MY EARLY LEARNING

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[Assignment: Define a handicap—learning disability, autism, hearing loss, legal blindness—that has touched you in your personal life, one that you or a person close to you struggles with. You may use several techniques to develop your definition: exemplification, comparison, description, narration, negation. Or you may wish to use more than one defining strategy.]

(1) The ability to learn basic skills such as reading and writing is totally taken for granted by those of us who develop those skills easily. For those with difficulty in learning to read and write, the world around them, where knowledge of these skills is essential, becomes a frustrating and defeating place. I know this well, because I, as a child, was unable to read. I had a number of major learning disabilities, the major one being dyslexia: a condition resulting from a fetal developmental abnormality that affects language development.

(2) I had experienced learning difficulties beginning at a very young age, but it was during second grade that it became apparent that these difficulties were a serious problem. While my peers were learning to read, I was not. No matter how hard I tried, I could not make sense of a jumble of confusing symbols. After much struggle on my part the problem was brought to the attention of my parents. My teacher informed my parents that I was simply not cut out to be a student and that I would probably not get far enough to graduate from high school. They told my parents to accept me for what I was and not to expect me to amount to very much. During the rest of that year in school my inability to read began to affect how I felt about myself and how I behaved. I had to accept that I wasn't as intelligent as everyone else. Not being able to earn the praise of my teacher for learning further added to my sense of inadequacy and defeat. Eventually I found other ways to get attention, like being a disturbance in class and misbehaving. On occasion, I would find school so frustrating that I would have violent fits when I came home. I don't doubt that I would have become a delinquent if my problem had been ignored.

(3) During the summer following second grade, my mother decided to see if something could be done. She had me tested at a special local school called The Reading Achievement Center. The test results diagnosed that I had about forty learning problems, most of them being minor but mixed laterality and dyslexia were the most significant. My mom wanted me to attend the school to get help, but by this time I wasn't exactly fond of learning to read. Eventually she bribed me by offering to send me to art classes if I would get help for
reading. I agreed. After six months of sessions at the learning center I was re-tested and found to have improved my reading ability by three grade levels. After another year of sessions, I was reading at a level equivalent to that of eighth graders. But my problems weren't solved: it took several years before I regained my confidence and self-esteem.

(4) My primary disability was dyslexia, typically the most prevalent reason for reading disabilities. About one out of ten Americans has the problem and seventy-five percent of these are males. Dyslexia is characterized by problems with language skills at an early age which, if not corrected, will continue into later life. The child will often confuse and interchange similar letters, possibly mistaking "saw" for "was" or mistaking the letter "d" for a "g." The dyslexic may be confused with left and right handedness, as I was and still am. Such a person has difficulty learning and remembering any printed symbol or word. This problem is not restricted to reading but also causes difficulty in math, perception, and grasping concepts. With these symptoms, it's easy to see why dyslexics could be and often are labeled as stupid, lazy, and combative. Regarded in this way, most children develop emotional problems, as I did, and become supersensitive to personal failure. Dyslexics do not have learning disabilities as a result of low intelligence; Albert Einstein, Woodrow Wilson, and Thomas Edison all had this disability. Rather, researchers suggest that this "developmental flaw" has biological roots. They suspect that, during fetal development, abnormalities in the left hemisphere of the brain, in areas associated with language development, occur, possibly due to abnormal amounts of the male hormone, testosterone.

(5) While the cause is biological, the remedy for dyslexia is an educational one. The personal attention of a one on one teaching situation is crucial, since the student must advance at his own pace. The use of phonics, the sound of letters and words, rather than memorizing words as a whole, is the key in most cases. The usual repetition and building of skills is also employed.

(6) Correcting learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, is possible in most cases. The real task lies in educating teachers how to respond to kids with learning disabilities: either helping the student directly or telling the parents to get help. The problem of recognizing the student who is having trouble learning makes the problem one of teaching disability rather than one of learning disability. Without the help they need, children with learning disabilities never begin to achieve their potential and will go through life feeling inferior, resentful, and failing.