



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Learn: To gain knowledge or understanding of or skill in by study, instruction, or experience.”

-From Merriam-Webster's
Collegiate Dictionary, 11th
edition

I recently attended an exercise class at the Albany YMCA. It consisted of great music and many dance movements, all foreign to me. The hardest were the ones that require you to use opposite arms and legs at the same time – not my forte. To say I got one movement out of five would be generous. But I had a good time.

After the class, I started thinking about the challenge of learning something new. I remember many years ago I decided I wanted to learn horse jumping. It turned out the first step is to learn English riding style, including posting. Having grown up riding Western – I even had a horse for a short period of time – this was not easy. And, in addition, the group lesson teacher was impatient and not nice. I felt like a failure from the beginning and although I persisted for several months, I never did get to jump. I should have found a new teacher but instead I just let it go; I think my self-esteem couldn't

take any more at that point.

Acquiring a new skill requires setting aside your ego and being willing to make one mistake after another. It is challenging and humbling and I have always struggled with being not very good at something as I am learning.

Currently, I am taking Spanish. I have a great tutor who meets with me once a week and gives me real homework assignments. I study a little bit every day and I am making progress, but it is slow – it takes me about five minutes to put together one sentence in Spanish. I've learned how to say “Slowly” and “How do you say?” and both of them are essential.

This isn't the first time I've studied Spanish. When I was in 7th grade we had a few weeks of introductory Spanish and we memorized a dialogue I still remember. In fact, it has turned out to be extremely useful, since it includes questions like: “I would like to introduce

you to my friend” and “Where are you going now, Juan?”

I had a chance to use my small amount of Spanish recently when an ESL class from the Albany Adult School came to visit the Albany Library. The teacher called in advance to see if I could give her twenty beginning students a tour of the library and perhaps read them a simple children’s book. I had never hosted an adult class visit and I was curious what it would be like.

When the group arrived, I discovered exactly what beginning meant. On the whole, their English was like my Spanish: minimal. Instead, they spoke Hungarian, Tibetan, Chinese, Spanish, Farsi, Russian - and Spanish. When I started to read the book I had chosen, *Round Trip*, by Ann Jonas, I could immediately see that the language I had thought was simple was way too complicated for them. However, the

illustrations worked well, because they are designed to be seen right side up and upside down - so, the visual part of it was perfect. I ended up just choosing one image from each page and saying it aloud so they could each try it.

As I repeated the word over and over and watched each of those fully capable adults try to make their mouths say foreign words, like “stars” and “bridge,” I was impressed with their courage and their good humor. I had a wonderful time with them and I hope they all bring their new library cards and come visit again.