



DYSLEXIA: A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE DRESSAGE HELPED MY DYSLEXIA

By Diane R. Jones

In June 2022, my boyfriend and I rented a vacation house with a tennis court. One afternoon, he asked me if I wanted to go out and hit the ball around. I said, “You know how that goes. I can’t hit the ball.” He said, “Let’s try.”

The last time we were on a court together, I was in my early 30s, and playing tennis was untenable. At 58, I had zero expectations that things would be different.

Over the years, he witnessed me struggle to high-five someone or catch something he mindlessly tossed my way. Once, he blurted out, “It’s like you have feet for hands.” It was an accurate analogy. My hands were about as helpful as my feet if I tried to catch something with them.

The chartreuse ball flew over the net toward me. I swung at it and miraculously hit it back to him. We looked at each other with surprise as he returned the ball. I connected again. We played tennis the remaining days we were there.



The first day, I thought it was a fluke. I fully expected the gift to be gone the second day, but it wasn't. The third day, it was there too, and every day since.

The newfound ability was nothing short of stunning. On the court, I didn't feel like myself. It was as if someone else was inhabiting my body. I was not the person I had known my whole life—the child who got picked last in whiffle ball, kickball, and every other sport when I was in school.

What changed? Why was my brain functioning as it never had before? I attributed the change to dressage.

I moved my horse to a dressage barn in April of 2019. I quickly told the trainer about my dyslexia, explaining why I may not follow her instructions as readily as others she'd taught. Unfazed by my declaration, she told me she had taught people with dyslexia successfully.

At various times, I found myself telling friends and family that riding dressage is like rubbing your stomach and patting your head at the same time—on steroids. I described how dressage is a continual interplay between your left and right sides while riding in patterns.

I noted myself getting better at all the right-left / up-down pattern work and silently felt proud that I was getting it! I had no idea that this hobby was changing my brain in other ways.

I was diagnosed with dyslexia at the age of 6. I struggled in first grade. My mother noticed I wrote the letters of my name backward. I also naturally read from right to left, and I didn't possess age-appropriate hand-eye coordination.

My parents decided to have me repeat the first grade and enroll me in special education. In Special Ed, the teachers tutored me in reading and writing. We worked tirelessly on my balance and hand-eye coordination. I recall bouncing a ball repeatedly with both my left or dominant hand and my right hand, walking on a balance beam, and, the most demanding activity, doing both at the same time.

The intervention made a difference for me, and the rest of my academic career was normal except for significant test anxiety. I graduated college cum laude with a marketing degree.

By the time I was an adult, I had come to accept my lack of hand-eye coordination and tactfully avoided activities that highlighted my disability. I could do many things—running, biking, hiking, skiing, triathlon, and more. I focused on these activities and was good at them.

One dreaded, familiar hand gesture always left me feeling embarrassed: the high-five. For most people, it's a spontaneous way to connect and celebrate, to say, "Good job" or "Well done." The intention behind the gesture is recognition, a form of saying, "I see you." But when you have dyslexia, that simple action can cause the person to feel uncomfortable or even ashamed. Such was the case for me.

Otherwise, dyslexia didn't hinder my ability to be successful in my 28-year financial services career. If overtired, I'd catch myself reversing letters in a word while writing, and my ability to spell declined further from its already lower-than-normal level.

I'm grateful for the early intervention, which positively impacted my scholastic career. However, it did not eradicate the low self-esteem and lack of confidence I felt. I doubted I was "smart," even in the face of evidence to the contrary. There was an ever-present undercurrent of self-doubt.

I'm writing this story to highlight the incredible neuroplasticity of the brain, even in middle-aged people. I want to give adults with dyslexia hope that they don't have to settle for what has been their norm.

Lastly, it's impossible to overstate the power of partnering with an equine for your physical, mental, and emotional health. As such, it may be beneficial to enroll children with dyslexia in a therapy program that utilizes equine movement to help them overcome aspects of their disability.