

Thank You Temple Musings of a Visual Learner Living in a Verbal World

By Irene Willis



I totally get Temple Grandin. A friend of mine recently emailed me excerpts from an interview Temple did about the HBO movie, *TEMPLE GRANDIN*, based on her life. Temple described how she “thinks in pictures” – how she is a visual learner, not a language-based learner. For instance, if she hears the word “factory,” she kind-of googles pictures of factories in her head. Like Temple, I also have to process statements visually. Unlike Temple, however, this hasn’t ended up being such a successful experience for me throughout my life. In fact, it’s been confusing a lot of the time, especially before I knew about visual learning.

For instance, I’m not sure where books fit. Wouldn’t books be something a visual learner liked? You have to look at them to read them. I consider myself a visual learner but I don’t like books, well reading them anyway. I prefer short articles, especially those with pictures. (For a while I wanted to be a photo journalist; that seemed appealing!) I guess most books are language-based because, although you use your vision, they’re typically full of words. See what I mean? Confusing!

Sometimes I think if only I liked to read and had the patience to do so I could have done pretty well in college. I never read my textbooks - could never focus long enough to read them. Makes me wonder how I even got into college, because, aside from reading *Cheaper By the Dozen* in the 10th grade, I can’t recall having read any books in high school. In ironic fashion, for not liking to read, I did spend a considerable amount of time in the Ithaca College library. Not studying though. Usually sleeping in an orange naugahyde chair. When I did read, it had to be highly interesting to me. I struggled with assigned reading and only read when given options to choose from.

Somehow I got into graduate school. Graduated too, and with good grades. Maybe this happened because grad school required a lot of research, looking up journal articles, and not so much required textbook reading. I enjoyed hunting down journal articles...*and this was before Al Gore had invented the Internet*. Or maybe I did well in grad school because I was paying the tuition? Perplexing!

Journal articles often included tables and charts. I was drawn to them. They captured my attention and were interesting. I suppose that’s how I absorbed the content of the articles

– visual interest was a gateway of sorts to learning. Synthesizing the material and organizing a paper with an outline came easy to me when the information had a visual component.

It was kind of the same experience with people. So often people either a.) all look pretty similar to me or b.) their names blend together. Shelly and Sherrie, Don and Ron, Anna/Ann/Annie. Or Dennis and Kevin (I always get those two names mixed up). I think life would be much easier if everyone wore name tags all the time. Or there was something wildly different about each and every face or something distinct about every name. Then I could relate. But that's not life, so again... *it's confusing*.

I usually end up referring to people using a unique visual association, such as where I met them. Like, Kitchen Table Lady. Can't recall her name, but I met her at my kitchen table. In my house! A friend brought her by (not unannounced) asking me to help sort out her child's IEP. We spent a few hours together. I even went to a meeting with her the next week too, but I still can't remember her name.

Or, Pregnant Lady and Sara Lee. When I go to IEP meetings with parents I usually draw a sketch of the table with boxes around it representing people at the meeting. Inside each box I label the name of the person sitting there and their role. It's my visual cheat sheet. Even if the person has an interesting name – like Sara Lee - chances are I won't remember it. Later on, like after this particular meeting while talking to my friend Beth, the conversation might go something like this. "So, Two First Name Lady, the one on the box at 6 o'clock...can't remember her name...something like Robert Davids, or David Roberts, but girl names instead..." My friend who luckily knows me well enough to not get annoyed at such a lead in replied, "You mean Sara Lee?" I just can't remember Sara Lee's real name unless I first envision that she's Two First Name Lady. And even then, the name recall is doubtful. Then there was the pregnant lady at 3 o'clock. Yup, don't remember her name either. But I do know that was the meeting with Pregnant Lady and Sara Lee.

Then there was Parking Lot Lady. I hugged her in the parking lot three times before we even introduced ourselves. Even after she told me her name I could never remember it. For the longest time I simply referred to this woman as Parking Lot Lady. When thinking of her, the visual picture of where I met her pops into my head, but recalling her name is a struggle. You should know I don't randomly hug people in parking lots. But, she had a backpack that was see through, exposing epi-pens, benedryl - emergency medicine. Her child had the same severity of food allergies as my son Teddy. That day I met her in the parking lot of my daughter's preschool we connected without words. We were both neurotic! Not really...well perhaps...I had never met anyone who had a child with the same severity of food allergies as Teddy. I knew how she felt taking her child to preschool with soooooo many medical concerns. One drop of dairy and poof! EMERGENCY! Parking Lot Lady and I...we "got" each other.

When our new neighbors moved in I simply referred to them by their last name. "Seinfeld" was one of my favorite television shows and the new guy next door had the

last name of Cramer. Although he is more like the character George from the sitcom, I easily remembered the name Cramer because of the TV show. I don't remember ever using his first name. He's just Cramer. Now the whole neighborhood calls him Cramer.

If I Only Knew

You may think all this is amusing; maybe you even chuckled along the way. Yes, it may seem funny at times, but to those of us living with these types of learning challenges, the world is more confusing than entertaining. Visual learners and language-based learners – if only I'd recognized the difference a long time ago. Maybe then I would have thoughtfully facilitated the way I did things. Or, at least I would have understood why some things came with more difficulty than others. Perhaps in college I would have geared course selection toward classes that required term papers or allowed visual projects rather than those with final exams. At the very least, maybe I would have tried harder to read the course description catalogue.

Thank you, Temple. For teaching us all that some of us think differently and not all of us think in words. For making it your life work and leaving this profound education of the masses as your legacy. For me, and I'd guess for many others like me, it's been life changing, and made our world a little less confusing.

BIO

Irene is a special education advocate from Bucks County Pennsylvania. She has two children; her oldest child has Asperger's Syndrome.

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