

— Annie in Disabilityland —

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

Once upon a time, a girl named Annie had an extraordinary experience: she passed from one world into another, without any conscious effort, just as Alice arrived in Wonderland after falling down the rabbit's hole.

At first, Annie didn't know she was in another world. *She* didn't look any different and didn't act any different. Her first clue came when she heard people speaking. "My goodness," she shuddered, "I must be in a different place! I can't understand what anyone is saying anymore!"

She overheard her parents talking about something called an "eye-ee-pee" which was part of a "94142," that became an "idea." She didn't know how numbers could change into letters, but she assumed her parents knew what it all meant. Then she heard them spelling a woman's name and saying she was like 504, and Annie certainly didn't understand how a lady named Ada could be like a number!

Annie knew for sure she had arrived in another world (or was this all just a bad dream?) when strangers came into her classroom at school one day and took her away from her friends. First, Miss Lisa took Annie to the empty gym and had Annie do some goofy exercises. Annie thought Miss Lisa was nice, but she didn't really know why she had to do all this stuff, she didn't like being away from her friends, and she didn't know who Miss Lisa really was. (She told Annie she was an "O-tee" but Annie had no idea what an "ott" was and she couldn't figure out why everybody *spelled everything* all the time!)

Later that day, Mrs. T came for Annie. Annie wondered if she was an ott, too, a forgetful ott who didn't put the "O" in front of the "T." She seemed

like a nice person, but Annie began trembling as Mrs. T opened the door to the "retard" room. "What is happening to me," Annie wailed inside her head. "I don't belong here! I know I don't!" But she was afraid to speak up for herself. Holding back tears, she asked Mrs. T if her mother knew she was here. "Oh, yes, Annie! Your mom and dad only want what's best for you, and they know I can help you with all your special needs."

Annie's heart was broken. Why would her mom and dad want her in *this* class instead of Mrs. Grace's room where all her friends were? Why was this happening to her? She just didn't understand. She only knew that, for some reason, things began changing after her mom took her to the doctor a few months before.

She didn't know why she was taken to the doctor that day. She wasn't sick, and it wasn't even good old Dr. Mann. It was someone she had never seen before. Annie remembered hearing her mom and the doctor talk about her that day, and . . . Ah-Ha! That's when all the spelling began! Annie remembered hearing *adhd*, *add*, *mbd*, *pdd*, and the name Sid. That's when everything changed. When they returned home that day, she heard her mom telling her dad about a couple of those new words. Later, her brother came in and said, "So, you can't cross the street and chew gum at the same time, huh?" She punched him in the arm, just like she always did when he was mean to her.

Time passed. More and more of Annie's days were spent in the yucky "retard" room. (The teachers called it the "special ed" room, but Annie didn't think there was anything *special* about it at all.) She hated it, but knew she'd get in trouble if she said how she felt. She got in trouble anyway, however, when her

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feelings spilled out in other ways: she didn't finish her work (it was boring); she didn't always do what Miss Lisa wanted (the stupid exercises); and she missed her old friends. Soon, she wasn't invited to any more birthday parties.

When she moved up to the middle school, she sometimes saw her old friends pass by in the hallway. But she didn't go to the school dances with them. The "special" kids (oh, how she *hated* that word!) weren't allowed to do what the other kids did.

After moving to the high school "retard room," everyone was spelling again. She heard "vearr" and "eye-tee-pee" at the meeting she attended with her parents, the special ed teacher, Mr. Speck; and a bunch of people she didn't know. They asked what she wanted to do when she finished school. She sat and thought about it for awhile—this was the first time anyone had discussed her future with her—but everyone took her silence as ignorance. Without waiting for a reply, they decided Annie would work in a fast food restaurant.

So when she was sixteen, Mr. Speck and Mr. Ehab, the vearr man, took her to the Dairy King for her first day of work. She didn't know why she couldn't get her own job, just like her big brother had done. But by now, she knew better than to ask or argue. She didn't really like her job—her boss talked to her like she was a two-year-old—but it was better than being in class. Why, Annie wondered, did she have to go on an "outing" to the grocery store with her class? The teacher said she needed to learn these "lifeskills," but Annie knew all about going to the grocery store—she had been going with her mom all her life!

By this time, Annie's life had changed so much she wondered if her life before that fateful doctor's visit was even real. She still felt she was in a bad dream from which she couldn't wake up. But then, maybe *this* life was real, and her life before was a dream. She wasn't sure anymore.

At the next meeting (when she was eighteen), Annie heard more new words about plans and programs—"eye-h-pees" and "eye-pee-pees." She and her parents met with another group of people she didn't know, and they talked about Annie learning to be an adult (was she going to have to go to school for that, too?) and moving into a group home (Annie wondered if it was really a "retard home"). Her parents told her how proud they would be when Annie moved into the House of Hope during the summer.

One night, during the last month Annie would be sleeping in her own bed in the house she had grown up in, she overheard her mother and father talking in the kitchen. Her mother was crying, and in between the sobs, Annie heard her say, "But what if it's too late?" And her father tenderly replied, "It's never too late. We've made some mistakes—we didn't know any better—but now we do. And we can't change the past, but we can surely change the direction of Annie's future, and we will!"

The next day, Annie's life changed again, overnight. Her parents told Annie she would not be moving to the House of Hope after all. She would stay home, where she belonged.

With tears of joy, Annie's mom and dad talked with Annie for hours that day. They asked her what she wanted to do with her life, and they listened to everything she said. Soon, Annie was enrolled in American Beauty College—she wanted to be a hairdresser—and the family decided Annie would get her own apartment in two or three years when she was successfully employed and had a small nest egg, just like her big brother had done. Annie's long nightmare was finally over.

Several years later, Annie asked her mom what caused the change Annie overheard in the kitchen that night. "Honey, we finally realized we had been listening to others all those years, instead of listening to our own hearts. But more importantly, we hadn't been listening to *you*, Annie. For here," she said, as she pointed to her daughter's heart, "is the *real* house of hope."