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Dealing with the Trauma of Undiagnosed Dyslexia

Aisling Dolan

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Abstract

The theme of my Master's by research is an investigation into the condition and effects of dyslexia on one's personality, academic experience and professional growth. I wish to examine and acknowledge the effects dyslexia has on an individual's ability to learn and grow in a "typical" twenty-first-century society. I intend also to highlight the emotional impact this disability can have on a person's sense of self and how they develop through childhood. I hope to demonstrate the link dyslexia has in fostering a visual form of thinking and expression. I also hope to evaluate how one's dyslexia reveals itself in so many ways in everyday tasks one performs as an active participant in society. I am now in my fifties and have spent most of my life hiding my dyslexia from those around me. The reason for this is that I hated the feelings of embarrassment and inadequacy it caused. No one likes making mistakes, but it was especially traumatic in my early childhood as I grew up in a time in Ireland when there was an ignorance in our educational system when it came to informed knowledge around neurodiversity disabilities, such as dyslexia. Therefore, in order to do this research I am choosing to use myself and my experiences as a type of autoethnographic case study. Autoethnographic research is about giving an individual the opportunity to deeply and meaningfully reflect on their own story, in order to better understand, know and interpret their personal and cultural experiences. Thus, it is a research methodology that helps me explore myself. Consequently, I will be an active participant in analysing the impact of dyslexia on my education and personal life, while also demonstrating the link to my creative abilities as a graphic designer, typographer, photographer and fine art printmaker. It will explore the impact, limitations and advantages that dyslexia have brought into my life and career.

Keywords

Dyslexia; Neurodiversity; Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD); Childhood stress; Literacy; Inferiority

Introduction

This article arose from an interdisciplinary Postgraduate Research seminar, titled "Contextualising Trauma and Disadvantage" and is my response to my early experiences of growing up with undiagnosed dyslexia. Obviously,

many Irish children sadly suffer and have suffered throughout our society for not being able to operate “normally” inside and outside the classroom. Although I was not beaten or strapped for my many mistakes, unlike many of my dyslexic contemporaries and predecessors, my early life was nonetheless marked by a lack of compassion and understanding with regard to my learning difficulties. This had a deleterious effect on my educational experience, confidence and self-development, exerting a direct impact in my career choice and professional progression. This paper looks at these disadvantages and explores the consequences.

My earliest memory that something was wrong with me was when I was about six years old and was given six spellings to learn for the following day. This task and dread of being tested would throw me into extreme anxiety, inconsolable tears, and worry, a state which a Dyslexia Ireland Report sums up in the following manner:

Dyslexia is characterised by cognitive difficulties in (1) phonological processing, (2) working memory, and (3) speed of retrieval of information from long term memory. Dyslexic difficulties occur on a continuum from mild to severe and affect approximately 10% of the population. People with dyslexia may experience greater stress and frustration as they endeavour to learn, resulting in heightened anxiety, particularly in relation to literacy acquisition.¹

Since this moment, I have always struggled with literacy-based tasks, including writing this article. Although I achieved the basic exam requirements to get into third-level education, reading, writing and retaining information was and remains extremely difficult for me. Processing language-based information quickly and automatically was also very problematic. As a result, I have a visual way of thinking. I read pictures quicker than I can read letters. My chosen field of work was therefore always going to be in the visual arts as a creative. However, the emotional harm and baggage that my young life suffered due to the consequences of being dyslexic inflicted definite damage on my self-esteem and self-confidence. My dyslexia has also impacted on my personality and to a degree I believe even on my physical health and well-being. Only in my mature years am I able to recognise my behavioural patterns of being a “people pleaser” to family, friends and even strangers: I am always desperate to be liked, to compensate for my perceived “weaknesses.” I know now, through my career progression as a Graphic Designer to the role of Creative Director, by the response to my

¹ “Annual Report 2018,” Dyslexia Association of Ireland, accessed October 13, 2023, <https://dyslexia.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Annual-Report-2018.pdf>.

fine art by my peers and from commercial sales, and by my students' level of effective design knowledge and application, that I do in fact possess certain qualities, talents and intelligence. But it has been an enormous struggle.

My diagnosis of my dyslexia indicated a presence of Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), which shows how I have difficulty with attention, concentration, organisation and in my ability to start and persist with a task. Research such as that conducted by Agobiani, Sally and Scott-Roberts reveals the extent to which dyslexia can damage self-esteem:

It was postulated that high rates of co-existence would support the notion that the term "dyslexia" is inadequate, especially if the impact spreads beyond diagnostic criteria [and that] students with dyslexia who show signs of ADHD may benefit from interventions or programmes which specifically address issues of low self-esteem and self-image in order to increase the likelihood of engagement and the fulfilment of academic potential.²

Contrast this feeling to how, while walking in the beautiful Dalkey quarry near my home, where I admire the resilience, strength and determination, I observe in the difficulty some flowers and plants have in order to grow as they do through the cracks in the rocks (Fig. 1). They remind me of myself in my own struggles to cope with my dyslexia.



Figure 1: Gorse on Rock. Photo: Author.

² Sally Agobiani, and Sally Scott-Roberts, "An Investigation into the Prevalence of the Co-Existence of Dyslexia and Self-Reported Symptomology of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder in Higher Education Students and the Effect on Self-Image and Self-Esteem," *Journal of Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning* 17, no. 4 (2015): 20, <https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.17.4.20>.

Ultimately, I grew up with a very negative view of myself and as it is deep-rooted since childhood, it is challenging to change this mindset. This is mirrored in the quote below from Annie Tanusagarn:

Self-worth is a fundamental concept surrounding how we feel about ourselves, how we perceive ourselves, and how we engage with others. The way we interpret our value is conditioned in childhood, as a normal process of development between caregiver and child. Yet, *what* we are conditioned to believe about our value and worth are the result of our earliest lived experiences, including the role that our environment plays (mom, dad, caregivers, teachers, and friends).³

The ongoing consequence of getting most things “wrong” in school blocked an ability in myself to grow up with any sense of self-worth. I lived every day of term in a state of stress and anxiety. These negative emotions combined to become my childhood trauma. Like all traumas, they can still be triggered and physically manifest today. The International Dyslexia Association notes that: “Individuals with dyslexia may experience marked anxiety in situations in which they feel they will make mistakes, be ridiculed, or made to feel foolish in front of others.”⁴ I was therefore in a constant state of “fight or flight.” By undertaking this journey of research, I wish to clearly identify the parts of me that are a consequence of my dyslexia and hope to finally acknowledge, understand and get healing from the emotional trauma of my early years. My hope is that this methodology of autoethnographic research will also help me uncover positive aspects that this disability has in fact given me.

Literacy Expectations in Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s

Today in Ireland, there is a general assumption that all children have an expectation of a healthy, safe and supportive education. This was simply not the case for me and others like me in the 1970s and 1980s:

During those decades, dyslexia was not well understood or widely recognised, which meant many teachers and educators did not have the knowledge or training to recognise the signs of dyslexia. Many children

³ Annie Tanusagarn, “How ‘Conditions of Worth’ Can Become People-Pleasing Behavior,” *Medium*, accessed September 25, 2023, <https://medium.com/invisible-illness/how-conditions-of-worth-can-become-people-pleasing-behavior-d1bd477c1c83>.

⁴ “What is Stress?,” International Dyslexia Association, accessed September 25, 2023, <https://dyslexiaida.org/the-dyslexia-stress-anxiety-connection/>.

were deemed “lazy,” “unmotivated” or “thick” due to their reading and writing challenges.⁵

We had what is referred to as “undiagnosed dyslexia” but in those days, in my community and private Catholic educational institution, they had other words to describe us. I was considered of low intelligence by my teachers, my peers and even by my parents. I was there from age five to completing school just before my nineteenth birthday and hated all of it. I believed growing up that I was “stupid.” From a young age my mother, observing my struggles, would often say: “Life will be hard for you.” In my naivety at that time, I didn't know why she said this, but on reflection it did little to support or encourage a valued sense of self or ability.

Struggles with Information Processing

Had anyone been looking, I expect signs of my dyslexia were becoming evident even before First Class, just at the same time the Roman alphabet was getting more complicated in my eyes. No longer just a rhyme of the ABCs to remember, now we were learning the formation of words - literacy. I found it difficult to verbally read the words and so learned the shape they created, rather than sounding it out. As a result, when I came across a word I did not visually recognise, I struggled to read it. Creating the sound of the word, one letter at a time, was very difficult for me.

Having dyslexia is not simply about an odd spelling mistake, or being slow at reading, or struggling at times with comprehension, memory, or languages, or difficulties with mathematics and numbers. Although everyone with dyslexia can have different degrees of severity, there is a commonality of difficulties, including cognitive and processing difficulties:

Dyslexia can be described at the neurological, cognitive and behavioral levels. It is typically characterized by inefficient information processing, including difficulty in phonological processing, working memory, rapid naming and automaticity of basic skills. Difficulties in organization, sequencing and motor skills may also be present.⁶

⁵ “Getting a late Dyslexia Diagnosis: why so many people are getting diagnosed with dyslexia in adulthood,” Employers Neurodiversity Network, accessed 25 September, 2023, <https://enna.org/getting-a-late-dyslexia-diagnosis-why-so-many-people-are-getting-diagnosed-with-dyslexia-in-adulthood/>.

⁶ “Report of the Special Education Review Committee, 1993,” National Council for Special Education, accessed September 23, 2023, https://www.sess.ie/sites/default/files/Categories/Exceptionally_Able/SERC_Except ionally_Able_Talented.pdf.

Very soon it was evident to me and my peers that I was not equal to them. I was not average. They were more able, successful in class, in homework, in reading, spelling and learning. When it was my turn, I stumbled, made ugly sounds that were either too slow or incorrect. Often, as a last resort, I would guess at the word and hope it was correct. This of course made the other children laugh at me. As a result of my struggles in junior school, I was kept back a year. In those days, this was the only solution offered to my obvious learning difficulties. Over twenty years later little had changed. The Task Force on Dyslexia observed in 2001:

The lack of knowledge among class teachers, subject teachers and learning-support teachers about dyslexia, and the consequent lack of an appropriate response on the part of schools was a particular concern. It is significant that relatively few submissions called for a significant increase in special education provision for students with dyslexia.⁷

But repeating the year made little difference. At every mistake I would trip further into isolation, aware that both my classmates and teachers found me pathetic. Immediately that puts you in a place where those labels stay with you. This “difference” had consequences and so, not surprisingly, I also suffered bullying. Children by their nature want to befriend peers, the ones that are clever, pretty, and academically successful, not the students like me who were only befriended by other insecure timid children. Anything about you that was different was too tempting for the clever confident pupils to ignore, never missing the opportunity to belittle you for their own amusement and peer credibility. This bullying caused huge isolation and loneliness in my young life. I felt like I was in a prison with no way of getting out until I had done my time. Hence, I was a nervous, quiet child. I suspect now that I said very little because I worried it would be “wrong.” Without confidence, I was a shell of myself and began to only trust looking inward, while I tried to process everything that was happening around me. Although my Mother’s attempts to console me were full of love, it was the norm in those days that little consideration was given to the emotional and mental health of a child. Children did what was expected of them and were corrected if they did something wrong. This was not my parents’ fault. They were products of their own upbringing. But there was a failure during my childhood to recognise my learning difficulties and introverted tendencies as a disability.

⁷ “Report of the Task Report on Dyslexia,” National Council for Special Education, accessed September 24, 2023, https://www.sess.ie/sites/default/files/Dyslexia_Task_Force_Report_0.pdf.

I was never scolded by them for my low grades or told to study, but I knew they too thought me weak and academically below standard.

I was always very conscientious about my studies, perhaps because I hated so much being thought of as unintelligent and so I worked very hard to achieve my “pass” grades. I learnt then that to exist in the “normal” academic world, I needed much more time than others in order to achieve the bare minimum. I also struggled with memory work, made even harder for me due to my dyslexia. Although I had a good ear, languages proved impossible in the classroom environment. However, my biggest fear was to be asked to read aloud in the classroom. This can be seen in research that concludes that

brain imaging suggests that people with dyslexia do not activate the left hemisphere (the language side) in the brain as much when reading as non-dyslexic readers and that there is less engagement of the area of the brain which match letters with sounds.⁸

As a result, on a daily basis I would be filled with dread and nervous anxiety. I lived in that state of fear for most of my school days, reinforcing an expectation of “failure.” I could rely on no one to change this pattern or to make it go away. All through my school years, although I was never in trouble for misbehaving, I believed the teachers only favoured the successful pupils. Their lack of commitment and duty of care toward the weaker students like me, who obviously were challenged, was massively neglectful and those years of mentor inadequacy left their scars.

Visual Communication

As a young person, the only subject where I felt any sense of achievement was art class. Both my parents are very artistic and so our home was always full of art materials. It was the only subject that I had a talent for, and I soon learnt that my artwork made me feel good about myself. I think it became my salvation and “safe” place, where I could simply be me. Possibly my love of art grew as much from my need to express myself, as my need to prove to myself and others that I was good at “something.” My skills as a creative began to be nourished and develop, as did a little glimmer of self-confidence.

I have often used my art as a form of therapy, an example of which can be seen here (Fig. 2):

⁸ Cited by Keith Murphy in “Experiencing Dyslexia Through the Prism of Difference” (PhD diss., University of Maynooth, 2021), 48.



Figure 2: Photo by Author in a field along between Clifton and Claddaghduff, Galway, 2022.

“The Wayward Tree” - an analogy of me.

This tree has been impacted by its surroundings. It does not grow straight. It is not average. It is not the norm. It has grown this way, as it coped with its bitter and harsh environment. It struggles to flourish and can only do so by compromising, struggling to exist. It has seasons and grows branches and leaves, just like the other trees, but is constantly working harder to keep up. Its appearance may be different but like others, it draws its strength from deep down below the soil.

On leaving school, my collection of creative work produced a reasonable portfolio, with which, along with five passes and two honours in the Leaving Certificate, was enough to get me a place in a four-year degree course in Visual Communications in The College of Marketing and Design in Dublin city (later known as Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), and then TU Dublin). I was nineteen and could not have imagined the joy and relief of being accepted onto the course of my choice, surrounded by people who loved what I loved. Also having been with the same students in school for 14 years, my new peers were unaware of my difficulties with reading or spelling. This was a fresh start; no one knew me from before or the shadow I left behind. I was taken at "face value" and for my artistic measure, which was obviously as good as theirs, since we had all been accepted into the same four-year degree course. I was finally happy; I think for the first time in my life. I was beginning to be evaluated by my abilities, not my many "disabilities."

The early years of my course introduced me to many subjects: photography, colour, design, drawing, all of which I loved and soaked up. They also taught me many techniques and mediums that I could finally use to fulfil my creative need to make pictures that told a story. This all compiled to suit my dyslexic mind, as I learned a language based on imagery.

At that time, I was teaching myself a new medium called Scaperboard, which replicated the impression and marks of an original style etching. It is a hard cardboard, covered in a layer of white chalk surface and then painted with black ink. As you scratch the top surface of black, to reveal the white from below. Etching and original printmaking was an area I was learning but I was also curious about other modern methods that created the same visual effect. This area later became the topic for my thesis.

I had always been fascinated with Samuel Beckett's chiselled features and how, despite my limited reading of his work, I felt it was a face reflective of his complex and introverted work. I drew portraits of him many times and eventually chose scaperboard to produce this portrait of him (Fig. 3). On completion, I used the portrait in a poster design as a college project for the Beckett Theatre in Trinity College. I then submitted it for a competition I heard about at the time for "Young Advertising Designer of the Year Award." I won First prize. It was 1990 and I felt proud of myself for the very first time.

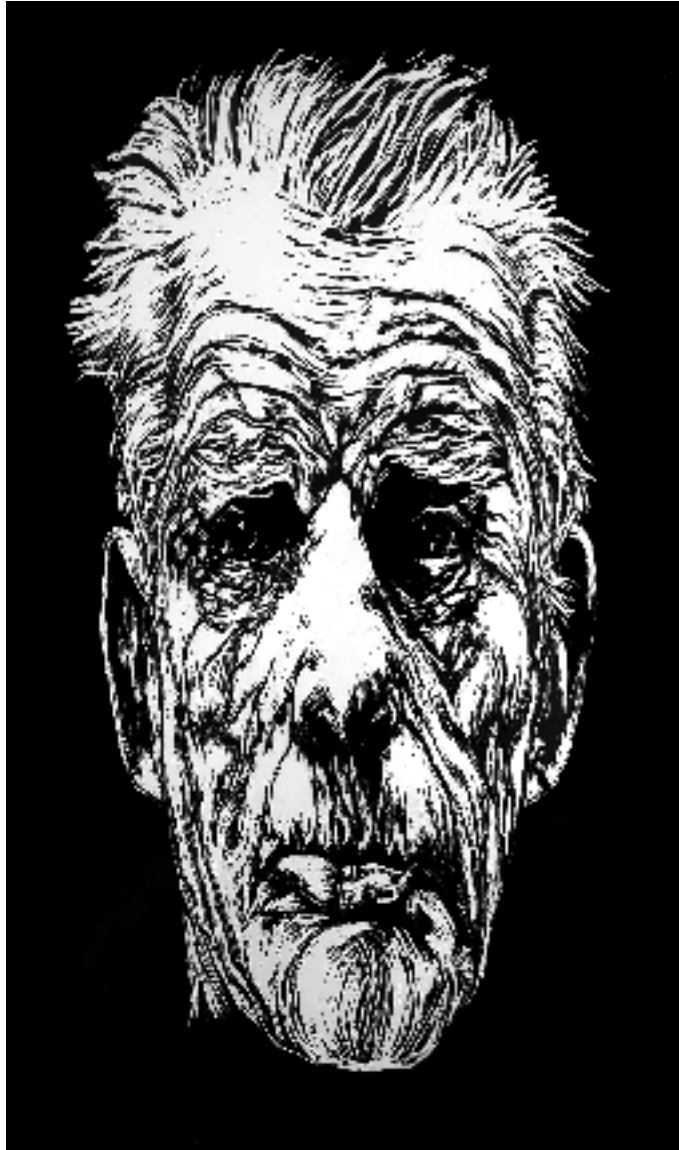


Figure 3: Portrait of Samuel Beckett, by Author (College project, College of Marketing and Design), 1990.

Also at that time Bono was raising funds for a famine relief charity in Africa by selling black and white photos he had taken while visiting there with his wife Ali. I was fascinated by the compassion captured in these portraits. I decided to attempt to draw one of the images using this same medium. (In my naivety I wondered how I could draw a black person on a “black” chalk board. As I worked on it, discovering that this is achievable by the shapes of the features and texture of the hair). On completion, I used it to design a poster for Sudan Relief, placing each letter of the word P A I N in each of the four corners for effect. The font treatment chosen reflected I felt the desperation associated with abject poverty.

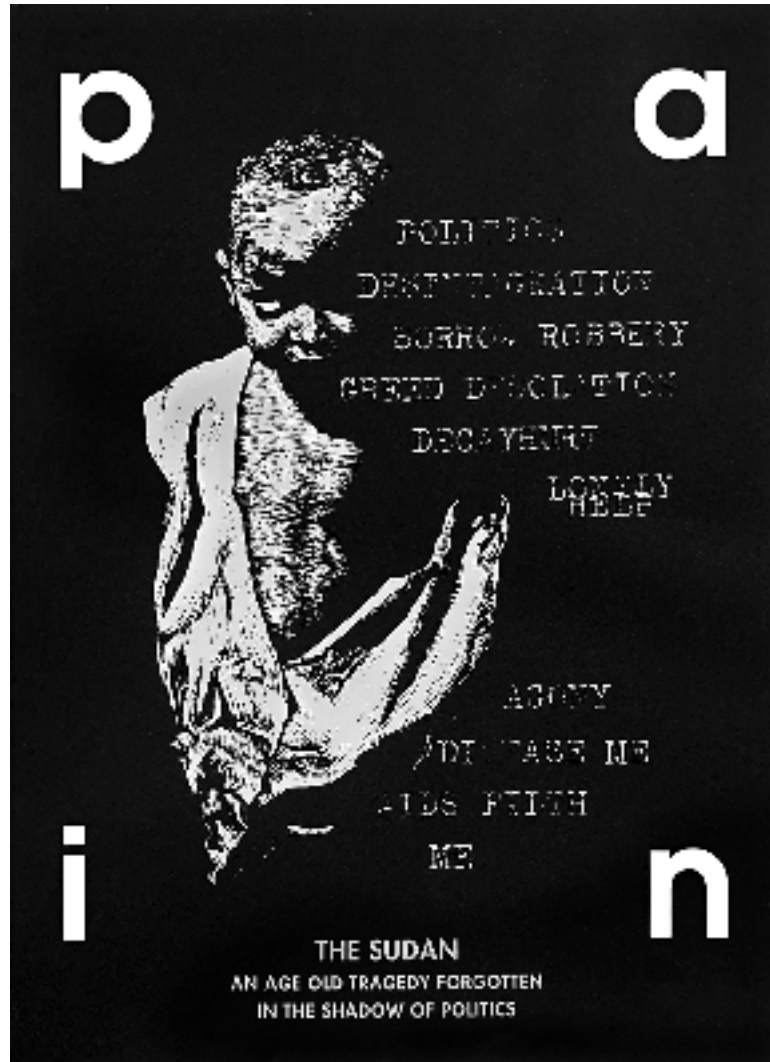


Figure 4: "PAIN" design poster for Sudan charity, by Author, 1990.

This began my love of design, both with a purposeful emotional response and with effective type and layout. My dyslexic mind encouraged a heightened need for clarity and hierarchy, to help the reader at every moment in their comprehension, and ease of reading. In a way I trusted my creative instincts even before I fully knew how to use them. I could now design with "me" in mind. Through my eyes. For my brain and way of visual interpretation and receiving information.

The artistic, supportive environment of those four years in college had an enormously positive impact on my depleted confidence suffered in school. I also believe that the teaching I received in the practice of design theory and effective typography design, greatly benefited my artistic creativity for effective visual communication. I flourished at styling and controlling the legibility of the text, along with the imagery and overall appearance and layout of a design. Ironically, I think my dyslexia may have heightened and

thus informed the choices I made in my designs to create effective visual communication. Ultimately, I began making all the decisions through my “dyslexic eyes” about every aspect of the design. Including making the text elements easier to read. Unlike other similar courses at the time, the teaching I received stemmed from quality rather than from the design trends of the day. This is an aspect of my training which I am immensely appreciative of and which I try to reinforce in my classes.

On reaching my final year, I knew my design work was of a high standard, but I had to write a thesis in order to graduate and my dyslexia hugely impacted my abilities to do this. Of course, the college did not recognize that I was dyslexic and so no supports or allowances were made. A possible reason for this ignorance by the college is outlined in an article written by Louise Holden in 2013 for the *Irish Times* which states that despite the Dyslexia Association of Ireland (DAI) being established in 1972, it had to change its name in the 1980s to the Association of Children and Adults with Learning Difficulties, so it would be taken seriously.⁹ Ireland had such an ignorant stigma and misunderstanding about dyslexia, it was not officially allowed be renamed until the year 2000. Consequently, it is taking longer for our generations in society to realise that it has nothing to do with one’s intelligence.

Understandably, my thesis received a very poor grade, reducing my overall final grade from a First to a Second. I knew then I was never going to know a life without dyslexia and had to accept that it was never going away and would always impact on my work. I believed at the time it would hold me back from any form of real career success. But I had begun the journey of having the knowledge and skills to produce good visuals that did have value and worth. I believed I possessed enough value to merit the start of a career as a creative Graphic Designer and Illustrator. And thus, my career began.

⁹ Louise Holden, “Spelling out the needs of students with dyslexia,” *The Irish Times*, December 10, 2013, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/spelling-out-the-needs-of-students-with-dyslexia-1.1621963>.

Professional Development as a Graphic Designer and Illustrator

Ireland in the early 1990s was in a recession, and the vast majority of my class either emigrated or applied for social welfare. In order to get a job, I also left Ireland, receiving a Morrison Visa in the lottery from the United States Government. I first moved to San Francisco in 1993 and began working in the music and retail industry where my style of illustration and painterly hand script typography were in high demand. It was before emailing and texting and so life was simpler, and my dyslexia was easy to hide. At the time most of my briefs were verbal and client meetings were face-to-face. But technology was advancing quickly, especially on that side of the world. Emailing became the norm between staff and client and so writing, grammar and spelling were all expected to be of a high standard, which again I struggled with. But this was not all. Software programs to produce design, illustration and photo editing files were also advancing and becoming the new industry standard and norm. I was reluctant at first to learn these computer programs but knew I had to in order to stay employable. My reluctance and difficulty with learning from books was avoided when a colleague offered to train me by showing me herself how to use the software. Always my preferred way of learning! This person was also the first to suggest I might be “dyslexic,” as was she. I was in my mid-twenties.

My knowledge grew as I changed jobs and, at times, countries. At each junction of my career journey, I chose another area of design I had not yet explored. On reflection, as a result I have worked in almost every area of commercial design, from music to brand identity, packaging, corporate, finance, entertainment and food marketing, all in both the print and digital media. Those jobs did not come without additional effort on my behalf to conduct my creative abilities in busy offices, with digital communication and technology, while still coping with my reduced abilities in reading and writing. Again this meant I needed “more time,” which has always been a cost to me, not my employer (I have never been paid for overtime).

Over the years, advancing in my career, by winning accounts for my companies by my design pitches, and at times winning design awards, all brought me a great sense of self-pride. In my work, always paying the most attention to the legibility and styling of typography using effective hierarchy, complimentary colour and creative use of layout and negative space. The following are some examples of my commercial work (Fig. 5-10):

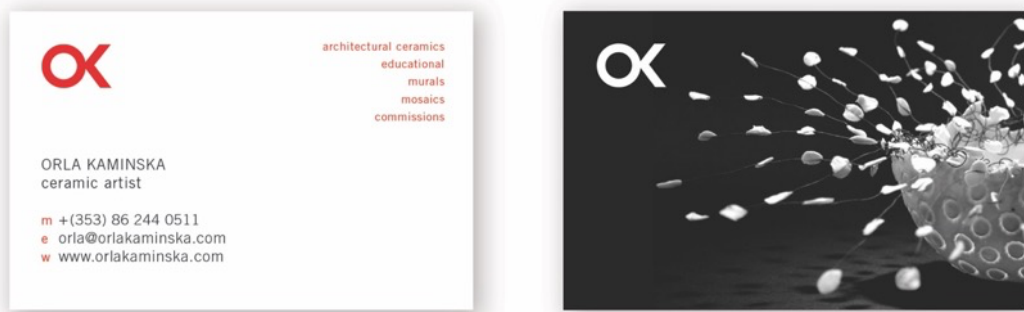


Figure 5: Logo design for ceramics artist Orla Kaminska, by Author, 2015.



Figure 6: Realtra Space Systems Engineering, brand identity. By Author, 2018.



Figure 7: Dunnes Stores Christmas brochure, design by Author. Contact: Bonfire, Dublin 2017.



Figure 8: Mc Inerney Bread Stuffing. Concept brand identity and packaging by Author, 2017.



Figure 9: SOBO District brochure, design by Author. Contract: Originate, Dublin 2016.



Figure 10: SOBO District brochure, design by Author. Contract: Originate, Dublin 2016.

Professional Development as a Fine Artist

Expressions of sincerity

When we think of exemplary poets, writers, artists and composers, we think of the enormous passion and emotion that they put into their work. This is normally where we find excellence, as it is created from the author's heart, soul and mind. Love and happiness are common themes, but our need as artists to express difficulties in life is more common. Perhaps it is our human nature to create a way to process a difficult subject by closer inspection, no doubt because these difficult parts need addressing and response to aid recovery. If we can see our expressions of emotional pain, perhaps it helps in our recovery of it.

Recently, Bono talked in a radio interview of his own need to extinguish his trauma through his lyric and music writing. He says he is able to "leave it be" once it has been composed. His song "I Will Follow" is a response to his loss of his mother as a boy and his desire to follow his mother into death rather than live without her. In my opinion, Edge's guitar-playing embodies the panic and despair of Bono's bereavement. It is a moving and powerful song, and its creation perhaps was a small part of his process of recovery from

his grief. We cannot underestimate the power that creativity has in allowing us to process our inner thoughts and emotions.

Once introduced to printmaking and etching in college, my love of all its many media and techniques developed while attending courses in San Francisco City College in my twenties. I had found a tool to express myself and my feelings. It gave me a voice without words. Since then, although my work as a fine artist encompasses everything from simplicity of design, form and texture, it is also a medium which I can use for my emotional response and expression of feelings. Again, using my imagery, rather than my words to communicate my thoughts and responses.

Personal visuals with universal themes

In 2005 I embarked on a solo career of fine art. This decision was encouraged by significant surgery that I had recently undergone. I turned to my art to help in my emotional healing from this medical experience and its consequences. My first print was an impression of the imprints of the fifteen staples, both top and bottom along the opening, made by the surgeon. My perfect waist, no longer perfect, but with a permanent imprint on my flesh. In the shared studio space, as I created this print, I kept my left arm in an arc around my plate, like a child hiding my emotional truth, uncertain of how it would be interpreted by the other printmakers in the studio, embarrassed at the crude theme of my image. I had no intention of ever showing this piece publicly but needed to see it for myself in order to aid my recovery from the visual effects of the surgery on my body. At that time, I felt embarrassed and not understood. The emotional impact of my dyslexia has often felt the same.

A few years later, again I created a series of prints in response to my scared body. I love beach stones, and reflected one day that each mark on a stone is part of its history and creation, just like my scars are part of the journeys life has taken me on. I needed to change how I thought about my-self-image and so titled the prints "Beauty Marks" (Fig. 11). I am very proud of how I was able to alter my confidence about my body image through my fine art practice.

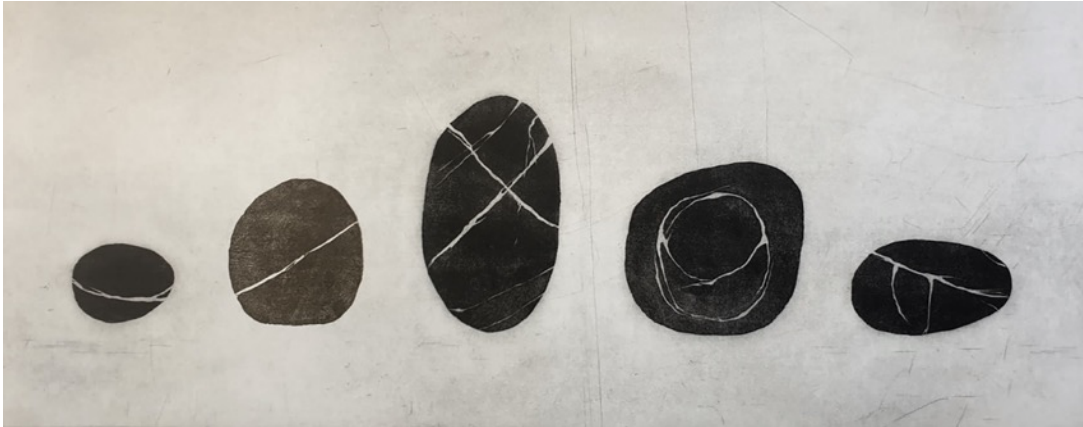


Figure 11: Sample prints from series on theme of "Beauty Marks" by Author, 2010.

In 2007, this print was part of a solo exhibition I produced under the title of "Sentient." This body of work also included titles such as "Lost," "Hurt" and a series of four prints under the theme of "Black Eyed Angles." These pieces steamed from my response to what was going on in my life at that time. Romantic heartbreak and bereavement.



Figure 12: 1/30 "Some Days" (Spit-bite etching) by Author. Exhibited in annual RHA exhibition, Dublin, 2014.

My fine artwork was and is, also a place where I can celebrate "a line," colour or texture and enjoy it for its own merit. The joy it brought in creating "it" and the pleasure it gives me to look upon it after. My titles to my work also give reason to my more graphic and abstract prints. The titles also help to unlock the theme and concept of the prints.

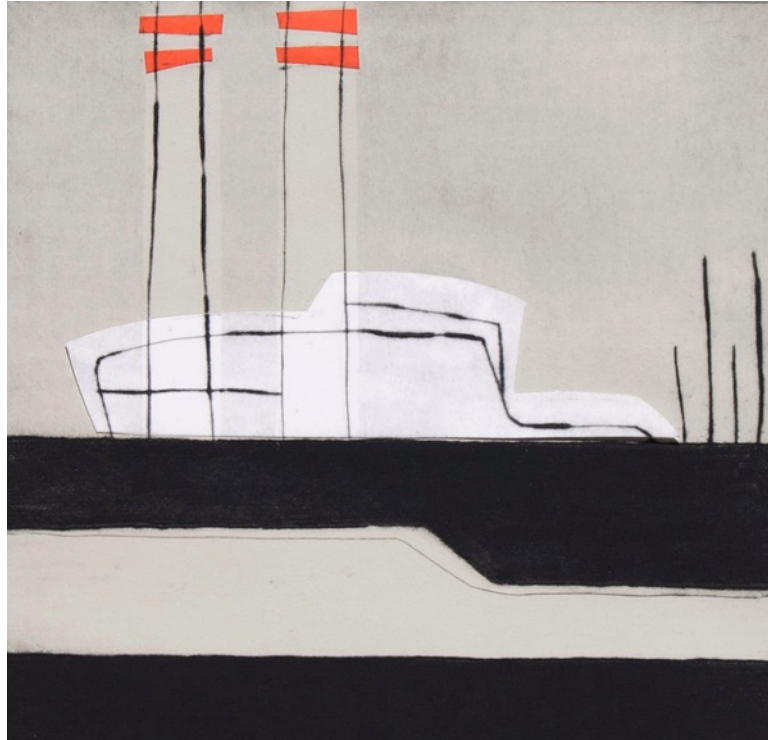


Figure 13: 1/30 "From the Strand" (Carborundum print) by Author. Exhibited in annual RHA exhibition, 2015.

Those early years of printmaking as a full-time artist allowed me to learn many of the print techniques that fall under the general title of "printmaking." Woodblock, spit bite, hard and soft ground etching. All of which I enjoy, as well as mixing mediums, while exploring colour and texture.

The piece seen next below (Fig. 14) was a response to my returning to Ireland after almost a decade of living abroad. I had been anonymous and taken at face value when living in other countries. But on my arrival home, I fell back into my box and place. Looking like and sounding like everyone else, playing the role of "an old friend," "sister," "daughter," attentive "niece," even "Irish Catholic convent girl," from "that" school and from "that" address. I missed my freedom. I was back home and reminded of my compromised abilities by all those around me that had me sized up. Judging me for the person I was, instead of the person I had grown to be while abroad.



Figure 14: 1/6 "Wearing a face that she keeps in a jar by the door" (Spit-bite etching), by Author, 2006.

It is hard at times to have the courage to expose my feelings and I have even produced a print called "Exposed." Due to my undiagnosed dyslexia as a child, I carried so much pain around with me as a young person and was devoid of any tools to save myself. I was lost and insecure and always fearful of appearing stupid. Fearful in case I really was stupid. It is perhaps because I grew up like this that I hold such depths of pain and emotional response. Perhaps I am able to touch it and see it and create it more readily than others because my dyslexic mind impacts so much on how I see the world around me and in how my eyes and mind work. My young struggles have forced me to find other tools by which to process life challenges. My dyslexia is embedded as a part of me as much as my personality is.



Figure 15: 1/30 "Fallen" (Photopolymer etching), by Author, 2017.

A decaying leaf found with my Father in my garden (Fig. 15). All that remained of it was its skeleton, curling in on itself. Its sad and decaying look immediately resonated with memories of my best friend's body wasting away from cancer. I decided to capture this in this photo etching. It was important to me that the title was honest and reflective. I felt the name "Fallen" was a way of suggesting something coming to the end of its life. The lower positioning of the leaf on the etching plate was to emphasize again the "fallen" aspect. Commercially it has sold very well, which made me feel I had achieved the correct amount of emotional suggestion. "Sad art" rarely sells and yet grief is a universal feeling that happens to every one of us at some point in life. It also helped me in the process my grief.

There is no doubt to me that my art is a vessel for my creative expression. It is my medium of choice and comes from my need to visualise my feelings and thoughts. Without this creativity, there is a void in my life which I am acutely aware of. I feel my most true self when I am creative.



Figure 16: 1/30 "Holding On" (Photopolymer etching), by Author, 2017.

The print "Holding On" (Fig. 16) was also created in response to my grief and is essentially me telling my fragile self that I can get through this sadness and loss if I just hold on.

This heightened need to express myself through visuals is a big part of who I am. Perhaps because since I was a small child my art was my safe place to express myself and how I am feeling and thinking. It is where I can process a difficulty and once put down, like a list of things one has to do, can remove it from my thought and torment and begin my recovery. Dyslexia caused me not to trust words, but I can trust the pictures I create. They are my story, my feelings. They are my words.

Emotional Consequence: Empathy and Difference

There was a lady on the radio recently about the same age as I, talking about growing up hiding her attraction to other females. She felt she was different and had no one to admit this to. She was not being true to herself or to what made her different and she certainly was not celebrating it. Society as a whole judges people who are different without pause or reflection, every day in every walk of life. For being gay, for being socially challenged, for living with a disability, for being black, for being white, for wearing a jilbab, for not wearing one. For having tattoos or even an accent! It takes little to make us

different from each other but a lot to be accepted by each other despite those differences.

I lived in San Francisco in the nineties and early noughties and loved it specifically for this reason of general openness and acceptance in society. I also loved who I was there and realise now that a great part of that was due to the fact that no one knew about my past or my childhood struggles and bullying. There, I had no negative baggage and no associations to hold me down. I did not have to feel embarrassed because of my perceived “shortcomings” and instead embraced a life where I was normal. It was pre-email and texting, so all this helped enormously in my abilities to hide my dyslexia.

I have often critically been called “overly sensitive.” How could I have become anything else! My level of empathy has grown from my traumas and difficulties. A skill which ironically is now to the forefront of essential qualities called “Soft Skills.” I tend to always support the underdog. I’m drawn to things that are not quite perfect. Is that because they remind me of me? As a lecturer I am able to bring this empathy into the classroom and endeavour always so that none of my students ever feel lost as I so often did. I consciously work at remaining open and accepting to those around me as I never want them to feel as out of place as I did. I see now that my greatest difference has been my dyslexia. I am learning to accept it and maybe even one day to celebrate it.

Conclusion

Is my dyslexia at the root of who I am? At the very least, it is an ingredient that impacts my everyday life and work. It has done this since I was a small child. But I feel I have been in battle all my life. Clashing with the expectations of an ignorant 1970s and 80s educational system, fighting with myself in despair at my constant failings in the classroom, despite my enormous efforts. I tried so hard and struggled so much and suffered such sadness as a result of my dyslexia. My inability to be like others or the norm left me feeling “different.” According to the Dyslexia Association Ireland:

Dyslexia is not an illness or disease that can be treated medically, nor is it something that comes and goes; it is a cognitive difference and can be inherited through genes and DNA.¹⁰

¹⁰ Keith Murphy, “Dispelling the myths around dyslexia,” *RTÉ*, January 6, 2023, <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2023/0106/1344834-dyslexia-myths-misconceptions/>.

It will never go away, and I will always need to make compromises and spend more time to perform every single writing activity that this literacy and digital life requires. It is not always easy.

In much the same way as Art Therapy, my creative resource both in my design and art training, has given me the tools to produce work that I can use as my form of self-expression. In being able to do this my sense of self-esteem and confidence has changed completely from the insecurity of my early childhood due to my dyslexia, to a competent commercial and fine artist. Today, all I can do is be honest and true about my story of trauma and difficulties growing up with dyslexia and finding a way to express myself without words.

Time is no guarantee of healing or distinguishing the emotional childhood scars left by my dyslexia, but learning to understand and accept my experiences and my emotional response will help. Society today is so much more aware that a person's struggles with reading, writing, obtaining and comprehending the written word, is not a reflection of their intelligence.

Finally.