

# Living Differently.

Because "normal" no longer makes any sense.

## I wish someone had intervened...

JANUARY 28, 2013DECEMBER 11, 2015 / HEATHER COSTARAS  
(HAT).



(<https://liveagainsttheflow.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/little-princess.jpg>)*Above: Conventional school made this creative-creature very, very miserable.*

**Every time I read this story, I get a bit emotional...**

Gillian was only eight years old, but her future was already at risk. Her schoolwork was a disaster, at least as far as her teachers were concerned. She turned in assignments late, her handwriting was terrible, and she tested poorly. Not only that, she was a disruption to the entire class, one minute fidgeting noisily, the next staring out of the window, forcing the teacher to stop the class to pull Gillian's attention back, and the next doing something to disturb the other children around her. Gillian wasn't particularly concerned about any of this – she was used to being corrected by authority figures and didn't really see herself as a difficult child – but the school was very concerned. This came to a head when the school wrote to her parents.

The school thought Gillian had a learning disorder of some sort and that it might be more appropriate for her to be in a school for children with special needs. All of this took place in the 1930's. I think now they'd say she had attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and they'd put her on Ritalin or something similar. But the ADHD epidemic hadn't been invented at the time. It wasn't an available condition. People didn't know they could have that and had to get by without it.

Gillian's parents received the letter from the school with great concern and sprang to action. Gillian's mother put her daughter in her best dress and shoes, tied her hair in ponytails, and took her to a psychologist for assessment, fearing the worst.

Gillian told me that she remembers being invited into a large oak-panelled room with leather-bound books on the shelves. Standing in the room next to a large desk was an imposing man in a tweed jacket. He took Gillian to the far end of the room and sat her down on a huge leather sofa. Gillian's feet didn't quite touch the floor, and the setting made her wary. Nervous about the impression she would make, she sat on her hands so that she wouldn't fidget.

The psychologist went back to this desk, and for the next twenty minutes, he asked Gillian's mother about the difficulties Gillian was having at school and the problems the school said she was causing. While he didn't direct any of his questions at Gillian, he watched her carefully the entire time. This made Gillian extremely uneasy and confused. Even at this tender age, she knew that this man would have a significant role in her life. She knew what it meant to attend a "special school", and she didn't want anything to do with that. She genuinely didn't feel that she had any real problems, but everyone else seemed to believe that she did. Given the way her mother answered the questions, it was possible that even *she* felt this way.

Maybe, Gillian thought, they were right.

Eventually, Gillian's mother and the psychologist stopped talking. The man rose from his desk, walked to the sofa, and sat next to the little girl.

"Gillian, you've been very patient, and I thank you for that", he said. "But I'm afraid you'll have to be patient for a little longer. I need to speak to your mother privately now. We're going to go out of the room for a few minutes. Don't worry; we won't be very long".

Gillian nodded apprehensively, and the two adults left her sitting there on her own. But as he was leaving the room, the psychologist leaned across his desk and turned on the radio.

As soon as they were in the corridor outside the room, the doctor said to Gillian's mother, "Just stand here for a moment, and watch what she does". There was a window into the room, and they stood to one side of it, where Gillian couldn't see them. Nearly immediately, Gillian was on her feet, moving around the room to the music. The two adults stood watching quietly for a few minutes, transfixed by the girl's grace. Anyone would have noticed there was something natural – even primal – about Gillian's movements. Just as they would have surely caught the expression of utter pleasure on her face.

At last, the psychologist turned to Gillian's mother and said, "You know, Mrs. Lynne, Gillian isn't sick. She's a dancer. Take her to a dance school".

I asked Gillian what happened then. She said her mother did exactly what the psychologist suggested. "I can't tell you how wonderful it was", she told me. "I walked into this room, and it was full of people like me. People who couldn't sit still. *People who had to move to think*".

She started going to the dance school every week, and she practiced at home every day. Eventually, she auditioned for the Royal Ballet School in London, and they accepted her. She went on to join the Royal Ballet Company itself, becoming a soloist and performing all over the world. When that part of her career ended, she formed her own musical theatre company and produced a series of highly successful shows in London and New York. Eventually, she met Andrew Lloyd Webber and created with him some of the most successful musical theatre productions in history, including *Cats* and *The Phantom of the Opera*.

Little Gillian, the girl with the high-risk future, became known to the world as Gillian Lynne, one of the most accomplished choreographers of our time, someone who has brought pleasure

to millions and earned millions of dollars. This happened because someone looked deep into her eyes – someone who had seen children like her before and knew how to read the signs.

Someone else might have put her on medication and told her to calm down. But Gillian wasn't a problem child. She didn't need to go away to a special school.

She just needed to be who she really was.

*From the book "The Element – How finding your passion changes everything" by Ken Robinson*

The reason why reading that story (and many other beautiful stories like it) tears me up – is because it resonates so strongly and so deeply within me.

I was that child... I was that "Gillian" ... and, especially in high school. I was always SO bored... I hated school SO much... I was always in trouble, always in the detention quad, always in the school principal's office – being threatened with expulsion. The teachers were always telling me to "stop daydreaming!" or stop doodling in my workbooks.

And I felt like such a loser – and so, so stupid. Like something was deeply wrong with me. Because I just was not in the slightest bit interested in maths, science or accountancy.

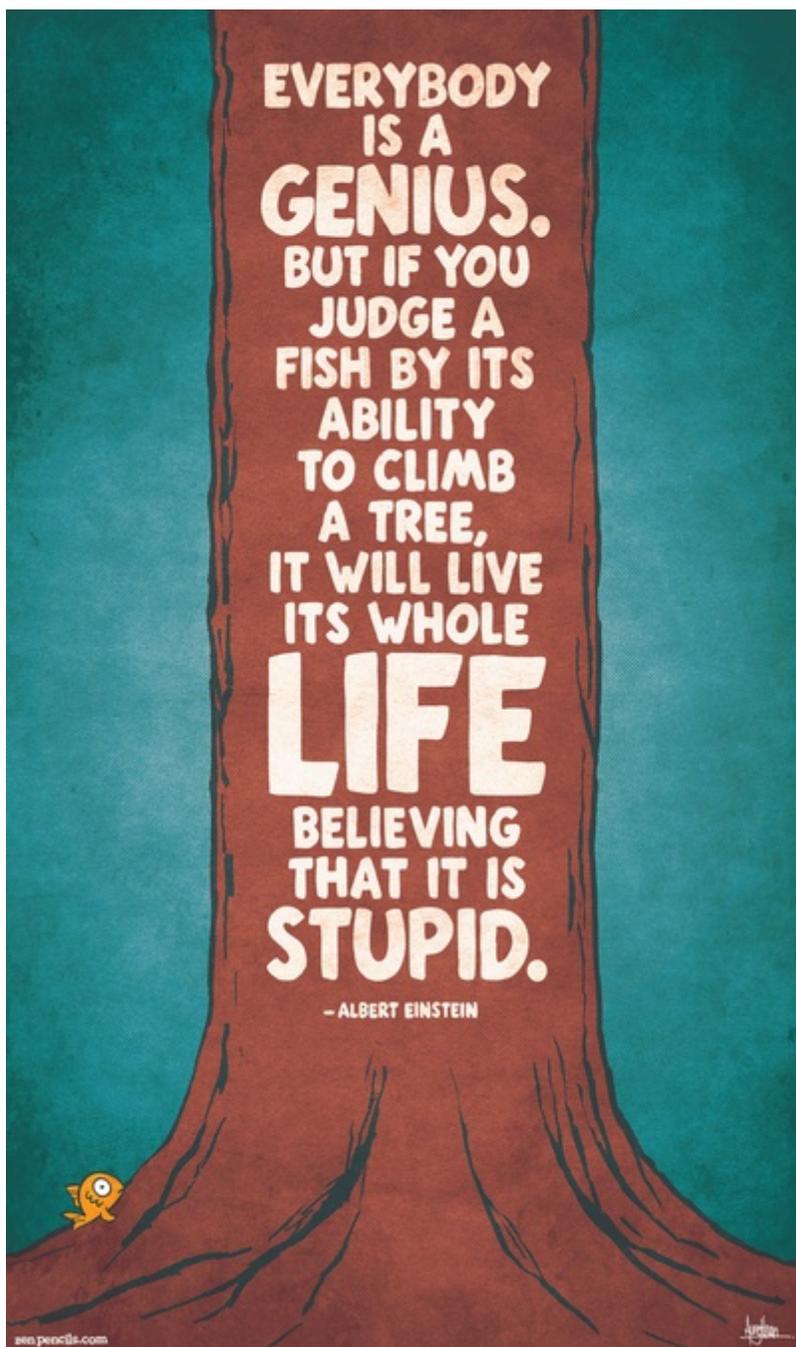
If only somebody had said to my parents: *"Your daughter isn't stupid, Mrs. Patterson... she's an artist and a musician. Send her to an Arts School"*.

If only someone had intervened.

And if only I had gone to Art School instead. I would have *excelled* in an art school! If I had been *allowed* to create music, harmonies, pictures and stories... I would have excelled – and I think my self-esteem would have soared in the process.

But – in my school – art and music were seen as silly, superfluous things – as 'hobbies'. I was bad at all the things I was supposed to be good at – and good at all the things that weren't considered important.

And that's why Ken Robinson's book resonates with me on so many levels... and comes highly, highly recommended!



(<https://liveagainsttheflow.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/genius.jpg>).

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**Update:** *I have a big, fat, crazy dream... and have written and illustrated a book titled "How Heather got her Hat'ness back" – with the hope... the very hopeful-hope... that it will inspire somebody – somewhere – to embrace their beautiful uniqueness and to be themselves. I hope it also inspires parents to think twice about attempting to squish their little creative-creatures in to a mould that may not fit. Here is the link to view the first couple of pages of the book.*

(<http://www.themadhat.co.za/wp/blog/2015/12/01/preview-of-hats-book/>).

If you like what you see – you can buy it on Amazon, [here](http://amzn.com/1517602270) (<http://amzn.com/1517602270>).