

1

Disability and Revelation

Lessons Learned and Flying Squirrels

Like many people in the field of special education, I often ponder what we really mean today when we use the term *learning disabled*. How valid are the concepts that underlie the term, and how well served are children when we describe them as having learning disabilities? In the midst of these ponderings I sometimes remember a boy from my childhood. Most people thought he was not very bright, but he helped me learn lessons that have been deeply meaningful in my life. These were lessons about fish and squirrels and about schools and values.

I first met the boy when I was in the seventh grade in a small rural school. My family had moved during the preceding summer from our home in the city. In my old school, I had been with the same children each year up through the sixth grade. My first few days at the new school were frightening for me. Most of the students in my class seemed older and larger. I was still at an awkward, in-between point in my development. Although puberty had not arrived for me, some of the boys in my seventh grade class were already shaving. Some of the girls also showed clear signs of adolescent development. Suddenly I felt like I was going to school with grown men and women, which was very intimidating. I longed to be back with the other children in my old school in the city.

10 My Own Journey

The boy I remember during my musings on learning disabilities was one of the tallest of the boys in my class. He was big and his looks were imposing, but he was very quiet. In fact, he was shy and the brunt of many jokes. He was rarely able to answer questions from the teacher and this inability was mocked. He was often unable to finish seatwork or chalkboard problems, and this became fodder for constant teasing. Even though he was larger than most of the other boys, he took their kidding and even their ridicule without retaliating. He was an easy target for harsh jokes about his appearance. He was large, but everyone called him Tiny. Even though this was a spoof on his size, his real name was so unusual that it was also used as a source of ridicule. And so he preferred to be called Tiny.

I thought Tiny was just as strange as the others thought he was. Although in this little rural school nobody had great wealth, Tiny's clothing clearly showed signs of being handed down for several more recyclings than most. The lunches he brought to school were obviously made from whatever had been left from his family's supper the night before. Sometimes he brought stale biscuits and cold cooked vegetables. This was quite different from the standard fare of peanut butter sandwiches and fruit that most of us brought from home. Tiny was always clean and neat, but it was obvious to all that his family was poor.

It was not only his poverty that made him appear strange to the other seventh graders, but also the fact that he was a loner. He usually rode on the school bus in a seat by himself. He rarely spoke to anyone, and he often gave only one-word responses when he was asked questions. Tiny had younger sisters. If he were seen talking with anyone at school, it would be with them. The only sign of assertiveness that I ever saw in him was in his protectiveness of his sisters. I do not recall anything specific about his care of them, but I know that people understood that although he would not respond to their attacks on him, he would not let his sisters be hurt.

After the first couple of months of school, however, I got to know Tiny in a different light. In fact, we became friends. It happened, at least partially, because I had become a loner at the new school myself. I was the only new student in the seventh grade and, as I have said, I had not yet hit that spurt of growth that would propel me into adolescence. I lacked confidence in myself and was still too childlike to fit in very well with most of my new classmates.

After school each day I spent time alone. One afternoon I explored a cornfield that was brown and dry with the remains of an earlier harvest. I had overheard some of the other kids say that somewhere beyond the field was a pond. I discovered the pond that sunny November day but, more important, I found a friend. As I climbed over the fence that surrounded the pond I saw Tiny. He was fishing. He watched me climb awkwardly over the barbed wire and nodded. We were both embarrassed at having stumbled onto each other, but there was no way to avoid a conversation. I'm not sure who spoke first, but I think it must have been me. Even

though I had become a loner in my new environment, of the two of us, Tiny was definitely the more private person.

That afternoon I learned how to fish for what Tiny called sunfish. In telling me about them, he talked more than I had ever heard him talk. He told me with enthusiasm, for example, that some people called sunfish either panfish or crappies. Crappie, panfish, or sunfish—the pond was full of them! So full, apparently, that there was ferocious competition among them for food. We fished using balls of sandwich bread on hooks with four prongs, and we sometimes caught two fish on the same line. The fish seemed to leap for the bait as soon as it hit the water. When we ran out of bread, Tiny showed me how to pull the hook through the water and snag the hungry fish with bare metal. He had a bucket of water that we put the fish into to keep them alive. Periodically he would check the bucket and pick out the smaller fish that had not been injured too badly by the hooks and return them to the pond. After all of our fishing was done, Tiny strung the fish that he wanted to take home on a long piece of cord. He strung a share for me.

Tiny then led me on a shortcut through the cornfield, over the railroad tracks that bordered it, and up a path that led to the back of his house. His house was very modest and covered with asphalt-shingled siding. He invited me into the kitchen, which was off the back porch. His sisters were busy helping their mother with supper. They were surprised and embarrassed to have me suddenly appear in their home. Tiny's mother, however, was delighted to see us and soon made everyone feel more comfortable. She had a bright smile and gentle manner. I liked her immediately. She was glad to have the fish and quickly had the girls cleaning them for cooking.

We talked for a little while about school, the pond, and the fish. And then I left, walking the short distance to my own home, feeling glad that I had come to know Tiny. I looked forward to seeing him again.

Although we barely spoke at school, I spent lots of afternoons fishing with Tiny. One day in January we went sliding on the frozen pond and played ice hockey with dead oak branches and a flat rock. Although most of the pond was frozen thick, I broke through near the bank. Both of my legs went into the icy water up to the knees. Tiny helped me get out, and he built a fire to warm my feet and to dry my shoes and jeans. He always seemed to know how to take care of things like that. Tiny, who was wise and mature beyond his years in many ways, liked helping people when given the chance.

The next fall we went to the eighth grade together at the high school. We had continued our friendship during the summer and worked together to earn spending money. I was accustomed to making money by mowing lawns, delivering newspapers, and working at a golf course. Tiny involved me in *real* work. We loaded pulpwood, which were long pine logs, onto a railroad flatcar. This was the most exhausting, dirtiest, and discouraging work that I had ever tried. It rivals any demanding physical work I have

12 My Own Journey

done since. The more wood we loaded on the flatcar, the bigger the stack of logs on the siding seemed to grow. Several times a day a truck would arrive from the cutting site on a nearby mountain with even more wood! The logs were thrown from the truck in a haphazard fashion that looked a lot easier than the lifting we were doing to get them up onto and in place on the flatcar. I came close to crying at times. I was tired, scratched, and bleeding from the pinebark, and I wished that I could somehow escape the commitment to finish the job. In reality, Tiny did more than his share of the work. I took frequent and long breaks. He never complained and kept working while I rested, yet he shared with me equally the money we were paid when the job was over. The whole experience was a great motivational lesson for me. It convinced me of the wisdom of staying in school and "getting an education."

Things did not go well for Tiny during our first year at high school. We had no classes together, but I knew that he was not happy. Socially, he continued to be a loner, and at the high school he was teased by an even larger number of students. Again, he never retaliated. He suffered the insults about his size, his shyness, and his poor school performance in silence. I don't remember ever coming to his defense. I'm sure I lacked the maturity and insight to do so.

Our friendship after school and on weekends continued. I enjoyed his company, and he always seemed happy to see me. We went fishing, took hikes, and once made a dam in the creek that ran at the foot of the hill below his house. We put some of the smaller fish that we caught in the pond into the pooled water. We shared good times, but we never talked about school.

After our first year in high school, I saw even less of Tiny. When we started classes the next September, he was still classified as an eighth grader and his schedule was completely different from mine. The next year he didn't return to school. It turned out that Tiny had failed some grades in elementary school and was actually a couple of years older than me. He was old enough to drop out of high school.

The next time I talked with Tiny, he gave me a very short answer to my question about school. "I'm just a slow learner, that's what they said. I can't make it in school anymore and I have to find something else to do now." He told me this as we were exploring in the woods just beyond the pond. A year earlier he had shown me how to harvest mistletoe there. His technique was based on his excellent aim with a 22-caliber rifle. He laid on his back and shot the mistletoe out of the oak branches where it grew in the large and damp tree joints. He explained to me that his mother sent him to the woods every year around that time to shoot mistletoe. She decorated the mistletoe with ribbons and sold them to neighbors for Christmas trimmings. Tiny was a good marksman. He showed me that it took good aim to knock out only part of the plant, which he told me was what he was trying to do because if the whole plant was blown out of the tree there would be no new growth for next year.

This time we were walking in the woods behind the pond to see something special that he had found. Under a big oak, he pulled back a rustling cover of dry leaves to reveal a cardboard box. Inside the box were shredded rags swaddling a baby squirrel. It was special, he explained—it was a flying squirrel. Earlier in the day he had seen it helpless and trembling under the tree. Tiny knew flying squirrels forage for food at night. He planned to return the baby to the nest that night while the mother was hunting. He told me I could help.

That night, I held a flashlight as Tiny scaled the tree with the baby squirrel in a cloth bag he had tied to his belt loop. He gently put the baby in the nest and then climbed back down the tree. As far as I know, the reunion was a success. On our walk back to his house, I asked Tiny how he knew so much about flying squirrels. He explained that he had learned it all from what he called his “books.” When I asked what books he was talking about, he told me that he had an old set of encyclopedias that he read at night. It was a set that his mother had found for him. I have no idea what the circumstances were of her acquiring them, but he showed them to me with great pride. They were dated volumes, old and mildewed, but they were readable and he stored them carefully in a crate under his bed.

I was amazed! The boy who had dropped out of school and thought he was slow was a researcher. When I asked about this seeming contradiction, Tiny told me that he could “read fine” when he had enough time and when he wasn’t going to be taking a test. He liked to read and he loved to learn, but he just couldn’t do it the way it was done in school.

Education was defined narrowly during my years in school. Learning was to be done the standard way or not at all. During the years that I knew Tiny I didn’t know anything about individual learning needs or what would come to be known as learning disabilities. I did know, however, that something was terribly wrong when the rescuer of flying squirrels and an expert on their habits and habitat thought that he was too slow, too different, to be in school.

The rescue of the baby flying squirrel was the last adventure that Tiny and I shared. Events took us in different directions and I don’t recall having had another conversation with him. I am sure that we must have seen each other after that, but I just don’t remember it.

When I first thought of writing down my memories of Tiny, I began to wonder if I had simply forgotten that he eventually came back to school. I pulled out old yearbooks and searched for his face in the classes of each of my high school years. He wasn’t there. I also searched my memory for any recollection of him during those years. I could remember nothing.

On a recent trip to my hometown I asked some old friends about Tiny. I found that I wasn’t experiencing memory lapses as I had feared. Tiny never returned to school. For a while he found odd jobs that allowed him to help his mother and sisters. Finally he found a way to help them even more—he joined the army. My friends say that Tiny took care of his mother and sisters by sending money home for them.

14 My Own Journey

A disturbing discovery came from my inquiries: Like many other boys of my generation who left school, and who joined or were drafted into the military, Tiny died in Vietnam. Without the options of educational deferments or the other opportunities that might have been available to him if he had more education, Tiny was sent to the front lines of the conflict. I know nothing of the circumstances of his death, but I have imagined that he died in a jungle. In my imaginings, I have hoped that he had a chance to see and be close to jungle animals before he was killed. Maybe he rescued a few. Maybe if he had returned from the jungle he would have looked them up in his "books."

If Tiny had lived in a time and place that defined ability and courage more broadly than the schools of our youth did, he might have been seen as a bright and brave young man with great potential for learning. Instead, he died serving a system that viewed him, and taught him to view himself, as slow and as a dropout. I am grateful that I had the opportunity to know him as something more. I trust that our society and our schools have become and are becoming even more open, inclusive, and compassionate. I hope that there is a place for those with Tiny's talents in our schools today. I trust that he would have been truly helped by the opportunities available now. I hope that he would have been helped, rather than further handicapped, by being recognized as having a learning disability. I hope that he would have had the opportunity to help other people the way that he helped me.

Flying squirrels live in the hollows of trees. They hunt for food at night. They usually have babies twice each year. They glide from the highest branches, swoop low, and then soar higher again. Thanks for the lesson, Tiny.