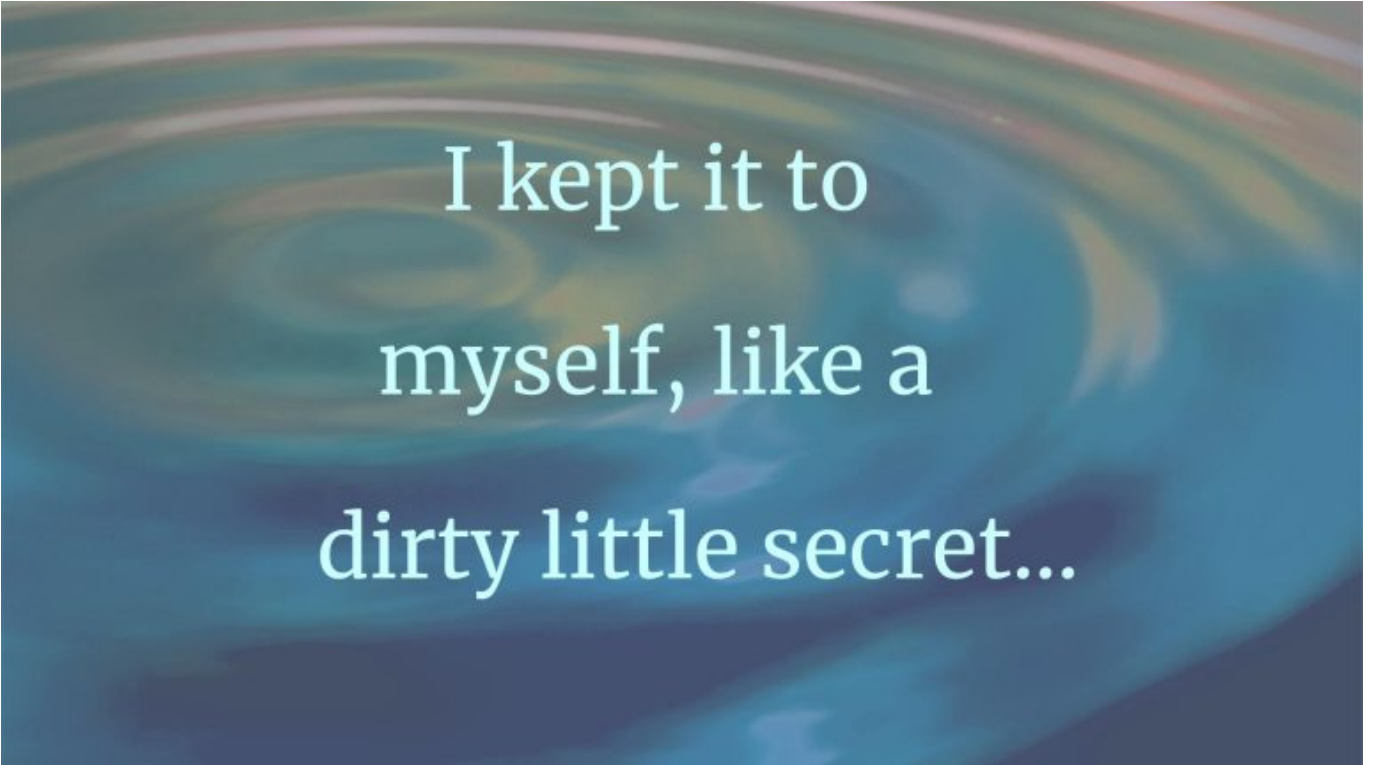


I Can't See Pictures in My Head

Category: Stories

written by Liana M. Scott | June 11, 2024



I kept it to
myself, like a
dirty little secret...

Editor's Note: This piece was a finalist in the Pulse writing contest, "On Being Different."

Visual imagination is like a superpower or a sixth sense: We take it for granted. On demand, we conjure up images of those we hold most dear: family, friends, our beloved pets. We envision people, places and things that we'd like to experience in the future. We revisit cherished memories simply by picturing them, essentially reliving them, all in our mind's eye.

That is, unless you have aphantasia—like me.

Aphantasia is the inability to visualize, a rare trait shared by roughly 3 percent of the world's population. We call ourselves *aphants*.

Throughout childhood and into adulthood, when asked to imagine, picture or visualize something, I always thought the request was meant metaphorically. And in job interviews, when asked, "Where do you see yourself in five years?" I didn't realize that this was intended literally—that I was meant to actually see myself doing *something*, *somewhere* at some time in the future. I simply didn't understand that my imagination was blind.

In 2006, Rhonda Byrne's self-help book *The Secret* came out. It was a global sensation that spoke to how positivity and mindset, coupled with the power of visualization, can invoke the law of attraction to manifest our deepest desires.

I had the positivity and mindset part in the bag, but the visualization—well, that was another matter. After speaking to colleagues and friends who were also exploring *The Secret*, a light bulb went on: *Could it be that people actually “see” images in their minds? Like, literally?*

I was forty-two when I had this revelation—and I kept it to myself, like a dirty little secret. Clearly, my inability to see pictures in my mind put me in the minority, and I felt unwilling to expose it. It was weird. Weird is different. Nobody likes different.

But aphantasia is an *inability*, not a *disability*. So I went on with my life much as I had before. Nothing of importance changed. I couldn't visualize. So what?

Fast forward to early 2021, when, in trying to holistically reduce my stress levels, I began exploring meditation.

Most aphants will say that they find guided visual meditation nearly impossible, because it starts with something like: “Relax and picture yourself *<enter calming scene here>*.”

As soon as the words “picture yourself” are uttered, the aphant is lost. *I* was lost. Every time I tried visual meditation (believing that this was the only kind of meditation), I found it frustrating and demoralizing.

In one session with a meditation specialist, I surprised both the practitioner and myself by blurting out, emotionally:

“I can't visualize, okay? I can't *picture* myself *anywhere* doing or looking at *anything*, okay? I just can't!”

“Oh,” the practitioner responded calmly. “You have aphantasia.”

Three simple words. Just like that. *You have aphantasia.*

I was stunned. My mind-blindness had a name?

“I have w-what?” I stammered.

“Aphantasia,” she said again. “It means you can't visualize. It affects a tiny proportion of the population. But that's okay. We'll try a different approach.”

And that was it. *I have aphantasia. It's a thing. I'm not weird, after all.*

I started to cry, and before I could stop myself, all of this toxic self-loathing that I had no idea I'd been harboring spilled out: feelings of inadequacy, failure, exclusion and even shame. I recounted an incident at a work function where my team was asked to solve a three-dimensional puzzle. While my colleagues busily suggested this or that, I froze. I simply couldn't conceptualize what was being asked, let alone help to solve the puzzle. I crawled into myself, ashamed of my inability to see what they saw, excluded

from their collaboration. I hemmed and hawed, brow furrowed, as if I had something to contribute. I didn't. I perceived myself as a failure: *Something's wrong with me. Why can't I do this?*

The poor woman got more than she bargained for that day. She was gracious and supportive, though, and taught me other ways to meditate that didn't involve using my mind's eye. More importantly, this woman, whom I'd never seen before and have never seen since, changed my life.

Immediately, I scoured the internet for the word *aphantasia* and came upon several studies, an aphantasia website and, most importantly, people just like me. I devoured the information that helped to explain the ways in which having aphantasia has likely impacted my life; some obvious, some subliminal.

For instance, I can't picture my loved ones' faces. I can never remember where I parked my car. Memorization and mathematics were very difficult in school. They still are. Spatial concepts are tricky. I can't remember the books I've read. I can't recall geographical landmarks, and driving without specific directions is problematic.

The list goes on. I learned that other aphants have similar unconventionalities, though it's not a written rule.

My husband, a hypervisualizer, was as shocked as I. After nearly forty years together, it was just not something we'd ever asked each other about, as in:

Me: "Hey, so, can you picture a red apple? Like actually see it in your mind?"

Him: "Sure, can't you?"

It just never came up.

I'd assumed that he visualized things metaphorically, like I did, and he'd assumed that I visualized things in infinite detail, like he did. Discovering his ability wowed me, just as discovering my inability baffled him.

"But wait," he started. "You love reading. How can you possibly enjoy it without being able to visualize the unfolding story? And you write fiction. How can you write stories and imagine all those scenes in your head without visualizing them? "

Fair questions—ones I really had to consider.

I had my first aha moment, as I call it, about reading. How could I enjoy reading so much, if I couldn't visualize? Long descriptions of scenery, what people wear and how they look bore me. I skim the content for the bare minimum and move on. *She was twenty, in the forest, and it was dark.* That's all I need. My brain considers the rest to be extraneous detail, window dressing. I'm all about the meat of the story—the action, how people feel, relationships, conflict and so on.

As for fiction writing, I didn't realize how big a role a visual imagination can play in the creative process. I simply write what I know, perceive and feel, without the visual component. For instance, I *know* what a car crash looks, sounds and feels like, so I can write about the experience, adding the window dressing as I go.

The meditation practitioner adopted a different approach with me; and my brain has done so, too, since birth. My brain has unconsciously devised strategies to bridge the gaps left by aphantasia. I learned and continue to learn. I thrived and continue to thrive. I'm curious and creative. I write imaginative stories, bending my capabilities in imaginative ways.

All of which raises two questions: What is "normal," anyway? And what is "different"?

I'm right-handed, an attribute shared by more than three-quarters of the world's population. I am in the majority. In this, I am *normal*.

I have green eyes, a physical characteristic deemed rare, since only 2 percent of humans have it. In this, I'm in the minority. I am *different*.

I can't see pictures in my head. I have aphantasia. It's more common than having green eyes, but far less so than being right-handed.

In this, I am not normal or different; I'm *neurodivergent*.

I am just me.