

WALKING THE ROAD

to self-love

every road is
different,
every
destination is
the same



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VAN GESSEL

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All opinions presented in this memoir are mine and are based on my personal life experiences. While I have used trustworthy sources throughout the memoir, where applicable, the knowledge that I share is mine and should not be interpreted as 'universal truths.'

This is especially true of how I describe corporations and societal views of learning differences.

This book is dedicated to my family --the one I was born into and the one created. Thank you for creating a stable foundation, from which I feel safe enough to take the leap and write this book.

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Preface

Not all roads are created equal. Everyone has a different mountain to climb, a different storm to weather, and a different race to compete in. Some will be more challenging than others. If you're going to learn from me, you really need to know what road I've been walking. It was a dirt road with upside-down signs and a grim outlook.

The Road with the Upside-down Signs

I wasn't like most freshman college students. I didn't really have trouble adapting to my new living space or being away from home. I had fun sleeping on the top bunk, despite being scared of heights. I got used to sharing bathrooms and showers with the men in the same building despite being shy. I didn't find it difficult to meet and connect with new people or find my way around the enormous college campus. I carried around a paper map of the campus for a while, and it served its purpose no matter how nerdy I appeared. And, for some reason, I didn't have

trouble making friends, even though by my own standards I was quite shy. No, I struggled with the very thing that had brought me to campus: the schoolwork.

It was the beginning of the school year. I knew that I couldn't afford to allow the coursework to pile up on me as it had in high school. I was far away from home, from my dad. He couldn't help me here. "The college therapist worked out of a small, sparsely decorated office painted sage green-probably because someone had told them that the colour green was calming. Unfortunately, the paint didn't have that effect on me. I was stressed and overwhelmed. I initially sought out therapy to have someone neutral to talk to and to see what I could learn or improve about myself. I didn't realize I would walk out of the therapy session uncovering a potentially huge problem! I have always found schoolwork to be difficult. Even after just one month of college, I was already behind in my coursework. I found it difficult to focus on the tasks, read and understand the material, and apply it to the course assignments. I was painfully aware that coming to college brought higher expectations for success from my family and friends. I had something to prove to them. And I didn't want to let them down. So, I sought out the listening ear of the college therapist. She looked to be in her late fifties and had short hair speckled with grey. I sat across from her in a light blue padded armchair and uncomfortably waited for her to begin.

The college therapist worked out of a small, sparsely decorated office painted sage green-probably because someone had told them that green was a calming colour. Unfortunately, the paint didn't have that effect on me. I was nervous. I brought with me what I felt was a huge problem! I have always found schoolwork to be difficult. Even after just one month of college, I was already behind in my coursework. I found it difficult to focus on the tasks, read and understand the material, and apply it to the course assignments.

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“So, Anne...” She said, looking up from her notepad. “I see that you're a freshman and that you've come to us from another country.” I nodded. We briefly talked about my experience moving to the United States, and how things are going living with roommates for the first time. The therapist, we'll call her Sandy, had a very kind face with a clear complexion, soft-looking eyes, and light brown hair hanging down loosely. She dressed casually in jeans, a white blouse, and a light yellow and purple flower-patterned scarf around her neck.

I explained to her that I have adapted to the new country and being away from my family quite well. Sure, there are some minor challenges with the roommates, such as having different wake up schedules or habits, but overall, we were getting along pretty well. “So Anne, how are classes going?” She asked kindly. “Well, it's only been a few months, and I am already behind in my coursework.

I've always found it difficult to read and absorb information.” Sandy smiled and nodded as if she had heard this numerous times. She asked me about my SAT score with curiosity, which I responded that my math score was 720, while I scored 520 in the verbal section. Due to the discrepancy in the scores, she recommended I get tested to see if I had a learning disability. Out

of curiosity, I agreed. Sandy scheduled me in with two psychologists to complete the rigorous tests, and then I left.

The tests were scheduled for the following week. It might sound strange, but I wasn't very stressed out or fearful of the results. I enjoyed the process of learning about myself and how I function. Like I said before, I was and still am a self-help junkie. My first test day had arrived. I remember following the instructions Sandy provided me and found my way to the classroom where the clinical psychologist was waiting for me on the other side of the door. She greeted me with a smile, and warmly motioned me into the room. I remember thinking that she reminded me of a preschool teacher, with her enthusiasm. She smiled at me and asked me to sit in one of the chairs. "Hello, Anne. I'm Susan. I'm one of the clinical psychologists the school partners with." She said as she took a seat across from me. "I'll be asking you a series of questions, and I'll also walk you through some exercises to complete. Please answer them to the best of your ability." I nodded, and she began what would be a three-hour exchange of questions and answers. The string of questions and exercises eventually stopped. "Ok, we are all done," Susan announced, jotting down one more note on her clipboard. "I'll send this test away, and you should have your results soon." I breathed in as deeply as I could and left the room. I had a short break before coming back to the same room to meet with Gloria, the Educational Specialist, who also ran a series of exercises and questions with me for another couple hours. She also ran her own tests and got results back to me as well."

I remember standing in the middle of the cream-colored hallway outside of Sandy's office, studying the words. I read them repeatedly.

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It was hard to believe, but somehow at the same time, I wasn't surprised. The test had come back with a diagnosis. No one likes that word: diagnosis. It said that I had dyslexia. It said I'm different.

Thankfully, my parents took the news well. But they did have one piece of advice for me, which would change my life, "Do not openly share your diagnosis with anyone. You must protect yourself from being judged and misunderstood." After I told them the results of the assessment, I tucked the assessment packet away and didn't look at it again until grad school, six years later.

The Crash

That day in the testing room was the symbolic car crash that led me right off the road to self-love. It was the day that everything changed for me. I could no longer believe what I had previously believed about myself.

I internalized the diagnosis of being *broken*, *dumb* and not *damn good enough* in every area of my life. And those internalized thoughts started my journey of officially labelling myself that way.

The diagnosis awakened in me complex feelings of shame, self-doubt, and confusion. I was constantly fighting with myself, part of me wanted to be my most authentic self, but the other part struggling with this concept since I was no longer sure who I was.

What Does your **most authentic self** mean?

Your most authentic self is the person that you are naturally meant to be. It is the purest version of yourself from your personality to your physical looks to your dreams and desires.

How could I be my *most authentic self* if I wasn't sure who I was, or even worse, if I didn't like myself? I remember feeling like a mannequin, you know those plastic women that stand in the storefront windows modelling the beautiful clothing that almost never looks as good on you. Like the mannequin, I looked like a real human being who had things figured out, but on the inside, I was just as empty. No path. No destination in mind. I was stuck.

Off-Road

When you are no longer sure who you are or when you are acting in a way that is not authentic to yourself, you are off-roading. You're lost. You are going in a direction, but you're not sure where. And that's exactly how I felt after I first heard my diagnosis. I had no idea where the right road was or even if I was a good driver anymore.

I'll be honest, this was not the first time that I had struggled with my identity.ⁱ From an early age, I had trouble pinpointing exactly who I was and how I should define myself. Am I Taiwanese or Dutch? Should I define myself by my gender (a particularly difficult notion as people often mistook me for a boy while growing up)? I think of myself as a people person, but am I really? How can I be if I have dyslexia and a verbal processing disorder?

Now, with this diagnosis, I was forced to wrestle with my identity all over again. I often asked myself, *who am I? What is my purpose? Am I able to do what I thought I could do? Will I succeed in life? Will I make my parents proud? Can I?* The answers that first popped into my head were foreboding.

Not the Same

You might be thinking that a dyslexia diagnosis is not the end of the world. And you're right it's not. But it is a shock to the system. A shock that most people don't talk about. It is true that the educational system has made leaps and bounds in recent years to recognize different

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learning methods and abilities. But once students graduate, the real world doesn't have the same support in place. The real world sees you as a 'normal' adult who has the same social, cognitive, and learning abilities as everyone else.

And it is this issue that brings on so much hardship for the adult with dyslexia- aka. Me. I was not the same as everyone else, and yet I would be judged the same way. That was my lot.

My New Persona

As time went on, I desperately tried to get back on the road, any road. I tried to make myself appear 'normal' and like I had things together and I knew exactly where I was going. None of these things were true. My attempts to tug at the wheel and direct myself back to a normal reality was involved putting on a 'new face.' Feeling like I was no longer acceptable as I am and overcome with the fear that others would think that I am stupid, I would put on traits that I thought people liked, like humor.

I also highlighted my natural qualities that I knew could outshine my obvious stupidity (or what I thought was stupidity). That meant that I was more charming and funny than usual. I projected this easy-going person, who laughed at herself and was comfortable in her skin.

That was my outer self. My inner-self focused on improving the weaknesses that I saw in my dyslexia and attempted to fix them.

What is a persona?

A **persona** is the aspect of someone's character that is presented to or perceived by others.

Hiding From the World

I could not keep up my newfound persona for long.

It was exhausting to play a charming and comedic puppet to entertain the people around me. So, after a while, I thought *perhaps it's easier just to hide*. Slowly but surely, I started to go into hiding, reflecting on my physical body and inner being.

I kept speaking to a bare minimum, , wore mostly dull colors, and in certain situations (such as meetings or in class), I hardly even moved. I stayed utterly still in fear that someone would call on me to say something. My thinking was if I didn't talk, no one would find out how dumb I was. And that is what I wanted. To be invisible. I no longer revealed my true self to the outside world. The colors of my true nature had washed away with the watery sadness of my tears.

Dissatisfaction, Disappointment & Disapproval

The news that I received in the counsellor's office changed me into an insecure, nervous, and low self esteem person. As time went on, and I finished my post-secondary degree and even moved on to graduate school, I lived under the burden that no matter how hard I tried, no matter how late I stayed up to study, or how much I applied myself to attaining my school work , I wouldn't be as good as the other students. My dyslexia would determine my fate. And I was destined to live a life of dissatisfaction, disappointment, and disapproval.

Now, this sounds rather dreary, does it not? Well, it was, if I'm honest. The light does not seem so bright if not for the darkness. That was my darkness.

Let's journey on to the light.

*We are all on the road to self-love, whether we
recognize it or not.*

Some of us never get there.

*Some of us stumble along the shoulder our entire lives
and never reach our destination.*

*But the ones that take their eyes from the dusty mess of
the gravel and see the bigger picture of their journey.
They are the ones that are sure to reach the finish line.*

Chapter 1

Walking the Road to Self-Love

*"One's destination is never a place, but rather a new way of seeing things." -Henry Miller (1891-1980),
American Novelist*

Without love, there can be no life. As human beings we thrive while being loved and we deteriorate if we feel unloved. These things are generally recognized as universal facts. Everyone knows love is important. The concept is reflected in the media, in movies, books, music and so on. It's everywhere. But in those contexts, we are generally talking about romantic love. What about self-love? I think that concept is more elusive- hence this book.

So, what is Self-Love?

According to the Brain & Behaviour Research Foundation, self-love is a state of appreciation for oneself that grows from actions that support our physical, psychological and spiritual growth. Self-love means having a high regard for your own well-being and happiness. Self-love means taking care of your own needs and not sacrificing your well-being to please others. Self-love means not settling for less than you deserve.¹

If you are not able to love yourself, then you are unlikely to allow others to love you or to love others in a healthy way. Once you have a deep understanding of how to love yourself and

¹ <https://www.bbrfoundation.org/blog/self-love-and-what-it-means>

are living it out, you will see a huge difference in your relationships, and how you think others perceive you. You'll feel more secure in yourself, and more able to give of yourself instead of taking from others all the time. Dr. Margaret Paul, says it the best, "...Loving yourself is the key to creating a passionate, fulfilled, and joyful life."²

A Distant Memory

My mother used to serve us salted sardines. By the time I was fifteen, the sight of that uniquely shaped tin can reminded me of one thing: a car accident.

My family often took vacations in the summer months to escape the thick-nauseating heat of Taiwan. One particularly humid summer, we chose Hawaii as our destination. The air was cool [compared to Taiwan] and the ocean breeze was rejuvenating. My family and I were having a lovely day at the beach, splashing in the salty-water, and generally enjoying ourselves. I can still remember looking into the water and seeing the crystal clear greenish-blue rocks stationed in the shallow sands. It was beautiful. The day was getting away from us, and we had to return to our condo. The four of us crammed into our rental car and dad started driving up the mountain road. My mom was quietly dosing off in the front passenger seat, and my brother and I were talking about the fun that we had just had. We were all relaxed. We felt loved and able to love each other. I can remember looking at my mother, slightly slanted in her seat ready to have a nap; and looking at my father in the rear-view mirror as he drove. I was thinking of how lucky I was to have a family that I enjoyed spending time with. I returned my attentions to my brother who hadn't stopped talking to me, when suddenly our moving vehicle came to a crushing stop

² co-founder of *Inner Being* and published author of *Inner Bonding*, amongst other self-help books.-
<https://www.mindbodygreen.com/0-15295/how-do-you-actually-learn-to-love-yourself.html>

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and then *WHAM!* I felt my body be pushed forward, only to be stopped by the seatbelt wrapped around my waist. The world had suddenly changed.

“Is...is everyone ok?” My dad’s voice cracked as he turned to the back and gently touched my face.

“Yeah, dad. We’re ok.”

“Yeah, good.” My brother agreed, despite his slightly frazzled look.

“You good, mom?”

“I’m ok. What...*Ah...*” Mom gasped in pain, massaging her forehead. “What happened?”

“I don’t know. I’m gonna get out and talk to the other drivers.”

Drivers? I thought, then remembered that we had crashed into the car in front *and then* were crashed into in the back.

We were sandwiched between two cars.

I watched my dad get out of our car and walk with a slight limp over to the driver ahead of us.

They talked for a few seconds, dad smiling the whole time. *Must be ok since they’re smiling.* I

thought as dad walked past my window to go to the car behind us. I tried to twist my neck to see him through our back window, but it hurt too much so I just sat down. I was amazed at how good

I felt, seeing as how we just were in a car accident. Nothing hurt, except for my neck and that

was minimal. My brother seemed to be ok too, just a little quieter than he had been.

Suddenly I heard my dad’s hand clutch the door handle of his door and return to the driver’s seat.

“So...?” Mom asked, not giving him much time to relax.

“Everyone’s ok.”

“That’s a relief!” I said, letting out a deep breath.

“Yeah, and our car is fine too.”

“Oh good,” mom replied, resting her head back against her seat.

“Yeah, it’s kind of amazing. We could have been really hurt and look at us all. We are fine.”

“Yeah, but the car behind us looks like it’s taken a beating.” My brother piped in.

“Yeah, like a bent old sardine can,” My dad said, roaring with laughter at his own joke. I couldn’t help but smile, not wishing ill on the family behind us, but grateful that we were all ok and in good humor. Even mom grinned at dad’s joke.

That experience put everything into perspective for me, even as a fifteen-year-old girl. In one moment, I learned that life is precious, and so are the people around me. And even more than that I learned the value of self-love.

What does self-love have to do with a minor car accident? Thinking back on that day, I am convinced that if we had been in an argument and stressed out prior to that car accident then our bodies would have responded differently to the impact, and the result could have been catastrophic. But because my parents raised us in an atmosphere where self-love could grow and blossom, we were able to enjoy our time together, feel loved and supported and most of all *relaxed*. Our relaxed state was a game changer that day. And were relaxed because we felt loved. And if we feel loved we can love ourselves and others. Self-love and the support of family won that day.

Self-love makes us resilient, more compassionate with ourselves and others, more forgiving and more at ease with ourselves and others. And my family’s resilience was evident that day, as hours later we were having fun again playing dominoes together.

The Road I Was On

I used to think that I was dirty, mostly because the road that I was on was dusty, grimy, and full of horse manure if I’m honest. It was the road of a struggling dyslexic. There is nothing

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like the dirtiness of feeling completely and utterly stupid. I mean, struggling with reading and writing sounds like a fault. And to me, it was for a long time.

Most people find out that they have dyslexia at an early age. I didn't find out until I was eighteen and a freshman in college. It was a bombshell. I mean I remember feeling like I was behind in school, even in middle school. Academics were always a challenge for me. By the age of fifteen, I was using Google's search engine to look up definitions of words that I probably should have known but didn't want to ask anyone about. Even with Google's help, I couldn't grasp the material presented in my schooling and this was a problem, because my parents expected me to work hard and produce great results. The former was my constant resolve, but the latter never came.

Finally, with books and books stacked up on the tiny wooden desk in the corner of my dorm room, I accepted that I couldn't do this on my own. I needed help. So, I went to the guidance counselor's office and that is where my eyes were opened to what I thought was the heart-rending realization that there really was something formally wrong with me.

I finally had written confirmation of just how dumb I was. They said the dirty "D" words, not one, but two. I was told I had "dyslexia" and a "disability," specifically, a *verbal learning disability*. Both the therapist and education specialist tried to emphasize my many other strengths and even stated that my IQ was above average in some areas, but it was too late! I had stopped listening after hearing the dirty "D" words. They had lost me in my own head. *What does this all mean? Am I broken?*

*"How can you love something
that's broken, and even worse, dirty?"*

For a decade or more, I walked a road where I didn't recognize my surroundings or myself. I didn't recognize the face that I was putting on; the face that I hoped would fool everyone I knew. I didn't recognize my gifts, the good things in life, or my friends who were there to support me. I was in a slump. And the only thing I could think of was to cut my hair, dye it and run. Avoidance, like a pair of well-worn sneakers, propelled me on my journey.

In those days I didn't like myself. And I didn't think others liked me either. I saw myself as stupid, insignificant, and unworthy. This meant that I avoided going deeper in my relationships, afraid that they'd see exactly what I saw. I wasn't ready for that.

I know now that I didn't want to hide from my friends. I wanted love and acceptance. And now I know that that starts with me.

My Road to Self-Love

All throughout my journey with dyslexia, I have been on the road to self-love. At the trailhead, I was looking for signs that would direct me to the 'fix-it station' but after a few years on that trail, I realized that that's not the point. Some things don't need fixing; just redefining. And that was true for how I thought of my dyslexia. Once I realized that there were no fix-it stations on the road to self-love, I was the better for it. Instead, I saw signs pointing at opportunities to see how dyslexia makes me unique, gifted in some ways, and intelligent. I started thinking of dyslexia in a different, more positive way. And most of all, I started to see that I am more than just my diagnosis. And this is true of you too. You are more than your diagnosis, your situation, or your past mistakes. You are more than all of that. And you are worthy of love. If you get on the road without that you're bound to get lost or worse, crash.

Finding Your Path to Self-Love

In this book, I'll take you for a walk down the road toward self-love and show you that even with roadblocks we can all get to our destination: a purposeful, and meaningful life full of real love for ourselves and others.

I'll tell you all about the stops that I made on the way that contributed to my willingness to heal and eventually love myself again. My goal is to pass on my experiential knowledge and help you along your unique journey. I'll do that by telling stories, some humorous, drawing practical life lessons from those stories and giving you practical bulleted points to make your journey a whole lot less bumpy than mine was. There will be homework every now and again, so be prepared to work. Remember, you'll never grow a grain of wheat without picking up the rocks first.

In other words, you have to put the work in if you want to get to where you're going: a genuine love for yourself that can carry you through life. Work might include, being honest with yourself, completing the reflective journaling exercises throughout this book, and being willing to talk with a trusted, friend, family member or even a professional about anything that you think may still be unresolved.

Are you ready?

Let's begin

Do you Love Yourself?

Take this quiz now and measure how much self-love you already possess.



POINTS SYSTEM

When I choose [A]

+6 Points

When I choose [B]

+3 Points

When I choose [C]

0 Points

YOU SCORED...

30-42

You are doing...well marvelous! No really! Amazing job. You really have a solid sense of self-love and might not even need to read this book, unless of course you want to be a good neighbour to someone else.

15-30

You are not in the worst of places, but you are also not completely there yet. You don't hate yourself, but you could have a much richer life if you cultivated a genuine love for yourself. So keep on reading and we'll get you on the right road.

0-10

You are either going through a rough patch right now, or you've never full thought about the concept of self-love. Either way, we are here for you and happy to direct you towards self-love. Remember if you need any extra help seek out friends, family & professionals.

ⁱ Schrader, Jessica (2018) “The Authentic Self” *Psychology Today: Canada* Published online February 28, 2018, Retrieved on July 27, 2021, from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/traversing-the-inner-terrain/201802/the-authentic-self>