



Letter From Dumbland

by Bryce Webster

The Myth of Learning Disability

In advertising, it's called weasel type, those tiny bits of typography which explain the nut of the matter (Offer expires on May 31, 1997. Employees of XYZ Corp. are ineligible). So, here goes the weasel type of this discourse.

I am not a teacher. Nor am I a mother. Not even a research scientist, a sociologist, a social worker, a therapist, a doctor of any sort, a crank, or a do-gooder. I am not, as I am at pains to make clear, a journalist; I am not now nor have I ever been a "liberal." I am not a religious nut, nor a moralist in the current pejorative sense of the word as used by the aforementioned journalists. Neither am I a political maven nor a mental midget (the two terms being, in some cases, interchangeable). I fully realize these statements open me to substantial risk. So be it.

What I am is an author of books and articles about entrepreneurship and business who finds the term "learning disability" one of the most frightful phrases, describing one of the most damaging concepts, of this generation or any.

It all started with my young nephew, when he was 10, some five years ago. He spent a couple of hours on a trip to Connecticut with me, crying because his fifth-grade social studies teacher had him adjudged learning disabled. No fool, the kid assumed this meant he was a dummy. He was hurt, distressed, depressed, and hopeless. And I wanted to kill his educator.

I didn't. I probed for more information. Was my nephew doing poorly in social studies? Yes. But Miss Perry didn't like him. How did he know? She ignored him whenever he raised his hand. He's a pragmatist, like his

aunt, and a little short on persistence. But what 10-year-old isn't? So he ceased raising his hand. Why expend the energy uselessly? Doesn't sound stupid to me. Shortsighted, yes. But stupid? No. He's a goal-oriented kid. When there's no chance of reaching one goal, he simply picks a different one.

I encouraged him—pointed out that anyone who could remember 10 full years of batting averages of both leagues could hardly be stupid. And correcting his first-grade teacher about dinosaurs—and having her apologize to him—was not dumb. Nor was writing a novel at age nine (about dungeons and dragons, of course). A young boy who could come through the breakup of a home with his humor intact and be polite and well-spoken to adults . . . well, that person is not stupid.

It helped. But still, he had been labeled, or libeled as I prefer to call it. His grades kept plummeting, not only in social studies but also in subjects he liked better to begin with. By mid-year, I had decided to have him professionally evaluated, over, I admit only a bit shamefully, his mother's protests.

The results? No learning disability was apparent in the short evaluation. The therapist recommended the full treatment, so to speak, but his mother ignored that. (It is in her best interest, she thinks, to keep the kid down. But that's another story.) The simple fact that a therapist—a well-respected one at the Institute of Rational-Emotive Therapy—told my nephew he very likely was not learning disabled was a miracle cure. His grades went up almost instantly, and by the middle of spring he had been removed from at least some of the hated "LD" classes. My nephew, now almost 16, is hard at work as a reporter on his school paper. His grades are acceptable. He has friends. He plays baseball well. He still knows more about sports statistics than any 10 adults. And he doesn't feel stupid anymore. He intends to become a sportswriter when he grows up,

which I heartily endorse. He's a good writer, has a quick mind, and loves the sports which he realizes he is too slightly built to play professionally.

What was gained by all this? First, of course, his social studies teacher shifted an unwelcome student to another classroom. Second, his school district got another body to count in their federally mandated special education classes. No doubt this helped their grantsmanship. Very likely, also, it kept at least one otherwise "excess" teacher's salary intact.

Is the term "learning disability," then, synonymous with "Public School Teachers' Full-Employment Act"? I think so. And its immorality lies in labeling a whole lot of innocent children with a hurtful tag they will never lose so some adults would have a job to do. Whatever happened to those public-service commercials about a mind being a terrible thing to waste?

In the Arizona suburban school districts of Window Rock and Bisbee, 11.1 percent and 12.16 percent, respectively, of the 1983-84 school budget was used for special education. The suburban districts of Apache and Cochise spent, respectively, 8.1 and 9.8 percent. The urban district of Tempe, however, spent a whopping 17.7 percent of its budget on special ed. And the rural (possibly Indian) district of Valley Union spent 17.5 percent. Conclusion? More city kids and rural kids are learning disabled than suburban kids. Is this true? Or could it be that the rural districts are recipients of government largesse through grantsmanship and income-transfer, while the urban districts are beneficiaries of grantsmanship and teachers' organizing? Or perhaps through the agitation of well-educated and well-heeled parents? It could be.

The body of literature about mental retardation suggests quite clearly that affluent families are more likely to use the public health services than are middle- or working-class families. However, children from affluent fami-

lies are much less likely than poor children to be labeled mentally retarded, although both may have the same intellectual levels. This interesting perversion of logic, or what might be called The Prince and Pauper Syndrome, seems to translate well from true mental retardation to LD.

Certainly, this is true in New York City. I have some so-called learning disabled friends there: two children of a wealthy family.

The first child is prone to temper tantrums and always has been. But then, he's the baby, the afterthought. And although this family can easily afford to spend \$40,000 a year on private school educations, the beneficent city of New York saw fit to pay and is still paying for the first seven years of this child's very special education. Not that it has done any good. He still embarrasses his older sister with baby talk. He still wrecks his big brother's belongings with nary a peep from a parent—except to enjoin the big brother from killing him, a bad idea, I think.

Frankly, I cannot see that the child is anything but wily, lazy, and self-centered. For, when he is around adults who do not tolerate such behavior, he behaves almost like a boy his age might be expected to. He can carry on quite intelligent conversations for a good length of time, about subjects from anteaters to manned flight. His motor skills seem less impaired than at the family breakfast table. He is even able to visit museums without touching the gem cases while, at home, he can scarcely pour a glass of milk without major assistance. He reads things for himself in public. He even suggests routes to cabdrivers to cut the expense of the ride, which he is clearly calculating along with the meter. So in what way is this child learning disabled? His supposed dyslexia disappears on demand, as does his inability to pay attention, his baby talk, his trouble with sums, *ad nauseam*. Indeed, this "poor child" was as well-read last fall about the Iran/Contra "scandal" as many adults and could ask more perceptive questions about it than most. He even expressed his own ideas about the morality of the thing.

So much for the family's poor baby. There's also the problematic sister. She's a charming and beautiful young

teenager who likes to write and date, doesn't like math and Latin. This is because, I was recently informed, she is "learning disabled" in math and Latin. Tutors, money. Simple connection, especially at the financially beleaguered private boarding school she attends. I hope she transcends it. Since she's a pragmatist, too, I think she will. But I wonder who's paying for this one.

I know who's paying for the disproportionate number of specially educated learning-disabled students in the great state of Delaware, where the Teachers' Full-Employment Act is in full swing.

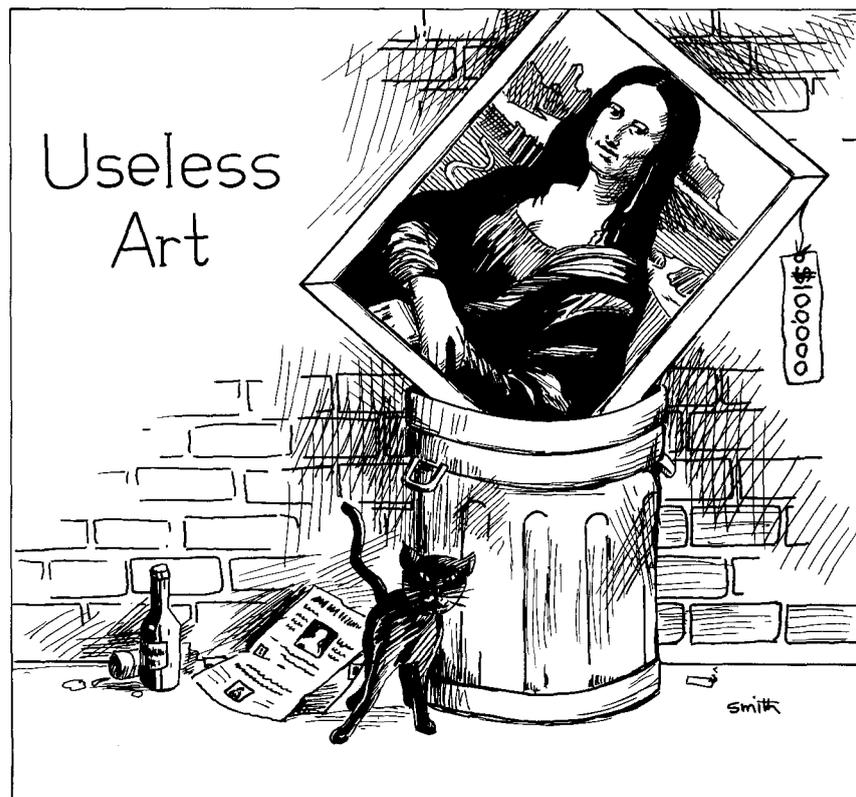
In 1969, it might easily be argued, the graffiti was on the wall. The first of the baby boomers were graduating from college, and they were not having many babies. Moreover, a huge supply of these baby boomers burst forth from the teachers' colleges (after all, Mom and Dad had pointed out that Janie would have summers free if she became a teacher) onto the dwindling job market. So is it coincidence that in Delaware, in 1969, enrollment in special education leaped by 30.9

percent, while the increase in total student enrollment inched up only 4.7 percent? By 1973, when the invisible ink was being heated up and brought into clear view (the general enrollment having dropped by 1.8 percent that year), special ed enrollment leaped by 20.3 percent. In 1977, the spread was plus 12.1 special ed, minus 3.5 general enrollment. And so on.

In 1981 and '82, enrollment dropped for both. But it dropped less for special ed. The spread in 1981: minus 1.5 special ed, minus 4.4 general enrollment. For 1982: minus 0.1 special ed, minus 2.6 general. But by 1983, the last year for which I could obtain figures, the balance was back in the plus column for special ed (plus 2.7) while still dropping generally (minus 1.3). It's not hard to believe that in Delaware, one-quarter of all elementary schoolteachers are teaching special ed—which is taught to a mere 11 percent of the students, although this, too, is climbing.

To say that learning disability is something of a joke may sound cruel. But let's face it; when a subject ends up the feature story on a local 11:00 news

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show on a network affiliate—well, that's a joke. In May, this occurred at a Miami-Fort Lauderdale network affiliate. Ten thousand Broward County students, the reporter said, were learning disabled, poor dears. About the same time, I found that two days a week the public library didn't open until noon. Granted, the kids would be in school then. But it seemed symptomatic of the learning illogic—what about the mommies and daddies, after all?

That same week, I was told that every school in the county had gotten a Moog synthesizer under a federal grant. These go for about \$2,000 apiece. There are more than 100 schools in Broward County. And some schools got more than one synthesizer. I know this because our office manager's daughter brought one of them home. "Take it if you want to play around with it," the music teacher said. "No one here knows how to play the thing." The kid's father is a computer whiz. It is costing the government, or us, \$2,000 for the child to play with the Moog and present her electronic fiddlings at the annual talent show. (What happened to cute pet tricks? Or acrobatics?)

When something is really ludicrous and bothersome, most healthy people make jokes of it. It's not surprising, then, that whenever there's a proof-reading error around the office, we all cackle about the proofer being learning disabled. Someone fails to hear what is being said and asks, "Could you repeat that?" "What, are you hearing disabled?" is the usual rejoinder.

Can't live within your income? Obvious financial disability there. Used to be called profligacy, or even spend-thriftiness.

Drop your coffee cup after a late night with a storyboard? Must be motor coordination disabled. Remember clumsy? Most kids outgrow it. And therein also lies a tale. I know a dance teacher who is so clumsy offstage and out of the studio that she literally walks into walls. This is partly because her early training taught her to look up and ahead, which makes it easy to trip over a button if your mind wanders. And, of course, until she had radial keratotomy surgery, she was almost legally blind.

There are untold brilliant scientists

who are clumsy, in the everyday sense of the word. Never mind that they can dissect a newt's eyelash in the lab. When they walk around doing their daily chores, they bump into things. Their gait, as long as it gets them where they want to go, is of no concern to them.

And then, there's what I call the Stephen Hawking theory. Hawking is, you may recall, the most brilliant physicist in recent memory. Like Einstein, he had problems in school. But that's only half of it. Hawking's body is wasting away. Today, he can move only one or two tiny muscles voluntarily. It is a disease he's got, a syndrome. But look at what it does, for him and us. Though I daresay he might disagree, it blessedly allows him to be a completely cerebral being—in a way, it helps him with his immense contributions to human knowledge. He doesn't have to waste his valuable time giving inane talks to mindless yobbos at conferences somewhere in Ullululand. Of course, he misses out on playing touch football with his kids. But his contributions to science have been such that it matters little to those who come after if he was purple with blue spots and had a learning disability in French, Urdu, and lute-playing. (I have never heard of a lute-playing disability, but give it time. I myself have a Judith Krantz book-reading disability; I would give a lot to a good grantsman to get me some federal funds to overcome it.)

Besides being the foundation of the above-mentioned Full Employment Act, learning disabilities are very likely to be the great homogenizer many of us have feared for so long. All men (and women and children and dogs and cats and budgerigars) are not created equal, at least in the simplistic (read wrong) sense given forth by the schoolmarms (educators) today. Equality is a very unequal thing. My own brother is Mensa-caliber; I am not. On the other hand, the public body of my mental work exceeds his by an unknowable factor, since he has never published anything. He is an auto dealership manager. But we are equal. He's happy and so am I. He escaped from school just before learning disabilities came on the scene, so escaping his share of labels. His attention wandered in math class; he knew more than the

teacher was teaching for his grade level. He just plain hated history. Now, he's my main source on historical perspective of modern events; he's a voracious reader in that field.

And he's a riot. The synapses in his brain flash so fast and so well that he can see true humor in just about anything and give it voice. He has a fan club in three states. And Japan.

So what would have happened to the tyke if learning disability had been around in his early youth? Probably he would have been categorized as LD with verbal impairment or accused of having a short attention span. Or maybe someone would have written something like this: "His fine motor movements for cutting, pasting, writing, hammering, stringing beads, working puzzles and more look immature and clumsy. He displays poor ability to combine movement and vision."

That described my brother at a certain age to a T. The thing was, he was the only left-handed member of the family. Also, before he could toddle he began to speak *Chinese*, which he picked up from the laundryman. Today, Chinese is all forgotten. And he did outgrow the clumsiness, although not before he embarrassed me for years.

One of the relatively harmless primers for parents of LD children gives laundry lists of "can't do" things at the end of each chapter. Here's one: "He often cannot distinguish similar sounds one from the other, such as b and t, and v and th, so of course he cannot attach correct pronunciations to their symbols and his spelling may be dreadful. At times you are bound to feel he is the one who hid behind the door when they were passing out brains because he thought they said trains."

Actually, the joke involves rain (after all, many a young boy would be first in line for trains). Yet, how many of us always hear those similar sounding letters correctly? If we did, there would be no need for the international phonetic alphabet (a as in alpha, b as in beta, c as in cat, and so on, widely used by those who dictate and those who transcribe).

And another: "Some LD children make astonishingly bizarre attempts at phonetic spelling on almost all

words." So that makes them stupid? Or crazy? Listen, it's English—American English at that—these kids are having to learn. Maybe they think their way is a nifty shortcut. After all, no one ever proposed that the author of *Winston Tastes Good Like a Cigarette Should* was learning disabled—though he bent grammar to his own meaning and usage. I do, however, remember snide remarks about the destruction of the language wrecked by ad-speak.

The author of the primer does point out that labeling a child LD is tantamount to saying he has a dread disease which can only be treated by the supertrained. And this, she adds, is untrue. Her prescriptions for the prevention of LD look to me like common sense that used to be, as little as 25 years ago, how children were ordinarily raised. For example, the guide recommends, among other things:

Speaking to your infant so that he or she will begin to recognize human speech. (Anyone for raising the kid with wolves?)

Providing your child with paper and crayons in ample supply, as well as puzzles and other amusements of early youth.

Avoiding encouraging "baby talk"; rather, she says, one ought to repeat semi-gibberish in complete sentences, so the child will learn.

Making sure the child has games that foster coordination. (Hint: The New York child's parents did not play ball, or much of anything else, with him. They did hire an "occupational" therapist at \$80 an hour at the taxpayers' expense.)

Watching the child's diet; he may be sensitive to sugar (hyperactive kids, it has been known for more than 20 years, usually are) or something else, particularly chemical additives in food. In other words, feed the kid food, not chemicals, and limit sweets. This used to be the most common of common sense.

Developing a program to control behavior. (I assume this might include liberal use of the word No. Modern mommies appear to need their own remedial course in this simple Anglo-Saxon syllable.)

Ignoring tantrums is also recommended. (Think about it. How many modern mommies have you seen buy-

ing off Junior with a toy when he was trying out for the Eddie Munster award in the supermarket?)

Belatedly, I don't mean to imply that learning disability doesn't exist. It possibly does, in a few extreme cases. The rest, as far as I can tell—and as far as the few traditional good teachers I know can tell me—is all fluff designed for the parents who like to feel their child is "different." If they can't have a genius, a learning disabled will do. This in itself smacks of the parents being rational discrimination disabled.

At its heart, then, is learning disability anything more than the kids' brains and bodies developing at different rates? Must we make a "disease" out of what is a completely ordinary process? A book editor I worked with once told me she was dyslexic. But she had managed to graduate from Mount Holyoke before anyone ever thought up the term. Her dyslexia, however, got her out of a lot of proofreading. She chose this excuse-path in adulthood—kids don't have that choice. However much we may natter about kids having rights, the one fundamental right they do unarguably have is to their own selfhood. Denigrating that selfhood for adult convenience is unwise at best and immoral at its base.

I argue for simplicity, common sense, and good teaching. I argue for a return to a world in which smart kids could do it all, whereas other kids were magnificent at math and poor at poetry and vice versa, while still others were average, and a few, just a few, needed extra help to reach their potential. That, after all, was what teaching was all about.

Bryce Webster is author of In Search of Modern Ireland: An American Traveler's Odyssey (Dodd, Mead).

Letter From the Lower Right

by John Shelton Reed

Fightin' Words

Perhaps you heard something of the furor evoked down here a couple of years ago when it was reported that a

speech pathologist in Chattanooga, one Beverly Inman-Ebel, was conducting a class for those who wished to shed their Southern accents. (That's how the news stories put it. One could as well say, of course, that they wanted to acquire a Northern—or, as it's known in the speech biz, a "standard American"—accent.) On investigation, it turned out that Ms. Inman-Ebel's course was just one of many; such courses were available in several other Southern cities.

Alas, despite ridicule and abuse from regional chauvinists like me, the abomination continues to spread, showing how irresistible is even a bad idea whose time has come. Now my own university has gotten into the act. Our department of "speech communication" offered such a course last fall. When I ventured to inquire whether the taxpayers of North Carolina knew that their money was being spent to deracinate their children, the department's chairman tried gamely to put the best face on it. She offered the pragmatic argument that actors and media personalities and businessfolk need to be able to speak in "standard American." (A friend observes that it's too bad our alumnus Andy Griffith didn't take such a course. No telling what he might have amounted to if he could speak properly.)

People should take these courses, in other words, for the same reason that people teach them: because there's a mess of pottage in it. Or, if "mess" is on the list of condemned Southernisms, we can say: because it will help them make a buck. My colleague the chairman did not venture to say whether it is right that there are occupations where this is so, or whether students should be encouraged to enter them. She just offered it as a fact of life.

And, unfortunately, she's correct. Some non-Southerners—prospective employers, customers, clients, and voters among them—simply find Southern accents unpleasant. Billie Sue Knittel of Atlanta, for example, enrolled in a lose-your-accent course taught by an Ohio migrant named Shelly Friedman, and told a UPI reporter that the Yankee dentist she works for made her do it. "I talked too Southern for him." This jerk didn't want her answering his phone until