I am a lucky man. In the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD), which I direct, I am one of two counselors working exclusively with students with disabilities. In any given semester, we have between two hundred and three hundred students registered for our services. My colleague, Jhony Nelson, the Coordinator for Students with Disabilities, manages our Assistive Technology Lab and works with visually and physically disabled students. As a learning disabilities specialist, I am the sole provider of services for the entire college community. Each day, from the cradle of my office at LaGuardia, an international depot for people in search of educational roots, I come in contact with people from around the world. Many have journeyed far with the ultimate intent of returning home with newfound knowledge to spread. Others are beginning new lives in a country they view as their new home. For some students, acknowledging a disability begins another journey.

My office’s mission is to ensure equal access and opportunity for all students with disabilities as set forth nationally by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the subsequent Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, which mandate equal access to opportunity in education and employment, to name but two domains within their jurisdiction. We serve students with any disability; through the Programs for Deaf Adults (PDA), we have a supportive role with deaf and hard of hearing students. We provide counseling, reasonable accommodations, and support services to eligible students, and act as liaisons to the college community.

Many of LaGuardia’s students, whether international or native-born, are alone in their academic endeavors, straining to balance family, work, and studies. The special pressures on them have led me to adopt and model the concepts of D. W. Winnicot, the eminent British child psychiatrist and psychoanalyst famous for his theories of the “holding environment.” In psychoanalytic terms:

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\text{the therapist’s task is to provide such a ‘holding environment’ for the client so that the client might have the opportunity to meet neglected ego needs and allow the true self of the client to emerge (Robbins).}
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Maintaining consistent counseling relationships and cheering students on when stressors arise are two ways that I can create a holding environment, assisting as they meet their needs, achieve their goals, and develop their true potential.

While OSD certainly is not directed at providing therapy, I believe that the basic tenets of Winnicot’s theory apply to my counseling relations with students. However, the approach of the holding environment is not always in harmony with student perceptions of my role. For example, there are times when a student is reported for cheating during an academic test administered in the OSD office. In this instance, it is hard to convince the student that I am being supportive when, after informing him or her of the college’s academic integrity policy, I notify the instructor of the incident. My students know that they may not like what I tell them; but they also know that to do my job well, I must be honest, a professional value emphasized in the work of the humanist psychologist Carl Rogers. A proponent of client-centered therapy, Rogers spoke of the need for clinicians to develop in themselves the following qualities:

- Congruence – genuineness, honesty with the client.
- Empathy – the ability to feel what the client feels.
- Respect – acceptance, unconditional positive regard towards the client (Boeree).
For many LaGuardia students with disabilities, the threshold of my office marks a border not easily crossed. Historically, some cultures have tended to hide people with disabilities, resulting in secretive behavior that makes it hard to get help, especially if doing so is condemned as a show of weakness and revealing emotions is taboo. For many international students, entering my office can be even more difficult as they struggle to find the right words. In a recent article in the International Journal for the Advancement of Counseling, C. H. Patterson writes:

*Cultural differences impose barriers to empathic understanding – to communications of the client about himself to the therapist and to communication of the therapist’s understanding to the client.*

*...The first barrier is of course language.*

A particular challenge for both my students and me is just this – the effective communication of ideas and feelings. As I speak only English, the burden of responsibility often falls on students to express their experiences in a second language.

Many students, especially those with psychiatric impairments, enter my office in search of a safe space to speak freely without fear of being judged. Once established, our working relationship allows them to control the issues which, left to accumulate, could build up and cause dysfunction. My role is to facilitate a rapport that instills both the confidence to be open and the awareness that asking for help reflects courage and the desire to flourish. I draw heavily on my educational and professional experiences to reassure students that all communication is confidential and to make sure that each first encounter provides a foundation for future work. Establishing an alliance and demonstrating commitment are my immediate priorities; the more I can do to create a comfortable first encounter for students, the less likely they will retreat.

When I look back at my graduate education in reading and learning disabilities and at my certificate training programs in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, chemical dependency counseling, and family and divorce mediation, I feel that I was destined to be Director of the Office for Students with Disabilities at LaGuardia. During my clinical training at Teacher’s College at Columbia University, where I worked with adults in diagnostics and tutoring, I learned about the scars adults bear because of their disabilities. Shame, embarrassment, alienation – all could qualify as stigmata on the spirit. The real spiritual casualties, however, were self-esteem and hope. After years of frustration and failure, few of the people I tutored hoped for success, and I did not always know who would conquer their demons. But those few warriors determined to wage the valiant fight inspired me to pursue a career in special education.

My current holistic approach has evolved over thirty years of experience. As a special educator, I am committed to assisting students in realizing their academic potential. As a psychotherapist, I view the whole person as a Gestalt, a being greater than the sum of his or her parts, which may include a disability. Training in chemical dependency counseling has taught me to work with students one day at a time, never confusing the future’s big picture with present moments. Savoring the small steps students take, I celebrate the energy manifested in their stride.

Over the years, many individuals have bravely entered my office, determined to seek the assistance needed to advance academically, achieve a college degree, and obtain employment. One of these was T, a young male in his twenties, who came to LaGuardia after failing at a senior college. When I met with him and his parents, his self-esteem was low; even making eye contact was an effort. The family desperately wanted to hold on to possibilities, and the air was filled with a mixture of apprehension and hope. Recently diagnosed as learning disabled, T was momentarily defeated, but he was not willing to surrender. In affirmative tones, I expressed clearly that he could still succeed. During T’s time at LaGuardia, we met frequently. Gradually, he had less need for my reassurance and more occasions for my con-
gratulations. He took full advantage of the reasonable accommodations and tutoring for which he was eligible, and fueled by an increased ability to solve problems and think independently, T’s self-confidence grew. After graduation, T attended a CUNY senior college. All his accomplishments were the result of his own endeavor.

Another student, a male in his forties, had a history of mental illness. Easily agitated, V was often menacing in appearance. He struggled to understand how systems worked, and his grasp of social and business conventions was uncertain and sporadic. A frequent visitor to my office, his anger bubbled just beneath the surface. Against the backdrop of Columbine, it was conceivable that others might be nervous or frightened around him. But I thought that if I let him vent, we could examine the causes of his frustrations and together try to address them. If V was inappropriate, I gave him feedback. To his credit, he could admit to his errors, an important behavior that I repeatedly praised. When he graduated, not without great effort, we both knew that his perseverance and his willingness to take responsibility for his actions had served him well. V wore these qualities proudly, like badges on a uniform.

Unfortunately, not all students who enter my office will graduate or transfer. When students are not succeeding, I attempt to identify the barriers before them. For example, one student whom I met weekly struggled painfully to explain his academic difficulties to his family. We talked about the reasons why he could not be honest with them; in the end, he left LaGuardia, perhaps because of the intensity of his anxiety. Similarly Q tried unsuccessfully to learn English and to do well at college. Behind her difficulties was the abuse, physical and emotional, that she experienced in her family because of her learning disabilities. Not knowing what happens to students after they break off contact is part of the counseling process, though an uncomfortable one.

As a person with a disability and an educator, I have used my own life as an example of overcoming obstacles, and after many years of grappling with being a role model, I have become more accepting of its responsibilities. As a counselor at LaGuardia, I find myself challenged each time I meet with students, and I am grateful when my efforts can help them to discover their individual potential. Along the way, I continue on my own journey. My skills are not allowed the luxury of hibernation and I enjoy the surprise of the unknown. I continue to fill up with lessons and souvenirs, the gifts of others.

Works Cited
