

RECOLLECTION ESSAY OF TIMES I'VE TRIED TO FORGET

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Even in grade school in New England I knew I had a problem. I couldn't remember the names of athletes or their statistics like some of my friends, so I didn't like following sports much. I could remember the words of songs, though. Even now I can remember the words of popular songs I heard when I was a kid and can come up with most of the lyrics to people's amazement. I worked hard and did well in grade school. I never could learn to read well, though. Having to read anything aloud filled me with sheer panic. I may have known the spelling for a day or two but I didn't do very well when the teacher picked randomly from part spelling words. Trying to write sentences was painful. I could come up with great ideas in my mind that I couldn't put down on paper because I couldn't spell most of the words and I didn't remember the grammar rules. Yet, I was usually on the honor roll. I read only what was necessary to do well in school. I never read for fun. Cliff Notes helped me understand the theme in most long books in high school and college.

In high school I was on the debate team, and we traveled a great deal. It was a wonderful experience for me. I routinely made it to the semi-final and also placed within the top eight extemporaneous speakers in the state. Even though I made national honor society during my junior year of high school, and graduated 29th in a class of nearly 600, I haven't forgotten the pain of my grade on an IQ test read out gleefully in the class by my history teacher, informing everyone that I had gotten a mentally retarded score. This same teacher reduced my grade in the history class based on nothing more than that test. I spoke with him about the grade, but he had made up his mind on my potential, like so many others have done since then.

My college career started at a well-known college in Midwestern USA. Spelling, grammar, and reading problems continued to embarrass me. I made B's, some C's, and a few A's as chemistry major, but I never failed a course. I began to feel very self-conscious about my problems, and I became very reserved around my peers. I had few friends. The next year I transferred to a college in New England where I thought I might be happier. I took a religion course that required a lot of writing. I loved writing themes, but invariably, I would become frustrated because the teachers spent all the time criticizing the spelling and never commenting on the content. This professor was no exception. He saw little of value in the content, although I had spent many hours on the paper.

After graduation I worked as a research assistant in a famous research laboratory before I began medical school. My MCAT scores were low. I hated taking standardized exams because I couldn't read well or quickly. My reading

deteriorated under time pressure. I can remember being completely destroyed by standardized, single and multiple answer tests in general. If I didn't know or understand one question, I couldn't get it out of my mind. I'd try to go on to the next questions, but my mind was trapped in thought about the past question. I used up so much mental energy that I was mentally wiped out after the exam. I always scored poorly.

In medical school I continued to have difficulty with multiple choice exams. It always seemed to me that when I performed the poorest, I would hear other students talking about how easy the test was. That would make me feel even more stupid than I did originally. I failed Part 1 of the NBME three times before passing it. The clinical years were a cinch for me. Many important physicians went out of their way to tell me what a good physician I was going to be. The boards weren't required for graduation from my well-known medical school, and I went on to my residency in pediatrics. I passed the FLEX on the first try, and I was elated! Later I became chief resident at a prestigious medical center, and I taught some classes as well. I was respected in my field. Then I had to take the specialty board exam – which I failed several times. My self esteem began to vanish. When I walked down the hall of my medical center and saw a colleague, my immediate thought was, "I hope he doesn't know how very stupid I am!"

When I failed the specialty exam the third time, I decided to go into another specialty. I had the same experience of extremely good-clinical work with poor performance on written exams. No one ever suggested that I should be tested to see what was causing this discrepancy between clinical performance and testing ability. At present I have completed two residencies, two one-year fellowships, and I have been on staff of a medical center for several years. However, after 7 attempts, I have not passed my specialty boards. Finally my wife had enough of the trauma that I was bringing into our home because of my failure on exams. She divorced me, and she and our two sons moved to another state.

Just as I was at my lowest ebb, a colleague told me that she wondered if I might have a learning disability and possibly an Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). After giving this some thought, I decided to be tested. I have an IQ in the genius range, and I am reading on a high school level. My reading rate is very slow. I also have ADHD. All of these have made it impossible for me to pass timed, lengthy multiple choice exams. Spending time with Medical H.E.L.P. to learn to improve my reading skills was well worth the time required. I also learned improved study techniques, highlighted almost everything, giving me a "yellow book"- because everything was important. Probably most important was the time we spent in improving my self concept. I was amazed at the amount of negative thinking I was doing. I learned to change my thoughts to

more positive ones, and to give myself positive feedback. Instead of saying, "I am so stupid. I am dumb, dumb, dumb!"- I began to say "Sure, I've had problems with those exams, but now I know the problem, and I have new techniques to use. I am successful. I am a good person!"

The next time I take my specialty board exam, I am not going to set myself up for failure. I am not going to be my own worst enemy. I am going to think well of myself, and I am going to believe in myself." I am a good physician!

Note: *This physician did pass his specialty board examination, and he is now a board certified specialist in his field.*