

In Memory of Ansel Adams:  
A Salute to the "Internal Spark"  
By Clare B. Jones, Ph.D.

Often when parents and teachers look at the characteristics of AD/HD, they tend to focus only on the deficits or the areas of the disorder that made the diagnosis apparent. They forget to investigate the strengths of the person with AD/HD. Each day, we as caregivers of children or members of their community must remember to affirm for them what they also do well. We need to support them and verify that "yes, they do have a challenge, but if they can find their strengths, they can be successful."

This is particularly important for those of us who make the diagnosis on a daily basis and who are often requested to speak about AD/HD to others. In my practice, and certainly in my travels around the country, training thousands of teachers, doctors and parents, I never want to forget to share the success stories of those who have somehow coped with this limitation and moved on with their lives. Their stories of conquest must be broadcast and sometimes we are the exact people to be their representative.

I, too, live with a disability. I am hearing impaired and was diagnosed as a young adult. At that time, I can remember seeking contemporary role models - others with hearing impairments who were doing "okay." The most famous "poster person" from whom others would encourage me to gain inspiration was Helen Keller, but she seemed almost saint-like and too remote for me. I do remember one of my mother's friends telling me that aging movie actress Nanette Fabraye wore hearing aides, but since she wasn't in my monthly issue of SEVENTEEN she went largely unnoticed by me!

However, I was keenly aware that I was searching for people like me who had managed to be triumphant in their lives and career despite their disability. I know it is similar for those who are diagnosed with attention disorders. Following the diagnosis, parents will often ask me if I think their child will be able to accomplish something despite the disorder. Young adult clients will urge me to predict the same. Therefore, over the past years I have sought out articles and stories about the survivors of disabilities, literally, the "hero" stories of those among us. I use them in my talks, and in my practice, not only for inspiration, but also for empowerment. Reading or hearing about AD/HD and others who cope with it can lay the foundation for accepting and confronting this condition.

There are capable adults with AD/HD in every career imaginable and they have been successful at every level. I know adults with AD/HD who are physicians, lawyers, actors, teachers, firefighters and professional athletes. I have worked with adults with AD/HD who are entrepreneurs and head their own companies. Some are artists and some are photographers. What they have in common is AD/HD. What they do not have in common is what they choose to do with it.

In her book, *Growing Up Creative*, author Teresa Amabile salutes photographer Ansel Adams. Adams, known worldwide for his creative landscape photography, was

the official photographer of the national parks. He was a self-described hyperactive child who had great difficulty adjusting to a traditional school environment. Amabile describes him as a young child who found there was only one rewarding way to get from place to place, and that was to run! In his own autobiography Adams wrote, "At age ten, I remember wanting to run to the beach near our home in sun, rain or fog, and expend the pent-up physical energy that simply fermented within me. Today, I would be labeled hyperactive."

Ansel's parents enrolled him in a succession of schools, but because of his activity level and behavior, he never lasted long. After Ansel had spent several frustrating years in public and private schools, his father chose to tutor him at home.

In his autobiography Ansel wrote:

Each day was a severe test for me, sitting in a dreadful classroom while the sun and fog played outside. Most of the information received meant absolutely nothing to me. For example, I was chastised for not being able to remember what states border Nebraska and what are the states of the Gulf Coast. It was simply a matter of memorizing the names, nothing about the process of memorizing or any reason to memorize. Education for me without either meaning or excitement is impossible. I longed for the outdoors, leaving only a small part of my conscious self to pay attention to schoolwork. One day as I sat fidgeting in class, the whole situation suddenly appeared very ridiculous to me. I burst into raucous peals of uncontrolled laughter; I could not stop. The class was first amused and then scared. I stood up, pointed at the teacher, and shrieked my scorn, hardly taking breath in between my howling paroxysms. To the dismay of my mother I was escorted home and remained under house arrest for a week until my patient father concluded that my entry into yet another school would be useless. Instead, I was expelled to study at home under his guidance (Adams and Alinder, 1990).

Ansel's learning experiences were based on his activities and strengths. His father took the things Ansel was intrinsically interested in and built the learning curriculum around them. His father chose to use the outdoor environment that Ansel so loved and used it as his main teaching experience. He put a camera in his son's hands and through this tool brought that environment to Ansel's eyes. Ansel credits his father for providing this experience and salutes him for listening to his soul, the soul of a "different drummer."

Adams wrote:

I am certain my father established the positive direction of my life that otherwise, given my native hyperactivity, could have been confused and catastrophic. I trace who I am and the direction of my development to those years of growing up in our house on the dunes, propelled especially by an internal spark tenderly kept alive and glowing by my father (Adams and Alinder, 1990, 17).

Ansel Adams's photographs of beloved natural scenes within our national parks remain some of the most inspirational pictures of our time. His techniques in the field of photography have been the benchmark for the photographers who follow in his

footsteps. He epitomizes what people with limitations can achieve in their lives when they begin to develop their personal strong points.

This year, CHADD and ATTENTION! magazine sponsored a photography contest entitled, "The Many Faces of AD/HD." It was open to all photographers ages 6 to 99. Winners will be recognized at CHADD's 12th annual conference in Chicago this fall. We hope the contest appealed to readers with attention disorders and gave them an opportunity to highlight their talents. There may even be some readers who aspire to follow in the footsteps of photographers such as Ansel Adams. I am proud to share his story with our readers and families with attention disorders, in hopes that you too, will be guided to develop your own personal abilities, what ever they may be.

Should you want to read more about Ansel Adams and his life, visit his foundation's web site at [www.anseladams.com](http://www.anseladams.com).

## References

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