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Kathy Orr Allen

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## Coping With My Vision Disability

Kathy Orr Allen

I didn't begin learning to read until my first child was born in 1972. When he was born, I wanted to be able to read to him, as my grandpa Wall and my grandmother Ruby Nell had read to me. I have struggled my whole life with a vision disability called convergence insufficiency, but it was not diagnosed until last year. When I was a child in school, my teachers only knew that I couldn't, or wouldn't, read. I always had trouble when we were reading or copying from the board.

In elementary school, we were divided into reading groups. When it was my turn to read, I could never see the words on the page. They were blurry, or they appeared to float on the page. When my teacher would ask me to read, I would say nothing. Then she would ask me to read after her; I could always do that because I was repeating her reading. Then she would say, "It's your turn to read the next line."

Goodbye to You, Searching Alyssa Lancaster



I would pause, struggling to remember what might have happened to Dick or Jane at that point in the story. The reading group would laugh, the teacher would get upset with me, and then I would throw up on the teacher's shoes. My teacher would then scream, "Take her to the school nurse!"

**F**or many years, I related reading to being sick. It always made me sick. My teachers didn't know what to do with me during reading classes, so they had me run errands for them or sit in the back of the room and draw. I spent much of my time in third and fourth grade drawing cartoon figures, a talent that was useful later when I became a mom and a teacher's aide.

One day when I was giving my mother-in-law, Adelma, a ride in an area unfamiliar to me, she told me to turn right onto a certain street. I missed the turn because I couldn't read street names. So she called out to me, "You missed it, Kathy. It was this street. How could you have missed it?" I didn't know what to say, so I told her that I was sorry. I said that we were talking and I just didn't see it. She nodded her head, but she suspected the truth.

**D**ays later, when I was at her home, she handed me a magazine, opened it to a recipe she had marked, and asked me to read it. I just looked at it and set it back down. Soon she started to question me about the recipe: "Does it sound good to you? Would it be easy enough for you to prepare?" I didn't know what to say.

She then said, "Kathy, you didn't read the recipe, did you? And you couldn't read the street names the other day, either!" I was

crushed. I admitted that I had never been able to read words because they were blurry to me and made me sick when I tried.

Within a few days, she had made me an appointment with her optometrist. He wasn't sure about the problem but gave me eye exercises and prescribed glasses to help with the eye strain. Adelma then revealed to me that her own mother had an eye disability!

Adelma was always supportive. Over the years she helped me deal with my reading problem in many ways. For example, she bought me a dictionary and taught me how to look up words. She helped me plan the preschool Sunday school lessons I taught, by reading the lessons to me and helping me look up words I didn't understand. She also taught me how to write letters to family and friends. She often did so over the phone when my husband and I were living overseas or in a distant state.

**E**ven as I was learning to read, I still continued into my adult life trying to hide my disability because I lacked self-confidence and my reading vocabulary was limited. When asked to read aloud in church, for example, I would hand my scripture verse to the person seated next to me before it was my turn and then dismiss myself, saying I had to go feed or change my baby. I would stay in the lady's restroom until I was sure my verse was completed, then return to thank the person who had read for me.

I remember once when my first daughter, not yet two years old, asked me, "Mommy, why do we always stay in the lady's room to just stand here?" I didn't know how to answer

her, so I picked her up held her in my arm's and cried. I didn't know what else to do. She put her little hands on my back and patted me gently, with her head on my shoulder, saying, "It's all right, Mommy. It's all right, Mommy." She kept saying that until I stopped crying.

In the fall of 1984, while living in Maryland, I enrolled in the GED program. I was told to be at Maryland High School at 7:00 pm for testing. I was nervous, but not as much as the man sitting in front of me. He was struggling so hard, he got up twice and asked if he could leave, but the woman in charge asked him to stay until we finished the testing. As we finished, I tapped him on the shoulder and said softly, "You know, in time, you can get your GED!" He told how hard this was for him, I said, "I know. I used, to sit in your desk!" He did stay and went through the program in the lowest class.

**I** was placed in the highest class, thanks to Adelma's earlier work with me. After seven months of GED classes my teacher sent me to the testing center to take the final tests. My reading was so slow and painful that it took me two Saturdays, a month and half apart, to complete all five of the testing booklets. Even though I received my GED, reading was still slow and painful for me. It always gave me migraines and made me nauseous.

Over the years, my convergence insufficiency became better, but it still gave me headaches and eyestrain. The months I was studying for the GED, my young children would get off the school bus, come in, and find me lying on the sofa with a wet washcloth on my forehead. My oldest son

would say to the three others, "Shhh. Mom's been studying again."

A few weeks after I completed all the GED testing, an envelope came in the mail from the testing center. I placed it on the kitchen table. As I did my housework, I would walk by it, pick it up, then put it down again. I could not open it. If I had failed, then I would have to retake it and study even harder, and that would make the migraines and nausea start again.

**W**hen my children got off the bus and came in from school, they noticed the envelope on the kitchen table and asked me, "Mom, why haven't you opened this to see your test scores?" My daughter opened the envelope, put the testing score in front of my face, and said, "Mom, don't you want to see that you passed?" All four of my older children hugged me, and said, "Mom, we knew you could do it! My oldest son added, "And it only took you thirteen years!" I yelled, "What, I passed?"

As painful as my disability has been for me, in some ways, it has made me stronger. I have learned that I can relate to children and adults who have disabilities or have been rejected. I could do so even as a child. In my neighborhood in Oklahoma, where I grew up, Indian families moved in throughout the school years. They came from different reservations from all over the state, some with only the clothes on their backs. Some children from one of the reservations didn't even have shoes to cover their bare feet when they arrived. The PTA had a clothing drive to help them.

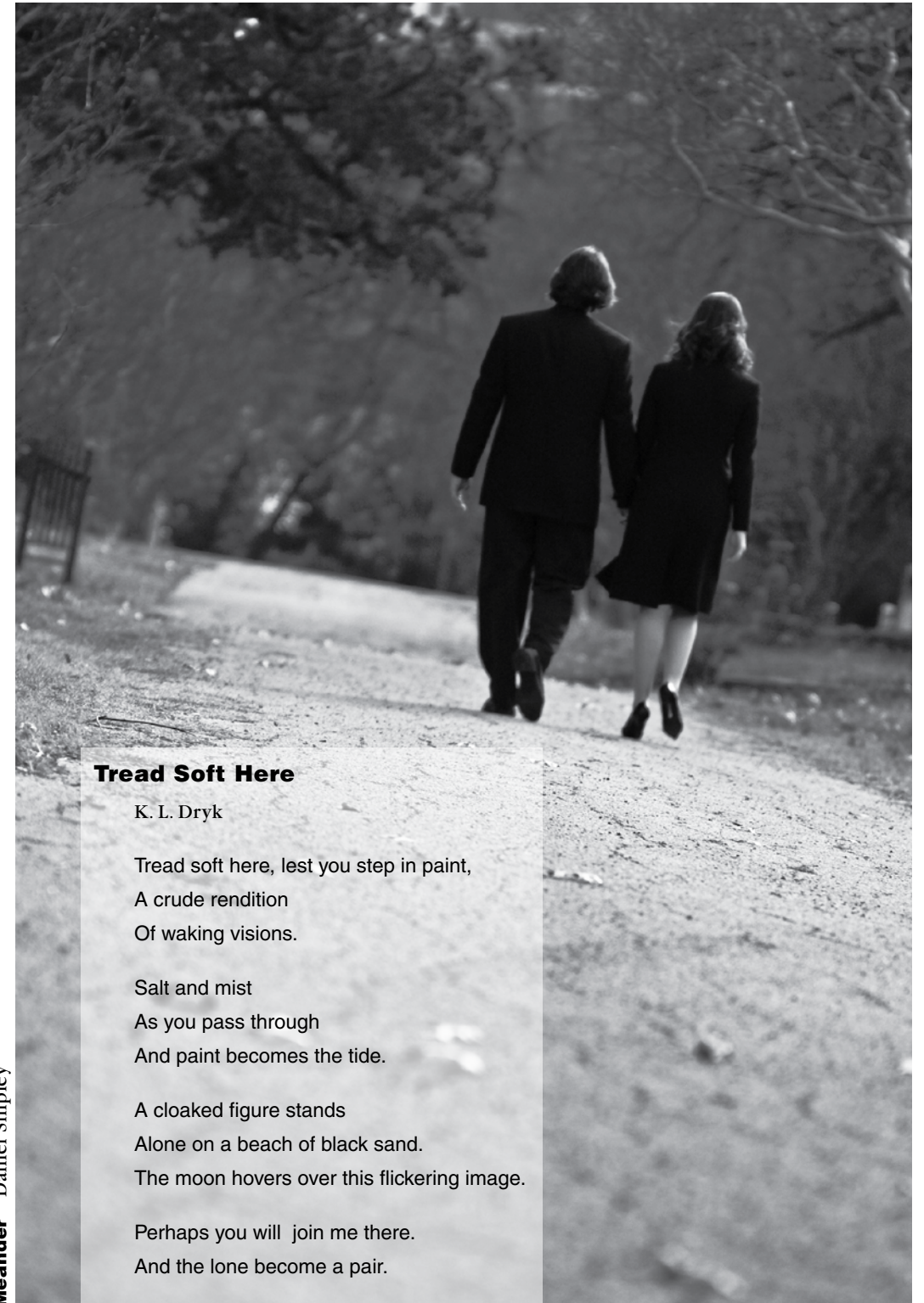
Some of the children in my school made rude comments to them about wearing their old clothes. One day I saw one of the Indian girls wearing one of my own old dresses, but I didn't say anything to her. In fact, most of them didn't speak much English. When I got home from school that day, I asked my mom what I should do. I explained to her that some children were making rude comments to them about wearing hand-me-downs.

My mom said, "It's important to be kind to them, help them, and be their friend. If you see someone wearing your old dress, say, 'You look very nice in that blue dress today,' but never mention that it was your blue dress before it was theirs. That would be unkind. They are a proud people. As you know, you have two great-grandmothers who are Indian. They are proud of their heritage, and you should be too."

As an adult, I have continued to work with people with disabilities. I worked in church as an interpreter for the deaf and later in the public schools, signing for deaf children at all grade levels.

Adelma had opened a whole new world for me that I never dreamed would ever be within my reach. Even the time I spent alone drawing cartoons in the back of my third and fourth grade class has proven valuable. My students today are delighted when I draw pictures of them, such as my sketch of the three second graders standing in front of a row of computers and staring through a window into the adjoining class. Not only are they delighted to see themselves in the picture, but their parents often ask for copies. My hearing impaired students are especially fond of my sketch of myself as their interpreter wearing my "Hands in Harmony" choir shirt.

It has been many years since I was that little girl in elementary school who couldn't read and was sent on errands or simply sat alone in the back of the classroom drawing pictures. As I look back, I can see how being excluded, though painful at the time, was in some ways a blessing. The experience helped me develop my talents and my sensitivity to others. In all reality, dealing with my disability has helped to make me who I am today.



### Tread Soft Here

K. L. Dryk

Tread soft here, lest you step in paint,  
A crude rendition  
Of waking visions.

Salt and mist  
As you pass through  
And paint becomes the tide.

A cloaked figure stands  
Alone on a beach of black sand.  
The moon hovers over this flickering image.

Perhaps you will join me there.  
And the lone become a pair.

Meander Daniel Shipley