

# MICHAEL SCHINDLER

## Unwrapping the Gift of Dyslexia



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Languages were far and away my least favorite subjects growing up. In grammar school, spelling bees were stressful as I couldn't reconcile the tornado of jumbled spelling possibilities swirling in my head. There was little hope for a win, so the consolation prize was an early exit but with, hopefully, minimal embarrassment. Far more frightening was reading aloud. Already equipped with a creative spelling mind, I was equally imaginative with oral pronunciations. Standing up in front of my classmates, textbook nervously in hand, it was a forced and sporadic recitation. Rhythm and flow were non-existent as I battled the words, and a singular, paranoid desire to finish as quickly as possible superseded everything. Stumbling to the end of a passage, I knew that I retained nothing – so please no follow-up questions. Reading comprehension was another obstacle, only slowly hurdled by rereading word-by-word multiple times. Other subjects fortunately came more naturally, but languages were baffling, exhausting, frustrating, and embarrassing. I often wondered, “Why don't I get this?”

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When I was 10 years old, a sharp-eyed schoolteacher called my parents and recommended an evaluation by a childhood psychologist. The diagnosis was Dyslexia with an Auditory Processing Disorder. Dyslexia ran in my family as my younger brother was diagnosed with it as well. Later in life, I learned that my paternal grandmother (who was likely dyslexic) couldn't read until she was 13 and fooled her teachers by memorizing and reciting everything flawlessly. As part of the evaluation, I took a hearing test, which confirmed that my ears were physiologically normal. Yet despite good hearing, I struggled at times to understand spoken language. As it was explained to me, instead of distinctly hearing individual spoken sounds, I heard groups of sounds and guessed the most likely spoken word. I was never consciously aware of the process but, effectively, conversations were sometimes a guessing game, particularly in loud environments. When my brain guessed incorrectly, normally the gaffe was so startling that I immediately asked the other person to repeat themselves. It was occasionally comical, but most times, it was downright trying. Nevertheless, having a name for my condition was comforting and an acknowledgement that I wasn't fully in control. It wasn't, however, a solution.

The pathway forward was support, in all its forms. Quickly after my diagnosis, I enrolled into a specialized after-school language program. It was intense and strenuous with endless drills – reading passages, listening to tapes, writing compositions, vocabulary exercises, evaluation tests, and then repeat. Sacrificing free time to study language wasn't exactly fun. However, the community of patient educators and peers, with whom I shared an unspoken understanding, was always encouraging. Repeatedly drilling one's weakness was mentally exhausting but I methodically improved. Aside from tutoring, I received institutional support via extra time for some standardized tests and school examinations. With 50% more time to (re)read, comprehend, and (re)write, the playing field became a little more level and my language scores jumped dramatically. A great irony was that some classmates felt that extra time was "unfair" as they surmised that I "didn't need it." It was a backhanded compliment because they didn't see how time-consuming and demanding language was for me. Finally, my family supported me financially and emotionally. Tutoring was expensive, and I was extremely fortunate to have access to it. But more than that, my family's unwavering emotional support kept me grounded, especially during the occasional dark fits when frustration and mental fatigue collided to produce anger and resentment. Despite periodic outbursts, my family continually nudged me forward. With comprehensive support, I ended up doing well academically and eventually graduated from the UC Berkeley – just like my paternal grandmother. My time at Berkeley was filled with more twists, turns, falls, and recoveries but ended with two bachelor's degrees (Economics and Japanese Language, interestingly) and an MBA several years later.

Joining the professional world was liberating as the pressures to conform to the standard academic system, which focused on the majority versus the learning differenced minority, subsided. Growing up, I had a subtle, mildly unnerving sense that I thought and processed information differently. In the comparatively less structured professional world, that subtle sense became much more pronounced, emerging more forcefully and leading me to uncover previously dormant strengths. "Out-of-the-box" thinking, connecting seemingly disparate points, seamlessly zooming in and out between detail and big picture, and rapid ideation were dyslexia's gifts.



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Those gifts when combined with grit, empathy, and adaptability – all forged during my childhood – enabled me to confidently share a fresh perspective to various opportunities and to successfully stand out. Another great irony was that my success in academics hinged on forcefully quieting my dyslexic mind while professional success came from freeing it. Constraints peeled away, revealing the innumerable possibilities ahead. I sought out new stimulating experiences, which sent me across the globe from San Francisco to Barcelona to Singapore, through numerous business fields, and ultimately into various leadership positions. My teams designed, launched, and scaled various initiatives – generating tens of millions of dollars in incremental profitability, unlocking new commercial strategies and approaches, piloting big data / artificial intelligence use cases, and much more.

Dyslexia is an enigmatic and wondrous gift, but it is challenging to unwrap. Supporting and patiently nurturing our minds, particularly when we are young, maximizes our chances for success and kicks off our journey of discovery. Specialized programs, staffed by deeply committed educators, exist to build the strong foundation that we need to move forward. The pathway onward isn't easy, demanding double effort especially during the school years, yet the long, winding journey is worthwhile. When we experience small wins, we capitalize on that momentum, budding confidence. This delicate sense of self-worth is strengthened by our resilience and adaptability, both honed through overcoming adversity, and safeguarded by the steadfast support around us. Equipped with the tools and capabilities to be successful, we can navigate forks in the road.

The toughest impasse along my journey has been learning to allow my dyslexic mind to flex its unbridled energy and to focus it, after spending so many successful years, subduing, and working around it. Unfocused, the dyslexic mind can be unrelenting, spinning, crashing waves upon waves of different ideas, flagging urgency everywhere, disorganized, and noisy. Focused, the dyslexic mind is curious, powerful, fast, unintimidated, connected, and positive. Some people may argue that you “outgrow” dyslexia but that isn't true. One gradually learns how to tap into, focus, manage, and finally trust it. Today, I'm still a terrible speller; I continually reread at a snail's pace; I mishear words in conversations. However, I can chart a path through the ambiguous and complex, be empathetic to others' stories, and increasingly trust and leverage dyslexia's strengths. The world is rapidly becoming more complex with ubiquitous information flow, constant connectivity, heightened sense of urgency, and the need for more creative solutions to big complex issues. Paradoxically, the world is starting to look more dyslexic to me.

While others may struggle to adapt to this new, seemingly chaotic reality, we dyslexics are born and wired to thrive in it. I'm still unwrapping the gift and am unsure exactly where my journey will take me, but I feel assured that I'm prepared for continued success and exploration largely due to my dyslexic mind.

