



# I Just Don't Learn The Way You Learn

## A PROFILE OF AUTHOR/ARTIST TORY WOOLLCOTT

By Kenneth E. Seaton

**T**ory Woollcott is one-of-a-kind, the “goofy” kind, but still one-of-a-kind! She’s an award-winning writer, artist, comic and one ferocious supporter of dyslexia awareness. Tory is also a proud Canadian who graduated from the University of Toronto with an Honours BA in archeology and Near Eastern studies.

She’s also studied graphic design at George Brown and is now a working full time as an adaptive technology trainer with LEARNstyle.

Tory has become a campaigner for dyslexia awareness; has appeared on CBC Radio’s Metro Morning, Ontario Morning, and Canada AM, and been featured in many articles. She is spreading the word on dyslexia by speaking at events including: Word on the Street and Right to Read, as well as at the University of Toronto and at a variety of public schools around the city.

Her highly successful graphic comic book *Mirror Mind: Growing up Dyslexic* tied for first prize in the General Category of the

*SPACE Awards*. It’s her story on the challenges she faced growing up in Toronto with dyslexia. Tory did and does things on her own terms and her book frankly illustrates how she was misunderstood by some of her teachers and teased by her classmates. It describes how she eventually got the assessment, the help and the education that she was missing.

*“... experts view it cross-culturally as a survival tool crucial to human advancement ...”*

One can’t help but laugh when you meet Tory Woollcott: not at her but *with* her. She exudes humour and it doesn’t just seep out of her--it leaps out and grabs your attention. There is a fine line between laughing at someone and laughing with someone and Tory seems to have been

able to discover how to blur that line to her advantage.

When asked when she first started to use humour as a defence mechanism she chuckled, drummed her fingers on the desk and said, “Oh God... in the uterus! Always always...the terrible thing is, I’m not that funny! If I were actually funny it would probably work a lot better. I’ve found that if you say something ridiculous and then just wait with a ridiculous face on long enough, someone will giggle.” I wondered if they were laughing at her or with her. Grinning she said, “I don’t care so long as they are laughing and I can get out of it, I’m thrilled!”

While doing research for my interview with Tory I found some interesting You Tube videos of her that were filmed in libraries. Since we were meeting at the Toronto Reference Library; I had to ask her if she found it ironic that she seemed to be interviewed a lot in libraries? And given that she has dyslexia, was there some sort of hidden message here? She laughed,

agreed that it was ironic and said, "I love libraries so much, especially the reference library. It's like nothing else."

"When I was young and I would go to libraries and try to find a book and I would say that I'm not very good at reading, the librarians would always find ways around it. Librarians are so great, so invested and I think that they are a lot like teachers in that it is more than a job, it is a completion of something!"

She goes on to say that most people who have any sort of LD really know pretty early on that there is something a bit different about them and everybody else. For her it was probably going into kindergarten, because everybody else was getting something out of books, "(It was) something that I really wasn't understanding and I really liked the pictures but I never really felt an interest in these word things that everybody else seemed to be into," she says. "Honestly, when I was very young, I just thought that everyone else was crazy: Why are you worrying about this when we could be looking at the pictures."

In her book she writes: *"I made a decision then that has followed me for the rest of my life. I would keep everything separate. Home would be different. I would not make my mom sad because of what happened to me at*

*"... of particular importance is the structured nature of how lessons are delivered ..."*

*school or with my friends or anything. I would never tell. And I never did. This book is the first she has heard of it. I became a secret keeper I think that I will always be like this."* Was she still a secret keeper? "Yea I am. Actually, when I first started noticing that there was something different about me I was mostly invested in keeping it a secret. That need-to-keep-it-a-secret was the occupation of everything, it wasn't great but I was so preoccupied with trying to cover it up that any other emotion would kind of take second fiddle to it."

We are having our chat in one of the reference library's new study cubicles. It's made of glass and sort of looks like a fish bowl. While functional, there's a lot of distractions going on outside. During our interview Tory's eyes are constantly roaming, but now they lose focus as she stares off into space. She remembers that when it was story time in school she would run and hide or do something goofy or loud in order to get ejected from the room. "Anything-to-avoid seems to be something that all of us that are bundled into this LD package do," she laughs, "Seems to be our main tactic."

Tory goes on to say that she has a self-esteem war going on and that she kind of likes her defence mechanism of being goofy and always having a joke handy or being silly. "The way I communicate, the way I speak, I know comes from the dyslexia and from the way my brain is wired. It allows me to communicate and understand things in that way, it is a bonus. I certainly think that the bonuses (of having dyslexia) outweigh the negatives."

Fire leaps from her eyes and she leans forward, pushing into my space as she declares, "I really don't like the term 'disabled.' I don't like it especially for 'learning disabled.' No, I'm not, I can learn anything; I just don't learn the way you learn. But I think that it is an inaccurate word and I think that's what bothers me about it; I hate it!"

#### "Spelling Disabled"

Tory asserts she is not learning disabled if anything she is spelling disabled. "I don't like somebody who is not me putting me into a learning disabled box that I have not named." She prefers the term, 'learning difference' instead of 'learning disabled' and whenever she says, 'LD' she is talking 'learning difference.'

"I'm kind of done with this LD being a negative; certainly all my life I thought of it as being a negative and thought of myself as being less than everyone else." She looks at me speaking softly. "You know that feeling keeps creeping in to me and it's that little dark monster that I don't think that I'm ever going to get rid of."

She's now working fulltime with kids, loving it and ready to turn her humour on anyone who doesn't get these kids. "But every single kid that I work with is certainly not less than anybody! I talk to these kids and they're smarter, they're faster, they're coming up with stuff. Like yeah, some of them have a delay, right. So I will say to a kid how do you spell 'red', and you're going wait for a second. It doesn't come to them right away, and then they say 'red,' R-E-D but that delay allowed all sorts of crazy stuff to happen in there."

She stops to catch her breath and plunges on. "I say, 'okay, spell 'red' and it takes them a minute to spell 'red' but what else did you think about? 'I thought about apples, I thought about Little Red Riding Hood, I thought about the colour red, I thought about blood, I thought about this, I thought about that!' Like there is the same amount of brain juice happening in this kid

*"... but instead we shrug it off as someone who is simply off-kilter ..."*

as is happening in any other kid, it's just that the way that this idea is expressed is just taking a second longer."

I asked her if there was anything special that she'd like to say to our readers. She grins and says, "I just feel that there is this negative attitude towards something that is in fact, positive. It's like, oh, dyslexia is so bad, but if it's good enough for Einstein it's good enough for me. It's fine and like ADD, okay...have you hung out with a kid who has ADD? They are awesome, they're awesome!"

"That's the thing that I want to get off my chest!" She thumps the table, "Let them play video games, let them goof off, let them read comic books, let them do things for fun, let them be good at something, don't make them do their homework all the time. All these kids ever do is their homework and they get yelled at for not paying attention in school, let them play soccer; just let them go and goof off with



their friends and just be teenagers, you know. It is so important.”

I was curious about her “secret keeper status” and how her Mom reacted to the book. “My Mom was very surprised and sad, sad that I haven’t told her since. My Mom and I have a really excellent relationship. She was sad in that she felt that she probably would have helped, but I didn’t want to tell her. In that when I was home, I was home and this was a different world and when I am home I am with my parents and I am safe and everything is fine!”

With the success of *Mirror Mind* I was curious if we could expect a sequel or was she working on something else? She replied that interesting enough her next book will be titled Toronto to Tuscany. It will be a sort of travel diary which evolved from a month-long journey that Tory and her boyfriend took through Italy. *Mirror Mind: The University Years*, is still in the works.

However, the second book is proving to be much trickier to write. “I’ve got the story mapped out but as I was writing it, it started to become more and more about my grandmother because my grandmother had become very sick and passed away recently.” Her voice continues with a catch in it, “I wanted to talk about that and the story kept changing and evolving, becoming this different thing and moving

away from the LD and the focus of that. I keep having this debate with myself. Do I want to continue to focus my books on being about having dyslexia or do I want to focus them on the experience of me being me?”

Having sat with Tory for over an hour-and-a-half now and listened to her story I now, like her readers, feel that I know her a little better. I felt comfortable asking her if she was going to grab a banner and charge to the front as an advocate for dyslexia. Laughing, she skirts the question by saying that she loves working at LEARNstyle and that they have given her the opportunity to work with kids, and as a result, she is taking her [mirrormind.ca](http://mirrormind.ca) blog more seriously.

“I do want to start blogging with more of a direction than I have been in the past because my blog was more about my art and goofing off, it was just a fun thing and I’m starting to realize that there aren’t very many advocates for dyslexia who are themselves dyslexic. I’m starting to see how important that is!” As to being more of an advocate she says, “Yes I hope to. I view the LD community as a tribe and I just want to look out for my group. They are my “peeps” and I just want to do anything I can to help out my group! I just love LD kids; I think that they are the best and I just want to hug them and tell that everything is going to be okay!”

## TORY-TESTED AND OK'D TECHNOLOGY

- Word Q software helps the user with typing and proofreading by providing features such as word prediction, highlighting, and auditory feedback. It can also read back text as the user types.
- Dragon speech recognition software types as the user talks and it allows the user to use their voice to create and edit documents or emails. It can also be used to launch applications, open files, manipulate the mouse, etc.
- Smart Ideas is concept-mapping software used as a visual learning tool that helps the user to develop and organize written assignments, and understand complex ideas. It includes extensive clip art galleries and a multi-language template library.
- There is also Kurzweil an award winning integrated literacy software that reads text aloud from digital, online and print formats. It provides reading, writing and test taking support.
- AudioNote allows the user to take notes synced to audio via note-taking software. It combines the functionality of note-taking and voice recording in a downloadable app.
- Or go old school by using your smart phone to take photos of things that you need to remember, to buy, where you parked your car, etc.
- She also uses a cheap plastic fifteen-inch ruler to help her focus on what she is reading by placing it beneath the line that she’s reading. Its function is to block out the words and sentences she doesn’t need yet.

