

The Voices of Whitman – Cognitive Diversity by Natalie Tamburello

This isn't the first time that I have spoken to an audience on this subject, but today, there is a distinct difference. *You* have no idea what I am going to tell you about myself. I'm sure you are looking at me wondering...what makes her diverse? Why was she asked to be a part of The Voices at Whitman? And I certainly understand your perplexity. After all, I appear to be a typical Caucasian woman from San Francisco. My difference or diversity is invisible, the eye is unable to see it, yet approximately 20 percent of the population has a difference very similar to mine, which means that within this audience, there are a number of you who are like me - though likely it is less than 20% of you. The reason that I say that is because a much smaller percentage of people like me make it to college let alone a college as prestigious as Whitman. Most people who are like me not only do not make it to college, but unfortunately, they fill our prisons and jails, in fact 60 – 75% of America's incarcerated share my difference. At the same time, 35-40% of entrepreneurs and CEOs share my difference. And, I share my difference with Einstein and Edison.

Now you might have an idea how I contribute to the diversity of Whitman. I was very *lucky* to be diagnosed with a learning disability at the end of first grade. Now I say I was lucky for two reasons...the most obvious reason is that I learned *early* on that I learn differently from 80% of students. I underwent days of testing to learn exactly what was (quote) "wrong" with me. I was diagnosed with dyslexia, a very broad term used to describe a variety of difficulties having to do with the acquisition and processing of language. Dyslexia can dramatically affect one's ability to read, comprehend, write, spell, and do simple arithmetic.

But not every dyslexic is the same; we each have our own set of strengths and challenges. My dyslexia entails auditory processing difficulty, reading comprehension problems, and slow processing speed. I was additionally diagnosed with a non verbal learning disorder which is completely separate from dyslexia. I suspect these terms don't mean much to you or say much about how this all affects my ability to acquire knowledge. An early explanation by San Francisco's Child Development Center where I was tested summed it up pretty well: I had a PC for a brain but I was using only Mac software to process information. You computer historians know that in 1997, there wasn't a lot of interface possible between PCs and Macs.

No one needed to tell me that I wasn't like my classmates. I knew I wasn't *anything* like them. School sucked...and I mean sucked big time! The worst part was knowing that I was smart and capable but something was keeping me from reaching my full potential. *I couldn't "get it!"* The classroom was unbearable. I'd rather die than read aloud. Watching my classmates devour intriguing novels I could only dream of reading was intolerable and embarrassing. Every night I worked at my homework for hours and hours, unable to complete it without a ton of help from my parents.

To give you a brief idea of exactly how hard school was for me, here are some stats: I was unable to read until 5th grade, I went to a special-ed school for three years, and to this day I cannot spell, or do simple arithmetic to save my life and it still takes me twice as long as any other student to complete work of equal caliber. And I will never be able to achieve a score on a standardized test that will adequately represent my knowledge, understanding, intelligence, or capacity. I could not and cannot do simple arithmetic, but calculus and the hard sciences, I get. I can't read well, certainly cannot

spell, but I love philosophy, debate and social sciences. Learning to read and write a foreign language is a killer for me, but I know American Sign Language.

I hit plenty of walls in school, to be sure, but I didn't end up so frustrated that I dropped out or gave up, like so many of the people that end up in prison. You may see a lot of people like me successful in the arts, sports and business, but there are fewer of us in the world of academia... and, sadly people like me in the academic world have grown accustomed to hiding their difference, because academia is not a friendly environment for those of us who have difficulty with reading, spelling, and test taking.

Okay...now you are wondering how did I get here? How did a person who struggled academically as much as she did make it here? Remember when I said that I was *lucky* to be diagnosed in the first grade...and I said there were two reasons. The second reason is that I truly believe that my difference is a gift. As odd as this sounds, I would not be as successful as I am today if it wasn't for the determination instilled in me *because* of the struggles I endured. And that is *exactly* what I told every college in my college application essay. Now in making that decision, I was risking being rejected from schools because of my frankness in discussing my learning difference. After all, I was speaking to an audience historically unfriendly to this difference, but I knew that the schools that accepted me knew exactly what they were going to get...and these schools were going to accept me for who I was, despite the so-called "flaws." Whitman was one of those schools, and when I came to visit Whitman to see if it was the school for me I was blown away by the Academic Resource Center and grace with which Whitman provides support for people like me and EVERY student, learning difference or not. I never thought I'd find a place so accepting and encouraging.

Now that I have completed my first year and about to start my second, I know that I have chosen a truly unique institution. My whole life, I worried that I wouldn't be able to reach my dreams, and too many of my teachers reinforced that concern, especially early on. It's extremely hard to believe in yourself when the very people in charge of educating you don't believe in you either. At Whitman, when I told my advisor and professors that I had a learning disability and that I wanted to be a pre-med, psychology major with a neuroscience emphasis and a minor in education, I waited for the awkward silence and the belittling pity that marked my early education, but that didn't happen, no one doubted my ability; I was encouraged. When I applied to be a student academic advisor, no one doubted my ability; I was encouraged. Whitman has accepted me and treats me with the respect that is too often denied by classmates and teachers. So if you are a person like me and you are worried - as I was at this very moment last year - I want to let you know that you can do it...it will be hard, but you know hard, you've done hard all your life. What's different here is that you'll be valued, honored and encouraged; no one thinks you need fixing. You're here to soar to whatever heights you care to reach for, and all the support and encouragement you wanted previously is here for you. Sure we learn differently, and with that difference comes a world, a sea of strengths....and your strengths at Whitman are valued, waiting to be discovered, uncovered so they may flourish and serve you.

Welcome to Whitman, a place where your difference has a voice, an empowered voice, and a visibility so you may explore the gifts that are uniquely yours.