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THE INCOHERENT BRAIN

Learning to teach the learning disabled

By Allyson Goldin

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A boy, seventeen, sits in the Resource Room of his high school trying hard to remember the capital of France. He looks pained, like someone about to swallow a pin. A teacher and an aide are trying to help him pull up the word.

"Rhymes with Harris," says the teacher.

"I love *duh-duh* in the springtime. I love *duh-duh* in the faaaaall," sings the aide.

"I know this," says the student, whom I will call Alan Tanner.

"It starts with a 'P.' "

"I know this, I know this, I know this," Alan says, but he doesn't. He will have to be told, and he will forget it again. "Paris," in all her romantic glory, falls away from him without even the nostalgic hope of an *au revoir*.

Alan is lost in the sludgy zone that is the learning process, that mire lurking between knowledge presented and knowledge absorbed. It is a dangerous patch, as perilous as the distance between seeing and believing, and the words, the concepts, the bits of data that get stuck there disappear forever, leaving nothing but residual traces of doubt. Most people are capable of negotiating this cerebral tar pit; they can build structures over the top, connecting one piece of knowledge to the next, until their minds are equipped with an elaborate framework—a cathedral!—girded with language, safe and strong, and ready to support continued expansion. But there are others whose structures continually sink. They hammer away at the problem of learning until their differences become apparent, their doubt certain. At the Seattle-area public high school where I work as an aide, such people are officially classified as "special-education students"—or "the SPED kids."

The high school is medium sized—1,164 students—and located in a beautiful upper-middle-class suburb. For a public school, it is well endowed, classrooms and teachers' offices loaded with up-to-date software and computers. The teaching staff is young and smart, educated at places such as Berkeley and Stanford. They're into combining subject curricula and teaching with technology, and although they do face the overcrowded classrooms endemic to American public schools, their classes are disproportionately populated by thoroughbreds—students well traveled, tutored, and trained in everything from golf to modern dance. School starts at 7:15 A.M., and most kids show up. About 88 percent of the seniors will attend colleges or universities next fall.

Within this promising pool swim Alan Tanner and the seventy-five other students who qualify for special-education services. These are the students who, for one reason or another and to varying degrees, cannot process, retrieve, and use information—cannot learn—as well as others. Less than forty years ago, many of

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these students simply "flunked out," meaning either that they dropped out of school voluntarily or that their local schools, unable to cope with them, shunted them off to institutions better able to handle "slow" or "troubled" youths. It's only since 1975 that federal law has required local public schools to provide an appropriate education to all enrolled students. Special education, then, is relatively new—a grand, gawky experiment. What, after all, does it mean to provide *an appropriate education* to a student? Frankly, nobody knows. Appropriate education is relative. It depends on the kid. Some seventeen-year-olds need to be able to factor polynomials and deconstruct *Ivanhoe*; other seventeen-year-olds need to learn to recognize common visual cues: *skull and crossbones mean poison, do not touch, stay away*. And there are a lot of seventeen-year-olds in between. It's hard to tell who requires what, and so school districts all over the country expend a lot of energy and money identifying "special needs" children and figuring out just what exactly their "special needs" really are.

At this school, as in many high schools nationwide, suspected SPED students undergo expensive testing and psychological evaluations in order to be classified: learning disabled, severely learning disabled, developmentally disabled, behaviorally disordered, or health impaired. Such titles earn them a variety of benefits, from extended test time to physical therapy. At a minimum, they get to spend one hour per day in the Resource Room, a space designated only for learning-disabled SPED students, where they can work with staff members dedicated to preventing them from falling behind. Resource students must meet the high school's compulsory academic requirements just like everybody else, and since this school follows a program of "inclusion," the Resource kids spend the rest of their school time attending classes right alongside those bound for the Ivies. Even the least severely disabled SPED students are quickly overwhelmed, so the Resource Room is a busy place. I'm part of the scenery there, a Resource Room maven, though I have no previous training in special education and no high school certification. I taught freshman English for two years in graduate school, but that was a whole different bag of tricks.

The Resource Room is located in the north wing of the school, just this side of the heart of things. Inside wait three large tables surrounded by yellow and orange chairs, a couple of computers, a big dry-erase board, and the woodsy smell of an overfilled pencil sharpener. A wall of shelves bears titles such as *Lots of Fun with Analogies* and *Math for Independent Living*, along with other vital supplies: a basket of calculators, twelve dictionaries, protractors, graph paper, colored pens, and a stack of Dixie cups with which to distribute lunchtime medications. The Resource Room has no door onto the main hallway. To get in, kids either have to go through the connecting teachers' office or through the adjacent "self-contained" room. The self-contained room is where the really serious SPED kids spend their days. Here are the developmentally disabled, the autistic, the syndrome kids. These students never leave their colorful classroom, which is equipped with a refrigerator and a microwave. They learn life skills, basic reading, basic math. It's a nice environment, but many of the Resource students will not set foot in there. As one kid put it, "You can tell just by *looking* at those people that there's something wrong with them."

You can't tell just by looking that any of the Resource students are disabled. Overall, they're a handsome crew. Most of them participate in typical high school activities: playing on sports teams, going to dances, singing in the choirs, sneaking out to weekend parties. Shielded in the Resource Room from the eyes of their bright peers in the hallway, these SPED kids' learning problems stay hidden, and the reality of their sometimes dramatic lack of classroom ability is obscured by appearances of relative normalcy.

Today in the Resource Room, Alan Tanner sits next to Jeremy Platt, red-faced and plump, squirming in his seat. By midyear, Jeremy, who is attention deficit and hyperactivity disordered (ADHD), will be pulled out of all his mainstream classes. At a separate table Nicole Balto, dyslexic and lacking a short-term memory, studies herself in a small mirror and applies brown lipstick. Mitch Swann, a heavily impaired student who reads and writes at a kindergarten level, stomps through the hall on his way back from somewhere. Mitch's I.Q. is so low that he teeters on the edge of being classified "developmentally disabled." He slams the door on his way into the classroom, his sense of spatial relations on a par with his social skills. Later this year he will misjudge the distance between himself and a window, hurling his head and torso through the startled glass.

It's third period.

I move from kid to kid, checking the assignment sheets that the Resource Room vainly requires. No one ever fills them out, except for one fastidious, high-functioning junior who keeps a copious Day Runner as a totem of personal style. Nicole Balto stows her lipstick and moves on to eyeliner. "Hey, beautiful," I say, but she's having none of my plying good humor.

"I don't have any work, okay?"

This is a lie. She, and everyone in the room, has a backlog of homework, but she can't think of what it is, didn't catch exactly what the teacher said, couldn't possibly remember it long enough to write it down. I spend a portion of my day dashing around asking teachers what they've assigned, like an academic secret agent.

"Mr. B. said he was going to hand out a work sheet on water and evaporation."

"God!" says Nicole. She shoves her makeup into her backpack. "Fucking leave me alone."

Mitch Swann lets loose an absurd, high-pitched giggle.

I try another tack. "Nicole," I say, "you've been doing so well. Get out your work sheet and we'll be done in no time, and then you'll be free, free, free."

She puts her head down on her desk.

At the other table, Jeremy makes gurgling sounds while Alan stares blankly at his *Huckleberry Finn* work sheet. Alan and I studied the relevant chapters yesterday, but he can't remember the first thing about them. He points to the word "Jim" on his paper. "Who is that guy?" he asks Jeremy, who supposedly read the book last year. Jeremy shrugs.

"I gotta go to the bathroom," says Nicole.

"First let me see your homework," I say.

She rolls her eyes at me, grabs her backpack, and walks out.

The rules are flexible in special ed. There are kids who bolt from a classroom out of defiance, and there are kids who just have to get up and walk around to relieve nervous energy. Some respond to direct orders while others will shut down, practically refusing to blink unless assignments are meted out as options. Learning-disabled students don't come with instructional manuals—*Alan Tanner for Dummies*—or definitive diagnoses. Learning disabilities are irregular, evasive creatures. They do not dwell in any specific area of the brain but seem to be all over the place at once, the result of subtle, ill-defined disturbances in neurological structures. The going theory is that learning disabilities form in the later stages of brain development when a child's neural cells are becoming specialized and moving into place. Like snowflake crystals, learning disabilities knit themselves into little individuals that defy all but the broadest categorizations and definitions. There's no such thing as Learning Disability Type 28, responsive to regular doses of Dexedrine, firm assignment deadlines, and authoritative threats.

Along with these learning disabilities, most of the Resource students have attention deficit disorder (ADD), and many have additional complications too—clinical depression, a touch of psychosis. ADD, according to one theory, is the result of the brain's pokiness in absorbing its own glucose and presents a range of symptoms: it can make a student a bit too easily distracted, or, in its more severe forms, it can rattle a student's concentration so much that she cannot process both syllables of a two-syllable word.

"Diffe—rent," reads one young woman. She looks up. "That's what you pay for your apartment, right?"

The I.Q. scores and the carefully kept school charts reveal little about how each student actually learns. Jeremy's I.Q. is high, but he can't control his impulsiveness. He's a talker, a wiggler, a scribbler. He can't sit still long enough to let information in one ear, let alone out the other.

I teach by trial and error. Nicole will work if she thinks it is social: I get her to write by passing notes to her in class. I fold them up like wontons and print my messages in big block letters. She writes back in purple pen and believes this is our secret. Jeremy Platt will work if I stare at him and hover. Nothing I've done helps Mitch Swann so far, but Alan Tanner, it turns out, responds to rhyme: *Grant rode forth from the chilly North*. He can remember this. The trouble is that the rhymes do not go on to trigger other memories. His Grant does not come with a corresponding Lee; his North does not suggest a South. I spend an afternoon summing up the bare basics of the Civil War in a series of rhymed couplets. Alan learns these, but when I then ask him to name one cause of the Civil War, he cannot. The poem and the concepts remain separate in his head, and I'm foiled again.

It's at times like this that Alan's learning disability becomes tangible. Here is his missing link, the gap in his wiring where rhyme should connect to reason. That synaptic electrobond is just not there, and it won't be taught into existence any more easily than a one-legged man can be taught to have two legs. I am irritated by people who believe all learning disabilities can be "outgrown" in time or remedied by purchasing a few books-on-tape. This is a boldly ignorant estimation of a problem faced by approximately 5 percent of youngsters in American public schools. Most learning disabilities stick. Brains don't reconstitute themselves with any more frequency than legs do.

What needs to be found are circuitous routes around the missing links. The three certified SPED teachers with whom I work assure me that such detours do exist; the challenge is to locate them. To that end, we all observe the students constantly, discuss them, dwell on them. We attend some classes with the SPED kids, reteaching the curriculum an hour later in a different way. We modify their homework, consult with their teachers, meet with their parents and counselors. If kids are failing hopelessly, we pull them from their classes and teach them privately or in small SPED classes. We teach into their eyes, their ears, their hands, their lifestyles: *Evaporation, Nicole, is what happens when wet hair gets curled and comes out dry*. We wield large Magic Markers, speak in funny voices. We stand on tables if we think it will help. Expressions of student discouragement only bring on our language of hope: *You learn differently, that's all. No worries. Let's map out the chapter with drawings*. But there is never enough time. The mainstream classes move much faster than we can push our students, and so we teach all day with urgency. Like track coaches, we tell the kids to keep going, to focus, *focus just a few seconds longer*. We teach through lunch; we teach through union-mandated planning periods. We haven't a second to gawk at their ranks—over six dozen of them needing very individualized, lengthy attention—and we don't take breaks to discuss our exhaustion.

I lie awake at night. Floundering students implicate their teacher to some extent, though that's a weight, I'm told, I should not take upon myself. Still, I'm up and thinking, trying, late as it is, to picture their brains, to find my way around—navigation by metaphor. The strange thing is that in my imagination, their brains are never made up of that dolphin-textured kugel-ish stuff my biology book once described. I see their brains as being full of color, sound, light, and movement. I envision Mitch Swann's brain, for example, to be crowded with tiny test tubes—neatly stacked. The test

tubes serve as containers for his thoughts. The moment a fact or notion goes in, it is automatically sealed up by a rubber stopper that shoots into place from the space in back of his eyebrows. THWUP! No two data will ever meet—the sound of a "p" remains quarantined from the shape of its letter—and data retrieval involves first guessing which tube and then prying off its stubborn seal.

While I'm reading to another student, I look up to find Jeremy Platt standing, unbuckling his belt.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Taking my pants off."

"What?"

"Removing my pants. I'm hot." He says this with the incredulous impatience of a mother explaining household rules for the umpteenth time.

"You keep your pants on!" I say.

Jeremy will be allowed to vote in less than a year.

The incident is weird enough to warrant a conference. I talk with one of the SPED teachers, Jeremy's case manager. He shakes his head. "It's that lack of impulse control, and also"—he pauses to make sure there are no kids around—"he probably has a crush. Don't sit down beside him or kneel next to his desk. Keep some distance."

Teaching SPED students is intimate. A SPED instructor has access to the grim details of the students' disabilities, test scores, past behavioral indiscretions. Any private information that isn't in the files is eventually revealed by other staff members: *Don't seat Larry next to Lukas because Larry pulled a knife on Lukas last year.* The students know their teachers are privy to their secrets, and there is a quiet, sometimes grim camaraderie in this.

"Hey! Do you *like* teaching all us idiots?" asks Nicole.

"Idiots? I've never seen an idiot in here." I look behind me and under the desk. I shade my eyes with my hand—a mock sailor looking for land. "Nope. Not one. Sorry." She laughs.

My work is one-on-one. I visit each student during the period, con-

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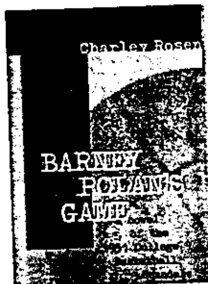

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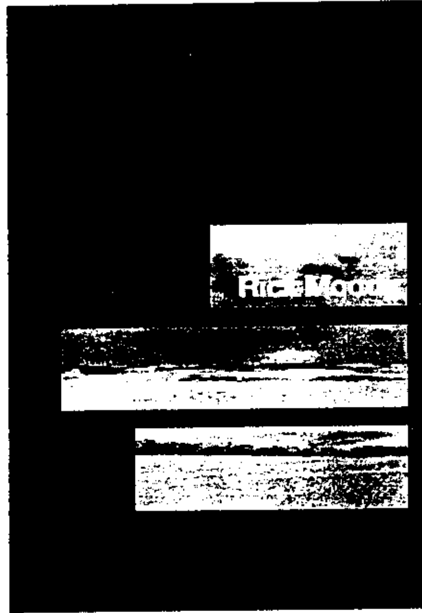

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centrating on some more than on others. I bend down over their assignment sheets whispering about their loads of homework, the status of their grades, their attitudes: *You're slacking in that class in a big way. Why? What's stealing your energy? Have you been forgetting to take your meds?* They lean in, listen, squirm in their seats, shake their heads, fabricate excuses, vent their anger. The familiarity allows them to say things rarely heard in a mainstream classroom.

My life sucks, okay? I hate this fucking school.

I read to them in corners. I stand by as they sweat through columns of math problems. *No, no. Look at that again. If you divide one side of the equation by three, then what do you have to do to the other side of the equation?* I see their mistakes, bold as bruises; I'm a witness to their personal pain. In return they want to know that I'm trustworthy. They test me.

Nicole has her head down on her desk again, having tried her best to repel me with some choice verbal zaps.

"Okay," I say. "Let me know if you decide to do some work."

Less than two minutes pass before she flips her well-moussed curls back and mumbles my name. I stop what I'm doing and go to her.

Nicole's brain is full of strobes that flicker and swivel, allowing only glimpses of words, numbers, ideas, and experiences; it's hard for her to tell what's going on without grimacing. Informational bits dance across her cerebral stage like characters in a musical, but the big spotlights never fix on the romantic leads, never guide them from their respective corners to the center of the stage, where they might embrace in a doubly illuminated circle.

There's something else, too. All her spotlights are plugged into one dangerously sapped outlet, with socket extensions branching to the right and left like weary arms. The heat and the weight of all those cords sit directly upon the platform of her self-esteem. This is the crisis zone for Nicole, the area that needs hypervigilant attention. In her mainstream classes, she sits in the back, talks, smiles at the boys, and applies her makeup in broad, consciously seductive strokes. She copes with her disability by raising failure to the level of the super cool; when a teacher calls on her, she says, "I don't knooooow," in a voice pitched to match genuine mockery. *As if I'd be listening to you, bub!* Nobody writes, "She's a joy to have in class," on Nicole's report card, unless they're being facetious.

That learning disabilities warp behavior is no surprise. In mainstream classes, every one of the Resource kids sports a coping mechanism. Alan Tanner is practically a ghost in his English class; he remains utterly silent, as invisible as possible, and copies answers from a friend. Jeremy Platt is just the opposite; he copes by clowning. A constant flow of disruption draws attention away from his disability:

Teacher: Does anyone have any questions?

Jeremy: Yeah. Why does it burn when I urinate?

Mitch Swann's coping mechanisms are incredibly detailed. Although he cannot read or compose a sentence, he has learned to mimic the behaviors of his classmates. He stares at his book when others are reading; he doodles when others are writing; when the class is listening, Mitch looks intently at the teacher. He can copy anything off the board, though he doesn't understand his tracings, and he seems remarkably tuned in to group discussions, nodding approval now and then as the other students discuss ideas that are Greek to him. Mitch has spent years perfecting his classroom deportment, as have most of my students. Their efforts to cope impede their chances to learn, but then coping is a matter of personal survival.

Coping mechanisms do not disappear when students enter the Resource Room. Although they know they share the SPED label, each one is defensive about the extent of his or her disability, and they all are anxious to hide the awful fear that comes with being a high-school-aged SPED kid bound imminently for the world at large.

As difficult as high school is for these students, the SPED staff does provide understanding and advocacy, and a place where the kids can feel valued regardless of their scholastic performance. But they are about to be pushed out of this protective nest, and this terrifies them. If school is a young person's proving ground for future success, then my students' failures in the mainstream academic arena have left them with precious little optimism about their chances of coping in the big, bad place called life.

Their fears are well founded. Nationwide, only about 44 percent of learning-disabled kids will live independently, away from their parents or guardians, within five years of graduation. Although 71 percent will get jobs within the same time period, they will earn an average annual wage well below the poverty line. Arrest rates among their ranks will rise from 20 percent two years after graduation to 31 percent three years after that.

The weight of my students' worry is a thousand times heavier than regulation teen angst, for it calls into question their ability to "make it" on the most basic levels. It's a terrible fear, a fear for survival, and I don't know how they live with it. I cannot fathom showing up as they do, to a place where I will be asked to perform tasks I am not capable of—a back flip off the high wire into a shot of whiskey. I cannot imagine facing, year after year, the embarrassment and the bitterness of my incapability. I am in awe of their courage, and so I allow them their armor, their myriad coping mechanisms. Let Mitch Swann have his clipboard of scribble. Say nothing about Nicole's lip, Jeremy's jokes. It's best to respect the masks, to acknowledge their artful designs and work around them.

By the time Alan Tanner really and truly understands the basics of the Civil War, the rest of his class will be halfway up the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Alan's brain is a honeycomb of mine shafts that spiral toward invisible gems—*Fredericksburg*, *Gettysburg*, *Huck Finn*, *cotton gin*. Alan himself is inside, tunneling through

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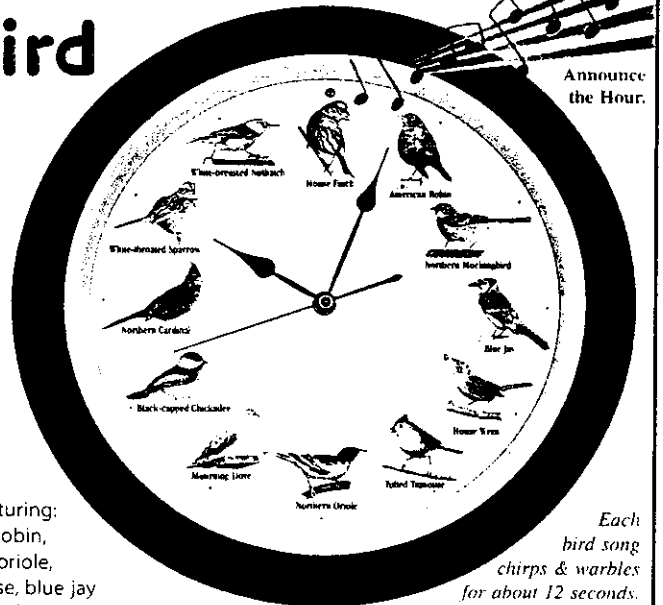

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his brain's passageways, unable to see what he's after. It's scary and cramped. I know, because I'm there, too, bat-blind and trying vainly to turn on the lamps. This is where Alan and I meet side by side, both of us clamoring to find a path to the jewels, to some secret portal of release. Where, oh where is that Underground Railroad? We twist and we turn—we knock around for our footholds, but it's no use. We are both terribly, terribly stuck.

To teach SPED kids is to empathize with their constrictions; both you and your students wrangle with the same neurological knots. I don't know how to teach Alan any more than he knows how to learn; he studies his history book and I study him. By now, I am tuned in to his moods, his body language, his humor, his lingo. I know his likes and dislikes. Yet not more than an hour ago I wrote the word "Appomattox" on the board for the twentieth time. "Appomattox," he repeated. I did a quick pantomime of a Union soldier saluting the defeated Confederate general, an act Alan's seen before. "What happened at Appomattox?" I smiled like it was no big deal, but I thought to myself, *Please, please, please, please, oh please*. Alan thought the same thing: *I know this, I know this, oh please!* I waited a minute and then gave another hopeful clue: "Someone surrendered at Appomattox. Who surrendered?" I looked for that flash, for the way his eyes travel rapidly up to meet mine when he does occasionally know an answer.

Nothing.

Not one cannon fired off to stir up old Virginia dust, and we were both left with the same dread, the same painful grief of knowing that neither of us was any closer to reaching the end of this war.

The truth is, Alan is failing American history and English, despite the hours he and I spend every day trying to get him through both classes. He's been able to complete only a third of his assignments, and his prospects for making tracks by the end of the semester are dismal indeed.

Alan's mother is at the end of her rope. She's come in for a lunchtime conference and stares tight-lipped at her son while his case manager explains that the best thing to do for Alan at this point is to work with his teachers to modify his humanities curriculum. If his classmates write four-page papers, for example, he'll write less or do a different project. This means his report card will show an "M" for "modified" next to his letter grade at the end of the semester.

His mother, a beautiful woman with precisely painted eyes, works her heel into the stiff carpeting beneath her chair. Alan is her only child. "I try to help him at home," she says. "He complains that he has trouble answering the questions, so I tell him he's the kind of person who has to read something *twice*. Lots of people have to read things *twice*."

Alan sits beside me, elbow propped on the table, chin weighing glumly on the heel of his hand. This is hell for him: his SPED teachers and his mother in the same room, his brain out on the table. It's messy—all those tunnels and crevasses. His mother can't look. He doesn't want her to. He wants her to believe that, yes, his is a problem of laziness and impatience, that given enough time and stick-to-itiveness he can somehow "catch up" and run in the same ambitious races as normal learners. His SPED teachers, however, are trying, as gently as possible, to point out that this is not the case. They defend him: "Alan is doing his very best; he couldn't possibly be more dedicated or determined." What they are really saying with their compliments is this: *Alan could read something a hundred times and not be able to fill in the blanks on a comprehension work sheet. Comprehension is not his forte*.

"He'll still be learning the same concepts," says Alan's case manager, "but he'll be able to focus on them better if he's not so overwhelmed."

Mrs. Tanner is suspicious. I don't blame her. She's heard this business before about how her son *simply learns differently* and must sense the lie of it. *He'll be learning the same concepts*. This is not so! The rest of the kids in Alan's class will take home a healthy knowledge of the complex economic and political issues that led to Southern secession. They will be able to trace Confederate passion for states' rights all the way back to the initial concerns of the Founding Fathers at the sweaty old Constitutional Convention. Alan will not remember the Constitutional Convention. If he's lucky, he'll be able to say of the Civil War that it was fought because of slavery.

"I don't see how watering down these classes for him is going to help him in the long run," says Mrs. Tanner.

Alan's case manager explains the advantages of modification again. To him and to me, the plan seems necessary. Try as we might, we haven't been able to find those mystical routes around Alan's missing links, and we're guessing we won't be able to. We're cutting our losses, saving Alan from the wretchedness of failing, of having to repeat classes whose repetition, in our judgment, would do him not one whit of good. We have considered our decision carefully, have fretted over it, have discussed it with Alan, and now we are sure we are right. It seems logical to us, a matter of biology, a matter of the brain on the table.

But Mrs. Tanner is looking at her son while we talk. She listens, and what she hears between the lines is that we are giving up on him. We are declaring to her that the normal, junior humanities course is one more thing that Alan cannot do. *He can't keep up, he just can't*, is what we are saying, and this is painful. It's as if we were excising another small part of her handsome, gentle child before her very eyes. It is a horror.

Mrs. Tanner draws a breath and considers things. She asks Alan what he thinks, but he doesn't respond. He's got his hands splayed out in front of him, fingers stretched, and he's staring stoically at them as if to guard them from walking away.

"Okay," she says, finally. "I guess if this is what you think we have to do."

In a small SPED English class, we're doing an assignment for which students write the question "Who am I?" at the top of their papers and go on to answer that ques-

tion ten different ways. It's a good language exercise, and the kids are enthusiastic. I help them to flip through dictionaries and thesauri so they can find just the right words for describing themselves. One writes, "I am athletic." Another prints in big letters, "I am EXCITING." Mitch Swann covers his paper with his arm so I can't see what he's doing. He takes his paper with him after class and spends his break time asking others how to spell a seemingly random list of words. A couple of hours later he turns his work in, handing me his paper folded into a small square. He bolts off to roam for a while, and I uncrease his work.

1. I am a stupid person
2. I am illiterate
3. I am a dumbfack [sic]
4. I am a retarded person who can't do anything right
5. I am chicken shit

Later, when I catch Mitch, he doesn't want to talk. He's agitated, thinking that I'm going to punish him for writing four-letter words.

"No," I say. "You're not in trouble. Honest."

He fusses with a button on his shirt.

"You know my policy on bad words," I say, but he doesn't remember it. "There's no such thing unless the words are meant to hurt yourself or other people. I'm worried that you tried to hurt yourself with your own words."

"Nah," he says.

"Let's look at this." I turn the paper toward him. "Do some of these words make you feel badly?"

"I don't care if . . . forget it."

I try to help him complete his thought. "You don't care if what?"

"I just don't care."

"C'mon, Mitch. Let's work on replacing all the hurtful words with positive words."

He jerks his chair away from the table. "We were supposed to say who am I."

"Yes."

"Well . . ." He stops fidgeting. For the first time ever, he faces me squarely and says with presidential confidence, "Those are the right answers."

He's got me cornered. There's no telling him he's wrong; there's no explaining euphemism. *No, no, you're "severely learning disabled." You learn differently, that's all.* If Mitch had half a wit he would answer: *Yeah, I learn differently all right. I learn so differently that at the end of twelve years of constant education, the only two-syllable words I can write are "mother" and "other."* I keep a brave face. "But there's so much more to you," I manage.

I've admitted defeat. I've effectively said: *Yes, Mitch, you are a dumbfuck, but . . .*

"You're a nice person," I offer, pathetically.

A floundering student implicates his teacher.

I can't sleep. School starts again in five hours, and I'm failing fast in the business of finding ways to help my kids. Plunged deep into these pillows, my large, above-average brain feels sodden, immobile, stumped. The race to help Mitch Swann and the others "keep up" in their mainstream classes seems to teach them how they differently *don't* learn rather than how they *learn differently*. As I push them academically, I only feed their frustrations. At worst, I'm like a bad nurse, jabbing around to find the right vein, brutalizing in my attempt to cure.

I comfort myself, thinking about how sometimes they do learn, that here and there small pieces stick as I work through assignment after assignment with them: Nicole knows how to calculate the perimeter of a square; Jeremy can explain the plot of "To Build a Fire"; Alan remembers how they used to burn witches at the stake. But learning is not a game of pin the tail on the donkey. These bits of haphazard knowledge are of little use unless they serve as connectors for many more bits of knowledge.

How will my students build their cathedrals, and with what? They haven't got the blueprints, and a few odd-size blocks of academia—*evaporation*, *Appomattox*—will not be sufficient to raise the roof. From their scattered piles of cerebral rubble, they are hard-pressed to fashion even the humblest shelters for their eroding self-esteems. They wander around, becoming more convinced, with every step, of their propensities to sink with the bricks, like Paris into a tar pit. I can see them slipping, and I feel useless, following along as I do with my bucket of sloppy encouragement. *You can do it*, I hear myself say, or, absurdly, *Mind over matter*.

We are, all of us, losing faith—they in themselves, and I in the existence of those detours around their disabilities. Nobody I know has come close to locating any of these pedagogical easy streets, these elusive ways of teaching that convey the most precious piece of knowledge: *how to learn*. I want desperately for these inroads to exist, if not for all of my students, then at least for one. I want this for Alan Tanner, with his polite, boyish smile and his valiant efforts to remember anything at all, or for Nicole, so perilously close to joining the ranks of pregnant teenagers and high school dropouts. I'd give anything to find the music that might soothe Jeremy Platt's itchy mind or quell Mitch Swann's fears—awkward Mitch Swann, who will put his head through a pane of glass. I want to give him some memory to cling to, some small package of reliable facts and figures. *This is your father's office phone number. This is the name of your only friend from church.*

The one thing Mitch Swann does know is the size of the black holes in his head. He knows that they encircle him, circumscribe his experience to an extent only microcosmically modeled by his high school's Resource Room. He feels the stubborn tightness of the stoppers in his test-tube head and wants to force those corks out—plug his nose like an airplane passenger clearing his ears, and pop them with a hurricane of breath. He cannot imagine the rush—air, lungs, blood, brain!—and his inability to imagine it is physically painful, an asthma of being, as unyielding as the length of each day, day in and day out.

As Jeremy Platt once aptly put it: "Mitch Swann is dumb, but he's not *that* dumb." ■