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John Lennon: Imagine Dyslexia

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John Lennon: Imagine Dyslexia

By: Rafael Scarnati

Imagine, if John Lennon didn't have dyslexia, would he have been the popular icon that he is today?

Thirty years after his death, we remember John Lennon as one of the most influential artists of all time. He has sold millions of albums. His music transcends generations. His ideas remain as inspiring and popular today as they were forty years ago. Yet growing up, few people would have expected him to be any more successful than a regular pot scrubber or factory worker in Liverpool. He was, like many dyslexic children going to school, extremely bright yet grossly underestimated.

He couldn't spell, even though he loved to read and write stories. He couldn't memorize the lyrics to other people's songs, but wrote amazingly creative ones himself. Except for his art classes, he had terrible grades in school. He was deemed a troublemaker and even when he dropped out of high school, his strong people skills and creative potential moved his headmaster to make a special recommendation to get him into college. He was an artist, a storyteller and a poet from a very early age. He was a leader among his peers. His ideas were always ahead of his time. His songs produce beautifully created and carefully crafted imagery of octopus' gardens, strawberry fields and a world without countries or possessions. It sounds like the typical story of a rock star making it big, but it is also a story that displays many typical characteristics of someone with the challenges as well as the gifts of dyslexia.

How do we know he was dyslexic?

A widely misunderstood condition, dyslexia does not simply mean that you cannot read, or that words appear to

be upside down or backwards. It also has NOTHING to do with lack of intelligence. It is not even as rare as we would think. Approximately 20% of the overall population experiences some sort of difficulty due to dyslexia. Most of the cases are, like John Lennon's, undiagnosed.

Dyslexics have a slightly different brain structure than most other people do. The right side of their brain is more developed (and therefore physically larger) than the average person. This means that they have trouble identifying certain sounds and symbols on a two dimensional plane (letters and numbers). They have trouble remembering things through rote memory (phone numbers and addresses), and are terrible at spelling and elementary math.

This also means that their visual-spatial skills and their logic and reasoning skills are far superior than the average person. Dyslexics are usually artistic, highly intuitive, extremely curious, innovative thinkers with great people skills. Sadly, because reading and writing on paper has been such an important skill to succeed in school, their teachers and peers have for years incorrectly labeled dyslexics as lazy or stupid.

Even though his aunt Mimi raised him, John Lennon occasionally spent time with his biological mother Julia, who taught him how to play the banjo and the piano. Fortunately Julia never made him read sheet music; otherwise little John would have been frustrated to no end by his inability to read the symbols and probably would have quit his musical aspirations early on in life.

Dyslexics are extremely gifted in the arts, but because of their inability to decode certain symbols on a page, such as letters, numbers and musical notes they have to learn the music by memory. When they do, they are able to produce beautifully structured pieces of music along with very creative lyrics. But they do need to make sense out of it before they can memorize, as rote repetition does not work for dyslexics. Lennon spent most of his time as a boy listening to Buddy Holly and Elvis on the radio, and because memorizing other people's lyrics was so difficult, he would simply make up his own words to the music: the mark of true dyslexic creativity.

“They hurt you at home and they hit you at school,
They hate you if you're clever and they despise a fool,
Till you're so ... crazy you can't follow their rules...

When they've tortured and scared you for twenty odd years,
Then they expect you to pick a career,
When you can't really function, you're so full of fear.”

Lyrics from “Working Class Hero”

Because of their keen intuition and strong social skills, dyslexics are usually the leaders of their pack and have a natural ability to influence others. At Dovedale Primary School, he was very mischievous and would always get into fights with other kids. This made him very well respected among his classmates, and he quickly became the leader of a 'gang' in his elementary school. He went on to Quarry Bank High School in 1952 with extremely poor grades. Although highly intelligent, he took no interest in conventional education and eventually dropped out. While his reputation as artistically gifted grew in school, he built an extensive portfolio, one he kept since his early years in primary school. His school master, Mr. Pobjoy, thought that he would be successful in the arts and made a special recommendation for his admission to the Liverpool College of Art. It was there that he met his first wife Cynthia, and his career as The Beatles' front man took off. The rest, as they say, is history.

All you need is love...and a little bit more.

It is the hardest thing for a child with a learning disability to go to school every day not understanding why they struggle so much. John Lennon did not know he was dyslexic until much later in life, but he *always* knew he was different than all the others. He described his feelings about it to Jann Wenner in his famous 1971 Rolling Stone interview.

People like me are aware of their so-called genius at ten, eight, nine... I always wondered, “why has nobody discovered me?” In school, didn’t they see that I’m cleverer than anybody in this school? That the teachers are stupid, too? That all they had was information that I didn’t need.

I got...lost in being at high school. I used to say to me auntie “You throw my...poetry out, and you’ll regret it when I’m famous,” and she threw the...stuff out.

I never forgave her for not treating me like a...genius or whatever I was, when I was a child.

It was obvious to me. Why didn’t they put me in art school? Why didn’t they train me? Why would they keep forcing me to be a...cowboy like the rest of them? I was different, I was always different. Why didn’t anybody notice me?

A couple of teachers would notice me, encourage me to be something or other, to draw or to paint — express myself. But most of the time they were trying to beat me into being a...dentist or a teacher.”

“The guitar’s all very well, John, but you’ll never make a living out of it”, his aunt Mimi famously said. Yet despite her and most other people’s doubts, John Lennon remained the leader of his band and a leader of his generation throughout the rest of his years. Like many gifted people, whether they are social, political or business leaders, it has been BECAUSE of his dyslexia and not DESPITE it that John Lennon is the legend that he is today. Imagine that!

Can you imagine what your child, nephew, niece, brother, sister or friend with learning problems can become if only given the opportunity to shine by playing to his or her strengths? Can you imagine a world without the contributions of Lennon, Da Vinci, Einstein, Picasso, Ansel Adams, Henry Ford, Churchill, Patton, Eisenhower, Edison, Mohammad Ali or Hans Christian Andersen? Can you imagine a world in which children don’t have to feel stupid when they go to school because they can’t read like the rest of their friends? You may say I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one. Like many other professionals around the world I work with dyslexic children every day, and I know that it is possible to fix their learning problems. All they need is love...and a dedicated professional to work with them.

To read more about dyslexia, visit:

[Stowell Learning Centers](#), [Bright Solutions for Dyslexia](#), [LD Online](#), [Smart Kids with Learning Disabilities](#), [International Dyslexia Association](#), and [How To Make Learning Easier](#) blog.

****The author is a Learning Specialist and Associate Director of [Learning Foundations](#), a Diagnostic and Learning Center in San Antonio, Texas that provides 1 on 1 tutoring for students struggling with dyslexia, ADD/ADHD, math, comprehension, processing skills and other learning problems*

If you live in San Antonio and your child has learning problems, visit www.learningfoundations.us to get him started on the road to success.

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