to develop skills and obtain knowledge in this area.

Entering the environment of the Educational Psychology Department proved to be a wise move. Again, I was able to work within a relatively small and concentrated department, with highly attentive faculty and equally motivated classmates. I shared my skills and enthusiasm with my mainly older colleagues, who in turn, offered their efficiency and the insight of their considerable experience as teachers and therapists. As one of only a handful of full-time students, I was offered the support and encouragement necessary for success. My love of the unusual and the creative was valued and I was given much room to explore and experiment. This, along with the creativity of my professors and colleagues, solidified my love for the study of child development and psychology.

I entered my Master's program with many fears, most of them surrounding my learning disabilities. Would I be able to keep pace with

professional colleagues? Could I handle the intensified level of reading and writing? Would I be exposed as a poor student, thinker and writer? I decided to be open with my faculty as to the nature of my difficulties, advocating for accommodation on my own behalf. While there was not universal acceptance of my request for assistance and accommodation among faculty members, most were understanding and supportive.

I soon realized that many of the circumvention skills which I had developed in my undergraduate years, were powerfully applicable in a graduate studies context and continued to allow me to learn and grow. I also came to see that I was not a victim of my limitations and that I could allow my skills as a thinker and writer to emerge almost unencumbered by my learning disability. Utilizing my skills and the newly available technologies meant that I could ease my fears and function on an acceptable level in even the most demanding of situations. I left my Master's program feeling competent and accomplished.

After receiving several offers from Doctoral programs in the United States, I decided to attend the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. Here, I felt that I could continue my work in an environment that was challenging, yet knowledgeable and sensitive to the needs of special students. I have been in the program for several years and, while there have been difficult moments for me, it has, in an overall sense, been a positive experience.

The two major improvements to occur in my life as a student during my graduate studies years are both technological. At the beginning of my Master's degree program, I began to use a computer. The computer liberated me, in a final sense, from the limitations placed on my writing. I was, once and for all, able to rid my work of its technical errors and allow it to be judged for its content alone. As I began my Doctoral program, I discovered the world of spoken word recordings. Since then, I have availed myself of services for the blind and disabled in several locations, widening the scope of available material each time. In preparation for my comprehensive exams, I was forced to hire a reader, as the required material was not readily available.

As with many of the skills that I have acquired over time, these technologies add to my arsenal of defense against the limitations placed on me by my learning disability. They not only allow me to present myself in public with a sense of competence and confidence, but add to my internal sense of accomplishment as well. More than most strategies which I have discovered and deployed, these make me realize that my learning disability is really nothing more than a technical weakness and not an indication of a general lack of intelligence or ability. They have gone a long way to silence those inner voices which are so critical, so limiting and so disempowering.

Yet, I still feel that I retain those old doubts and fears. Though it seems ludicrous to indulge in such notions long after they have been disproved, they do manage to surface with great ferocity. Evidence of success does not do damage to them in a manner that is equal to the damage caused by signs of failure. In a graduate environment, even the most accomplished student can feel mediocre. Given my old feelings of incompetence and stupidity, such normal setbacks take on enormous proportions.

Graduate school has been a place of great growth for me. I feel that the skills which I developed as an undergraduate in general and as a learning disabled student in particular, have served me well in this environment. Self sufficiency, motivation and creativity have all proven to be necessary and important skills for success. Having been forced to acquire these skills in order to maneuver through my early schooling has, I feel, allowed me to make the most of my graduate years.

Positive as they may be, these have not been years that are free of stress or strife. Early on, I learned that no matter how many understanding souls there were in a program, a level of excellence was expected regardless of disability or weakness. The effort necessary for success in the graduate environment has been, at times, overwhelming. This is especially true given the level of excellence and achievement of peers and teachers. Competition and comparison are inevitable in such an intense and highly accomplished environment. It is easy to feel inferior without learning impediments. With them, it is almost inevitable.

In both of my graduate studies institutions, I have seen a variety of responses to my disclosure of Dyslexia, as well as the general regard with which students with disabilities are met. Some are wonderfully accepting and accommodating, allowing modifications to be made which are reasonable and assistive but do not sacrifice the quality of the learning level. Others, tend to be patronizing, exhibiting unnecessary levels of pity at the expense of rigor and expectation. Still others are hostile to students who disclose—overtly or otherwise displaying their disapproval or dismissal.

I can recall several incidents throughout my years as a graduate student, when I would disclose my Dyslexia to a professor, only to be met with anger, incredulity or disrespect. More than once, I have been told by a professor that they would make no accommodations for students with disabilities, as it would lower the rigor of their classroom. Other times, I have been told that my work was simply too good to have been produced by a student with a legitimate learning disability. Somehow, these instructors equated learning disability with performance weakness and resented being asked to compensate for it or to reduce their standards. The most extreme example of this came in a course I took in special education, where a professor who taught us about learning disabilities privately admitted to me that she did not believe in their existence. Such negative attitudes leave me and many of my fellow graduate students with learning disabilities confused, angered and reluctant to discuss our needs with instructors.

Over my years as a graduate student, I have seen the development of special services for students with disabilities and have taken advantage of the support offered. I must admit, however, to a certain reticence where these services are concerned. I think that after so many years of self-generated advocacy and compensation, I was suspicious of outside offers and nervous that once I became dependent upon such services, they would be removed. I think that my experience is representative of many students in my situation.

Nonetheless, I do feel that Special Needs Offices and the services and advocacy they provide, are important tools to success at the graduate level. I can see that younger students who do not suffer from the suspicions that I do, have come to rely on these services, mostly to their benefit. It is sad to note that

with increasing budget cuts, such offices are closing at a time when their work is gaining acceptance among students and faculty and their efficacy is improving. Since learning disabilities are "silent" in the sense that they are not highly recognizable or visible, it is important to have support and advocacy for students who might otherwise needlessly suffer or fail in their graduate studies efforts.

As I write the story of my learning history, I am cognizant of the fact that I live in a time of unprecedented support for students with learning disabilities. I have, throughout my lifetime, benefited from a growing awareness of and assistance for my learning difficulties. Never before has so much been known about learning disabilities and never before has so much aid and remediation been available to students of all ages. I am equally aware, however, of the fact that the field of study into the makeup and needs of students with learning disabilities is in its infancy. Despite all that has been offered to me, the greatest advances that I made were self-generated. They have occurred in an environment that was sometimes supportive and understanding, but often in one that was either ignorant and oblivious or hostile and adversarial.

As the child of a learning disabled student, it is difficult not to be grateful for even these preliminary advances. I can see that there have been great strides made in the study and understanding of younger students with learning disabilities. Furthermore, I and others like me, have been granted the right to examine the phenomenon of students with learning disabilities in order to further our understanding of the population's needs. At the same time, however, it is disheartening to see how little has changed between my fathers' generation and mine and how slow the progress has been in my lifetime. Despite unprecedented advances in medicine, psychology and learning theory, and despite the meteoric rise of publicity and awareness surrounding learning disabilities, change comes at a pace that defeats too many of us.

My life as a learner has been one of much pain, but mostly one of great triumph. Though I am dogged by the many negative experiences of my learning life and remain hostage to feelings of inadequacy, I am liberated by my experiences of conquest and success. Though many of my learning institutions have not known how to handle me and meet my needs, I feel that overall I have

been granted fair and adequate access to learning. My goal as a professional is to add to that chain which seeks to form order from chaos, understanding from ignorance and acceptance from prejudice and fear. I feel that my experiences as a person with a learning disability have prepared me well for this exercise. It has taught me to view the world much as the ancient Kabbalists would—as a shattered vessel, whose potential lies in a myriad of beautiful shards, but whose completion requires delicate and intricate works of kindness and repair.

"Hitting the Wall"

COLOUR PLATE #11

After completing the task of writing the individual biographies, I waited to begin the phase of final thematic analysis. Somehow, I thought that the ideas would flow naturally and instantaneously from the biographical sketches. Much to my chagrin and later horror, they did not. After a while, I began to think it would never happen.

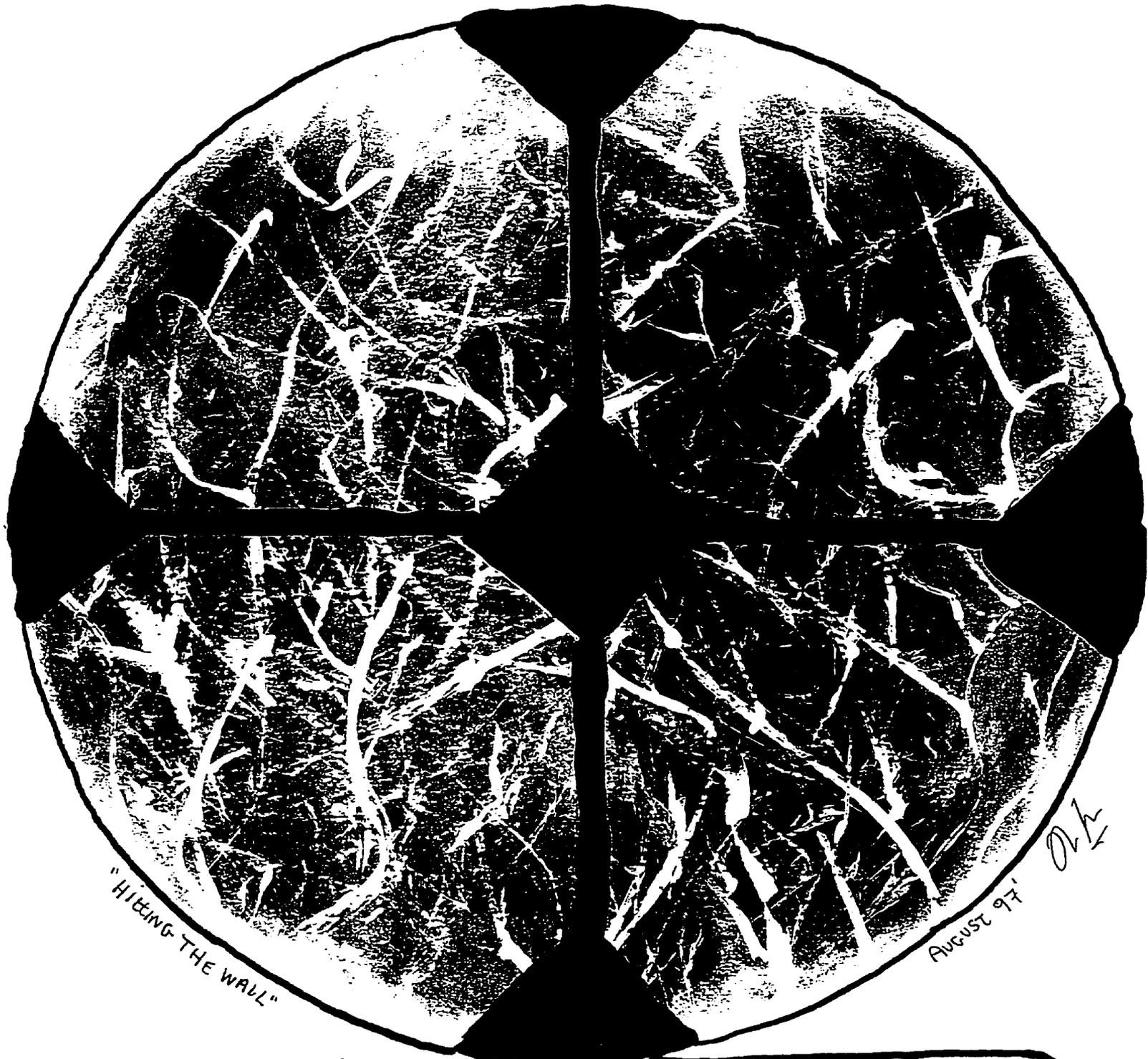
I wanted to represent this stage of the journey in marble—a large round sphere (a roadblock) perched atop an elegant, immovable column. I researched painting techniques, purchased special equipment and began to work on the sphere. To my chagrin and later horror, the piece didn't work, the marbling effect was flat, confused and lifeless. Art it seemed was imitating life—or was it simply that my creative process mirrored my intellectual state of stagnation.

Each time such a block happens, I think of long distance runners, who, when they can push their bodies no further, say that they have "hit the wall". Clearly, I was pushing myself to produce when the process was exhausted and needed time to regenerate. Once again, I needed to trust this part of myself and the work, something which I once again found difficult to do.

In frustration, I was going to throw out the artwork, as it seemed to me to have no life, no value. Then it hit me that despite its technical faults, it was highly representative of what was going on inside for me. Here was an opportunity for process and product to come together in a unique manner.

And just when I thought I had nothing in me that was creative or intellectual, I attempted to complete the art piece, using instinct rather than technique, having no expectations of perfection. The result was that the column—the final portion of the Mandala—emerged much closer in texture to my original intent. It seemed that I was able to let go of my conscious over-controlling elements and allow the natural, instinctive parts of myself take free reign.

And then, I began to allow this same thing to happen with my written work...



"HIENG THE WALL"

AUGUST 97

D.K.



"Bearing First Fruits"

COLOUR PLATE #12

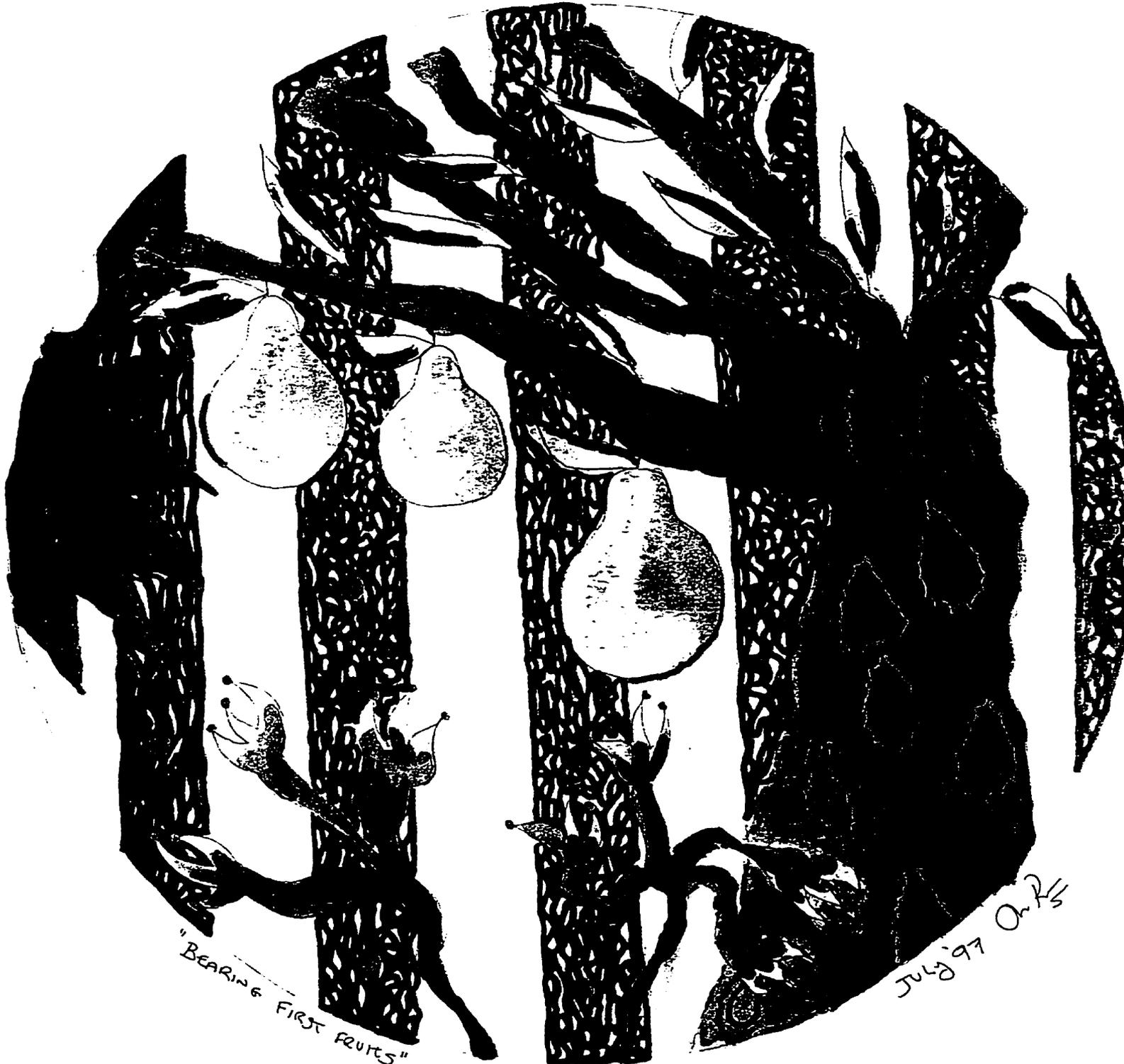
How exciting it was to see emerging on the screen before me the structure of my themes and patterns! During the intense heat of summer, I hid myself in a friend's basement and faced my computer, letting my mind make sense of the ideas that I was certain were there, literally at my fingertips. I had no idea how the order or structure of themes would emerge and I was not at all certain that I could verbalize concepts and connections which I had only begun to sense. I recapped for myself and for the reader the process of trying to unearth my themes and then allowed them to flow, pulling back the curtain of mystery to examine the garden of ideas which I had planted.

Lo and behold, there it was, as if by magic! Themes which seemed complete and confident, ideas that were well-formed and well-grounded. Forgetting all the months of organization, rumination and frustration, I began to ask myself 'where did this come from?'

Outside my window I could see the pear trees, the grass and the flowers, bursting with life, warmth and energy. Vibrancy seemed to flow in them as it did in my work—it was exciting, invigorating and immensely rewarding all at the same time.

This was all very new and I realized that it needed more time to mature and ripen. There were strange elements that I had yet to understand and contextualize— ideas that flowed from ideas that did not yet make sense. I needed to write it all out in detail, making sure that it hung together in a cohesive and approachable manner.

All that was yet to come. For the moment, I enjoyed the view—the feeling that things were starting to fall into place in a deep and significant manner. All of a sudden it seemed silly to have ever doubted the process or myself. From where I sat, overlooking this harvest of ideas, it all made sense.



"BEARING FIRST FRUITS"

JULY '97 On R/S

CHAPTER 5

Mural: A Thematic Analysis

The courage to be is the courage to accept oneself as accepted in spite of being unacceptable.

— Paul Tillich

Introduction

The process of analyzing data derived from a qualitative inquiry is complex and laborious. The intricate nature of its construction makes for work that is delicate and sensitive. Its need for rigor demands a product that is strong, thorough and solidly grounded. It is a colorful weave of that which the researcher brings to the task—personal biases, previous experiences, relevant theories and literature—in combination with the often large sums of data collected in the form of personal narratives, corroborating documentation, field notes, artwork and diaries. Such a process has as its aim, the creation of a product that is a corroboration between the known or presumed to be, with the previously unknown, or that which is discovered in the moment, uniquely arising out of data collected.

While it would be incorrect to state that an author can completely ignore the background of existing knowledge and bias, each qualitative researcher sees as his or her ultimate goal, the construction of themes and understandings of a phenomenon that arises primarily out of material they have collected. Indeed, the qualitative paradigm demands that themes and analyses be constantly compared and corroborated—not with pre-existing theories or presumptions, but with the words and experiences of Co-researchers (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). At some point in the quest for a qualitative understanding, a researcher must abandon (as much as possible) the background noise of previous learning, in order to clearly listen for new insight and information.

In order to accomplish this, the researchers must be sensitive to themselves, to the knowledge which they already possess and to the data which they have painstakingly collected and organized. Such a process requires

constant vigilance on the part of the researcher, who engages in an ever-deepening cycle of data analysis, thematic conjecture and final confirmation, based on a repeated contact with the data. What emerges is a construction, tentative at first, which gradually builds upon itself with increasing certainty and sophistication, only to return again and again to its roots in the words and ideas of the Co-researcher population. The ideal result of this work is a set of themes and insights which emerge as a composite spiral of interconnected units, built upon and rooted in each other and in the data which have been so conscientiously consulted for verification and confirmation (Lather, 1986; Lincoln & Guba, 1986, 1990; Merriam, 1988; Noffke, 1991).

In looking at the data for the present study, I, as both author and participant, was made keenly aware of the need for such rigor. It would not have been acceptable for me to discount my personal experience in favor of a noble but foolish attempt at pure objectivity. I simply could not listen to the voices of my fellow participants without, at some point, adding my own to the chorus. On the other hand, it would not have been sufficient for me to have listened only to the tone and timbre of my story at the expense of the others collected. What was required was a process known as "intersubjectivity" (Ellis & Flaherty, 1992) whereby collaborating parties (who understand that each holds a unique view of reality) construct a broad view of a phenomenon which attempts to encompass individual and shared perspectives.

After carefully reading and repeatedly re-engaging both the "raw" data (the taped and transcribed interview sessions, artwork and ancillary documentation), along with the biographical sketches which I had written based on this data, I began to look for themes. I struggled to find these themes, thinking that they would emerge from some ethereal, complex and soul-rending exercise that was as yet unknown to me. The more I attempted to find such a process, the more it, and the desired thematic insight, seemed to evade me. Reading and reviewing books which introduced me to the process of qualitative research did not prove helpful, as they tended to be purposely vague on the particulars of the interpretation process. Rather than being prescriptive, the works suggested that novice researchers cautiously avoid hypothesizing and instead look for answers from within the data collected. Beyond this, however, they merely advised authors to trust themselves, their instinct for thematic

construction and the precious gifts bestowed upon them by Co-researchers—the participants in this study (see Chapter 2).

It was not until I could let go of my need for a complex formulaic approach to data analysis that I began to see, perhaps for the first time, the existence of potent themes. Oddly enough, these themes seemed to have always been there, always have emerged from the stories as I engaged with them, but were never honored as such. That which I had once taken to be perfunctorily obvious, I now saw as profoundly important. Its simplicity, for me, masked its power and hid from me the realization of its stature. Having struggled to find obscurity, I came to realize that what I was truly meant to find was simplicity. All along, I had been seeing trends that were not merely distractions but were, in fact, the very stuff that I was after all along.

What I have come to realize is that the process of qualitative thematic construction is unlike any other learning exercise I have known and that it can, as a consequence, lead to discoveries which are similarly unique. My understanding of the process suggests that it requires four basic elements—trust, flexibility, intuition and movement. Trust, as I have experienced it, implies a willingness to see value in the material one has collected as well as in the self as collector. One must constantly fight off the erroneous conclusion that compiled data is vacuous and uninteresting and that this merely reflects a similar state of being inherent to the researcher. Reciprocal confidence in the goodness and strength of data as research and in the self as researcher, is key.

Flexibility, as encountered in this work, implies the ability to look at data from ever-differing angles and views. Searching for truth, understanding and insight often requires a fresh approach and a new lens through which to interpret that which is perceived. Abandoning, even temporarily, the views of predecessors, colleagues and even conventional wisdom, can often yield surprising results.

Intuition, in the context of qualitative inquiry as I have come to know it, implies the ability to listen, both the self and to the other as represented by the data. This process allows, with increasing certainty, the confirmation that one's insights are viable, tangible pieces of knowledge. In addition, it strengthens the

conviction that the data do indeed have interesting stories to tell and valuable lessons to be learned.

Movement, from this perspective, implies the constant contact between the internal and external, the self and the other (as represented by the data), the researcher and the researched. Listening to the data as well as to the reactions which emerge from this with equal ferocity and delicacy can assist in the construction of themes that soar to new heights, yet are firmly grounded.

Taken together, these attitudes have helped me to find a pathway into the data and have allowed me to experience the power of discovery and creative insight. In looking at published materials on the evaluation of qualitative data, I have come to see their vagaries as valuable lessons. Rather than being directive, they are experiential in design. They presume the reciprocal uniqueness of both the data and the researcher. They offer more than a mere formula for the derivation of communality. Instead, they invite the author to engage and construct, not only the meaning that emerges from this interaction, but the process of that construction as well. Such an open agenda left me feeling, at times, both marvelously free and dangerously uncharted. Yet, I was never truly alone in the process, nor did I feel completely un-tethered. As long as I had the data, as well as trust in my own instincts and intuition, I felt that I was standing on firm ground. Using myself and the words of Co-researchers as guides, I felt less like one who leaps across gaps in knowledge and more like a builder adding new levels to a secure structure.

Emergent Themes

As a result of my immersion in the above described process, I was able to derive a thematic structure to describe the educational life-histories of the six participants (referred to alternately as Co-researchers or "members of The Group"). This structure, attempts to describe experiences common to The Group on both the level of event and emotion. It seeks to detail not only the story of what happened to members of The Group, but also how they reacted to these occurrences and ultimately overcame the adversities presented to them. This is significant, in that it adheres to the stated goal of the study, which was to

both chronicle the progress of a specific population while seeking insight which might prove beneficial to others.

As such, the results of the data analysis have been divided into two sections. In this chapter, a thematic description of experiences common to The Group are presented in some detail. In and of itself, these results are significant, as there is much insight into human behavior and institutional conduct to be gleaned from these recollections. Following this, in chapter 6, a suggested model of assistance for future students with learning disabilities is outlined. This analysis utilized as its source, material explicitly articulated by The Group in answer to a request for advice, as well as the principles derived from the life history narratives as presented in this chapter.

Themes Describing The Group Experience

Two major themes emerged as organizing principles for the description of The Group's experiences of living with a learning disability and their reactions to this which have allowed them to progress to the highest levels of formal education. The first, is that there was a common experiential trajectory, which emerged for The Group, a loosely defined route that applied, almost universally, to The Group's development and experience. The second major theme, (related to the first), is that success came to The Group as a result of individual's ability to transform adversity into advantage. In analyzing those skills which were deficient to The Group, as well as those strategies used to overcome them, it became evident that there was a complementary relationship between the two. At some point in their journey, Co-researchers were not only able to overcome the negative effects of their learning disability, but, were able to make use of it in a positive manner. This not only assisted them in achieving normalcy, but left them with a distinctive advantage as thinkers and learners.

Based on the life-history narratives collected, members of The Group can be seen as having experienced a common experiential trajectory. This three tiered model, is both universal and particular. While all members of The Group experienced and recalled it at some level, each did so in his or her own way. It is important to note that this is a non-linear model of development and one that is free of any chronological sequence. Members of The Group progressed through

the stages at differing times in their student careers, with intervals of varying length and intensity. Some followed a trajectory that was linear, others one that was more circular and repetitive. Most, experienced a recurrence of steps, particularly as they moved into ever-higher levels of education which presented them with new environments, more complex learning and advanced incarnations of their difficulties. Yet, without exception, members of The Group reported experiencing growth along the lines described below.

The experiential trajectory, in its three main steps and 16 sub-steps is outlined as followed:

DISCOVERY OF DIFFERENCE

- Early Love of Learning
- Early Failures
- Sense of Difference

EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY

- Feelings of Inadequacy
- Social Isolation
- Working Hard, Getting Nowhere
- Negative Encounters With Significant Adults
- Hopelessness/Anger

SUCCESS OVER DISABILITY

- Discovery of Outside Skills
- Discovery of Early Coping Strategies
- Early Experience of Academic Success
- Encouragement from Significant Adults
- Accepting the Self as Different
- Development of Compensatory Arsenal
- The Power of Identification
- Transforming Adversity Into Advantage

The impetus to frame the thematic findings in this form, came from four primary sources: the qualitative research guidelines as posited by Ely (1991), the research of Gerber and Reiff (1988, 1991, 1992, 1994), of Siegel and Lowe

(1994) and, most importantly, from the narratives themselves. Ely's guide provided me with the idea that thematic understanding can best emerge from a well-reasoned set of broad categories or "thinking units". This, allowed me to look at the both the broad steps as well as the sub-steps in an organized and cohesive manner. Gerber and Reiff's work, widely considered to be both ground-breaking and the current intellectual standard in the area of adult learning disabilities, posits a set of inter-connected feelings and actions utilized by successful populations of learning disabled adults. While the model articulated in the present study did not necessarily intend to replicate Gerber and Reiff's work directly (there certainly are, however, overlapping themes), it does take as its chief influence the idea that such models exist and can be unearthed through qualitative means.

The work of Siegel and Lowe (1994), though focused on a different population, was instrumental in developing the current structure. Their "life passage" model—an exploration of the psychological development of gay men—posits a theory that is non-linear and non-chronological. Yet, it does present a working model with distinct steps, that is most insightful and helpful in comprehending the trajectory and experiences of The Group. Similarly, their use of a population that experiences difference long before it has definition, was helpful in framing the life-histories of the present population, most of whom comprehended their learning differences well before they were diagnosed as disabilities.

Most importantly, though, the model outlined above and detailed below, emerged from the structure and substance of The Group's narratives. Repeatedly, as I was compiling the biographical outlines, I was presented with scenarios which seemed to follow similar patterns. This struck me as most interesting, especially considering the divergent nature of the population in terms of age, level of education and field of interest. As I spent more time with the data generated by The Group, I was better able to see that this first glimpse of their commonalty had substance and therefore importance to it. Having been given examples of structure from outside sources, along with narratives that were compelling and consistent, meant that the developmental structure, along with the description of The Group's ability to turn adversity into strength, was in effect, discovered rather than constructed.

Description of The Experiential Trajectory

Discovery of Difference

The discovery of difference was an inevitable outcome for Co-researchers, the product of deviating from expected educational patterns. At some point in their school careers, Co-researchers began to display learning styles which seemed to them and others to be an anathema. Partially, they exhibited traits akin to bright students—they showed initiative, intelligence creativity and in some cases exceptional talent. At the same time, however, they seemed more like their less capable peers, sharing extreme weaknesses in some, if not all, basic skills acquisition.

The sense of difference or deviation from the norm, is widely regarded as the first step in realizing the presence of a disability. Several authors (e.g., Barnes, 1995, Hahn, 1993, Rose, 1997) have noted that the concept of disability is a social construction, a label which is placed externally upon an individual who in some way does not conform to societal ideals. It is not until a person is faced with the consequences of deviation from the norm, that any naturally occurring difference can be seen as a disadvantage. It is only when these stylistic differences—be they in perception of sight or sound, in movement or in the process of learning—create for an individual a lack of opportunity or access to knowledge and power that they can be called a "disability".

As such, students with learning disabilities, a relatively late emerging trait (as compared with other physical or psychological developments), may not have been seen as different or disabled, until they reached their school years. Prior to this, they may have exhibited differences in personality and behavior that were seen primarily as temperamental in nature and not as signs of weakness or lack of ability. Once in school, however, they began to be judged and to judge themselves by standards that labeled and categorized them as lesser able.

Since most educational systems tended to classify children along very narrow lines ("bright versus "dull" "successful" versus "challenged", etc.) Co-

researchers—fitting nowhere—were at a loss. They were either regarded as incapable, willfully ignorant of basic educational principals, or simply lazy, lacking in discipline or motivation. Their exhibited traits of intelligence were either ignored in favor of rigid definitions, or seen as evidence that their lack of progress was due to a deliberate attempt on their part to ignore learning.

The point at which difference was first discovered emerged for Co-researchers at various stages in the learning careers. For some, it was an early and sustained realization, permanently marring the learning experience. For others, it would emerge at a later juncture, challenging, perhaps for the first time, an educational trajectory that was previously positive and accomplished. At some point, however, difference became clear to all members of The Group, as well as to their teachers and parents. Potential could not be actualized at a level or rate that was acceptable. Failure became the norm.

Before they could accept their status as non-normative students and before they could begin to struggle to allow innate intelligence to emerge from under the veil of failure, Co-researchers would first have to see themselves as different and sense that something was not right in their lives as learners. As such, this stage in their development is an important one, for it signifies the entry point into a process that would leave its participants with strongly perceived competing feelings of strength and weakness, frustration and elation, triumph and tragedy.

Early Love of Learning

Though a majority of The Group noted that learning difficulties manifest themselves at an early age, most reported that by the time these appeared, they had developed positive feelings toward learning and the classroom environment. Furthermore, Co-researchers reported that a love and need of learning sustained itself throughout many years of tribulation, enticing them to remain in academic environments, even when they became harsh and difficult. Almost all recalled early classrooms with fondness, some even saw them as idyllic. Noah, for example, stated that he "loved" his preschool classroom and the exciting discoveries made possible there. Sandy, remembered her early-years teacher as "a princess."

These early experiences signaled the emergence of a life-long love affair between Co-researchers and learning. More than any other commonality, it was this affection and dedication to learning which unified members of The Group. In the preschool years, it was a combination of natural curiosity with an environment that allowed for a multiplicity of personal learning styles, that sowed the seeds for positive feelings toward education. Later, it was a desire to learn about the world, to discover new insight and acquire more sophisticated skills, which perpetuated the need to learn. Such feelings would prove to be remarkably resilient, considering the level of adversity that would later be encountered.

For a majority of Co-researchers, this early onset, powerfully felt love of learning, set the stage for success in the face of later challenge. It would appear that, as they waged their personal battles for self-understanding and success, Co-researchers would return to early positive memories for comfort and inspiration. This would, in turn, fuel the drive to learn, so often battered in times of adversity. Some, having temporarily conceded defeat to failures brought on by learning disabilities, would later find themselves experiencing a need to return to school in order to satisfy a deeply felt thirst for knowledge.

Certainly, there was great variation in the onset of experiencing learning disability, with some Co-researchers having only positive early experiences. Regardless of how early these turned to negative scenarios, however, all Co-researchers recalled some moments of joy and a sense of intense attachment to the learning process. All students who continue through the highest levels of educational systems are passionate about their learning. For Co-researchers, however, such passion served a dual purpose. It not only maintained their interest, but helped to inoculate them against many years of struggle, doubt and difficulty caused by learning disabilities. Without this passion, students might have relinquished and pursued other ventures.

First Failures

For most members of The Group, initial feelings of excitement and belonging in the classroom were soon challenged by growing disappointment

and lack of progress. Most Co-researchers remembered having had some level of difficulty in acquiring basic proficiency in literacy and mathematics. For no apparent reason, they began to fall behind their peers and exhibit either broad-based or skill-specific deficits. Sam, for example recalled "just not being able to do certain tasks and having to kind of learn and then over-learn something . . . yet, everybody else seemed to be able to do it, and I couldn't. " Sandy, stated that by the end of her first year in school, her parents realized that she was experiencing difficulty and that by "grade three . . . I started having memories of actual learning and disappointment and not being able to keep up."

Not all members of The Group exhibited signs of learning difference immediately. Kit, for example, was able to develop reading and basic writing skills at a very fast pace, well before his peers. It was not until midway through his elementary school years that his deficits began to manifest themselves in poor spelling, grammar and compositional skills, leading to many years of failure and disappointment. Manya, the product of a home environment that stressed reading and a student who not only showed talent but was given great latitude in her work, did not comprehend the first signs of her Dyslexia as it pertained to her learning until she was enrolled in an Ivy League university. Before that, she regarded her lack of directional skill and technical errors in writing and computation with casual bemusement.

Regardless of when these first incidents of failure occurred, it appeared that for all members of The Group, such experiences heralded a monumental shift in the learning experience. Almost immediately, failure washed over them with currents of self-doubt and loathing—feelings that would doggedly pursue them throughout their student careers. With no understanding as to why it was that they failed and with no visible means of overcoming it, members were thrown into a negative cycle from which they seemed unable to emerge. Kit, described these early years as being filled with "frustration" and "fear". Avi pronounced it to have been "disastrous".

These first failures stand as mirror images to early memories of excitement and accomplishment in the learning environment. As with the positive experiences, first failures appear to have had an effect that was powerful and long-lasting. As members of The Group progressed through

various educational systems, it was difficult to erase these early memories and the pain they caused. Despite many successes which eventually came to individual Co-researchers, these memories persisted with a ferocity that could not be dispelled.

Sense of Difference

Faced with a dichotomy of poor performance and a great love of learning, members of The Group attempted to reconcile themselves to a confusing situation. With few external cues to suggest that they were bright and capable, most Co-researchers had to depend on their own sense of selves as possessing abilities or skills which were of sufficient value to counteract evidence of their shortcomings. What emerged for many was a perceptible sense of difference between them and their peers, with whom they seemed to be mismatched. Since many classrooms were divided along lines of achievement, members of The Group were often placed with peers who seemed as different from them as accomplished students. Several noted the fact that they began, from an early age, to see themselves as existing in a "no-man's land" of self and other evaluation. They seemed too bright and articulate to be with those children who were less accomplished, yet not successful enough to be with children who were advanced.

Sam recalled this feeling with great clarity:

All the friends I did develop were . . . very bright and they were always in the very bright class . . . I was in the mediocre class and it was very frustrating 'cause I knew that I was as bright as they were . . . I couldn't express my abilities.

For most members of The Group, this sense of difference manifest itself most obviously in the classroom streams into which they were placed. Several recalled with great horror, their placement into reading groups which fit their technical abilities, but not their level of intellect. Sandy stated with great anger, that she did all that she could to escape the low status of the "Brown Group", despite her teachers contentions that she was not capable of doing so. Noah, like Sandy, recalled feeling mismatched both culturally and intellectually in his reading group. Having been placed in two different grade groupings

simultaneously—both above and below his age level on a daily basis—Avi felt out of place for most of his early learning years.

These early feelings of difference are significant in the development of later success for the population. They signal a level of health in the self concept of Co-researchers, such that they were able to remain connected with early memories of enjoyment in the classroom and intuitive feelings of worth and ability. By seeing themselves as different rather than merely incapable, an important doorway was left open to members of The Group for recovery from the trauma of repeated failure. These feelings, which would remain with members until they were confirmed by diagnosis or disclosure of learning disability, served to add impetus to their struggle. They gave Co-researchers reason to suspect that they were somehow not achieving at a level that was commensurate with their capabilities and thus empowered them to attempt to better their situation. This can be seen as the first step in the later process of turning adversity into success.

At the same time, however, these experiences signaled the beginning of a long standing struggle against frustration, apathy and anxiety. For, it was these memories which would form the bedrock of later feelings of failure and incompetence—feelings which remained with almost all Co-researchers long after they had begun to realize academic and professional success. As such, they formed the nucleus of the contradictory, often competitive emotions which seemed to typify the life histories of Co-researchers. Seeing the self as both unique, capable and strong and, at the same time, hideously different, unfit and feeble, appeared to be the inner projections which continuously fought for prominence in the self-assessment of Co-researchers.

Experience of Disability

Regardless of when Co-researchers entered the trajectory and began to experience difficulties caused by learning disabilities and irrespective of when it was that they received a formal diagnosis, all recalled a point at which they began to feel disabled. Though they may have initially considered themselves to have been "differently-abled", each reached a point of self-awareness which suggested to them that they were at a disadvantage. Having experienced

societal norms in the classroom, their own expectations and needs as committed learners, as well as the demands of their families and educational institutions, Co-researchers came to view their learning difficulties as detrimental.

For most members of The Group, no diagnosis was yet available on which to hinge their suspicions and self-evaluations. Left to their own intuitive perceptions of themselves and their situation, members began a period of self-understanding that would, in the long-term, prove to be important in their achievement of goals. It was this awareness, which was seen by most Co-researchers as the starting point for their ascension from failure to success. In the short-term, however, this sense of the self as flawed and somehow less capable, was immensely painful. Some reacted with anger, most, however, with sadness and withdrawal.

The damage inflicted by this period, appeared to range in severity but was almost universal in its longevity. For many Co-researchers, educational memories were tinged with an intense and long-lasting sense of loss, shame, guilt and self-loathing. Such feelings, accompanied the realization that try as they might, they simply could not perform academically at a level that satisfied them, or those of importance to their lives. Feeling both smart and stupid not only caused confusion, but anger and pain as well. Even after receiving a diagnosis—which would confirm for them their wholeness as a bright person with specific skills disabilities—the effect of these early traumatic experiences would return. This was especially felt in new learning situations, or moments of difficulty and crisis. Several members of The Group doubted that they would ever be totally free of the kind of self-doubt and deprecation that had emerged as part of their struggle with learning disabilities.

Feelings of Inadequacy

With an ever widening gap between potential and productivity evident in their school lives, Co-researchers began to experience serious feelings of inadequacy. Members of The Group—still exhibiting intellectual curiosity and a love of learning, but failing to keep up with achievement-oriented classmates—required a definition of themselves that would explain the discrepancy between

what they wanted to achieve and what they could. With a lack of formalized demarcation to guide them, Co-researchers relied on internal conjecture, along with external comment and assessment, for the development of an interior self-view.

For the most part, these views were wholly negative. Noah recalled that his understanding of himself seemed to suggest that he was somehow unwilling to undertake the effort necessary to read and spell with proficiency. "Someone said to my father that I was lazy . . . probably bright, but sloppy". Years later, when he finally discovered that he had a learning disability, this internal message came back to him. "I realized, for the first time, that I wasn't lazy and that I wasn't a lot of things, that I was learning disabled." In a similar vein, Kit, recalled that as a result of his parents' and teachers' incessant insistence that he was not exerting himself, he too began to believe that he was lazy. In an effort to stave off the deleterious effects caused by these feelings, Kit began to withdraw from his parents, disallowing their involvement with his education from high school onwards.

Other members of The Group came to the conclusion that they were simply stupid or incompetent. Sam for example, noted recurrent feelings of ineptitude. "I constantly feel like everybody is better than I am, and I feel completely inadequate." Sam's constant comparison of herself with her peers, exacerbated these feelings, resulting in repeated episodes of internal-dissonance. "There was the side me that knew . . . intuitively, [that I] was as intelligent as they were, but there was another side that [felt] I was so stupid, and how could I even bother to compare myself to these people." Despite all she has achieved, Sam reported that these feelings return on occasion with great ferocity, especially during stressful or difficult periods at school or work.

Even Manya, who was spared the discomforts of dealing with her Dyslexia until she was an undergraduate, reported feelings of inadequacy. Both prior and subsequent to her diagnosis, Manya often thought of her mathematical weakness as stemming from an inherent personality flaw.

It took a long time for me to understand that arithmetic was a dyslexia thing, as opposed to sloppinessI can accept that I have a learning disabilityI

don't like the idea that I can't write a good technical paper or write a good proof because I'm stupid or lazy.

Social Isolation

It was not uncommon to hear Group members recall periods of extreme social isolation during some period of their education. At times, it seemed difficult or impossible to find peers with whom they could relate to on both achievement and intellectual-curiosity levels. Though some of their social difficulties were due to the effects of specific learning disabilities (see Chapter 3), others were a result of poor self-concept and the legitimate feeling that they simply did not belong anywhere. Classrooms were remembered as tightly organized social systems, composed of rigidly circumscribed strata. Membership in any one sub-group often depended on level of achievement and interests. Defined as neither "smart" nor "dumb", Co-researchers often found themselves without a place in the society of the classroom.

Sam, for example, stated that "I always felt like I was on the outskirts, I never fit in." Kit recalled violent clashes between himself and his peers at school. While he explained this as stemming from social differences, it seemed that he could not find a group to fit in with. Instead, he focused much of his efforts on an intense personal struggle to succeed academically, preferring the company of books to people.

Avi, finding himself in two separate classrooms each day for several years, described a sense of alienation that persisted for many years. Even after he was ultimately placed in a classroom of his age-mates, Avi continued to experience isolation, as his peers had already formed bonds and looked upon him as an outsider. Similarly, Sandy, having spent time abroad and having developed a passion for world events, seemed out of place in her small-town classroom, where she was neither seen as neither a "good" or "bad" student. Even when she moved to a private boarding school, rife with intellectual peers, she continued in her role as "the other" in an environment where she exhibited both great talent and great weakness.

While feelings of social isolation continued to plague many Co-researchers, such that they still lack confidence in this area, none reported feeling permanently secluded. All seemed satisfied with their social circles. Sam even commented that she was very selective about her friends, as she placed great value in her relationship with them and only wanted the companionship of persons who supported and challenged her. A shift appears to have occurred at some point for all Co-researchers, where they began to experience social interaction as less painful and more rewarding. It would appear that such a shift occurred as Co-researchers began to study and work in environments where their disabilities were lessened in intensity and where they had achieved a measure of success.

Several Co-researchers noted the fact that they had at some point begun to carefully observe the personal styles and habits of peers and that through this they came to gain confidence in the social sphere. Often, students who were high achievers were chosen as subjects for observation. They were not only seen as the keepers of the secret to academic success, but also seemed to hold some answers to social questions. Modeling themselves after the traits that they admired, helped to reduce some of the anxiety caused by feelings of isolation and lack of social sophistication, which, after years of peripheral status, had not yet been mastered. The determination of Co-researchers in the social sphere seemed to be matched with that of academic progress and was, in many respects as successful. Yet, as with lingering doubts surrounding academic achievement, several Co-researchers felt that they would always be somewhat different and isolated from peers.

Working Hard, Getting Nowhere

For many Co-researchers, the most difficult aspect of their descent into the ravages of learning disabilities, was the sense that effort was not rewarded. Often times, members of The Group would describe the frustration of learning and over-learning material, only to fail in the demonstrative phases of classroom evaluation.

Kit, in discussing his years of struggle with learning disabilities, noted this phenomenon as it repeated itself in his early years—"I was just told to work harder.

Sort of a running theme—the majority of people just told me to work harder, and try to overcome these things.", **In high school**—"[I remember] trying to write and spending two or three hours writing a copy that is only marginally more legible. An hour per page . . . and still only sort of legible.", **and in his numerous attempts to pass a university level writing course**—"[I] tried to put all my energy into this English course. Didn't pass it. I got a D."

Similarly, Sam recalled the painful experience of working to pass exams, intuitively knowing that she could handle the material, but never able to demonstrate an acceptable level of competence:

I once went to a guidance counselor and I was absolutely in tears, I said "I just can't do the exams and I don't know why". I said "There's something wrong and I don't know why". I said "I know I'm smart, but I can't do these exams". And she looked through my files . . . and she'd say "oh, above average intelligence". And she'd say "well, I don't know" . . . pat me on the head . . . and send me back on my way.

The demoralizing effect of these experiences began to negatively impact on Co-researchers. Modern western educational institutions abide largely by the theory of meritocracy, which states that if given equal opportunities for advancement, those who are most capable will rise to the top, regardless of outside restraints, such as race, class and gender (Johnstone, 1992; Labaree, 1984). While many have challenged these notions (especially its lack of sensitivity to the disadvantages of minorities) (eg., Agassi, 1990; Aronowitz, 1997), a persistent cornerstone of classroom ideals holds that successful output is primarily the result of input on the part of students, since all other variables are seen as fair and equal to all. Certainly this was the prevailing attitude at the time when Co-researchers participated in the dominant educational culture.

As with their outlaw status in the traditional social schema of classrooms, in the case of effort and outcome, Co-researchers presented themselves as exceptions to this rigidly held belief. Most often they were invested in this principal, as much as (if not more than) their parents and teachers. They expected to see tangible results from their often Herculean efforts to keep pace with classmates. They shared in the disappointment of significant adult figures

who were unable to see that efforts were not rewarded and instead, judged them as lazy, stupid or irresponsible.

Worst of all, Co-researchers almost universally internalized the messages given to them by those most invested in the meritocracy theory, namely, that their failure as students was a result of their own lack of effort. Rarely, did it appear to them and to their parents that the fault lay with professionals who could not see that theirs was a divergent pattern of functionality and growth. Instead, all evidence of their struggles was erased and replaced with a mythical view of their work habits as shabby, inconsistent and lacking in investment.

It is not surprising then that, upon diagnosis, so many Co-researchers reported an instant falling away of their long-held belief that they were in some way lazy. Suddenly, years of effort and hard work were once again visible, detached from the need to prop up an educational theory that, for them, held little use. However, since it would be many years before such revelations were made, it is important to note the detrimental effect that this double edged sword had on Co-researchers. Not only did they become convinced that their efforts could not pay off, but they were then duped into accepting a view of themselves as having put forth inadequate self application and lacking a proper work ethic. This became a deeply etched message in the psyche of Co-researchers and one that was not easily erased, even by years of progress and accomplishment.

Negative Encounters with Significant Adults

One of the most consistently reported scenarios were encounters between Co-researchers and significant adults who were not only unhelpful, but who served as tormentors, agents of discouragement and objects of anger. Repeatedly, stories emerged of Co-researchers falling victim to those who mistook their disabilities for willful opposition, stupidity or lack of proper effort. As such, there seemed to be a liberty offered to these self-appointed judges (by a society which bought, wholesale, the theory of meritocracy and which was largely unaware of learning disabilities) to condemn, ridicule and berate Co-researchers with criticism and scorn. Such encounters seem to have added to the stress of Co-researchers and served to amplify messages of self-hatred and

failure. More importantly, though, they created anger among Co-researchers and it was this anger that was ultimately used to silence critical comments.

Teachers were often legitimately targeted as the focus of anger, as they were the harbingers of failure and the face of institutions which seemed to have no feeling or understanding of the individual's needs. Avi recalled several teachers who told him that he was lazy, stupid or willful. Noah reported several such incidents, beginning in his elementary years, when teachers told him that he was inattentive, uninterested and branded him a slow and even "retarded" learner. In high school, he noted an interaction with a teacher who repeatedly warned him that he would fail an exam that she was grading, an exam that would determine his ability to graduate high school and attend college:

A couple of days before the end of the term she came over to me and she said to me, "you're not gonna pass, there's no way you can pass those Regents Exams in English" . . . [later] I passed [the teacher] in the hall, she said "you know you passed, but I don't know how you did it?"

Sandy, with equal parts of wit and pain, described her worst encounter with a teacher:

I remember Miss W., she had to be biggest bitch that ever walked the face of this earth. She was from England and she was a horse, I'll tell you. Oh! She tied my hand behind my back, my left hand, 'cause I was going to learn to write with my right hand. No way in hell. No way in hell. She was so horrible, she used to walk up and down the rows with a ruler and whack it on the desk. She was just a wretched human being. And I remember feeling that I wasn't accomplishing.

Manya, encountering negative reactions only later in life, recalled a similar pattern. After succeeding in her early years and finding a place for herself in a prestigious institution, Manya began to feel the effects of her learning disability. Forgetting the promise of her previous years and critical of her seeming inability to progress at a rate similar to her peers, Manya quickly internalized the negative messages of her teachers. "I felt that I was very slow at the time, and my professors told me so in so many words, and they told me that I would fail."

Even more devastating, perhaps, than the constant barrage of negative feedback from teachers, was Kit's description of his parents' disapproval. Most Co-researchers reported incidents of conflict with parents who, for a time, colluded with the prevailing notion that success evaded them because of lack of effort. This, however, was usually balanced out by moments of tenderness, expressions of sympathy and hope and the stated belief in the ability and intelligence of children.

Kit, however, faced consistent negativity from his family and from his father in particular:

[I remember my parents] giving me a hard time about the spelling thing. I was just told to work harder. [it became] sort of a running theme . . . [and] it got worse.

Jumping down my throat [however] had the exact opposite effect [on me] . . . it didn't work . . . In grade 10, I just stopped showing them my report card. I got fed up with being belittled and yelled at because I wasn't doing well in school, so I just didn't bring my report cards home.

In some ways, Co-researchers seemed to understand the reactions that they received from such critical adult figures. On the surface, it seemed very easy for busy and often overworked professionals or parents to view students (who seemed to be defiant in their inability to absorb material), as inherently willful, slow or stupid. Functioning within the strict confines of a classroom system, with its social order and philosophical ideals, Co-researchers knew that they were anomalies who required quickly assessed definitions to explain their behavior.

Unfortunately, such a need for fast and easy assessment made for much pain in the lives of Co-researchers. Many longed for teachers and parents to see them for who they were—bright individuals with specific weaknesses. Instead, these trusted adult voices added to the mounting evidence against a view of competence. Sometimes this fired within Co-researchers a need to act and prove authority figures wrong. For many, however, it only made an internally negative evaluation seem worse and more real.

Hopelessness/Anger

After many years of expressing interest in learning, while at the same time failing to achieve the success that was so desperately sought after, many Co-researchers described periods of intense hopelessness. At times, this sense of dejection manifested itself in anger which was directed outward. Recipients of this anger (whether articulated or not), were those who appeared to obfuscate the inner sense of value and thwart efforts at achievement such as teachers and parents. Most often, however, these feelings were turned inwards, escalating a sense of desperation that emerged from negative external experiences and an internal self-concept that was increasingly poor.

The consistent recurrence of failure, created a situation of mounting anxiety and intense disappointment. In reaction to this, several Co-researchers reported developing feelings of depression. With no clear insight as to why it was that they were failing and few adaptive skills at their disposal for circumventing learning weaknesses, such a reaction would seem justified and natural.

All Co-researchers reported periods of great frustration. Several, noted that they had experienced a sense of resignation, often recapitulated at various intervals when learning difficulties reached their peak. During these times, little or no effort was put forth in the direction of schoolwork, as all academic endeavors appeared to be futile. Such moments were recalled by Co-researchers as some of the lowest points of their lives. Though much effort was exerted to rise above these feelings and great effort was exerted to avoid their recurrence, there appeared to be a lingering fear that they may at some point return.

For several Co-researchers, such as Noah, Sandy and Avi, these feelings manifested themselves most vociferously during late childhood and adolescence—long before adequate coping mechanisms were discovered. These periods were not, however, limited to Co-researchers' younger years, as several reported intense feelings of hopelessness in adulthood. Kit's experiences present an extreme example of this. Faced with multiple failures in his compulsory English Writing course and a staff of compositional experts who were unwilling and unable to assist him, Kit reported that the situation "frustrated me, and I got

depressed and I stopped working." **Later, after failing a separate attempt to pass this requirement, Kit withdrew from his program, despite a near-perfect grade-point average. He spent two years "being a janitor, and selling vacuum cleaners", before moving on to a school that would help him view his learning style in a more positive context.**

Like Kit, Sam found that she had run out of patience for cycles of disappointment and failure and left the educational stream:

When I graduated, I vowed I'd never go back to school again. "Screw this!" I just got through it, I got out and that's the end of it. I said I'd never [go back to school] again . . . God forbid! . . . 'Cause school—I hated school—[it] was just not the best place for me.

For Sam though (as with all member of The Group), the break with academia was not to be a permanent one. She soon found that the same frustrations which plagued her at school, existed in the work place. Here, however, her lack of education and its resulting status, kept her a victim of systems in which she could not function with integrity. Reluctantly and with a great deal of anxiety, she returned to the academic environment, seeing it as her only hope for advancement.

From their statements, it was clear that these episodes of anger and helplessness served as watershed moments for many Co-researchers. Fearing their return, great effort was made to achieve and continue to improve the sense of self and inner value. Additionally, memories of these feelings appear to have acted as impetus for greater self-awareness and improvement of the learning environment. Thus, despite their extremely painful nature, most Co-researchers regard these episodes as valuable lessons.

Success Over Disability

Along with the experience of failure and frustration resulting from their learning disabilities, all members of The Group recounted a process of empowerment and conquest. Each, at some point in their journey towards academic achievement, received forms of externally-originating

encouragement which changed for them their perception of themselves as helpless and ineffectual in the academic sphere. More importantly, there was a universal reporting of a deliberate attempt to find coping mechanisms and the gradual development of an internal sense of competence and mastery. Through this powerful combination of inner and outer investment, Co-researchers were able to remain in contact with their love of learning, their desire to achieve, and were able to hone the skills which grew to become their areas of expertise.

Though the steps described below applied almost without exception to all members of The Group, it is important to note that this occurred at individually variant rates of progression. Often, as the narratives were retold, a simultaneous account of empowerment and debilitation unfolded, such that there was much overlap. While being bombarded with failures and messages of ineptitude, Co-researchers took small steps toward rebellion against these erroneous assumptions. They engaged in a process of self-expression and definition, gradually migrating away from a negative model of the self and towards one of competence and strength.

External influences seemed to have played an important role in the genesis or solidification of the empowerment process. At times, the voice of an outside supporter, be it a parent, teacher or other valued adult, opened the way for newly evolving inner constructions to be validated and ultimately triumphant over negativity. At others, it was a moment of encouragement which allowed positive feelings to emerge for the first time, ultimately leading to the burgeoning of effective coping mechanisms. Even if rare and fleeting (as they were in so many Co-researchers' experiences), these encouragements acted as vital catalysts in the process of overcoming learning disabilities.

The process of mastery over weakness can be seen as the most consequential link in the chain of reckoning with learning disabilities. For it is in this portion of the experiential trajectory, where answers to questions of success and recovery are elucidated. Though no less dramatic than the previous sections, these portions of the narratives contain in them some of the most valuable insights. They point the way toward the empowerment of those with learning disabilities and give clues to the treatment and encouragement of the population on the part of teachers, parents and clinicians. As such, they

have received the greatest emphasis on the part of the researcher by design and instinctively by members of the Co-researcher contingent.

Discovery of Outside Skills

Despite the fact that most of a child's life is spent in school and that the majority of his or her self-concept emerges from success in this environment (Harter, 1990; Marsh, 1990; Vandell & Hembree, 1994), there are outside experiences which can bolster or supplant the effect of the academic domain (eg., Newman, 1991; Werner, 1993). Members of The Group, as examples of students who were largely incapable of real achievement in the classroom setting, often turned to alternate activities as a means of establishing a sense of competence and mastery. It was in these activities, where, perhaps for the first and only times in their lives, Co-researchers began to see themselves as capable and worthy beings. The effect of these pursuits would prove to be wide-ranging, as they would almost certainly spill over into academic life.

Noah, whose school progress was a constant source of pain and frustration, found achievement and belonging in the Boy Scouts. Here, Noah recalled, he had "no baggage" and could escape a reputation of ineptitude and inattentiveness, which had almost forced him to be labeled as mentally retarded. In a world that was often confusing and frustrating for Noah, the Scouting environment was "very well defined." In such a milieu, Noah could learn many of the interactive skills which his disability did not allow him to absorb incidentally. Common dress, conduct, goals and language all allowed Noah an experience of functioning on par with his peers, for the very first time.

Most importantly, the Boy Scouts encouraged members to engage in a variety of activities, only some of which required academic skills. In these areas, Noah could master and excel with equal or greater proficiency and speed. Success at this encouraged Noah to better himself academically, so that he could further his Scouting repertoire. "I was interested; therefore, if I had to read, read it slowly or whatever, I read it. And read it again." The benefits of this endeavor were quickly generalized to Noah's achievement in the classroom. In one year, "I went from probably a grade two reading level to a grade eight." From that point on, Noah's many academic setbacks were offset by his success at Scouting. No

matter what his teachers told him, or what his performance indicated about him, his ability to progress and develop as a Boy Scout reminded him that he was a valuable person, capable of learning.

Other Co-researchers, recalled a variety of activities from which they profited socially, academically and in the improvement of self-concept. Avi's work in the arts, for example, gave him a sense of accomplishment and helped him develop better motor and social skills. Several Co-researchers engaged in drama groups, which not only allowed them to increase confidence, but also improved reading, articulation and vocabulary. Music, along with sporting activities, taught Co-researchers such as Kit and Sam, valuable Co-ordination skills and an understanding of rule systems. Research suggests that incidental development of such insight is often missed by students with learning disabilities in everyday classroom learning, and that such skills need to be explicated (e.g., Keel & Gast, 1992; School & Cooper, 1983). Sam stated that "music was really something that carried me through."

Discovery of Early Coping Strategies

Closely linked with the above noted skills were the development of early coping mechanisms. Often, these came about as accidental discoveries and were in no way linked with diagnosis, or even a clear understanding of the self as learning disabled. Nonetheless, such discoveries had great importance. They allowed members of The Group to successfully navigate, perhaps for the first time, through difficult channels of learning, leading to a level of accomplishment that was often rare. Furthermore, it gave hint of things to come and insight into the power of searching for and utilizing a set of strategies. Later, these strategies would become more developed and deliberate in their formulation and execution. Eventually, Co-researchers would form an "arsenal" of circumventions and compensations facilitating not only basic accomplishment, but a high degree of achievement.

Co-researchers cited a variety of such early moments while recounting their student years. Sandy, in an almost instinctive move to bypass her reading difficulties, began to Co-opt fellow students into reading to her. This early strategy did not have as its source any real understanding on Sandy's part (or

that of her peers), that such an accommodation was necessitated by the presence of a learning disability. "I just said 'Oh, I'm a really slow reader, I just can't get this all read. Read, out loud.' And he would."

Avi, unable to spell or write his essay assignments with proficiency, asked two of his junior high school instructors to allow him to tape record them:

I carefully planned and researched that material, more so than I had ever done. I used classical music in the background and read slowly. When I got the papers back, I was amazed to see the grades I was given. All of a sudden, I seemed smart!

The effect of this success gave Avi two important benefits. For the first time, he was able to succeed at a school related task and felt the pride that this entailed. Such feelings would give him the impetus to improve his work habits and attempt to repeat his success. It also gave him insight into his learning style and needs. Not yet knowing that his difficulties were due to a learning disability, Avi would soon come to regard his weaknesses as purely technical and not due to some inherent intellectual flaw.

For some Co-researchers, these early tactics were creative, but lacked in honesty. Manya recalled spending an entire semester diverting her difficulty in acquiring German language skills, by conducting dialogues with her instructor on German philosophy. Describing some of her early moves as "cheating", Sam stated that she would, "look at other people's papers.. [or] write crib notes sometimes." Sam also remembered using her developing reputation in music class to avoid other more difficult subjects. "My music teacher helped me get out of Geography. So even though Geography was a requirement, we said that I was needed to be in . . . the stage band, so I was exempted from Geography." Later, of course, Sam developed more effective and scrupulous strategies. In those early years, however, she was desperate to succeed and found her first source of power and efficacy in whatever means were available.

Many Co-researchers noted an affinity for radio listening, which in turn proved to be form of audio-based learning. Sam, Sandy, Avi, Kit and Noah all reported becoming avid listeners to radio programming. Some, unable to read

with enough speed, used the radio as a means of obtaining information often lost in reading. Others, used concise and well articulated reports as a means of comprehending complex ideas and situations. This is significant, in that it signaled for many, the development of early circumvention skills. Later, these skills would be used with greater deliberateness and effect.

For almost all of the Co-researchers, early schematic approaches to problem solving gave not only relief to momentary impasses, but a greater sense of the self as capable and an agent of change. They also planted seeds of recognition—recognition that what troubled them was not a lack of intelligence, but a difficulty in expressing their abilities. For many, it rekindled the love of learning, which now not only became a matter of acquiring specific subject material, but also a series of strategies for the presentation of the self and skill.

Early Experiences of Academic Success

Closely related to accounts of early coping mechanisms came recollections of early salient, critical success. Similar to those early strategies, these experiences served to break the pattern of consistent failure or a record of sluggish progress. They confirmed for the Co-researcher an inner sense of self as capable—or at least hinted at this possibility—perhaps for the first time. As such, they were moments well remembered and often recounted. For some, they set the stage for a shift in perspective, heralding a new pattern of development and accomplishment. For others, it was a momentary occurrence, a glimpse of possibilities yet to be realized. For still others, these moments evolved into peak experiences within a repetitive cycle of success and setback, as skills were developed and confidence honed.

For students like Manya and Kit, natural talents in specific subject areas offered a sense of achievement. For Manya, such aptitude granted her a temporary reprieve from encountering the effects of her learning disability. For Kit, it provided respite from the drudgery of work in subjects that seemed impossibly arduous. While it could not alleviate altogether the effect of constant failure, it did offer Co-researchers both an opportunity to realize achievement and to maintain a connection to positive self-assessment.

For other students, many of whom did not excel in one particular academic subject until later in life, serendipitous moments of success acted as insights to general competence. Sam recalled that her creative writing skills, which developed in high school, led to her first real moment of success. Having composed a moving piece which was a metaphor for the effort to overcome the adversity of an as yet unnamed (and unknown) disability, she was voted class valedictorian. Noah, attempting to graduate from high school and prepare for the rabbinate, recalled his early success at passing a difficult exam. As with Sam, these moments took on special significance, as they signaled the end of a purely negative scenario. In these cases, they led to progress and a continuation of the educational process, which might otherwise have been curtailed due to lack of progress or drive.

Even for Manya and Kit, who did not experience early, universal failure, the first moments of success after entering the experiential trajectory were substantial. After experiencing failures brought on by learning disabilities, they, like all other Co-researchers, suffered from feelings of self-doubt and lack of confidence. Though memories of past successes may have buoyed them more than others, it was the experience of triumph after the discovery of weakness that appeared to have stemmed the tide of regression in academia.

Whether they heralded the beginning of unrestrained progress, or merely gave an indication of possible skill, these early encounters with success were meaningful to The Group. Suddenly, they confirmed inner beliefs and served to countermand voices of doubt and fear. As they came for most Co-researchers in the early stages of education (though at various points), these moments gave impetus to journeys of learning that would be long, see many failures and setbacks and require tremendous, concerted effort. The fact that they were so fondly recalled and were credited with such long-lasting influence, stands as a testament to their power and importance.

Outside Encouragement

Despite the fact that there was great divergence in accounts of experiences with adult authority figures, most members of the Group reported relationships (at some point in their educational voyages), that were significant

in their positive tone. Parents, teachers or other adults of influence and consequence, seemed to have helped in turning the tide of wholesale negativity. These trusted figures, whether in childhood or later, had the effect of bolstering an image of the self that was positive and achievement-capable. As such, their influence was considered to have been of great importance to members of The Group. They were regarded as having offered substantial, often unprecedented external proof that Co-researchers held the potential to achieve and exhibited the achievements necessary for success.

For Co-researchers such as Sandy, Noah and Avi parents played this vital role. Each told of the support and encouragement offered to them unconditionally by their parents, along with a sense of belief and value. Sam stated that "I always felt like I was special in their eyes . . . and I always felt that I was capable in their eyes." Acknowledgment of both success and frustration seemed to have been an appreciated and seminal trait. Sandy, noted that her parents' encouragement and investment in her education was all-important. "If my parents hadn't done that, I would not have ended up on the graduate studies list. I think that was a crucial point . . . they kept working [with me]."

Often more important than the support and confirmation which came from parents (who were presumed to do so subjectively), were educators, who acted as agents of encouragement and belief in the capabilities of Co-researchers. Noah told of several such teachers, one of whom was the first to notice that his written work had content value, even if it was not acceptable from a technical standpoint. Manya and Kit recalled the special effect that a supervisor had on their work and sense of self. Sam, noted that the attitude of a potential supervisor helped bring her back to school, even after she had sworn never to return. "I think, that he perhaps saw something in me that was a little bit different . . . There was passion there . . . I had some ideas. And he felt that he could work with that."

Unfortunately, not all contacts with teachers, professors and supervisors were positive. Each of the Co-researchers sighted examples of several (if not many) educators who were harsh, discouraging and detrimental to their development. For whatever reasons, these teachers chose to view learning disabled Co-researchers in prototypically negative terms, as willful, lazy, stupid

or untouchable. While they did have a tremendously negative effect on the psyche of Co-researchers—and this effect was sustained over time—they did not manage to destroy their morale or determination. In fact (as noted below), these negative attitudes were often turned around by Co-researchers and used as impetus for success and conquest.

This, however, did not detract from the deleterious effect of such teachers for Co-researchers. It did, though, seem to make the positive comments of supportive adults seem more significant and real. If negative teacher attitudes served to confirm the worst facets of the self image, then positive ones appear to have had the reverse effect. This, added to the development of first coping mechanisms and first tastes of success, seem to have solidified the foundations on which later progress could be built.

Accepting the Self as Different

At some point in their journeys, all members of The Group came to see and accept themselves as different from those around them. After many years of attempting to fit into the classroom society in conventional ways and failing, it seemed natural that a sense of deviation would emerge. While at first, this might have been a painful realization and one that was denied or hidden (as much as possible), it soon became clear to Co-researchers that such actions held little real benefit. Eventually, most came to see their uniqueness as not only tolerable, but as interesting, distinctive and even beneficial. Such acceptance, however, came only after a process that was sanguine and entailed a realistic acknowledgment of the fact that certain paths were blocked and that some goals were unattainable.

Accepting the self as disabled or simply differently abled, took various forms and demanded divergent concessions from Co-researchers, both positive and negative. For, Sam, it meant a gradual relaxing of the relentless comparisons she had made between herself and her non-disabled peers. For Kit, it entailed a move to a school where his needs could better be met and later, the choice of graduate institution where this could continue. For Avi, it was acceptance of the fact that more effort was required of him to succeed, with a greater sense of planfulness in choice of courses, study-habits and work

schedule. For all, it meant seeing the self as flawed yet valuable beings, worthy of self-investment.

Manya, after attempting to hide her limitations from students, came to the realization that such deceptions were a disservice to all parties concerned. She could admit her tendency to err in technical matters, while maintaining an air of integrity, authority and mastery of complex material. Freeing herself from the burden of deception, appeared to have made Manya a better teacher, writer and mathematician. Instead of devoting wasted energy to masking disabilities, Manya could, instead, focus on what she did best.

For Sandy and Noah, acceptance meant the realization that they would not take paths that had originally interested them, but could find contentment and success in other spheres. Sandy, having always wanted to be a lawyer, conceded that the amount of reading was simply too much for her.

I had nightmares about being somebody's lawyer and not reading that one brief or that one whatever and they're in jail and their whole lives are changed or somebody's child gets taken away from them or whatever it is, and it's because of me, because I didn't do a thorough enough job, because I could not get through the volume.

Though still somewhat unhappy that she was limited, Sandy did not allow her life to be ruined. Instead, she focused on those things that she could do well and enjoyed. She now has only "moments of regret" in a professional and academic life which she feels is challenging and for the most part, rewarding.

Noah, having spent many years attempting to be a scholar in his field of Judaic studies, appeared to have exchanged disappointment in his lack of research skills, with pride in his creativity and his ability to teach and to transform the lives of his students and clients:

I realized, as time went on, that I would never accomplish in Jewish studies what I would want to accomplish because I would never be able to read that way—the language would always remain an obstacle that I could never overcome There was a rapidity which was missing which I couldn't do, which I still can't do therefore I would have to either . . . feel inferior (which I did for a long time),

or ultimately move in another direction. So, I ultimately went in another direction . . . and that was the direction of my own creativity.

Kit, after allowing his disability to create feelings of anger, sadness and disappointment, came to the conclusion, that it was simply a natural part of his existence. Once he was able to do this, he began to see that his unique learning style held benefit as well as loss. Unlike most of his colleagues, he found that he was able to absorb, integrate and retain large amounts of verbally presented material. This made him a natural asset at professional conferences, a prime learning environment for members of his discipline. He noted the fact that he is often relied upon to attend such conferences and report back to others, for whom such functions are overwhelming.

Certainly, it was the identification of learning disabilities which, for many Co-researchers, finalized the process of acceptance. Here, at last, was a reasonable explanation for the many years of suffering and alienation that had been felt in academic settings—settings which were so important and much loved. Rather than seeing themselves as limited by these labels (as is often the fear among professionals), they acted as an important beacon, lighting new understandings of the self and experience.

For most Co-researchers, though, definition in the form of identification, while important, only accentuated the finalized process of acceptance. What was begun in a vacuum of professional insight developed gradually, out of a wealth of experiential knowledge and a determination to keep alive an attachment to the much needed learning environment.

Whether greeted with a sense of sadness or resignation, or as a means of enjoying new found happiness or liberation, all Co-researchers found it necessary to accept themselves and their differences. While many reported that they were still discovering aspects of their learning disabilities and felt that the process of growth was far from complete, they did so with a generally positive or at least benign attitude. Most felt that acceptance was a key element in overcoming the detrimental effects of their learning disability. It shifted the focus away from what could not be done and was lost, to a discovery of what was

possible for them as learners and creators and what could be gained from their unique perspective of the world.

Development of Compensatory Arsenal

Having erected a solid platform of self-acceptance, outside encouragement and experiences with success and early compensatory strategies, Co-researchers began to construct a comprehensive and systematic approach to overcoming learning difficulties. The need to remain active in learning circles and to complete degree work, forced many Co-researchers to engage in an ongoing creative process of recognizing weaknesses, evaluating the needs of the learning situation and formulating approaches to success.

Co-researchers sited numerous examples of coping mechanisms, which developed out of this process and which proved to be invaluable. Sandy organized for herself a virtual army of readers, editors and informants. Noah reduced the chaos of his perceptual difficulties, by organizing and categorizing as much physical and intellectual material as possible. Avi relied heavily on taped books and computer technology to circumvent his reading and spelling weakness. Sam carefully arranged her work time, her environment and the scope of her projects, to suit her need for organizational clarity. Manya mapped her routes carefully to avoid problems associated with her directional dysfunction. To reduce technical errors in the classroom setting, she enlisted the help of her students, rewarding them with a sharper learning experience. Kit, reported collaborations with others, allowing him to contribute his skill as an integrator of material and theoretical producer in exchange for their technical skills and presentational polish.

Since each Co-Researcher found individualized schemes for circumventing the effects of their particular learning disability, it was difficult to make generalized statements on their content and direction; however, it was possible to see that across all of these mechanisms, there are common factors. Firstly, each could be seen as powerful, helpful in the extreme and the product of much trial and error. Secondly, they rarely existed alone, but rather, as part of an interrelated set of actions which formed a network of compensatory skills and devices. Given the generally hostile nature of Co-researchers' experiences,

these compensations can best be described as an "arsenal". These weapon-like tactics were seen to have been used with technical precision and yielded consistent results. They confirmed the power of Co-researchers resourcefulness, as well as their tenacity in successfully maneuvering through academic environments that were often unfriendly, unwelcoming and unyielding in their lack of insight.

The fact that individuals such as these required strategies to shield themselves against the hostility, ignorance and generally unaccepting nature of the classroom, reflects poorly on the educational programs in which members of The Group were enrolled. Conversely, such actions stand as a testament to the strength and ingenuity of the Co-researchers. Creativity and the will to succeed appeared, in this case, to have dominated over ignorance and even the most grievous errors of educators and educational systems. The drive to learn for these individuals was apparently strong. The need to quench the thirst of curious and capable minds seems to have lead to the discovery of oases in the often arid climate of learning landscapes.

The Power of Identification

Solving the conundrum of their intellectuality and lack of easy success in reasonable scientific terms appeared to have had great significance and even reparative qualities for all Co-researchers. Finding an external causation for their weaknesses, seemed to have given members of The Group a feeling of control and an internal sense of peace. It nullified (to an extent) the negative impact brought on by struggles in the learning environment; it justified years of behavioral/learning patterns and validated the need for compensatory skills to lead the way out of the academic quagmire.

Noah recalled his reaction to learning of Dyslexia and the immediate association he made between the syndrome and his own life pattern:

As I began to talk to her more about learning disabilities, I realized, for the first time, that I wasn't lazy and that I wasn't a lot of things, that I was learning disabledMaybe it was the most significant shift in the whole thing—'cause for the first time I had frame of reference to understand what was happening with meBy

that time I had finished seminary and that made me realize why I had so many problems in the seminary.

Similarly Sam, attending a workshop on learning disabilities, was deeply moved to see her weaknesses as real and meaningful:

I remember . . . we were getting an overview what learning disabilities were and I was just . . . bowled over 'cause they were talking about me. And it was just . . . so emotional . . . I thought "Holy shit, this is me!" . . . I REMEMBER . . . actually going into the washroom and just bursting into tears because it was just so . . . overwhelming for me.

For others, such as Sandy, Kit and Manya, the moment of identification seemed less visceral and more reflective. Listening to their accounts of comprehending themselves as learning disabled, left an impression of a less epiphinal and more confirmatory experience. Rather than hitting these individuals like a bolt of lightning, an understanding of themselves as learning disabled seemed to fit easily, like a well-worn glove. It clarified and contextualized experiential pain in a simple, almost natural manner.

Regardless of their initial reaction to identification, all Co-researchers reported it as providing positive transformational benefit. Identification offered a plausible understanding of the self, of experiences and of the reactions of the self and others, without excusing or denying difficulties or painful episodes. It helped to direct individuals or else illuminate paths that were already taken, giving them certainty and added purpose. Overall, it seemed that knowing the self and accepting weaknesses as natural and integral, gave Co-researchers a greater sense of comfort and peace, allowing them to get on with the business of becoming themselves and finding their voices in the academic community.

Transforming Adversity Into Advantage

The end result of the above described process, appeared to leave Co-researchers with a significant set of skills. Grouped together, these skills can best be defined as the ability to take the challenges of the learning situation and transform them into a positive, working model of success. Since each Co-researcher faced challenges associated with the specifics of his or her learning

disability, each set of accompanying transformations were likewise unique. There were similarities, however, which crossed individual boundaries and appeared to represent the experiences of sub-sets (and in some cases the entirety) of the Co-researcher population.

The ability to transform adversity into advantage was clearly linked with the experiential trajectory outlined previously. In order to create a positive, progress-oriented reality for themselves, individuals appeared to have followed (in some form and order) the stages of the experiential trajectory. It did not appear that Co-researchers were born with this high-level coping mechanism, rather it developed as a result of experience and laborious effort. Furthermore, it was clear that a reciprocal relationship existed between inner development and outer response. Positive feedback, be it from teachers, parents or other significant adult figures, along with some form of success (either in or out of the classroom) seemed to have played a significant role in the ultimate development of this ability. Likewise, a model of the self that was at least in part positive, capable and persistent, seemed to play a key role in garnering positive responses.

As with all other aspects of the model presented, there were no universal frames of time or experiential landscape. Rather, it was only the general principles which appeared to have applied across the spectrum of life-histories. As such, some stories told of a fairly uniform and linear process for reaching this stage, realizing both its potential and benefit. For most, however, there was (as with many aspects of development in this phenomenon), a cyclical or episodic nature to the experience. Some Co-researchers lived and re-lived periods of strength and progress, alternating with regressive and disempowering phases.

Some examples of these transformations are listed below:

Transforming Discouragement into Determination.

Many Co-researchers experienced negative feedback from significant adults in their life, particularly from teachers. Often there were repeated and

intensive attempts to discourage and even depress the efforts of Co-researchers. Such experiences have been described above as a separate experiential step.

After years of such abuse, Co-researchers looked upon these memories in a two-fold manner. Clearly, they did much damage to the psyche and to the internal sense of confidence and ability; however, they also appear to have served a more positive effect, in that they acted as platforms from which sprang great tenacity and a will to succeed. Proving that teachers (and sometimes parents or administrators) were incorrect in their assessment of individuals and their abilities, seemed to have given them a purpose, focus and a tangible goal.

Repeatedly, in some form or another, Co-researchers recalled such episodes. For some, these were fairly benign experiences, whereby a teacher's passive discouragement was met with determination. Sam, for example, recalled an incident from her early school years:

I remember a teacher of mine, she'd put me into a low reading group, and I didn't want to be in that, I really worked hard to get up to that point, and she said "Are you sure, it's gonna be really (difficult)?" . . . And I said "yes, I am sure", and I really pushed to do that.

Many Co-researchers recalled similar moments in reading groups. Such episodes appeared to represent, for the first time, the mismatch that most felt existed for them between potential and achievement.

For others, the discouragement and its accompanying reaction was more forceful and experienced as a deliberate attempt on the part of teachers to restrain progress. Noah's story of discouragement at the hands of a teacher whose exam would determine his educational future, is a powerful example of such a cycle at work. Similarly, Sandy, described an encounter with a math teacher in high school.

I remember Miss B. who told me to leave the grade 13 math class because I was going to fail. "Sahndy dahling, I think you should go to the guidance officer and go and find another clahss that would be bettah for you." So I went down there, sat there for a minute, thought "Fuck you", walked back in and she said, "So

Sahndy, you're back. Why is that?" "Because I'm taking this math class, Miss B., and I'm going to pass." "Oooh, well good for you, deah."

For Sandy, as with many of the Co-researchers, the idea that she could not succeed, was an invitation for her to prove her worth. She remained in this class and passed it, much to her teachers' surprise.

Even at the higher levels of the educational system, Co-researchers experienced moments of extreme discouragement and the accompanying adaptive reaction to it. Kit recalled the many times that he was told that he could not succeed at the university level and of the pleasure he took in proving instructors and writing counselors wrong. Manya, failing her graduate level math classes, persevered and progressed in the field. In many ways, she credited those who attempted to discourage her for having made the choice to obtain top-level training in the field:

One of the major reasons I continued was to show themIt was a "fuck you" . . . I was damned if they were gonna stop meAn English teacher, asked me why I was wasting myself on mathematicsAnd she was telling me that I would really be very good at social work, why didn't I give up this nonsense of mathematics. That made me decide I was not going to give up.

Transforming Victimization into Victory.

Most Co-researchers saw themselves as victims of educational systems that did not understand them, attempted to limit their progress and hated them for their non-normative status. Justifiably, most felt trapped in a world where their innate intelligence could not shine through and hostage to their persona non grata status as neither stupid, nor easily capable of high level achievement.

Rather than allow themselves to quietly disappear or accept their victim status, most Co-researchers set about to comprehend and manipulate educational structures which would otherwise destroy them. Such a process appeared to have been necessitated by an understanding of systems as the single path available for the acquisition of knowledge and professional advancement. Since all Co-researchers saw these as very high personal

priorities, it became clear to them that their education required careful management.

Many Co-researchers noted the fact that they had learned to manage, manipulate or circumvent "The System". Most saw it as both underhanded (somehow sinister) and necessary for personal survival, achievement and progress. Such an assessment is partly accurate, as, in fact, there were elements of misconduct in memories of early system management, particularly at the beginning of such constructions. These included various forms of cheating, note-cribbing, copying fellow students' work, or purposely avoiding unwanted classes with feigned medical excuses or misappropriated assistance from authority figures.

Many of the strategies, however, were neither illegal nor unethical by any standard. Rather, they consisted of careful constructions of tactics and actions, based on close examination of teacher expectations and successful student strategies. They were legitimate responses to specific learning challenges, meant to meet the needs of classroom life. As such, many Co-researchers, who regarded themselves as functioning above the limits of educational institutions, could, in fact, be regarded as operating well within its parameters. What distinguished these actions from those of other, more average students who might have done likewise (and from those previously employed by individuals themselves), was the fact that they were so carefully calculated and executed.

Strategies, though varied among Co-researchers, had some common elements. Many were designed to circumvent learning difficulties in order to meet perceived teacher expectations. These included ways in which to memorize and retrieve facts, organize reading and writing assignments and present material for evaluation. In addition, there were study and work habits which were copied or emulated. Successful classmates' note-taking skills, work-load management and presentational efficiencies were most often cited.

At times, such management strategies were described in negative terms, such as "bullshitting", "cutting-corners" or "giving them what they want". At other times, they were regarded with a more benign, even positive disposition. They were portrayed as an insightful chest of tools for successfully meeting the needs of

educational environments, so welcome after many years of failing to acquire these skills incidentally.

Either way, there seemed to be two common elements to the attitudes displayed towards system management. Firstly, such strategies were seen as empowering and enabling students to finally overcome the deleterious effects of learning disabilities. Secondly, they sadly confirmed Co-researchers' feelings of alienation from educational systems, solidifying the outsider status. Such management was seen as victorious and liberating, further verification of innate intelligence. Yet somehow, its sweetness was tinged with bitter memories and a realization that life on the fringes of valued institutions was inevitable.

Sadly, most Co-researchers who were cognizant of their deliberate maneuverings, seemed to express a low regard for what was seen as the superficial trappings of academic life. They were a testament to the poor esteem with which education and educators came to be held on the part of students, who continued to perceive themselves as outsiders. After a lifetime in the classroom, Co-researchers believed that they were interlopers in a world they did not feel was their own.

Whether they were looked upon as poor reflections of the school system, or as a positive resonance of their own ingenuity, most Co-researchers were proud of the things that they had done to succeed. Overall, there was a sense of victory, a defeat of both internal and external negativity. Sam, in her valedictory address, noted that learning for her was akin to climbing a mountain, rife with hardship and perilous challenge, but sweet in its sense of achievement. Despite the many scars that such a struggle appeared to have left for members of the Group, almost all felt that they had won an important victory as students and human beings.

Transforming Learning Weakness into Strength.

Prior to receiving formal definition of learning weakness as disability, Co-researchers comprehended themselves as divergent from peers and normative

society. There was an innate awareness that personal learning styles differed substantially from the average and that this placed the individual at a disadvantage. Elements of anger, frustration, sadness and resignation could be detected in life-histories, as such insight was recalled along with the incidents that made such an assessment necessary.

Along with negative feelings brought on by learning disabilities, however, there were more positive accounts of learning styles and even a sense that they added to, rather than detracted from, an individual's life. Differences in perception and learning, which were seen to stem from otherwise disabling conditions, were concurrently labeled as positive assets. Along with positive traits such as strength of character and conviction, which appeared to be the ultimate reward for the struggle against learning disabilities, the innate benefit of a unique learning style represented a feeling of strength for Co-researchers.

Many Co-researchers spoke of their innate creativity, not only in dealing with the effects of learning disabilities, but as a direct result of their existence. "I see things differently" said Noah, "I can synthesize and organize ideas and concepts in ways which other folks cannot." Kit spoke of his heightened ability to listen to many hours of lecture, recalling and encapsulating them with great proficiency later, as a skill which he believed stemmed from his learning style. Manya valued her general world view as unusual, lucid and fertile, seeing this as a natural outgrowth of her Dyslexia. Others noted the fact that they are able to express themselves verbally, in writing or artistically, as a result of non-conventional perceptions and learning skills.

In addition to skills which stemmed directly from alternative perceptual styles, most Co-researchers felt that they had developed character strength as a result of their struggle to understand and value themselves and fit their unusual methods into normative cultures. Words such as "inventive", "persistent", "strong", "determined" and "independent" were used to describe the positive effects of dealing with learning disabilities. Themes of gradual empowerment, both in academia and beyond, ran consistently through the life histories of Co-researchers. Narratives were filled with heroic efforts to see the self as valuable and strong, bending the world to meet personal needs, while defending the self against the vicissitudes of inner hatred and outer disregard. These experiences

were regarded as important and necessary in the development of tenacity, durability, courage and vigor.

Two themes, especially present and relating to the transformation of disability into asset, surrounded the lack of definition of learning style and the negative self concept that emerged as a result of this ambiguous state of academic existence. Often, in the face of little or no accurate information on the nature of their learning weaknesses and how these could be alleviated, Co-researchers became their own experts. All appeared to have carefully calculated their needs, goals, weaknesses and strengths and matched these, with equal precision, to the demands of academic environments. As a result of this process (which for the most part, took place with little or no outside assistance), Co-researchers began to demonstrate high levels of independence. Their schematic approach to problem solving had, as a positive consequence, the development of self-sufficiency.

Evidence of this independence could be seen in many examples emerging from the narratives. Without exception, Co-researchers noted their tendency for highly autonomous lifestyles as students. Each had, at some point, embarked on a journey of self discovery and correction, leading to an improved alignment between their skills and the needs of their programs of study. In many cases, such a process came about out of desperation and was an extreme response to an extreme situation. As such, the independence that developed seemed to have a tenacity to it that was fierce. This might account for the general reticence among Co-researchers to become dependent on services offered to them by special needs departments of their local universities, once they have been diagnosed. It may also explain the unwillingness of many to identify themselves as learning disabled to professors and fellow students.

Sandy, discussing this aspect of her life as a learner stated:

I was uncomfortable with calling myself learning disabled, 'cause I didn't perceive myself that way. I've always been comfortable with myself all my life . . . I have been adapting since an early age . . . this is not something new. And I don't go around thinking "Geez, if I didn't have this learning disability I'd be different". It just is.

Closely related to this is the issue of self-esteem. As every Co-researcher noted, the vacuum of accurate information pertaining to individual learning needs along with periods of poor performance, negative feedback and lack of progress, caused extensive damage to the self-image. Each Co-researcher battled with feelings of incompetence and worthlessness, a battle that for most, was ongoing. At the same time however, each noted the presence of a healthy view of the self, a voice emanating deep within reminding them that they were bright and capable of achievement. This self-confidence was often obscured by more negative messages, but it was never fully eclipsed. Instead, it remained with Co-researchers and gained strength with each triumphant moment of growth and progress.

Sam, recalling her battle to retain a sense of self stated:

There were two sides of me: there was the side that knew . . . intuitively . . . I was as intelligent as they [fellow students] were; but there was another side that I was so stupid and how could I bother to compare myself to these people, 'cause there they were able to do all this stuff that I just couldn't do. And yet I'm a very stubborn, determined person and I never let that defeat me, I always kind of pushed on.

Avi expressed similar sentiments:

My life as a learner has been one of much pain, but mostly one of great triumph. Though I am dogged by the many negative experiences of my learning life and remain hostage to feelings of inadequacy, I am liberated by my experiences of conquest and success.

As the above examples cite, the process of living with a learning disability, for the Co-researcher population, had both positive and negative facets. Clearly, the themes that emerged indicated an existence that was difficult, challenging and unhealthy in many respects. Conversely, the population interviewed appeared to have carefully and deliberately taken their unique situations in hand and transformed their learning experiences from failure to success. Through the experiential trajectory outlined previously, Co-researchers overcame even the most difficult of learning disabilities. The fact that Co-researchers were challenged by so many internal difficulties, along with

repeated negative external messages, and yet managed to climb to the highest levels of academia, stands as proof of their determination and ability. They were truly able to turn stumbling blocks into stepping-stones.

Asked whether they would wish that learning disabilities had never been part of their lives, few Co-researchers reacted with overt self-pity. Most realized that their disabilities limited them, often significantly, and that this was regrettable; however, all seemed to view their lives as learners with a sense of acceptance, since all saw the benefits as well as detriments of their condition. "If a "cure" were ever found for Dyslexia, I am not sure that I would take it", stated **Avi**, "For, despite all that it has taken from me, this syndrome has shaped me and my view of the world in a manner that I have come to accept and to value." **Sam, responding to this idea stated that** "Today, I might take such a cure and get rid of all that slows me down. But I would never want to have taken from me the experiences that have made me the person that I am, with all of the strengths that I now possess."

"Finding Direction"

COLOUR PLATE #13

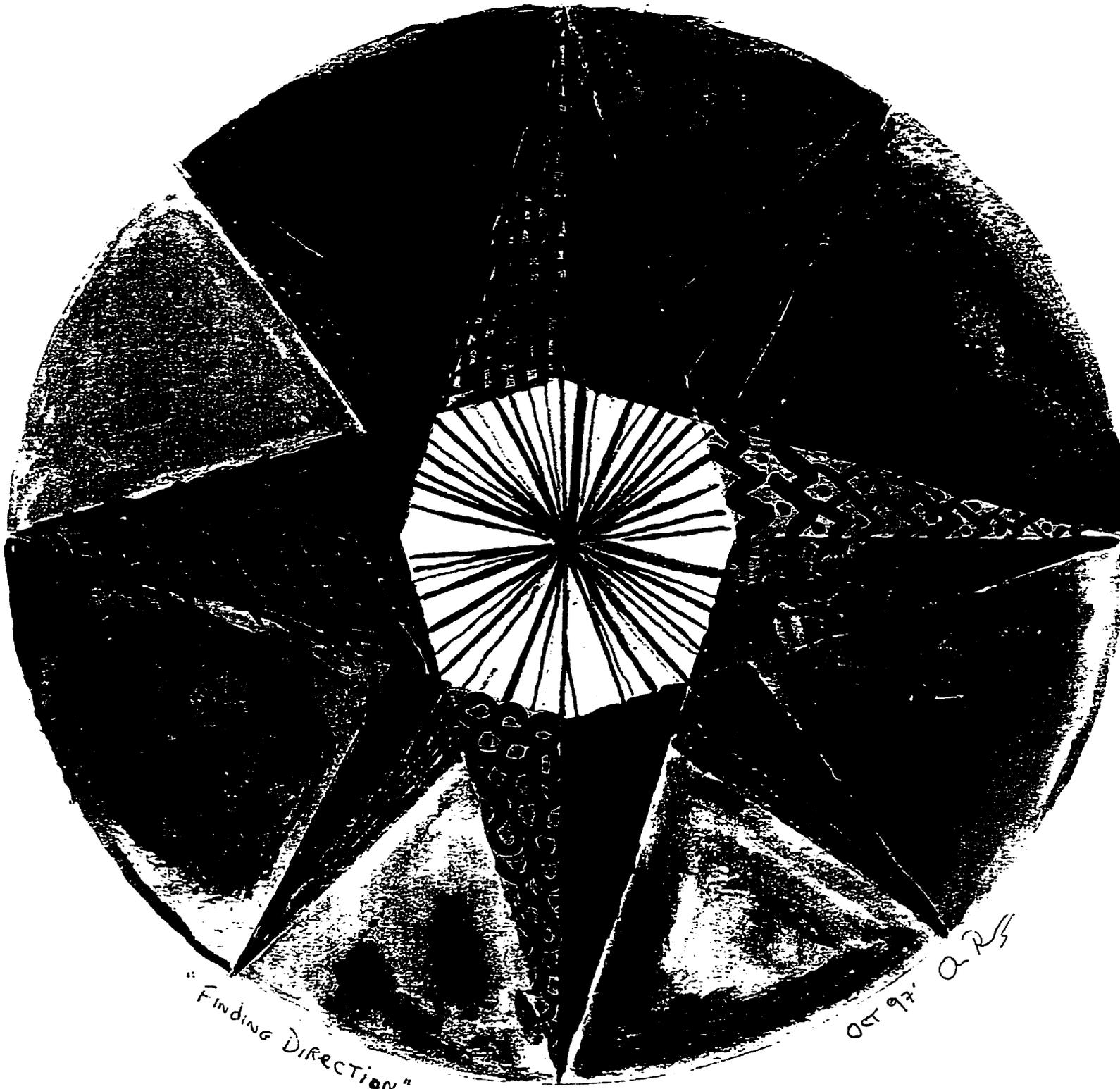
After the initial wave of thematic writing, after the overpowering feelings of joy and satisfaction had subsided, it seemed time to begin the work of completion. I was now at the point where I needed to tie in all the elements of my work, my proposal, the literature review, the biographies, the themes and the material that sprang from them. They were all there, yet they needed to be connected, reconciled and coordinated.

It took some time for me to consider how I wanted my final product to look. My initial vision had changed somewhat in substance, but little in structure. I needed to wed my initial vision with the reality of the work in front of me.

It seemed a rather pleasant task, this sewing together all of the pieces into a large and colourful quilt. I went with my initial ideas and with the texture and shape of what I had written, and it all came together. Not sporadically or laboriously as it had alternately done in the past, but in a whole and organic manner that seemed to almost independently find itself and open up before me.

I envisioned a patchwork quilt that was more than an indiscriminate collage of disparate elements, but was a coordinated effort covering the phenomenon in all of its possible directions. I used different textures and patterns to create a piece reminiscent of a compass. It seemed to represent the final stage—whole, calm, confident, complete.

In hindsight it was a very wishful image, for in truth, I was not yet there...



"Finding Direction"

Oct 97' A.R.S.

CHAPTER 6

Chiaroscuro: Thematic Illuminations

And you, to whom adversity has dealt a final blow
 With smiling bastards lying to you everywhere you go.
 Turn to, and put on all your strength of arm and heart and brain
 And like the Mary Ellen Carter, rise again!

— Stan Rogers

Introduction

The thematic analysis presented, along with the elucidation of an experiential trajectory common among members of The Group, chronicle a compelling and powerful set of life events. Both as individuals and as members of a collective, these accounts are dramatic examples of courage, determination and triumph in the face of adversity. Their importance is multifaceted, as they represent the story of individuals, of educational systems and institutions and of a disability itself. In this regard, they can be seen as histories of both the internal and external experience of living with a learning impairment.

More than merely being descriptive, however, the life histories collected in this study offer valuable additions to the corpus of knowledge in the field of learning disabilities in several ways. Firstly, they serve as a reflection of events past. All of the narratives reported not only the symptoms of learning disabilities, but also the consequences of these symptoms in the response they elicited at all levels of learning. As such, they act as a critical comment on the state of educational institutions and the attitudes of professionals within those settings. Such comments are important to clarify, as they serve to evaluate the educational methods and beliefs of the past, many of which continue to influence contemporary practice.

Furthermore, the narratives point the way to future endeavors in the remediation of learning disabilities and the attitudes taken in approaching those affected by them. Rather than simply critiquing or supporting past actions, the stories and themes highlight areas of need among a specific student population

(a population whose ranks are increasing at all levels of education). As such, these themes and narratives light a path to future remediation modalities and attitudinal shifts towards the population, illustrating priorities which clinicians and educators can embrace. Support for these actions is solidly based on the experiences and recommendations of a highly successful population, whose strategies and achievement should be seen as worthy of emulation.

Finally, the narratives stand as a statement on the nature of disability itself and the societal constructs which frame its existence. Adding these voices to the chorus of those whose physical selves function in non-standard ways, gives insight into the state of being which has become known as "disability". How society views such individuals and how it responds to their needs and existence, is given added strength by the inclusion of these narratives. As such, their value lies beyond the confines of specific syndromes, giving new resonance to the state of disability in contemporary society.

In this chapter, I reflect upon the thematic material drawn from individual and composite portraits, in an attempt to contextualize and highlight their import in these three areas.

Lessons Learned From the Past

Members of the group experienced life with learning disabilities in a variety of ways. For some, the intensity of impairment was more severe than for others, as were the responses to learning weakness by teachers, parents, peers as well the individuals themselves. Nonetheless, there were many similarities among the group's recollections and much overlap in the description and analysis of their lives.

From this, a series of comments on life as it was can be drawn; a portrait of a world just beginning to understand learning with enough sophistication to pinpoint and attempt to treat its associated disabilities. The role and reaction of various players in the drama of the storied lives (as recalled by members of The Group), serve to comment on how learning disabilities were viewed and dealt with by all parties concerned. For purposes of organization, the actions of major players have been separated into four groups: educational professionals,

educational institutions, parents and the students themselves. This will hopefully provide a well-rounded comment on the collectively recalled scenario.

The Role of Educational Professionals

While it would be unfair to state categorically that the remediation received by members of The Group at the hands of various educational professionals was wholly negative, the majority of accounts implicate this group most especially in creating and sustaining difficult experiences. More than any other of the major players, educational professionals were viewed as hostile, adversarial and demeaning. Their actions and attitudes personified societal and institutional shortcomings in comprehending and responding to the needs and sensitivities of students with learning disabilities. There was the most obvious sign that students were misunderstood and often mistreated by a system that failed them and fostered in them much stress and a profound lack of self-esteem.

The majority of professionals were seen to have failed Co-researchers because they chose to uphold conventional wisdom at the expense of individual needs. As the direct conveyers of educational theory and the modern western work ethic, educators were viewed as blind to the potential of students whose uniqueness placed them outside easily defined categories. Co-researchers were, for the most part, individuals who seemed not to be working at acceptable levels, not responding to prevailing methods of educational praxis and unable to fit into narrowly defined categories of success. Rather than closely examining students, educational professionals were seen to have defended traditional constructs. Thus, instead of regarding the system as having failed its charges, students were seen as having failed the system. Co-researchers felt that educational professionals erroneously viewed their lack of progress as resulting from laziness, willful disregard of education or a lack of intellectual capacity.

Criticisms leveled at professionals by the statements, memories and assessments of Co-researchers, were made with the full understanding that in most cases, there existed little if any knowledge of learning disabilities (though, at least half of The Group was schooled at a time when such knowledge was available). There did not seem to be much anger over what should have been known about learning disabilities, as it was assumed that this information was

unavailable. Rather, anger seemed to stem from the fact that so much of who Co-researchers were—their talents, skills and needs as students— were subserviated by the need for standard practice and assessment of progress. Since most exhibited at least some areas of strength, it was hoped that these would have been noticed and encouraged. Instead, good writers were condemned as incompetent because of poor penmanship, good readers ignored because of lack of organizational presentation and good thinkers discouraged because of slowness and an inability to obviate success by traditional means.

Co-existent with this highly negative set of memories, members of The Group noted educational professionals who proved themselves to be exceptions to this extremely destructive rule. In fact, almost all Co-researchers reported at least one professional who facilitated a view of the self as capable and worthy of investment. These individuals were not only tolerant and understanding, but helped Co-researchers realize their potential, encouraging them to struggle against failure and feelings of incompetence. If the majority of professionals embodied the worst of educational intolerance with its ingrained rigidity and shortsighted views of students, these educators personified all that was potentially good in such institutions. Able to see beyond the scope of others, their attitudes and actions liberated Co-researchers, often saving them from lives of professional and personal frustration. More than one reported the fact that a teacher or allied professional kept them in school and in touch with their self-esteem and drive to succeed.

The Role Of Educational Institutions

While it would be simplistic to blame educational institutions for their lack of knowledge with regard to learning disabilities, Co-researchers clearly felt that they were victimized by what many called "the system". As with educators, there was a feeling that educational systems were rigid, shortsighted and limited in their ability to assess and assist non-standard learners. This feeling was especially potent for those who were educated in systems where learning disabilities were known to exist, but where little was done to recognize or accommodate for them.

Several members of The Group described "the system" in anthropomorphic terms—it was seen as a faceless and brutal opponent and a merciless task-master. Some of these descriptions were rife with scorn and resentment. For it was this body, which appeared to deny them so much of what they saw others receiving, keeping them away from the highly valued prizes of achievement. With its lack of individuality and its need to stratify learners into neatly defined categories, educational systems were viewed as perhaps the most villainous cogs in the wheel of learning disabilities.

At the same time, most Co-researchers felt that the rigidity and simplicity of "the system" allowed them to eventually shed their victim status by learning to manipulate and circumnavigate its corridors. Almost all noted their growing abilities to "cheat" or "play the game", such that they could succeed. By closely observing those who did well within educational institutions, Co-researchers were able to evaluate the needs of classrooms and educational programs, fine tuning their own performance to mimic successful individuals.

Of course, along the way, all Co-researchers became such individuals—they embodied the success that they so drastically sought. All have spent the majority of their lives in such institutions, achieving at very high levels and apparently becoming ingrained in the system as graduates or faculty. Nonetheless, most never came to feel that they were truly a part of institutions or systems. They retained a sense of alienation and continued to define themselves as "the other" in almost every school they attended or worked in. Once placed on the outside, it seemed, there was no incentive to become invested in such systems, even if outwardly, members of The Group evolved into shining examples of success within these frameworks.

The Role of Parents

Of all players noted in the narratives collected, the role of parents yielded the least consistency. Several, detailed the high degree of support, direction and advocacy which they received from parents. Others, reported a lack of interest and incredulity from parents, while still others noted a lengthy history of adversity and discouragement. The only common element in this regard, seemed to be an assertion of the importance of parental input. Those who

received positive regard and assistance from their parents, noted that they were often the only external voices of a positive nature. They reaffirmed the belief in the self, offering an individualized assessment of skills and abilities, often missed by the outside world.

Kit, whose parents played a negative role in his life, appeared to affirm the value of parental support in his narrative as much as others whose parents were seen as allies and advocates . With no one in his life to reflect back to him those areas where he was capable, (even exemplary), Kit was left with the daunting task of constructing such evaluations for himself. His anger and sadness at the wholly negative treatment he received with regard to his school work and achievement, appeared to have driven a wedge between him and his parents. The pain of this experience seemed to have diminished slightly, when substitute figures were found in the form of professors, who saw in him much potential and encouraged him to pursue his studies. Yet, Kit retained a feeling of loss and betrayal in discussing the relationship with his parents

Co-researchers' accounts underscore the importance of supportive parental figures. Parents were the last and often only resort for comfort and belief, especially when it was not to be found at school and appeared to have been depleted on an internal basis. Many parents acted as forceful advocates for their student children, challenging school systems and demanding education that was suitable and sensitive to their child's needs. Most members of the group expressed gratitude to their parents for their assistance and support, stating that without them, they might not have achieved success.

The Role of Individuals Themselves

While much emphasis was placed on external responses to learning disability, it was by far, the internal process which appeared to have played the most central role for members of The Group. More than any treatment at the hands of educators, educational systems, family and peers, it was the manner in which individuals dealt with their learning disabilities and the efforts needed to overcome them, which seemed to determine success.

Individuals considered themselves to have existed in a number of seemingly contradictory states—to the world they were both smart and dumb, capable and incapable, victims and victors. Inside, they felt both tragedy and triumph, viewing themselves at once as highly skilled and profoundly deficient. They knew themselves to have been victimized by a lack of educational insight and progress and by their own negativity and paucity of esteem. Concurrently, however, there was an understanding that they benefited from external support and internal strength—they and others, exhibited faith in their abilities, offering the latitude and assistance necessary to succeed.

Certainly, members of The Group focused their attention on the injustice of their individual situations. Their anger with the outside world was palpable, as was their determination to right such wrongs and prevent their recurrence. Yet, what seemed to have interested Co-researchers as much (if not more), was their seemingly innate ability to have internally found the strength and resourcefulness to succeed. It was this message, more than any other, that they wished to convey. In their view, it was internal fortitude that liberated them most and allowed them to be regarded as worthy of interest and emulation. Such strength, once found, was seen to have become a permanent weapon in their arsenal, a strong protective shield that would remain with them for all future battles.

At the same time, however, many Co-researchers noted remnant feelings of ineptitude and inability, which seemed to stubbornly cling to them, despite their success. Such negative feelings were seen to be recurrent and to have continued in their ability to restrain further progress. A life of these competing feelings seemed not to have dissipated, but rather to have been taken to newer levels of sophistication. Able to recognize such feelings and to dispel them with experiential wisdom and a proven record of success, were seen as important coping strategies. Yet, none of the members of the Group could state categorically that they were free of such struggles. Many noted with some regret that negativity would pursue them in the future, no matter how much they were able to achieve in the present.

As such, Co-researchers seemed to have accepted much in their lives. They understood that they had traveled a great deal in terms of experience and

inner growth, having gained and lost along the way. They knew that there were aspects of their lives that could be changed, bettered and built upon for later success. As most were at mid-points in their educational or career journeys, such knowledge was key. At the same time, however, there was a sense of insight into the limitations placed on them by their learning disabilities, personality traits and by the external pressures of the world. While there was regret for some of this perceived loss, there was also strength derived from having accepted that which could not be achieved, relegating it to secondary status behind those things which could. As a group, there seemed little time for self-pity and resignation. What did seem to exist, however, was a sense of having found a meaningful path to success, while forgoing others whose traverse would not yield positive results.

Advice to Future Learners

As part of the interview process, Co-researchers were asked to provide advice to future generations of students with learning disabilities, their parents and educators. Drawing from this and from the information contained in the biographical material, a four-step remediation model was developed and presented below. This model seeks to address the perceived need for a holistic approach to learning disabilities on both technical, institutional cognitive and affective levels. It would alleviate specific learning symptoms, correct external attitudes towards learning disabilities, engage students in the internal work of accepting and circumventing learning weaknesses, as well as instilling in them a sense of competence and efficacy. The phases of this remediation process have been termed Recognition, Identification, Education and Empowerment. Taken together, these strategies are both reflective of Co-researchers' own experiences, as well as their vision for the proper remediation of future generations.

Recognition

Since most members of the Group traversed educational systems without the benefit of understanding their difficulties, it seemed to them essential that non-standard learning be recognized as a genuine disabling condition. Informing educators, parents and students, such that they are aware of learning disabilities and the differences between symptoms of specific syndromes and

other negative behaviors (such as lack of initiative, poor work habits, etc.) was regarded as the first step towards remediating and assisting affected students. Without such recognition and the removal of old stereotypes and rigid classifications, it was felt that little progress could be realized.

To some, such sentiments would appear to be redundant in an era where learning disabilities are recognized, well defined and effectively treated by trained, legally mandated professionals. It could be argued that to make such a request is simply to comment on past ignorance, having no relevance to the present or future ranks of students with learning disabilities. However, to claim that all of the battles for recognition and appropriate service have been permanently won, is naive and dangerous. Evidence abounds that such universal acceptance and support is far from achieved. One need only look at the paucity of research into the needs and definition of learning disabilities in adulthood, to see that the work of recognition is far from complete. Research pinpointing the lack of service available to students in post-secondary institutions serves to dispel the myth of universal service, even if it is legally mandated (see Chapter 3).

Certainly, it can be argued that much work has been done in defining the needs and limits of younger students and service is being provided in large numbers of public schools. The quality and availability of services, however, varies widely between jurisdictions and household income-levels. With shrinking budgets, special needs services, though legally required, are often seen as non-essential "frills" and are the first to be eliminated. In private school settings, little control is exercised on the quality and availability of services, as such institutions are seen as beyond the reach of public policy.

In addition, there is evidence that recognition of learning disabilities as a valid construct is far from universal. The organic origins of learning disabilities, its short and long-term effects, as well as the most efficient means of combating their negative impact, have yet to be fully understood. Several authors (e.g., Franklin, 1987) challenge the notion of learning disabilities, claiming that it is a socioeconomic phenomenon, a gender-based phenomenon, or a reflection of overly-liberal and lenient educators. Most professionals do not share these views and with much anecdotal evidence to counter such claims, there remains

popular support for learning disabilities. Yet, there are critics whose voices are clearly heard and often disproportionately represented to the public.

Challenges to the construct of learning disabilities exist even among institutions which accept funding to assist such students. A recent incident involving the president of Boston University, presents a harrowing example of this. Claiming that learning disabilities are "scientifically murky", Mr. Jon Westling, ordered the reversal of accommodational policies designed to assist affected students (Lewin, 1997).

In a major public address, Mr. Westling presented the case of a student whom he stated, was given outrageous privileges, which amounted to an unfair advantage and an invitation for laziness. Despite the fact that the example was later revealed to be a fabrication, the president pursued his policy, even in the face of legal challenges by advocates and students. These challenges, while still unresolved, have already garnered legal precedent. A preliminary ruling by the courts has indicated that students are to receive remediative assistance, but that the university does not have to alter degree requirements, even if they are impossible for students with learning disabilities to achieve (Kalb, 1997).

Such evidence, added to the still incomplete knowledge base pertaining to the makeup and needs of students with learning disabilities, points to the continued need for recognition. Parents, students and educators must remain vigilant in their pursuit of knowledge and access to fair and effective remediative assistance. Given the localized nature of educational institutions in North America and the resulting uneven levels of available service, there are many battles ahead for all parties concerned. Legal precedent and legislative efforts have allowed for much progress, but as several studies presented in Chapter 3 note, even these laws are not adhered to, especially in the higher realms of education.

Identification

Co-researchers felt strongly that a thorough and detailed identification of their learning disabilities, was an important step towards remediation and recovery. For most, such identification came later in life, long after they had

begun to suffer the effects of learning disabilities and been forced to construct personal compensatory strategies. Nonetheless, members of The Group noted that identification added much to their learning lives as well as to the internal view of the self.

Rather than feeling disabled by labels, or artificially placed into categories which did not fit, Co-researches saw identification as opening new doors of understanding and a sense of inner peace. For it was with such a definition, that old feelings of ineptitude, laziness or lack of intellectuality were finally dispelled. Here was an external explanation for all of the frustration and doubt which had been the hallmark of their experiences throughout their pre-identification lives. Suddenly, there were organized principles around which to continue the work of accommodation. Help was now available by professionals and self-examination was possible in new and more sophisticated ways.

Naturally, there are dangers associated with identification, especially for younger students who must carry the resulting labels with them on a permanent basis. There is a tendency to accommodate to the definitions offered, to limit the inner and outer work offered in order to suit the perception that one is capable of only so much and no more. With only crude definitions currently available, some might artificially place themselves or others within confines that are not truly reflective of weaknesses. Of course, no definition of learning disabilities provides indications of what a student is capable of, only what s/he cannot do.

Thus, the challenge for all those concerned, is to demand and produce definitions which are as complete and specific as possible. There must be a realistic evaluation of students, such that both deficits and strengths are recognized and dealt with. Leaving a student, his/her parents and teachers without a thorough understanding of their learning disabilities may be seen as a defense against the constraints of a label. Yet, it will almost certainly leave them vulnerable to the kind of pain and suffering noted by members of The Group, who lived with the shame and frustration of ignorance. It is in the hands of future researches, educators and clinicians (as well as advocate parents and students) to demand definitions which will liberate rather than constrain, inform rather than breed new prejudice and allow for progress rather than a continuation of difficulty and failure.

Education

For this group of successful individuals with learning disabilities, education, in its broadest sense, was paramount. All have devoted their lives to the pursuit of their own educational goals and all will likely engage in education in some form, as professionals. It is no wonder then, that education was seen as a priority for Co-researchers, who would naturally view it as the single path to success in their lives and in the lives of future generations. Modern western philosophy and work-place needs, support this contention, as all children and adults are required to complete various courses of study. Education remains, for most individuals, the primary key to success.

As such, access to the most effective and sophisticated general and professional educational programs was seen as important. Learning disabled students should, in the view of the group, be admitted to all programs offered to non-affected contemporaries. Modifications which allow for progress, but which do not diminish the rigor or standard of programs were seen as essential. Perhaps, it was because Co-researchers felt that they were often denied a basic education, struggled to succeed in professional or academic settings and made difficult choices based on a lack of acceptance and understanding in certain settings, which fostered this strong sentiment. All seemed to agree that educational options should be limited by internal considerations alone and not those imposed by uncaring and unyielding learning institutions.

Beyond the issue of access to general education, though, there was a feeling that students with learning disabilities require more education than standard learners. In their opinion, a higher-order set of skills should be acquired, so as to function on par with colleges (or beyond). These are the special coping strategies, which for most Co-researchers, were developed, out of necessity, on an individual and spontaneous basis, in the face of ignorance and adversity. Such skills, often looked upon both negatively as "cheating" and positively as an indication of emotional and cognitive fitness, were seen as the very essence of success. It was their development and deployment which appeared to separate Co-Researchers from others similarly afflicted, who were

unable to traverse the obstacles placed before them and navigate successfully through educational systems.

Thus, education takes on a new meaning. Not only do members of The Group feel that specific coping strategies need to be taught and practiced, but that metacognitive learning needs to take place in order to allow for the development of personally relevant mechanisms to emerge. Simply presenting strategies to students may allow them to deal with specific situations in a momentary fashion, but it does little to ensure that later obstacles can be met effectively. This is education at a very sophisticated level, it moves beyond mere instruction and into the realm of "reflective practice" as elucidated in the work of (Schon, 1987). Here, students become practitioners and are given insight into their ability to deal with ever-changing and emergent situations. In this sense, education returns to its meaning of origin, as students are literally given the opportunity to draw from within themselves the insight needed to progress and succeed.

Empowerment

At first blush, it would seem natural to assume that out of the first three stages of the proposed model for dealing with individuals with learning disabilities, a sense of empowerment would naturally and spontaneously emerge. After all, if a student benefits from a high degree of recognition, accurate and specific identification and an education that teaches both the content and process of learning, it would be expected that feelings of control and capability would develop. It is likely that for some students, such a result would be guaranteed; however, given the experiences of members of The Group, as well as their reflections on the needs of others in their situation, this is by no means a certainty.

Members of The Group (as noted previously) continued to feel a sense of loss, ineptitude and inequity. This occurred even after they were diagnosed, offered remediation and recognized their innate ability to cope with the rigors of learning with a disability. Almost all felt that feelings of disempowerment pursued them with dogged determination, affecting their lives and in some ways, limiting their experiences and ability to achieve.

As such, it was felt that beyond the specifics of recognizing, diagnosing and educating learners with disability, added psychological support is required in order to muffle the voices of inner negativity while amplifying feelings of strength and aptitude. It was felt by many in The Group that students with learning disabilities will always unfairly compare themselves to others whose learning seems to occur more naturally and with less effort. Failures will continue to reinforce negative self-images, while success will only temporarily dull, but never irradiate them completely. Achievement, without assisted changes in attitude and self-image, cannot permanently supplant a sense of incapacity and a view of the self as a lesser being.

In order to counter these naturally occurring feelings, along with the continued reinforcement such views received from a society which artificially imposes labels of normalcy and disability, an organized and concerted effort is required. Emerging from the stories and reflections of The Group is a two pronged approach, which may allow for a dissipation of negativity and the growth of a more realistic and positive regard for the self.

Firstly, an effort should be made on the part of teachers, therapists and parents, to carefully counterbalance definitions of disability with definitions of strength and proficiency. Careful examination of individual strengths, creative capacity and unique talents, will enable students to see themselves as more than learning disabled. The title "learning disability" itself misleads students to feel that they are somehow stratified below others. Instead, it should be pointed out that all students have both weaknesses and strengths which can and do affect learning and achievement. Further, it must be made clear that belief in the self along with realistic goals, strategies and a keen sense of the possible (and the impossible) will allow for success.

Secondly, it seems important that students encounter previous generations of individuals with learning disabilities, particularly those who have achieved measures of fulfillment in a wide array of domains. Books, films and live contact with learning disabled persons of various ages, would allow individuals to see that they are not alone, that there is a rich history of progress and attainment of goals among a variety of predecessors.

Support groups of peers and older students with learning disabilities would create community among a population that has traditionally been disparate and silent. Sharing experiences, frustrations along with joyful moments of progress, add to the strength of the human spirit, allowing it to move forward, less encumbered by the weight of doubt, fear and shame. Teaching all students to value themselves, to see their weaknesses as relative and their strength as unlimited, will add not only to the lives of learning disabled persons, but to society at large, which has traditionally denied normalcy to so many individuals.

Reflections on the Nature of Disability in Society

The journey of this dissertation, with its surprises and insights, has presented me with many important and acute experiences. I have been allowed to travel inward in order to find starting points for the exploration and understanding of others. At the same time, I have been allowed to utilize the insight of others in order to clarify and contextualize my own experiences and thoughts. This combination has proven to be quite powerful and transformative for me and, as I learned from many Co-researchers, for others as well. It appears that The Group has been able to shed light onto the phenomenon of learning disabilities and has, as was the original goal of the study, offered advice to others whose lives (or the lives of those with whom they work or live) are similarly laid out.

Beyond the confines of the particular phenomenon, however, the work of this study has sparked in me an interest in examining the phenomenon of disability and its place within contemporary society. Going into the study, I made certain assumptions and held particular beliefs about disability, society's relationship to it and the message that life with a disability offers to a broader audience. Over the course of this journey, I have had these assumptions and beliefs challenged. Listening to the narratives and their message in this regard, as well as reading about the phenomenon of disability in society, has given rise to a fundamental shift in my own views and to the message that I wish to convey in this regard.

The question of disability and its place in society is one that has surrounded me for as long as I can remember. Having been raised in an era of much change in social philosophy and in a society that has consciously sought to liberalize its views on the treatment of various minority populations, I was accustomed to attuning myself to messages of oppression and liberation from many camps. For most of my life, the physical and psychological structures which surround me, have attempted to sensitize and accommodate themselves to the needs of the disabled. With the ever increasing presence of ramps, elevators, Braille script and sign language, came constructions of accommodation on non-physical levels, as we were all made aware of the existence and needs of disabled folk. Language, along with political views, began to change, as society came face to face with individuals who had previously been denied routine access to public life, because of societal shame, anger and guilt.

As an adult, my work with disabled populations, along with a burgeoning sense of myself as learning disabled, lead me to examine the social conscience which had necessitated such intense change and accommodation. The question of why society held such views and how these views affected individuals, began to interest me. As a religious participant and educator, I focused my inquiry into the role of religious institutions, seeing that there was much negativity in traditional attitudes of churches and synagogues.

In an article which I wrote for the journal, Disability and Society (Rose, 1997), I discussed the conclusions that I had reached in examining this question. I stated that from what I found, it appeared that the Judeo-Christian theology had created the construct of disability for western society, laden with fear and negativity. Disability, for various reasons, was abhorrent and pitiful in traditional religious doctrine. Its followers perpetuated the fear and anger which resulted from these negative attitudes, segregating and, in many ways, dehumanizing a population that, ironically, required a great deal of assistance, patience and humane understanding.

Clearly, the past three decades have sought to eradicate older fears and vilification of disability. As such, there are protective laws, sensitizing educational campaigns and an ever increasing presence of disabled individuals

in all segments of society. Such actions, while important and effective, have not completely altered society and there remain a myriad of prejudicial attitudes and actions. Therefore, narratives such as those collected for this study, offer important lessons on the nature of disability. They highlight the struggles and obstacles which disabled individuals face on a routine basis and challenge the ideas and beliefs of educational and social philosophy which have allowed for such suffering to occur. They offer insight into the needs of the disabled population in educational contexts and heighten awareness among professionals.

All of this was the original goal of the study, and one that I feel was accomplished, chiefly through the compelling and insightful narratives of Co-Researchers. For me though, there was another lesson to be learned, another set of assumptions and prejudices which I found in myself and in the attitudes of those around me. While the majority of society claims to have shed its older prejudicial notions of disability, such that there have been improvements in attitudes towards this population, I believe that there is a newly developed prejudice that is as strong and as limiting as those of the past.

I encountered this prejudice in my own life, as I began to construct my dissertational study. When I formulated the goals and the process of this dissertation, it was my intention to focus primarily on the positive outcomes experienced by the population. I sought out in myself and others, those actions and attitudes which were constructive and growth promoting. I acknowledged the fact that along the way, there was pain and even suffering, but relegated this to a dramatic background, subservient to the glory of achievement and accomplishment. Like many others around me, I wanted to see disability in its noblest of forms—as a struggle of mythical proportions, personified by individuals who nullified their difficulties and heroically triumphed over adversity.

Much of this is, of course, true. Each Co-researcher has triumphed in his or her own way. Each has succeeded and reached a level of education and professionalism that is not only rare among disabled persons, but among the general populace as well. However, it is also true that the members of The Group suffered in numerous ways and with varying degrees of severity. All are,

in some ways, scarred by the experiences of their lives and all feel that damage has been done to them that is irreparable. Most importantly, members of The Group stated repeatedly, that success, though tangible and real, is permanently tinged by their continuing inability to perform in the world at levels that are wanted and often needed for progress. Why then, was I so focused only on the positive side of the narratives? What was it in me that was so willing to diminish such pervasive and significant information?

I came in contact with the severity of my drive to present only the most noble and pain-free aspects of disability, while presenting my initial research findings to a dissertation support group. As I phrased the results in such a way as to focus on the triumphal aspects of The Group, actively minimizing the element of suffering, I was challenged by my colleagues and supervisor. I began to realize that I was enacting a form of censorship on the material, which disturbed me greatly. I had spent so much time immersing myself in the data and attempting to sensitize myself to its messages. How then, had I allowed myself to be so distant from such important information?

Insight came with reading a personal essay in the popular press publication *The Utne Reader*. The essay, authored by Andre Dubus (an accident victim and paraplegic), (September/October, 1997) challenged the ideals he held about disability prior to his injury and which he believes, still limit the disabled in society. Society, in his opinion, purposefully presents only "the good story" of disability, because it lacks "the compassion and courage to imagine someone else's suffering" (p.35) . In attempting to highlight the triumph of the human spirit in the face of adversity, Dubus claims that we minimize the adversity. The result is that the disabled remain objectified, not as objects of pity or scorn, but as examples of happiness and triumph, often belying the torment which is routinely faced. Such desensitization, keeps the disabled at arms' length from the general populace, affecting their access both physically and psychologically to the wider offerings of the world.

I was shocked to realize the intensity of my own prejudice on this matter, once it became clear to me that I was attempting to present the phenomenon in a highly unbalanced fashion. I now understand that I was acting in a manner commensurate with the contemporary mythology surrounding disability. I see it

as a construction meant to rid society of old patronizing and antagonistic attitudes accompanying the pity and loathing typical of older attitudes. Yet, I cannot help but realize that such a construct is, in many ways, just as dangerous a pitfall as its predecessors. Had I only focused my energies on examining the possibilities which arose for Co-Researchers, ignoring the real and often severe limitations which were articulated, I would have failed to present the data in a thorough and complete manner. Worse yet, I would have failed in my goal to accurately reflect the experiences of Co-Researchers who placed their trust in me and in my attempt to move forward an understanding of learning disabilities.

As such, I have come to see the need for examining disability in a variety of ways and from different points of view. Understanding the social construction of disability is important because it allows for an eradication of damaging attitudes and an increase of accommodational strategies. To look only at one aspect of life with a disability is to stifle this process and to rob those who live with this reality of their power. It seems important then to present disability in all of its many facets, in order to bear witness to both suffering and triumph, conquest and vanquishment. It may also help shed light on the condition of humanity in general, as it attempts to understand suffering in its many forms. As Dubus states:

To view human suffering as an abstraction, as a statement about how plucky we all are, is to blow air through brass while the boys and girls march off to war. Seeing the flesh as only a challenge to the spirit is as false as seeing the spirit as only a challenge to the flesh. On the planet are people with whole and strong bodies, whose wounded spirits need the constant help that the quadriplegic needs for his body (p. 36).

In the end, the lessons I have learned are of balance, of truth and of the potency of hearing stories with an open mind and a willingness to learn. I have come to see disability and its place in society as a complex construct, demanding much thought and insight. It is clear that the journey toward full integration on those with disabilities has yet to be achieved. Yet, it is equally clear that much work has already been done and that as a society, we are fortunate to have guides and voices of dissension to lead the way.

"Stunted Growth"

COLOUR PLATE #14

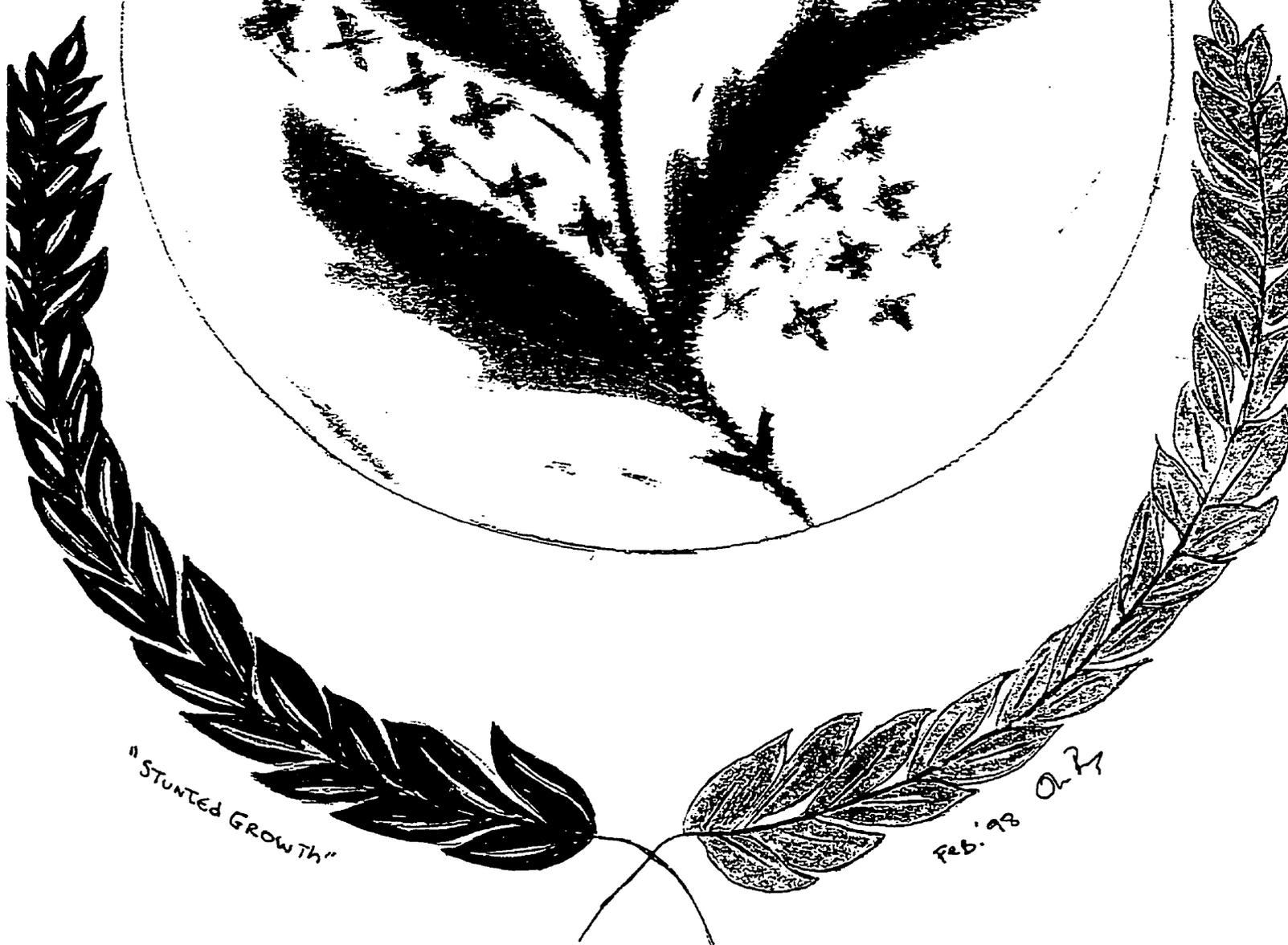
In the deepest part of the winter, the fruit of summer and the quilt of fall became covered in a snowy layer of frozen doubt and fear. Edging so close to the end of the project, I became incapacitated, incapable of taking the final steps towards completion of a draft.

Mourning on the first anniversary of the sudden death of my closest friend Shira and watching helplessly as another friend hovered close to her end, I became aware of the fact that I was looking at the completion of my dissertation as a form of death. For all of the strain and stress it has caused and with all of the joy that would come with its completion, it seemed that I was losing a trusted friend in this project, it had, after all, kept me focused and occupied during many trying and difficult months. What would life without this constant partner be like?

I knew that my growth in this area was stunted, that I needed time to regroup and find the strength to see the project through. I was drawn to a piece of embroidery that Shira had left me, a snowy white backdrop on which leaves had been sewn. The leaves, though green and lush, were only half complete, their other halves represented by a series of brown X's—symbols of incompleteness I decided.

I placed this pattern inside a small circle, representing the stunted growth that had been Shira's life and the incompleteness of my work. Just beyond the circle is a crown—a leafy wreath of victory in gold and silver, which would come with completion. For now, they were outside the field of the real, remaining only in the realm of the possible.

As I look at this piece, I see the white sphere and I realize that during this time, my work was literally and figuratively "mothballed"—frozen in sadness and fear. I would have to wait until the spring to feel alive again, invigorated with the drive to complete the project and allow the work to reach its natural conclusion



"STUNTED GROWTH"

FEB. '98 O.P.

"Rhizomatic Growth"

COLOUR PLATE #15

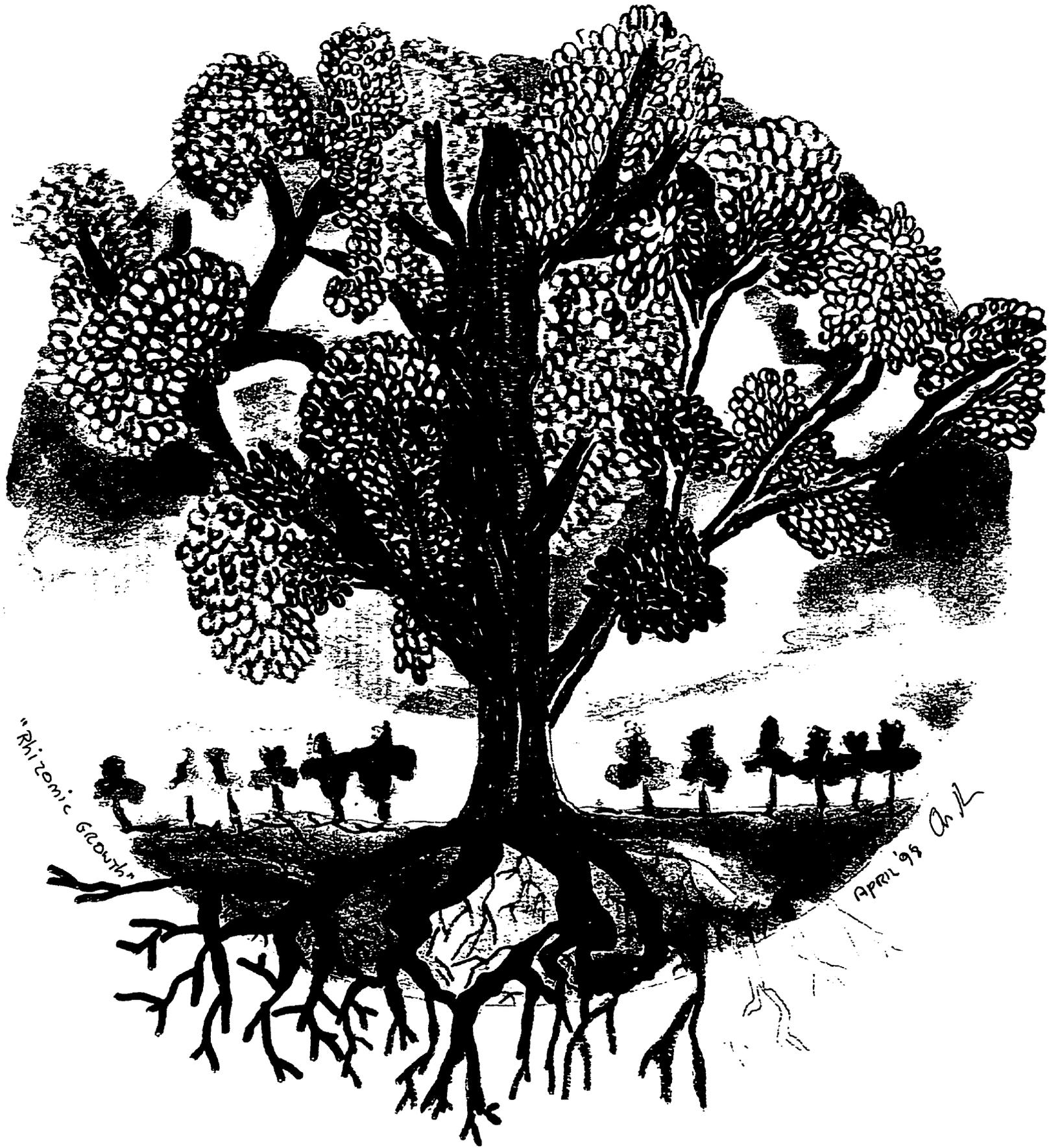
The inspiration for this piece, so stark in its contrast to the previous one, came from the enlivening and reassuring members of my dissertation support group. It was during one of our monthly meetings that the members reflected back to me my ideas and structure in a way that allowed me to push on and complete a draft of my work.

I began to describe to the group the feeling I was getting from my work, as I began to piece together all of the connected elements. It seemed to me that out of all of our individual experiences there was tremendous growth, a coming together of elements which, more than a conglomerate, took on a sense of independent and continued growth. In other words, the whole seemed greater than the sum of the parts.

Members of the group responded by suggesting that I was describing a "rhizomatic" growth pattern, one where the roots of a plant spread out under the earth, producing new generations in an interconnected manner. The iris is apparently a flower which grows in this manner.

From this, I began to see the work as organic, rooted in the individual experiences of the Co-researchers (represented by the different coloured root patterns). Together, they form the basis of a living, growing organism—each person's story coming together to create a cohesive thematic pattern. Veins of individual experience can be seen in the trunk of the tree and they have allowed for a variety of leaf patterns and colours to grow. Yet, it has, in the case of my work, become one unit, a live and vibrant entity with much to tell and teach.

At the foot of this tree I placed a set of irises, rhizomatically growing and intertwining with the tree. These are representative of several ideas—my personal growth as an artist, researcher, therapist and writer, my growth as a member of the support group and the growth I experienced from the mentoring relationship with my dissertation advisor. Additionally, I feel that it represents the growth that has hopefully taken place as a result of this project, not just for me, but for "us" —the team of Co-researchers and "them"—those who live or work with learning disabilities.



"Rhizomic Growth"

April 98 An R

CHAPTER 7

Foreshortening: A Second Review of the Relevant Literature

Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather he must recognize that it is he who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life.

—Viktor Frankl

Introduction

The purpose of the literature review as presented in Chapter 3, was to set that stage for the present study. In order to fully understand the issues at hand, their relative merit and significance within the corpus of knowledge surrounding the phenomenon, it was felt that a thorough review of significant works in the field was warranted. Such a review established a context for the study, as well as illustrating points of information already available on the subject of learning disabilities and the adult population. It highlighted the need for study in the area of higher education and pointed the way to some important theoretical frameworks available for the construction of a suitable and potentially informative inquiry.

Having utilized this knowledge in organizing the present study, having found a point of entry into the field of inquiry and having yielded a set of interesting and significant results, it is time to revisit literature relevant to the phenomenon. In this way, there can exist a symbiotic connection between fore and back ground, between that which was known and that which was learned on the journey just completed. This allows the insight of the present study to exist within context, making of it a new link in the chain of inquiry within the study of learning disabilities. This link will not only act as a bridge to work that has already been completed, but will lead the way to possible research and clarification in the future. In this way, scholarship in the field is both heightened and lengthened and the present study given added depth and dimension.

Beyond the scope of literature in the field of learning disabilities into which the results of this study belong, lies a wider body of literature pertaining to various aspects of the human condition, into which it can also fit. These too are

important links onto which the findings can be joined. They widen the implications of the work and serve to strengthen consequential theories and views on human behavior. As such, two important theoretical constructs will be examined and their relationship with the outgrowth of this journey established. Firstly, I shall examine the Existential model of psychology and human growth, as posited by Frankl (1967, 1978, 1984). This model has been an important theoretical construct within the field of psychology and has impacted on the development of my own thinking as well. It has influenced me as an individual, researcher, educator and therapist. As such, it seems important to me to place that which I have learned from on this journey in the context of learning which has inspired and guided me.

In addition to this, I wish to place the findings of this study in the context of an emerging and potentially significant theory—that of Emotional Intelligence (Goleman, 1995). The Emotional Intelligence theory is gaining great acceptance and influence and will, I believe, alter the ways in which we as professionals and individuals regard ourselves and those whose lives we seek to affect through our work. It is my feeling that the findings of the present study can be understood in the context of this theory in a manner that will impact upon it positively. It will also highlight potential paths for future inquiry and the need for a melding of research in the areas of learning disabilities and emotional intelligence.

Findings in the Context of Literature Pertaining to Learning Disabled Adults As Reviewed In Chapter 3

Breadth and Depth of Learning Disability Symptoms

Chapter 3 organized the literature pertinent to the field of learning disabilities and adult populations into several streams. One area concerned the longevity of learning disabilities and its continued influence on the lives of adult learners and workers. Authors such as Gerber and Reiff (1991), Buchanan and Wolf (1986), Frauenheim and Heckerl (1983), suggest that contrary to conventional thought, the effects of learning disabilities are not "outgrown" following adolescence. Minskoff (1988, 1994) goes so far as to suggest that symptoms can increase in severity, likely due to lessened levels of support and

exposure to environments with limited knowledge and tolerance for learning and performance weakness.

The results of the present study confirm this, noting that in all narratives, there was a continuation of learning difficulty. In several cases, there was a noted degeneration of progress in higher levels of education. This was particularly true for Manya, who managed to by-pass many of her symptoms until she reached post-secondary levels. The fact that the group was uniformly confirmative of this finding is significant. It highlights the need for continued work in the area of adult treatment. It should be seen as a call to action for institutions of higher learning who can expect to receive new generations of students with learning disabilities. These students are likely to be more vocal than those of the past, since they are accustomed to adequate levels of support and service.

Similarly, there were several studies presented in the initial literature review which noted the scope of difficulty associated with learning disabilities. Academic, social, daily living aptitude and self-esteem issues were of primary concern for authors such as Brier (1994), Gerber and Reiff (1994), Ross-Gordon (1989), Chapman (1988) and Hoy and Gregg (1984), all of whom noted deficiencies associated with learning disability diagnoses.

Narratives collected from Members of the Group support these findings in a number of ways. While there was tremendous individual variation in type and level of symptomatology, as a group there were examples of all impairments. For the most part, there were combinations of symptoms noted and almost all recalled significant loss of self-esteem. As such, the findings can be considered as added evidence to the breadth and depth of learning disability symptoms.

Paucity of Services and Acceptance at Higher Educational Levels

Some authors (e.g., Telander, 1994; Minskoff, 1994) have noted the fact that as students progress through various levels of education and attend post-secondary institutions, services for those with learning disabilities decreases. As Parks (1987) noted, graduate and professional schools in the United States

exhibited such an overwhelming lack of accommodational services, that they appeared to be in violation of both federal funding regulations and the legal mandate to provide assistance to persons with disabilities.

In schools where services were offered, there appeared to be a discrepancy between the perceived needs of students and those of the service providers, such that students often felt that their needs were not adequately met. (McGuire, Hall & Litt, 1991; Bursuck, Rose, Cowen & Yahaya, 1989). There was evidence of negative attitudes on the part of faculty towards persons with learning disabilities, along with unrealistically positive assessments of services available to affected students (Houck, Asselin, Troutman & Arrington 1992). It was theorized that this may account for the decrease in reported numbers of students with learning disabilities who move on to graduate and professional programs (Vogel & Adleman, 1992; Profiles of Handicapped Students in Post-Secondary Education, 1987).

Co-researchers experiences provide various forms of support for the above contentions. Several were students in educational systems prior to the enactment of laws and community standards which called for assistance and as such, had no expectation of service or support. For the vast majority, however, such legal and ethical sensitivity was in place. Despite this, there were scattered reports of appropriate or adequate services offered. Few reported receiving assistance at post-secondary levels of any significance and almost none discussed provisions offered at post-graduate levels. While there were some offers of assistance recounted, it appeared that they were minimal, difficult to obtain and seemed redundant after a lifetime of self-created compensatory schemes.

For those students who required assistance, experiences with special needs offices were not always positive. While Sam and Avi, for example, felt supported by their special needs providers, Kit recalled that those whose task it was to assist him with his writing difficulties, added to the stress and sense of failure that he experienced as an undergraduate. For several Co-researchers there was inconsistency between what was required for success and what was offered, leaving them once again alone in their search for success. The difference between those who were satisfied with the services provided and those who

were not appeared to lie with the ability to request limited and clearly defined forms of assistance. Experience with bureaucracies and with special services providers was also a key to receiving a desired level of assistance.

Resiliency and Learning Disabilities

Though the findings of this study concur with many of the negative attributes and side-effects of learning disabilities (and their treatment in educational systems), there was also evidence of a more positive nature to emerge from the studies collected.

Literature outlining the resilience and success of learning disabled adults in the initial literature review was drawn from several sources. Personal narratives attesting to various forms of success (Schmitt, 1992; Simpson, 1979) offered compelling examples of achievement. Scholarly inquiries such as those by Reiff (1995), Lewandowski and Arcangelo (1994), Kloomak and Cosden (1994), Scott and Scherman and Phillips (1992), corroborate these narratives with details of larger populations realizing goals in a variety of educational and vocational spheres. Werner's (1993) longitudinal study, offered depth to the breadth of information pertaining to the possibilities which can be seized by members of the population.

It is no surprise, then, that members of The Group added their voices to the chorus of those who herald the triumphal success of adults with learning disabilities. Their narratives support the contention that the path to success is an arduous, contorted and often painful. Yet theirs was a message filled with hope. It illustrated the best of the human spirit, of the power of persistence and creativity and the important role which teachers, parents and clinicians can play in bettering the position of those in need.

One area of note to emerge from this resilience literature and supported by the data, was that of the "late bloomer" theory. Success, though realized by all Co-researchers at all stages of life, seemed to be met with greater acceptance, wisdom and serenity in older members. This is partially due to the fact that success was long achieved in a myriad of ways in these individuals and had become incorporated (even if only partially) into the lives of Co-researchers.

Yet, it seemed apparent that, with age, there was a deepening of strategic competency, along with the ability to harness creativity and determination in a focused manner.

These findings are in keeping with theories posited by authors such as Gerber (1994) and Spekman, Goldberg and Herman (1992, 1993) and supported by works such as Basset, Polloway and Patton (1994) and Werner and Smith (1982, 1992). These theorists point to the fact that with age and experience, the adult with learning disabilities tends to gain both insight and confidence, leading to a personal renaissance of development. As so-called "late bloomers", it would seem that individuals with learning disabilities need to be given time to grow and form identities which are positive and achievement-oriented and which take into account their special developmental pathway.

Yet, for many individuals with learning disabilities (such as the Co-Reserachers in this study), time was not necessarily an afforded luxury. All attended graduate studies programs while in their 20s and 30s and all were forced to develop creative and effective coping/circumvention strategies early in their student careers. So, while it may be correct to state that time is needed before maturity is realized, it must also be noted that such opportunities are the exception. It can only be noted that whatever vocational or educational path is taken by young adults with learning disabilities, there will likely be an ease of coping with time.

Gerber and Reiff's Model of Successful Adult Profiles

Gerber and Reiff's 1992 model of high-achieving adults with learning disabilities offered a compelling role-model in the framing of this project. Both the qualitative manner in which the subject was approached and the detailed presentation of micro and meta themes, paved a theoretical pathway for the present study. It assured me that there was important work to be done in the area associated with my chosen phenomenon and exemplified the power of ideas which could emerge from a qualitative inquiry. The information emerging from their study helped me to structure some of the questions which were asked of Co-researchers, while its detailed presentation was helpful in framing an outline of the themes which emerged uniquely from the present study.

Though it was not my intention to replicate their work, I did find similarities between themes emerging from Co-researchers' narratives and patterns outlined by Gerber and Reiff. The dualistic model of internal process and external action presented in the study allowed me to look at the life histories with an added level of complexity. Clearly, the population of this project displayed functioning on both these planes. Internally, there were decisions and thought patterns, which were in evidence and which set the stage for progress. Externally, there was found to exist a comprehensive set of actions, concretizing the inner process and actualizing success. Taken together, this duality constituted a complex and highly effective coping system.

Gerber and Reiff's notion of control as the central motivator in the lives of all individuals with learning disabilities was in evidence among Co-researchers. Although it was not always obviously present in the narratives, there was certainly a detectable pattern of concerted effort made towards gaining control over a broad spectrum of personal milieus. This highlights the fact that for most (if not all) individuals with learning disabilities, life unfolds with much confusion and little sense of control. Given the fact that learning disabilities affect individuals in both intellectual and interpersonal domains, a sense of mastery over the environment would naturally dominate the developmental agenda.

As with the population found in the Gerber and Reiff study, members of The Group, presented themselves as highly determined individuals whose lives were focused on success and progress. Though they were not always overtly aware of this, they used this determination as the principal motivator for academic and personal journeys, which were often arduous and littered with challenge and obstacle. From this, came the compilation of strategies which improved over time with ever-better planfulness and efficiency. In evidence, were goals and plans on both small and large scales, with micro and macro agendas functioning concurrently.

Coming to terms with the self as learning disabled—challenged and yet capable and growth-oriented—was a process noted in Gerber and Reiff's work and strongly evident in the population of the present study. Each Co-researcher had, in her or his own way, managed to see him or herself as both disabled and

empowered at the same time, with positive results. Knowing oneself to be disabled, allowed for an easing of feelings of incompetence and for a reasonable explanation of weakness and blockage. It clarified the barriers which were to be overcome and cleared a path through which the journey to success could continue. Cognizance of disability was helpful only in combination with self-confidence (however battered and weakened it might have been after a lifetime of setback and failure), which held feelings of self-pity in check and prevented a sense of ineptitude from overwhelming and stagnating progress.

The powerful combination of accurate self-assessment, an understanding of needs and limitations and seemingly unyielding sense of determination, allowed both members of the present study and those of the Gerber and Reiff sample to realize elevated degrees of success. Utilizing some of the external skills alluded to in the Gerber and Reiff study, helped members of The Group take this internal structure and make of it a tangible plan of action. Among strategies found common to both groups were: The use of teachers and colleague students as role models and sources of advice; the creation of networks and support systems; the careful structuring of work and study environments and the goodness of fit between individual, the work environment, colleagues and supervisors.

Most importantly, was the common element of creativity. If determination can be viewed as the pillar on which rests the internal process of overcoming a learning disability, then creativity can be seen as the pillar of external manifestation. For, along with a deep sense of determination, each Co-researcher manifests the trait of creativity in her or his own unique fashion. As with Gerber and Reiff's population, such creativity allowed individuals to both achieve at levels that were commiserate with colleagues and to display talents or skills which exceeded expected levels of performance.

Gerber and Reiff's work was a thorough and exciting model from which to begin the work of the present study. Elements common to both works serve as powerful support for the theoretical underpinnings and practical information found in each. The findings of the present study are rendered more poignant and applicable because of this work, which has set the standard for inquiry into the lives of adults with learning disabilities. The scope and information of the

present study, however, does differ from Gerber and Reiff in several ways. It examined a student population, hoping to assist other students by thus focusing. It concentrated on the graduate studies experience as a model for the needs of students in the realm of higher education and the limitations of service available there. It centered on a relatively small population, with the goal of presenting not only thematic-based insight, but learning which emanated from individual narratives and life histories. The detail essential for learning to emerge in this way necessitated a limited Co-researcher base.

The most significant difference between this work and that of Gerber and Reiff is, I believe, the emphasis on the emotional aspect of life with learning disability and its consequence in the healing process. For me, the feelings which accompanied the experience of learning disability were of vital importance in understanding the individual and in structuring possible intervention models. Learning disabilities were not simply a set of logically comprehended or overcome impediments. They challenged the fundamental sense of inner competence, worth and ability in such a manner as to involve not only the cognitive but emotional life of the individual.

In presenting the results of this inquiry into the lives of those affected by learning disabilities, it seemed important to add this element and to make note of its power and pervasive nature within the experiences of the population. Similarly, in looking for possible intervention strategies which appeared to emerge from the collected data, it was material to incorporate the emotional element as part of a comprehensive and effective means of remediation.

In keeping with the perceived need to examine the phenomenon from an affective perspective and with an eye to structuring interventions which are similarly disposed, I turn my attention to two theoretical/clinical models of human behavior. These will provide guidance and support to the findings of this study and to the work that will likely emerge from it.

Findings in the Context of Frankl's Existential Model of Psychology

Viktor Frankl's Existential Model of psychology, can best be seen as an outgrowth of existential philosophy, popularized in the first half of the twentieth

century (Ivey, Ivey & Simek-Downing, 1987). The model rejects the notion that humanity is dominated by forces such as fate and biological drive. Rather, Existentialists view humans as ultimately free to make decisions and choices and to shape their destiny accordingly. Though it acknowledges the fact that humans, as biological beings, are subject to physical limitations as well as those of mortality and outside action, it does not advocate the position that such a reality should engender an outlook of resignation and immobility. Instead, it stresses the fact that humans contain within them the capacity to make of their lives what they wish—they can wallow in the misery of their condition, or can create (out of even the harshest of living conditions) an existence filled with meaning and hope.

Much as Existential philosophy emerged out of opposition to earlier deterministic theories, such as those of Hegel (Breisach, 1962), so too did Frankl's psychological model evolve out of opposition to the predominant theoretical poles of classic Psychoanalysis and Behaviorism. Freud and his disciples stressed a drive-based theory, positing a human existence motivated by the desire to fulfill basic in-wired compulsions and by the need for pleasure (Hall, 1954). Behaviorism, in contrast, stressed the learned nature of behavior, believing humanity to be ultimately malleable in the face of education and experience (Neisworth, 1983).

Frankl argued against the wholesale acceptance of these philosophies, stating that they formed only two-thirds of the personality hierarchy. True, humans are highly influenced by basic biological needs and are subject to the pervasive influence of experience and learning. These, however, do not complete the makeup the whole of the person, for if they did in Frankl's opinion, humans would be nothing more than a race of automatons. Frankl stated that the spirit—the ability to choose and find meaning—separated human personality from such an existence. If humans are driven by one main desire, Frankl believed, it was the will to achieve meaning in life. It is this spiritual element that forms the apex of the personality hierarchy, with body and mind subject to its ultimate freedom (Frankl, 1978).

Meaning (or “Logos” in Greek), is seen as the central force behind human personality and behavior. Though humans are not necessarily free to

choose the physical conditions of life and cannot avoid suffering, the attitude taken towards life separates the healthy from the weak. Frankl's ultimate proof of the validity of this theory, came with his own experiences in the Nazi concentration camps of Europe during the Second World War. Frankl (1984), saw that even in the most adverse of physical and psychological realities, some individuals maintained their lives and sanity, while others of equal health and strength, died or became despondent and helpless. This, he attributed to the fact that some individuals were capable of finding meaning and moving beyond pain, generating hope and deriving comfort (Frankl, 1967).

Meaning for Frankl is not to be created but rather discovered. This, he felt was accomplished in three main ways: By creating work or doing a deed; by experiencing someone, or encountering something (such as art, music or nature)—by seeing truth, beauty or goodness, or by feeling love; and in the attitude taken toward suffering. (Corey, 1977).

Frankl believed that pain and suffering, like change, were largely inescapable. Yet, much meaning could be found in the struggle lived within and beyond the confines of such adversity. Survival is a meaningful task; it brings with it the knowledge that the personality is capable and strong and that life, despite its painful struggles, can be rewarding (Farby, 1990). The wholesale acceptance of Freud's pleasure principals, has lead, in Frankl's opinion, to a culture which avoids the necessary struggles of existence, allowing itself to subsist in a drug-induced, anesthetized stupor (Frankl, 1984).

For Frankl, the personality is unhealthy when it is devoid of meaning and incapable of seeking it—living in what Frankl termed an "existential vacuum". A healthy human being, is one who achieves the continued quest for meaning throughout life and is capable of discovering ever-changing meaning, even if the process is uncomfortable and sometimes painful. This is particularly important because Frankl believed that meaningfulness fades and new meaning must be found. Filling the void left in the wake of this so-called "existential frustration", must be handled with great care. All too often, there is the temptation to fill the vacuums with the hollow prizes of material or power (Frankl, 1967).

"Logotherapy"—the therapy of meaning—is an educational process. Therapists assist clients in coming to realize that they are granted the right and responsibility of choice. Rather than dealing with subconscious material that is subjected to complex analysis, the Logotherapist seeks to help the client ascertain what is current in their minds and what can be done to discover meaning. Neuroses, in Frankl's opinion do not emerge from conflicts that occur within the subconscious struggle between drives and instincts. Rather, they are created in the mind or "Noos" (in Greek) and are the product of a meaningless existence. By helping the client to begin the search for meaning, Frankl believed that the symptoms of the neurotic would disappear and be replaced with contentment, the byproduct of a meaningful existence (Frankl, 1978).

In my opinion, the courage and creativity displayed by members of The Group, exemplifies the principles of Frankl's Existential Model of Psychology. Each Co-Researcher was able to face the harsh realities of biologically-based limitations and a human environment that was often hostile, misunderstanding or apathetic and make of it, an existence that was rife with meaning and success. Each faced the repeated challenges of learning disabilities with great courage and determination and understood, often instinctively, the right and responsibility which was theirs to choose and cultivate.

Frankl's model appropriately encapsulates the population of this study, because it both realistically describes the painful struggle of their lives, while underscoring the positive steps taken toward the derivation of meaning from such difficulties. All Co-researchers displayed existentialist overtones, they pragmatically saw themselves captive in situations which were inescapable and seemingly filled with challenge. Yet, at the same time, they were able to extricate themselves from the limitations and confines of their disabling conditions, through sheer determination of will and creativity of spirit. As the narratives so poignantly note, this was a process that demanded almost constant vigilance and was called into action on numerous occasions throughout Co-researchers' academic and professional careers.

Co-researchers discovered life-meaning in individualized ways, concurrent with their personal and academic interests. Utilizing some or all of Frankl's three pronged approach, there is ample evidence that life was and

continues to be a source of both considerable frustration and deep meaning for them. Seeing the lives lead by these and other individuals with learning disabilities in the light of Frankl's work allows it to be viewed in the fulness of its nobility. The intensity of both the negative and positive elements of the narratives is, I believe, best perceived through the lens of Existential Psychology.

It is, perhaps, because of my own experiences as a person living the duality of this reality, that I was drawn to Frankl and the school of Existentialism. While this may be the case, I suspect that the power of the theory is more universal and that I was drawn to it because of its ability to describe all of human existence. As such, it seems important to state that the model is useful in helping to frame the experiences of The Group. Equally (or perhaps more so) though, the lessons derived from this study stand as further support for the accuracy of Frankl's work and its ability to describe human existence. Frankl (who recently died), will be remembered as having served humanity as a guide—for increasing its self-awareness and ultimately allowing for the betterment of its condition.

Findings in the Context of the Theory of Emotional Intelligence

Another theory which looms large in my thinking and which is gaining wide-scale support and acceptance, is that of Emotional Intelligence. Daniel Goleman's 1995 book, introduced a broad audience of professionals and laity to the concept of Emotional Intelligence. The theory, drawn from a collective of research, evolves the notion of intelligence out of its traditional confines and into a newer, broader understanding. Moving away from older, single dimension theories of aptitude, Emotional Intelligence rejects the idea that intelligence is purely a cognitive trait, separate from affective considerations. It also challenges the previously held conviction that intelligence is an immutable, congenital factor, stating that change can occur and that learning can affect intellectual performance and general capacity.

The theory presents a model of intelligence that is both holistic and expandable. Drawing from the work of Gardner (1993a), it sees intelligence as multivariate—functioning on various levels and individualized in its makeup. It posits an understanding of humanity as ruled by both reason and emotion, in

concert. Emotions play a key role in the makeup of intellect, in partnership with reason and cognition. Thus, the so-called "intelligence quotient" (or IQ), derived from a single dimension theory of acumen and based on cognitive skill, does not stand alone as a predictor of success, or a measure of potential. Rather, it must be seen as functioning with and mitigated by another kind of intelligence, the so-called "emotional quotient" (or EQ).

Emotion in this context, can be seen as the gatekeeper of intelligence. Thoughts, ideas and rationales are all controlled by emotions, which regulate both their formulation and expression. Similarly, the intake of information and its integration within the cognitive realm is mitigated by emotions, which will always bend and shape it, much as a carnival mirror manipulates the visual reflection of the self. A person is not, therefore, merely a sterile producer and expressor of thought and information, but is a conglomerate of feelings and ideas which meld to form personality and intellectual capacity.

In an attempt to define EQ and explain its influence on the reception and expression of cognition, Salovey and Mayer (1990), breaks down the factors of emotional intelligence into five general categories. He defines them as self-awareness, emotional management, self-motivation, empathy and interpersonal proficiency. Goleman (1995), summarizing the research of emotional intelligence, outlines them as follows: "Self-awareness is defined as the ability to recognize and monitor emotions. Psychological insight and self-understanding are seen as key in the process of navigating through the emotional terrain of existence" (p. 42).

Emotional management is defined as "handling feelings so they are appropriate". This competence, which "builds on self-awareness", is "the capacity to soothe oneself, to shake off rampant anxiety, gloom, or irritability", along with "the ability to comprehend the consequences of failure at this basic emotional skill" (p. 43). Those who lack adeptness in this area, are seen as living at the mercy of their emotions, those who excel at it are considered able to "bounce back" with speed and efficiency. Goleman calls this, "upbeat denial" (p. 75).

Self-motivation, is defined as the ability to use certain emotions appropriately in the service of progress, while quelling others which might impede such forward movement. "Emotional self-control—delaying gratification and stifling impulsiveness" (p. 43), can allow an individual to persevere in the face of challenge and remain focused on the task at hand. Optimism and "flow"—a high level of concentration which minimizes interruption—are, on the other hand, emotions which facilitate success (p. 90).

Empathy, is defined as both the ability to sense and comprehend the feelings of others. Being "attuned" (p. 99) to others and to their emotional needs, allows the individual to step out of the self. Awareness of outside affect, not only creates altruism and prevents sociopathic behavior, but is also evidence of a high degree in internal familiarity. Knowing when and how to approach another, based on an understanding of their emotional state, is a means of facilitating positive interpersonal relations.

Interpersonal proficiency, is defined by Goleman as "the social art" (p.111). Utilizing the ability to comprehend and control emotions within the self, along with the capacity to recognize and be empathic to the feelings of others, is seen to be a key factor in emotional intelligence. As Goleman states, such skills "under gird popularity, leadership and interpersonal effectiveness" (p. 118). Organizing groups, negotiating solutions, connecting interpersonally and social analysis, form the rudiments of the social art and are descriptive of its most successful practitioners. In its most genuine and non-manipulative form, Goleman states that this skill epitomizes emotional intelligence. It is "stuff of interpersonal polish" and makes for a person who "others like to be with, because they are emotionally nourishing" (p. 119).

Emotional intelligence may help explain the variability of overall competence, even among individuals who appear to be of similar intellectual capacity and background. It may also explain the failure of purely cognitive assessments to accurately predict future success in a variety of real-life settings. It augments the understanding of intelligence, giving it greater intensity and texture.

The theory is more positive and less deterministic in its approach to intelligence, as compared with older models. It states that there are a variety of intelligences, that no one should be judged as less capable because of test scores which suggest weakness in one particular area. It proposes that intelligence, in an overall sense, can be improved with education and training. Emotional intelligence and its inherent factors can be taught, enhancing the overall functional capacity of an individual, even one whose cognitive abilities are seen to be weak.

The theory of emotional intelligence is relevant to the present study in two fundamental ways. Firstly, it stands as support to many of the findings which emerged from the study, as there is much overlap between this study and the theories outlined by Goleman (1995). Secondly, it may point the way to solving many of the difficulties noted in the lives of individuals with learning disabilities in a variety of research (including this one) and can be seen as forming part of the rationale for some of the recommendations emerging from the present study.

Members of The Group can be said to have exhibited a high level of emotional intelligence. The narratives and thematic analysis chronicle the gradual and deliberate development of competencies which bolstered natural abilities and minimized the effects of learning weakness. These included both cognitive and affective components. Co-researchers, in isolation, carefully crafted their lives so as to navigate through extremely turbulent emotional waters, calming inner and outer voices of criticism, doubt and anger. At the same time, healthier emotions were used to motivate and push towards progress. In an emotional world made up of competing stereophonic frequencies, the treble of the negative was decreased, while the bass of the positive was elevated.

Using Salovey and Mayer's (1990) model of emotional intelligence, Co-researchers can be seen to have developed many positive traits on their journey to success. They exhibited an ever-increasing sensitivity to their emotions, carefully monitoring feelings of confidence and despondency. Along with this, came the growing capacity for emotional management, activating positive feelings and quelling the ever-present negativity. As a group, they displayed a

very high level of motivation and told of their individualized schemes for increasing self-control and "flow".

Learning from all sources, members of The Group manifest keen observational skills, monitoring both the cognitive and affective behavior of successful colleagues, along with the demands of teachers and institutions in these spheres. Interpersonal skills, which facilitated progress on the journey to success, were in evidence for many. Statements indicating a high degree of empathy were, likewise, notable. In fact, it was often this feeling that motivated individuals to participate in the present research. Learning disabilities appear to affect the ability to incidentally acquire social competency (see Chapter 3). As such, Co-Researchers developed skills in this domain through constant and deliberate effort, allowing them to utilize the talents and resources of others and create a comfortable social network, necessary for professional and personal life.

Co-researchers experienced many failures in both cognitive and affective spheres, such that it would be inaccurate to state that they began their lives with highly developed levels of emotional intelligence. In fact, there was evidence to suggest that among most, there were deficits in social and emotional capacities. Yet, Co-researchers' vigilance and deliberate attempts at survival and self-improvement, transformed them into keen practitioners of emotional intelligence. The story of their acquisition of these skills is, in part, what makes the narratives so fascinating. Using the template of emotional intelligence, helps to structure and elucidate the factors which lead to their success. It adds validity to the findings of this study and serves to explain the pivotal role of affective mastery in accounting for the accomplishments of The Group. Conversely, the thematic analysis of the present study—highlighting an experiential trajectory which included many elements noted in the work of Goleman and others—adds to the corpus of evidence validating the theory of emotional intelligence and its assertion that positive changes in intellectual capacity can be realized.

In addition to the symbiotic benefits which can be derived from comparing these two pieces of research on a purely theoretical level, there is an additional, practical benefit to their confluence. For, the theory of emotional intelligence points the way to treating some of the deficits highlighted among the

learning disabled population. It offers a comprehensive approach to analyzing and ameliorating weakness, leading, potentially, to increases in overall functioning. Using the coping and accomplishment skills noted among Co-researchers as a guide, along with the model of aptitude posited by the emotional intelligence theorists, practitioners are given a powerful set of tools with which to approach the learning disabled student. Engaging students early on in their careers in such a remediative effort, may help alleviate some of the lingering emotional difficulties which might otherwise hamper progress or dampen success.

While it is not within the scope of the present study to offer a fully developed remediative model based on the findings of this research and the work of emotional intelligence, it seems important to note the connection. Future research may focus on such practical solutions, as well as explore the relationship between learning disabilities and emotional intelligence. Already theorists are working on ways to determine levels of what Goleman calls "emotional literacy" and the effect it has on learning and performance in a variety of ways (e.g. Hawkins, 1992; Elias & Clabby, 1992). Work with so-called "special needs populations" (including students with learning disabilities) in light of this theory has already begun (e.g., Greenberg & Kusche, 1993).

Like the theory of emotional intelligence, the message of the present study is one of optimism and potential progress. The purpose of the study was not only to highlight a set of extremely successful individuals with learning disabilities as examples of triumph over adversity, for its own sake. Rather, the goal of the research was also to suggest ways in which other students with learning disabilities might be assisted to reach levels of achievement similar to those realized by members of The Group. As with the work of Gerber and Reiff (1992) and Frankl (1967, 1978, 1984), emotional intelligence as outlined by Goleman (1995), offers practical advice in the search for effective and lasting means of counteracting deficits associated with learning disabilities. The existence of this theory, as well as the other models noted, holds much promise for the treatment of this population. It broadens the base of definition and solution to the difficulties of the learning disabled and offers new insight which may lead to increasingly potent assistive techniques.

"Taking Flight"

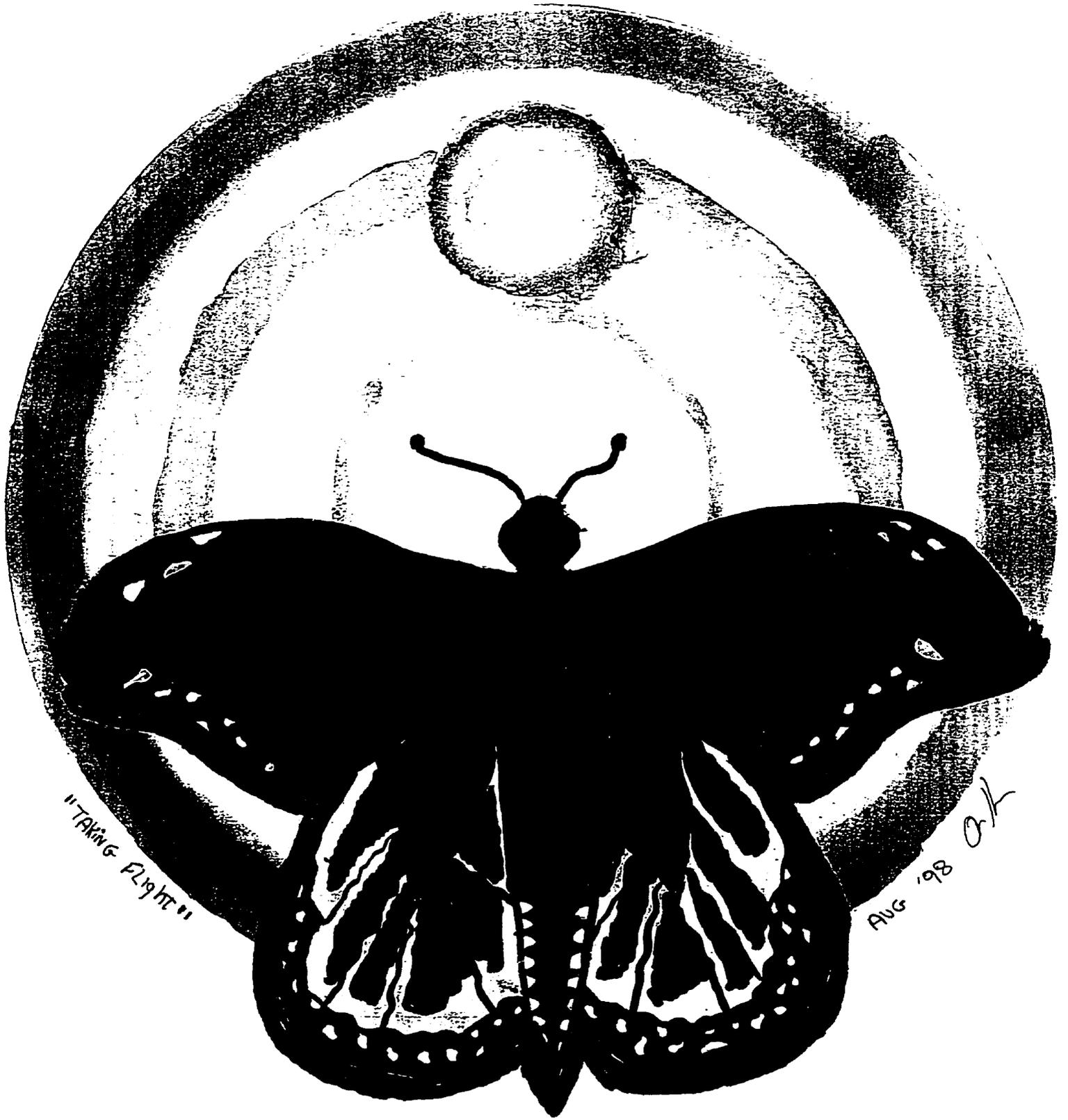
COLOUR PLATE #16

In June of 1998, I handed in the first complete draft of the dissertation to my advisor. After many years of work, months of completion and hours of final preparation, I see before me a document—large, complex and intense—a true reflection of me and my best efforts.

It seems to me that the whole project is now like a butterfly—after much time growing safely in a cocoon and suspended as a chrysalis, it is ready to take flight.

I chose the image of a Monarch butterfly for two reasons. Firstly, I felt that it reflected the symbolism of the project, it was a living being whose body was composed of various colours and shades, just as my work was composed of both the individual and collective hues. In addition, I was reminded of my Master's thesis experience, when I spent time in a preschool classroom observing students learning about butterflies. No theory or story could match the intensity of excitement which the children seemed to feel as they watched and waited for their home-grown Monarchs to emerge from their cocoons. In a touching moment at the end of the year, the children and their teachers released the butterflies into the wild, bidding them farewell and thanking them for the lessons which they had taught.

Though my butterfly is not quite ready to be let go, I can now look forward to the day when I set it free and thank it for all that it has taught me.



"TAKING FLIGHT"

AUG '98 *OK*

CHAPTER 8

Perspective: Some Concluding Thoughts

The It is the eternal chrysalis, the Thou the eternal butterfly.

— Martin Buber

Introduction

In ending a project such as this, I have many thoughts: Was the piece informative, thorough, exciting? Does it meet my expectations, those of my Co-researchers and those of outside readers? What has this project given me, my partners in the venture and those who read it? Did it live up to the ethical, creative and intellectual rigor of the qualitative paradigm?

Answering these questions, for me, takes on various forms. On the one hand, I can use the questions which I posed in the methodology section (Chapter 2) to evaluate the material, in order to see if it meets with the trustworthiness and authenticity of a qualitative work, as posited by Lincoln and Guba (1986, 1990). Since these have been my guiding principles throughout the process of designing the project, collecting interview data and analyzing the material, it seems that I should be able to answer most, if not all of the questions, for myself, in the affirmative. Beyond this, I leave the reader to judge whether the work meets their standards and merits their approval as an interesting and informative piece of human experience research.

Looking at the impact of this work and the messages which I hope it has conveyed, is another means by which to conclude. For this, I turn to the writing of Reason and Marshall (1987) in their work entitled *Research as Personal Process*. In this piece, they attempt to answer the question of why it is that researchers engage in the research process and the potential rewards that can be gained from it. In their opinion, the reasons are threefold, namely, that research is entered into in order to offer something to three different parties, termed as "me", "us" and "them."

The researcher is the "me". S/he engages in research because it holds "enormous potential . . . for personal development, change and learning" (p. 112). "Us", refers to the collective of individuals who form the cadre of Co-researchers. Research for this group "enables us to act effectively in the world (p. 113)", expressing our experiences and giving us new awareness of self and other. It allows the personal narrative to become a lesson and vehicle for reaction and transformation. Our intended audience is "them", "the fund of knowledge . . . the community of scholars" (p. 112), and, I would argue, the wider world of professionals, practitioners and those whose lives are touched by the studied phenomenon. It is also for "them" that we engage in this process, because we seek to inform them, to ask for their assistance in affecting change and to demand greater sensitivity in the way in which we and all of humankind, are treated.

What follows, is my understanding of the project in this context. It is my attempt—at the end of the process—to clearly articulate the message that I hope is conveyed by this work for all parties concerned, especially for "them". It also my intent, to discuss those aspects of personal development which occurred for "me" and, I suspect, for "us". It is the final, loving brush strokes, gently applied to a portrait just completed, a last wave to child, now leaving the safety of home, ready for independent challenge and adventure.

Comments on the Journey

For Me

The journey of conceiving, constructing and compiling this dissertation, has affected much change and growth in me. As a researcher, participant, educator, artist and psychologist, I have seen myself pushed to new limits and stretched in differing and often exciting ways. As my role in this process was manifold, it seems to me that each should be addressed in some form.

As a researcher, I was given the opportunity actualize my concept of research. Qualitative methods were—at the beginning of this process—a set of ideas and ideals, an untested playground for my imagination and intellect. I was uncertain as to how the process would emerge on a practical basis. I did not

know whether I would be able to articulate my understanding of the phenomenon or construct a means of conducting interviews and collecting data. It was not known to me whether I would be able to find suitable Co-researchers who would be willing to participate in such an intense and personal process. Neither, was it clear that the themes derived from these interviews would be informative and interesting or whether it would generate an analysis that was worthy of the stories collected.

What I learned, was that the integrity and rigor of qualitative methodology could be counted upon, at every step, to produce results that were exciting, interesting and worthy of the enterprise. Working within this demanding and often times laborious paradigm, never depleted my energies; rather, it continuously added to my sense of excitement and determination. It offered me many opportunities to encounter life from fresh and exciting angles. No matter who it was I interviewed, I was able to see interest and value in their tale. Similarly, themes emerged from the collected narratives in an organic and holistic fashion, in keeping with other aspects of the exercise. The sense of integrity, care and respect which was demanded of me as an interviewer, paid off in a myriad of ways, as material and emotion emanated in a genuine and complete manner.

What I can say, as a now practicing researcher, is that the feeling of having found a "home" within the qualitative paradigm that I encountered the very first time I learned of its existence, has remained with me, consistently, ever since. It is not an easy discipline by any stretch and its divergence from traditional methods of human experience research demands that it be guarded and defended with frustrating regularity. Yet, for me, it was and is the only path to take as a researcher, for it has allowed me to integrate parts of myself that once seemed so disparate and disjointed. It has allowed me to approach others with a similar feeling of integrity and wholeness and it is a form of intellectual inquiry that I intend to pursue with great care and ferocity in the future.

One of the greatest gifts bestowed upon me as a result of my work on this project, has been my reemergence as an artist. Once, art was my only refuge from a world of hostile words and numbers. As I gained ever-increasing levels of proficiency in these areas, its significance in my life seemed to fade. I now realize

that in my quest to conquer learning disabilities and focus attention on my education, I let go of an important aspect of myself as a visual artist. Though I never forgot the joy that being with art, artistic materials and artists gave me, I remained locked out of the world of visual actualization, in a self-imposed exile. As I began to conceive of this project—first thinking that I would only ask others to contribute works of artistic expression to its corpus—I began to feel the need to engage in visual artwork myself. At some point along the journey, I came to need this creative outlet, such that it became an integral part of the research process. I am so pleased that the paradigm allowed me to re-open this essential facet of myself. I now see it as a vital aspect of my work as well.

Over the coming years, I hope to continue to explore myself as an artist and the intersections between art and human experience research. Integrating these parts of my whole has opened new vistas of possibility to me. I look forward, with intense excitement, to the paths that it will take me down as I allow it to lead and guide me. I hope to be able to share not only the products of this journey, but the process of it as well, as I begin to discuss and teach others to facilitate within themselves, aspects of personal and interpersonal research which utilize various forms of artistic representation.

As a potential teacher and therapist, I feel that much has been added to my skill and knowledge base from this journey. I have learned to look at people differently, to value their knowledge and experience in new ways. I know now, that I will never again approach others simply as recipient clients or students—in need of help, learning and guidance, void of skill or insight. Rather, I will forever view those with whom I work as colleagues in a process of learning and discovery.

Facilitating, rather than engineering, liberating rather than inculcating, integrating rather than replacing—these shall be my goals. I have always been troubled by the tacit imbalance of power inherent to traditional andragogical and therapeutic modalities. Now, I believe, I have a key to unlocking a more equitable and perhaps even more efficacious means of accomplishing educational and therapeutic goals, in a manner that more closely reflects my personal understanding of human relationships.

As a participant in this project, I have also seen great liberation and development. When I began to consider a possible topic for dissertation research, I could not conceive of including myself or my story in a project. Now, I see that I not only should have, but must have done so, in order to retain my integrity as a researcher and social scientist. I no longer find value in impartial, dispassionate and disconnected research, but only in the need to become deeply aware of one's own feelings, ideas and biases. As such, I was glad to add my voice to the chorus of those whose lives constructed the phenomenon I researched. I feel that I was prudent and rigorous in approaching others and equally careful in presenting my own story.

I am very pleased that I allowed myself to become thusly involved. I know much more about myself—my strengths, weaknesses, my joys and sorrows—than I previously did. I have come to feel more connected with others whose struggle to defeat the limitations of learning disabilities is a life-long venture. I feel less alone, more empowered and in very good company. Placing myself in the context of a collective has not discontinued my own journey, it has, in many ways considerably enhanced, vindicated and strengthened it.

For me, then, the benefits of this journey have been numerous. I entered into this venture unsure and unaware of where it would lead me. I emerge, feeling stronger, more connected, better informed and left with a sense of integrity, creativity and invigoration. This was, by no means, a simple or easy sojourn, but neither was it overly arduous, painful or strenuous. It has allowed me to test my limits without pushing myself to unsafe and unreasonable places. Most importantly, I believe, it has prepared me for a lifetime of work for which I have great respect, commitment and admiration.

For Us

It is my feeling that the definition of "Us" in the context of this dissertation is manifold. In its simplest form, "Us" refers to the dyadic relationship which I had with each Co-researcher. This, was for all intents and purposes, the extent of the direct collaborative experience which we undertook and it has significance worth mentioning. In addition to this, there is the "Us" generated by the examination of the collected narratives and themes of all Co-researchers.

Though they never met as a group, there did emerge from this project, a sense of group and its associated consciousness.

Finally, there is the outer ring of "Us", the other students with learning disabilities—adult and child, present and future—who might in some way, be assisted by the work of this collective. I place them in the category of "Us" rather than the outer-most ring of "They", for I feel that there is a bond which links us all and makes of us, on some level, a community. Most of us will never meet face to face and most will never read or even hear of this project. However, there are unimaginable ways in which we will become connected and will be influenced by our common journeys and experiences, including those chronicled here. In honor of this fact, I have chosen to include this group and the comments I wish to make to them, in the broadest catchment of the word "Us".

The dyadic connection established between the research participants in this study and myself, was, for the most part, one of great significance. Each, had its own special flavor, tone and significance, in keeping with the individuality of the participants and our interactionary experience. Yet, as a whole, I think there were factors which proved common to most sessions. For almost all participants, this was the first and perhaps only in-depth discussion of their learning disabilities and the educational experiences which stemmed from it. For many, it was an important step in the acceptance and expression of feelings associated with this reality. There was a sense of importance that emerged, a feeling that finally a valuable story could be shared, events substantiated and vindicated and lessons for others gleaned.

Most Co-researchers commented on the importance of this event, either as part of the formal interview process, or privately afterwards. This was not universally the case, but there were indications that the interaction was powerfully meaningful and that much was anticipated from its occurrence in a research and educational context. To me, this points, once again, to the power and significance of qualitative research methods. Not only did participants leave feeling that they were respected and that their information would be used with great care, but there was a sense of good will, comradery and, I hope, deep understanding.

Since all of the Co-researchers had found their journey to ultimately be a solitary one (despite the presence and involvement of significant others), there was cognizance of community and commonalty which seemed to excite and enliven participants. The idea that their information might be used to benefit others and seek to, prevent the injustice and misunderstanding typical of almost all Co-researchers experiences, seemed worthy of the exercise and just reward for re-telling and re-living events laden with tremendous emotional content.

Beyond the scope of the dyadic and group context of this study, it is my sincerest hope that the work affects change within the learning disabilities community. Knowing that there is a group of students who have struggled and triumphed at even the highest levels of education, will I hope, give a sense of possibility and encouragement to others who face similar challenges. Learning the ways in which these unique individuals constructed coping and success strategies can, I feel, give practical insight and guidance to other members of the community. What we now know about how to overcome learning disabilities is, sadly, still not what we need to know in order to irradiate their terrible influence and consequence completely. The stories and themes which emerged from this project have, I hope, added to the base of knowledge on this subject and have taken us all, one small step toward the ultimate goal of nullifying the destructive capacity of learning difference.

My dream for "Us", is that we develop a greater sense of community. I would be most gratified to see this generation of learning disabled adults take a leadership role in advocating for ourselves and assisting others. Those of us who live life in this reality are, I feel, best suited to work for improvements in the ways in which society accommodates those with a learning disability. We are also the best models, teachers and mentors for other students with learning disabilities, for we can share our experiences and act as truly empathic professionals.

If there was less stigma attached to having a learning disability, more information on what it means to be learning disabled and a sense of pride in the accomplishment of having succeeded as a person with a learning disability, perhaps there would be more room for such a community to develop. In the meantime, it seems important to give voice to those of us who are brave enough

to share our stories and use our own experiences as guides to future accommodation. Knowing ourselves to be powerful, capable and in need of organized advocacy action would, I think be a good first logical step in the process.

In my own life, I see these feelings develop rapidly. Several years ago, I cowered every time a teacher or professor denied the existence of my learning disability when I succeeded at a level which they assumed to be beyond that capable of a person so disposed. When looking for a thesis topic, I again cowered, thinking that it was not relevant, interesting or potentially valuable in any real sense. After reading the literature, speaking with others whose lives are similarly laid out and having examined the population of this study, I do feel stronger, more confident and more committed to the idea that there is merit in voicing the needs and experiences of the learning disabled community.

When I recently heard that a colleague had once again questioned the presence of a genuine learning disability in my life—due to my ability to perform academically—I was angry rather than fearful, forceful rather than retiring. It seemed to prove the point all the more so, that there is a great need for "Us" to become a collective and to educate the rest of "Us" as well as the rest of "Them".

For Them

"Them", in context of this construction, refers to two sets of individuals. Firstly, there are those professionals—teachers, therapists, special educators and administrators—who deal with learning disabled individuals and have the potential to shape and influence their lives.

To them, I wish to say that they must read the narratives and themes with great care. They must see that errors in professional judgment, personal prejudices and collective ignorance, have painful and destructive consequences. No one person in this circle can or should take responsibility for past injustices, nor should they see themselves as solely responsible for the salvation of the learning disabled individual. Yet, there can be improvements in sensitivity, professional acumen and sociological norms, which may benefit this population. As with negative consequences, it should be clear from the narratives and

themes, that individuals can make a difference, that there can be much that is positive and reparative in the relationship with a learning disabled student.

As can be seen from the lives of students in this group, damage done through poor and negative treatment can have a lasting effect on self esteem and the process of overcoming roadblocks. Yet, at the very same time, kindness, understanding and consideration, can open doors, change minds and lead the way to new possibility and a sense of worth. It seems to me that for those who seek to work with learning disabled students, there is tremendous responsibility, great risk, yet endless possibility for good.

To those who administer and organize graduate institutions, it is my feeling that this project speaks most clearly to you. If there is any one strong message to emerge from this work, it is that learning disabled students with a variety of organically-based impediments, can make excellent graduate students and can contribute to the community of academics and professionals who complete these programs. In fact, it can be argued that such students make exceptional graduate students, for their educational histories and well-honed work habits, prepare them well for the rigors of most graduate programs. If the individuals of this study are any indication of the population's potential (and I would argue that they are), then the group exhibits qualities which seem to form the very essence of a graduate student. They are industrious, hardworking, motivated, self-starting, independent, tenacious, resourceful and creative.

In the broadest sense, I wish to make a comment to the largest group of "They", the general population. I strongly feel, that this project, along with a growing numbers of others in the field, suggests that we as a society must begin to re-examine some of the assumptions and prejudices which we hold with regard to individuals with disabilities in general and students with learning disabilities in particular. As a society, we steadfastly maintain artificial categories for human behavior which limit our ability to comprehend the true nature of an individual's capacity and potential. We segregate and segment people along very narrow lines of definition, thus slotting them into political and practical confines which restrict their growth and our ability to make the most of their talents.

It seems to me, that the concept of learning disabilities should be looked at more as a social construct and less as an affliction. The concept evokes a medical model of a syndrome that though organic in origin, is mostly sociological in nature. It is only by carefully examining our assumptions about education, about disability and about learning, that we can begin to unravel the ideas which hold us all hostage. Seeing learning disabilities not only as a malady, but as a by product of psychology, philosophy, theology, sociology and politics, will liberate us all. Even the term "learning disabilities" carries with it a narrowing medical connotation, an artificial social stratification and a moralistic judgment. Our goal should be to see all students as unique in their skills and abilities, endless in their potential and capacity to contribute to society.

Looking Toward the Future

And Moses went up from the plains of Moab unto mount Nebo . . . And the Lord showed him all the land . . . And the Lord said unto him . . . "I have caused thee to see it with thine eyes, but thou shalt not go over thither".

-Deuteronomy XXXIV, 1-4

I had always assumed that ending the dissertation journey would leave me feeling like Moses did at the end of the Pentateuch. Behind me, would be what I had accomplished—the growth I had participated in and facilitated. Ahead of me, would be that which was possible—the places I might have traversed, had I been able. The end, I assumed, would be bittersweet—I would reluctantly leave that which I felt was taken to a good place, but far from finished.

However, as with so many aspects of this journey, I am surprised to discover that my feelings are entirely different than I had expected. On the one hand, I am pleased with what I have done and, on the other, I am comfortable leaving the future work alone—for the time being—open to many other possibilities. I am, in other words, feeling peaceful.

I know that the work of this project was handled with the greatest care and respect possible. Much effort was exerted on my part and much energy was

expended on my behalf, by those who participated in the project, oversaw its completion, or supported me personally in my endeavors. The qualitative paradigm demands rigor, but does not function on the premise that one's work will reach certain hypothetical points. As such, I have worked hard and, in return, been given the opportunity to see this project emerge with surprise and delight, much as one who plants a flower enjoys the miracle of its unfolding. I feel content to let the work of this project stand on its own. If there is interest on the part of others to read and make use of this work, so be it and I will be honored. If not, I feel satisfied that I have done justice to myself, to the qualitative paradigm and, most especially, to those Co-researchers who trusted me with their life histories.

I realize that, unlike Moses who stood at the end of his career, I am only at the beginning of mine. I am impassioned by the phenomenon of this study—the convergence of personal emotional investment, intellectual interest and political purpose, gives rise to dreams of other projects and fresh directions for me to undertake. As the drawing of the trees in my final Mandala image suggests, I feel that there are new branches to explore and new fruits to pick, gather, ripen and sample.

There are numerous ways in which I, as a researcher, can pick up the trail of this project and venture into new territory. I would like to see more graduate students' lives discussed, in order to broaden this work with other aspects to the phenomenon. It would seem important to make use of the findings from this and other studies in the "real" world, examining their efficacy and relevance. Similarly, it would appear necessary to examine the social, political and educational foundations of learning disabilities with those individuals who are most directly involved in work with the population. If change is to be affected, then there must be a clear understanding of the constructs which both hold the greatest potential for assistance and those which hinder progress most clearly.

I hope that others will see the importance of examining the lives of learning disabled adults, especially those whose lives have taken them in directions not usually considered within their expected domain. There are those among the population who have ventured all over various professional,

educational and personal maps. Their stories deserve to be told, their lessons wait for others to discover, to learn and to share. If the stories and themes presented here and in other similar projects of this nature have managed to present the phenomenon in a sufficiently enticing manner, there may be others who are excited and interested in furthering the process of asking questions, challenging assumptions and exploring the incredible life histories of as yet unnamed individuals. The qualitative paradigm teaches us that there are as many good questions and worthy journeys as there are individuals who are willing to ask and travel down new roads.

Epilogue

Personal Journal Entry, April 6, 1998:

Three years after leaving my last class as a student in a formal educational program, I return to the classroom to speak to a group completing that same final course. I have been asked to describe my research journey and the process of organizing and writing my dissertation. I am grateful for the opportunity to share my thoughts, my work and my ideas.

As I engage in this process, I recall to the group the events of that last class in 1995, when I "encountered" reflections of my self as a student at differing stages of learning. Moving my hand in the air, I pinpoint the location within the room of each incarnation and the feelings revived by their presence. As if peering into a photo album, I can see with absolute clarity the vision of myself at each of these intervals.

While discussing the process of interviewing other students and how I organized the personal histories, it struck me that what I actually did, was to invite the prior incarnations of my Co-researchers into view for us to meet and experience. Suddenly, it seemed apparent that each participant had brought with them their vision of themselves at momentous points in their life journeys.

Now, as I look back over my work and the stories which I have collected, I see not only words, but a myriad of faces. These are the faces of my Co-researchers, past and present, who experienced life with learning disabilities in ways which were both similar and distinct. They are children and adults, youthful and mature, hopefully optimistic and hopelessly despondent. Each has a story to tell, a life to recall and lessons to teach. Each is powerful, compelling and in their own way, beautiful to behold.

Beyond that though, I can see other faces, those as yet unnamed and undescribed. They are the faces of those who will read and engage in the narratives and analysis and take from it that which they need and can make use of. They will shape and change and understand this work in ways that suit them and those with whom they work. Some will find the project beneficial, others, of little use. Some, I hope, will identify with the narratives and the analysis and make of it a link in their chain of knowledge and insight.

I tell the group that I am reminded of a play—consisting of only two characters—who psychoanalytically discuss their lives and the lives of those around them. As they invoke these memories, they facetiously state that the room they are in, is suddenly very big and very crowded.

And so it feels to me in this moment. The classroom, which so enthralled and intimidated me, seems suddenly very large—infinite in some respects. It is filled with a world full of students and teachers, learning and experiencing life with and from each-other in a multitude of new and exciting ways. Those parts of myself which once seemed so lonely and isolated, are now in the company of others, like minded and similarly disposed. I feel good about leaving them there in this crowd, for it is a safe, exciting and growth-oriented place to remain.

At the end of this journey, I see no doors to close, only those to open. I see many new ways in which to travel the landscapes of life and the inscapes of the mind. I see new partners and collaborators and those in whom trust is easily placed. I see a classroom, as big as my imagination. And I am pleased with what I see.

"The Forest and the Trees"

COLOUR PLATE #17

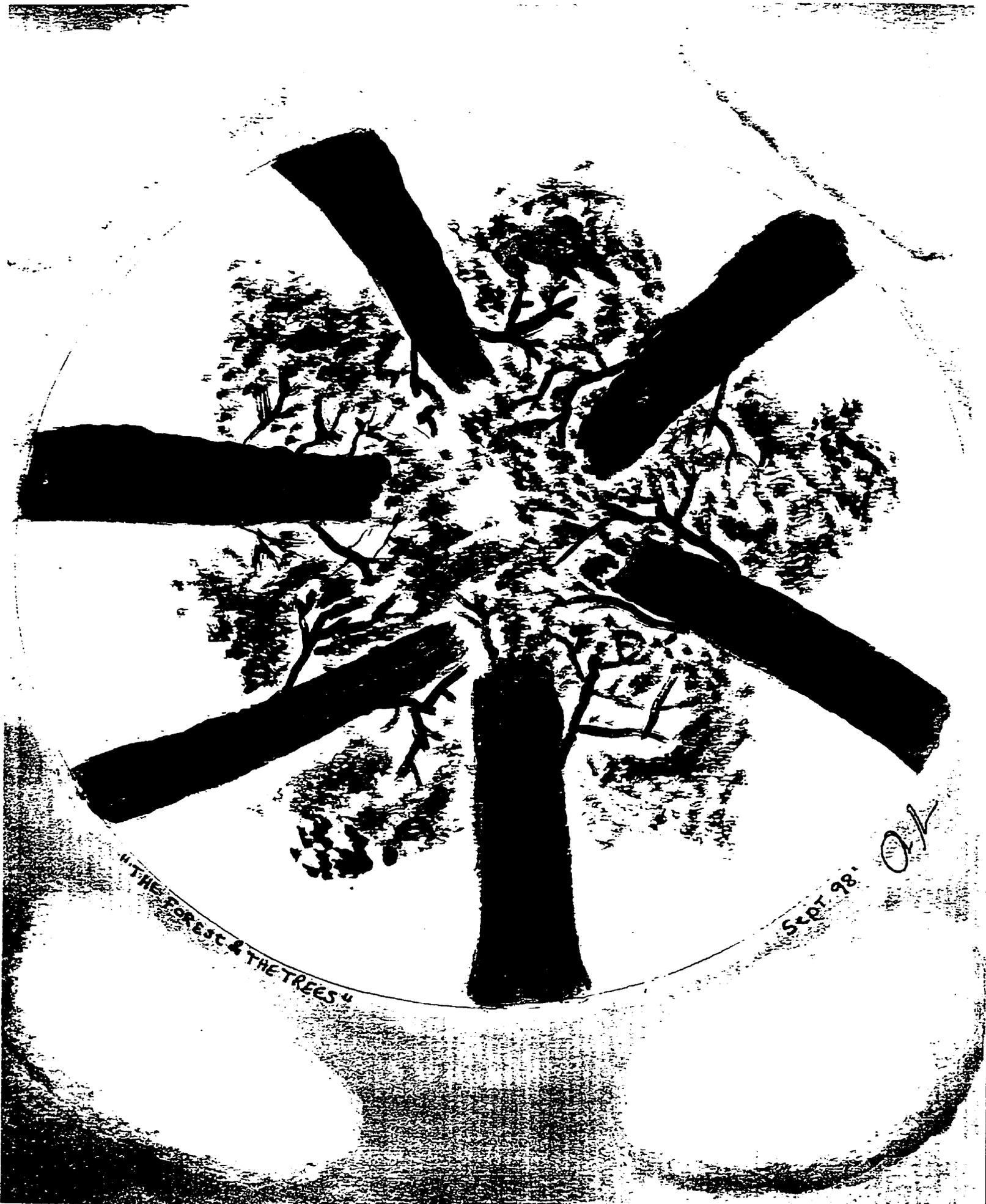
In the end, I sit back and watch with a sense of wonder the work that has grown up around me. I am pleased with the balance between the individual narratives and the thematic analysis; the voice of self and other; the emotional and the intellectual; the creative and the rigorous.

I imagine that I am lying on the floor of a forest, looking up at a group of trees. This perspective affords me a view of both the individual trees in their perfect majesty as well as the power and intensity of their conglomeration. There are six trees representing the six members of The Group, but one large clump of green growth at the top, representing the collective voice of themes and ideas.

Around me are the clouds of a peaceful but eventful sky—a perfect blue backdrop punctuated with cloud formations. I have placed these to symbolize the combination of triumph and tragedy that these stories so poignantly illustrate and which I hope, is left in the minds of readers who share in them.

I am pleased that this is the final image that I am left with, it is peaceful, introspective and proud. Its organic nature is a symbol of all that I had hoped for in the work of this dissertation. For it was my wish to create a work that grew out of important narratives and which always respected its roots in these unique stories. At the same time, it represents the enormous growth which I feel I have experienced as a result of my involvement in every aspect of this project. My mind, my spirit and my soul have all been stretched and expanded in new and exciting directions. I have been challenged and rewarded in countless ways.

I leave the project with a wealth of information, new skills and a desire to continue in the field of human experience research. I believe that I have gained much as a student, researcher and an artist and that I have allowed others and myself to express our feelings, thoughts and memories in a manner that will hopefully prove to be productive and useful. In the end, I am pleased with this work and happy to have journeyed down this path.



THE FOREST & THE TREES

SEP. 98.

OL

You're aware the boy failed my grade school math class, I take it? And not that many years later he's teaching college. Now I ask you: Is that the sorriest indictment of the American educational system you ever heard? [pauses to light cigarette.] No aptitude at all for long division, but never mind. It's him they ask to split the atom. How he talked his way into the Nobel prize is beyond me...

*- Karl Arbeiter,
former teacher of Albert Einstein*

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