

A lesson in frustration

Many people have strange beliefs in life, but I don't hold with most of them. I don't believe that aliens come and experiment on people; guardian angels don't protect and watch over us; witches and wizards are things that seem preposterous; out of body experiences are can be explained by science. Grand conspiracy theories never hold my interest for too long and I take ideas about spirits and ghosts with a pinch of salt. There is one area, however, where I am out there with the lunatic fringe. I believe in curses.

The reason behind this, you see, is that I am in fact cursed. As ridiculous as it sounds it is indeed very true. I know of nothing I did to deserve it and there is no way to be rid of it. Mine is a curse of biology, a curse of the mind. It doesn't manifest itself in blotches or pox on my skin; there is no outward sign. Nor does it bring me bad luck that strikes at the worst possible moment. It is my constant companion and what it does do is far worse. My curse is dyslexia and everything it brings with it.

One of the most recognisable symptoms of my curse is the effect it has on my reading and writing. My ability to recognise words and repeat them in some form whether it be orally or written. For years English teachers have been relentlessly drumming spelling rules into my head just for me to forget them a week later. It's as if my brain doesn't want to conform to the way that things are done. It wants to go off on its own tangent; to do things the way it thinks they should be done, spell things the way it thinks they should be spelt. This normally constitutes in an extra 'e' being added to the end of a word or doubling a letter in the middle of a word when adding an ending. But there are times when it goes way out to left field and everything starts to turn into phonetics. 'Why not?' says my brain 'This is how you say it so why not spell it this way?' it reasons. 'This is simpler. There's only one thing to remember, and life is too complicated already.' At this my sense of reason kicks in its two cents: 'That's true' reason says 'there's already too much to remember' and the brain nods eagerly at this. So the voices of my better angels are once again shouted down, overpowered by the hold that the curse has on me. Possibilities become 'Possibilites', people become 'peepil'; very soon 'qestion' and 'wurk' come to join the party and by this point all bets are off on what's coming next.

The task of always having to concentrate on spelling correctly is one that is not unlike doing algebra. You have half of the sum and you know what it's meant to add up to but you are not quite sure what the other pieces are supposed to be. There is no way to describe the difficulty I have trying to read or write simple pieces of work, and the only way to describe the relief I feel when I am allowed to write the way I want is that it's not unlike coming up for air after being trapped under water. The only way I can get across how difficult the curse makes these tasks is to turn the tables 180 degrees. To make you understand I'm going to have to make things a bit more difficult for you from now on.

There is more to the curse than a crimp in academics. Most people don't realize that dyslexia extends into all aspects of life. It affects everything from sleep patterns to taking parts in sports. It creeps into the most simple things and makes its presence known with a bang. This surprises most people; most see dyslexia as nothing more than a reading and writing difficulty or an overall learning difficulty at most. It's not, it changes everything, turns everything into a battle.

In the six years since I was given my label dyslexia has been an increasing influence in my life. To prove myself to others has become my main motivation where before the only person I felt I had to do that to was myself. My mother always says I was a confident child and that she doesn't know why I changed. I do. It was the dark corroding tendrils of my curse seeping in and stealing my self-confidence, replacing it with doubts and criticism. But who could blame me? As soon as people find out, the bar is immediately set so low that there are times when I can barely see it. And so the cogs and wheels of my brain process this and always come to the same conclusion. They must have done it for a reason. Why else would less be expected of me if I didn't have less to give, less to offer? Or did they always expect me to fail and this is just an easier way to let me know it? Am I better than this? Could I be better than what I have become? This, however, is not the worst thing about my curse. Yes the self-doubt and the constant need to prove myself is a pain but they are not my biggest burden.

My biggest burden is frustration. It is a thing that I have become very familiar with over the past few years: frustration with others, frustration with myself and frustration with the system. It simply boils down to a few main causes, the first of which is that no one really understands the effects that dyslexia has on a person. Even the people that are there for support, as great as they are, have no idea what it is actually like to be dyslexic, and no amount of explaining will make them understand. The more I learn about my curse the more I realize that the people around me have no clue about what's going on. Friends? Most of them tend to talk around it, the big pink elephant in the room. They don't understand the little eccentricities that go along with the curse: my stammer and inability to articulate myself seems like too much trouble for them to decipher, in much the same way as words are for me. It is this inability that fuels most of my frustration with myself; to know that I want to say and not be able to tell anyone; to know the answer and not be able to do the question; to know I can do the question and not find the answer.

All these things combined however do not, and cannot, compare to the frustration that I feel with the education system. The lack of knowledge that teachers have and the difficulty in making them understand that dyslexic doesn't mean stupid, the idea that I have to have every idea explained to me like a six year old or that I need to be watched over constantly while doing simple tasks. Teachers mistake lack of preparation as my way to avoid doing work, they think that lack of structure in work is simply laziness and an inability to take notes as a lack of interest in the subject. They do not see these things for what they are. They can't understand that being unprepared is because I really can't remember things I am to bring, not that I didn't do the homework. That the absence of structure is because the ideas will not stay long enough in my mind to be put on paper, so everything has to be instantly put down or lost. Not taking notes is not because I am not interested it's because I can't write and listen at the same time and understand both. But they would not understand if I explained. Repetitive failure has taught me this.

But I'm not completely defenseless in my battle with the curse (for a battle is what it truly is.) There are people who try to end the frustration and techniques that can be learned to work around the curse. There is the odd teacher that sees past the label and sees the potential. There are some friends that don't mind the random way in which my mind works and there is even one who embraces it saying 'It's Natasha logic, it doesn't need to make sense to the rest of the world.' There are times when I can pretend to be normal, times that it melts into the background to be just like a cloud over the sun on a clear summer's day. There are times when the battle doesn't seem so impossible.