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Topic: Fear or Connections

## Defying the Label

Fear of death, mutilation, rape can be terrible, traumatic events. But the more insidious, poisonous emotional fears of my youth are today's topic. Identified as a "mentally retarded" child, it was only after my dyslexia and severe myopia were diagnosed that I began my long struggle to combat the fears caused by the stigma of retardation. After being fitted for glasses in the fifth grade, I discovered the delights of reading and escaped into the imaginary worlds of science fiction. Worlds where I was able, for a time, to wall myself away from my fears.

As an extremely sensitive child with absolutely no self-confidence, I feared everything and almost everyone except my aunts and maternal grandmother. These individuals wrapped me in love but instilled the often-harsh discipline of "should" rules of behavior that caused anxiety every day as I struggled to retain their approval and love.

My mother and father played few and often negative roles in my formative years. I feared my father who was a loud, crude and physically powerful individual. My mother was an intelligent and determined to better herself. She left Florida in 1943 to attend Columbia University's Teachers College where she obtained her Master's Degree in Education in 1944. While she was in New York, I was left with her family. Her absence and subsequent divorce again generated emotional turmoil and anxiety that linger to this day.

My parents divorced in 1954. In early 1955, my mother took me to New York where she married a man with whom she had had an affair while my father was overseas in the army.

Already riddled with fears and anxiety, my nightmare had just begun. My step-father, a Summa Cum Laude graduate of Yale University, was an arrogant, intolerant man, who detested me. I feared and resented my step-father's acerbic assessments of my behavior, appearance and mental abilities. The constant drip of his poisonous verbal attacks reinforced my low self-esteem.

Only after leaving home and joining the army, did I begin to receive accolades for my performance and skills. Challenged by the military to excel, I went through airborne training. Later I attended Officer Candidate School where I was the number two honor graduate. Combat in Vietnam quickly convinced me to seek a college education.

After being accepted at Columbia University, I completed a Bachelor's degree in Chinese and Russian Affairs. After graduation, I joined the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and began a rigorous two-year fulltime course in Arabic. My career was marked with solid successes and steady promotions.

My successes within the merit reward systems of the army and CIA began to rebuild my self-esteem and confidence. Looking back through the fog of time, I realize that my sensitivities and anxieties, while painful, pushed me to prove myself despite being "retarded!"

Having been labeled a "retarded" was perhaps the genesis for the majority of my fears as a child and adult.