Francesca Cohn Speech (2/7/16)

"In the last three years here, I have heard many students around me exclaim at some point “Man, I must be stupid.” Of course, I am absolutely guilty of doing this as well, especially right after getting one of Mr. Tang’s chemistry tests or Ms. Yang’s timed writes back. It’s one of those things we say so frequently that we really don’t think about what we are actually saying. Or maybe you really do think you are stupid. For a while, I did.  But my experience with life has taught me that we, as a society, need to be rethinking the way we define who is smart, because I firmly believe that everyone in this room is brilliant in some way. Let me explain…

Although most of the other 3rd graders in my class had been reading for almost two years, at age eight I was just beginning to understand the simplest phrases on the page and each word still had to be sounded out gruelingly. I went to school everyday in a terror I was too young to understand or explain to my parents. The whole class was frequently screamed at, accused, degraded, and threatened by our teacher, but I believe I received some of the worst of it because I was the slowest to learn and the slowest comprehend. I was unexplainably far behind my peers and there didn’t seem to be a reason why, except that I was just slow. So one day, after another lesson I listened hard too, but just couldn’t seem to grasp my teacher sat me down in a chair next to her and leaned in so that I remember seeing deep pity, but no kindness in her eyes when said to me “Well, you must be inherently stupid.”

 I mean it makes a certain amount of sense, right? The societal definition of being dumb is naturally taking a while to understand things or piece them together. Unfortunately, the people we choose to consider the smartest in our society are the ones who learn the quickest. Obviously, I was incredibly upset and my parents finally understood enough about the classroom to recognize abuse and move me to my local public. However,  without fully understanding the weight of what had been said I quietly internalized how she had defined me until this definition began to resurface again middle school. My slow learning and comprehension began to take its toll on my self-confidence when in sixth grade my peers were doing one hour of homework a night while I was doing three. By seventh grade, a project and reading assignment that took them two hours took me six and a half. Though getting excellent grades at school, the stress, crying, and utter struggle of the homework to achieve those grades, homework others did easily, caused me to start believing that perhaps I really was suffering from a case of stupid. That was honestly my deepest fear of the time considering that inherent stupidity is not something that could be changed or fixed. By the end of seventh grade, school had become such a stressful and time consuming ordeal that I was burnt out. Can you imagine being terrified you wouldn’t even make it into high school, let alone college? Being the amazingly supportive people they are, my parents offered to let me take a gap year. I chose this option out of desperation despite the fear that I would be alienated for being a year older than anyone else in my class for the next 5 years.

The plan was to build up my reading, writing, and math skills to get jump start on and relieve the stress of eighth grade. But at the very beginning of my gap year, something happened that changed this plan, and my life, entirely. My mother heard from a friend that the academic situation I was experiencing might have something to do with eye function and suggested that I be tested. But I’ve always had  20 - 20 vision and I ate plenty of carrots? How could there be anything wrong with my eyes? Looking back it wasn’t particularly rational, but I was incredibly reluctant to get my eyes checked because previous tests my parents had taken me to (dyslexia, various learning differences, etc.) had either come back negative or with few answers but no solutiona. Now, normally people would see finding out they didn’t have a problem as a good thing, but I saw each negative as a reinforcement that there was nothing particularly wrong with me except that I had been born this way: naturally stupid. If my eye-test results also came back negative, I believed it would prove with finality that I truly was inherently dumb.

Following through with the testing despite this fear was one of the most courageous and one of the best decisions I have ever made. After the testing, the doctor came into the room where mother and I sat, me believing with surety that I was awaiting my doom. But when he walked in, I remember he looked at me and he said “five percent”

“excuse me, what?”

He said, “five percent. Your eyes are physically only picking up 5 percent of the words on the page at a 4th grade reading level.”

What? He went on to explain that additionally my eyes could not function together (which is called teaming), focus, or pick up peripheral vision. No wonder school had been a nightmare. On my way out, the doctor stopped me to mention that I must be very bright to have come up with so many “get around” tactics for reading that allowed me to be successful in school despite my physical obstacle. I’m not sure I can really describe the paradigm shift I had in that moment about how I viewed myself. Someone had just told me I was smart, and gave me the test results that proved it. My entire world changed as I began to see my talents along with my weaknesses and my confidence began to soar.  After two years of vision therapy, and another year of practice, I am absolutely loving APlit and I’m still blown away by the fact that I’m reading college level books at almost the same pace as everyone else, something 7th grade me thought entirely impossible.

So, why am I telling you this story and how does it relate to you? As Albert Einstein poignantly said,  “Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.” School is the only time in our lives when we are expected to be good at everything. While they are important for measuring understanding, standardized systems that separate those deemed  smart from those deemed not fail to take into account the complexities of a real person — their weaknesses and their talents, what we call their aptitudes. My eyes are often called a disability, because, although so much better, they do still slow my reading speed in a way society sees as handicapped. But really, I believe the correct term for my condition is a difference. I may not see in the same way you do and because of my eyes, under standardized conditions such as timed test in school, it may seem like I’m not as capable — someone might try to call me stupid. But oddly enough, the eye condition that makes me look less capable because I need extended time during a US history test, causes me to be in the 99% for my ability to see and distinguish color. Something incredibly easy for me in art class, would make someone who was possibly color blind but a very fast reader look less capable than me. It’s not that simple is it?

Here’s what I’m trying to say. Don’t let anyone ever try to tell you that you are stupid. Most of all, don’t let yourself say so. Because you may not find what it is for another two years,  maybe after college, maybe when your sixty, or you may have already found it, but whatever it is each of you is brilliant at something and that is what makes you a smart person. "