For those who have prosopagnosia or ‘face blindness,’ like Dr. Heather Sellers of the Hope English faculty, it’s a much bigger challenge. Their vision functions, but no face looks familiar, not ever.

“I have failed to recognize my step kids, my best friends, even my then-husband,” said Dr. Sellers, who has taught at Hope since 1995. “I can’t even recognize myself in a photo or video unless I remember what I was wearing that day, although my huge hair helps.”

Prosopagnosia is a neurological disorder through which the brain is unable to interpret the information that it receives from the face, with the effect of specifics to the situation or process that deals with face recognition. Researchers are still seeking to understand how prosopagnosia happens. Some who have it have suffered a head trauma, but others, like Dr. Sellers, have not. About two percent of the population is believed to have the disorder, with varying severity.

Dr. Sellers has been face-blind her entire life, but went nearly four decades without being diagnosed. Throughout her life she knew that something was wrong, but even at an early age she compensated by becoming adept at interpreting other cues such as hair style, clothing, voice and setting, which enabled her to minimize any indication that there was a problem—at least some of the time.

“When I was very young, the trouble wasn’t that apparent because the neighborhood or provided context—Pages always came out of Page’s house, Martha came out of Martha’s house,” she recalled. “But in my mid-30s, I wouldn’t necessarily recognize Page or Martha at school, let alone at the pool or the grocery store.”

The challenge intensified as her circle of friends and acquaintances broadened, such as during college.

“One day at the Spaghetti Station, on a date with a guy I was crazy about, I went to the bathroom,” she recalled. “When I came back, I decided, in a rash move, to sit on the same side of the booth as him. A few seconds later—I’ve already had a bad feeling—this guy—looks a lot like my date—is yelling at us…” I’d sat down with the wrong guy.”

At the age passed, she became increasingly aware that her experience was anything but typical, but had no idea why. She began to fear that she might be mentally ill. She did some investigating, and eventually connected with the Prosopagnosia Research Center at Harvard University, which confirmed through testing in 2005 that she was, as she puts it, “off-the-charts face blind.”

Dr. Sellers was relieved by the diagnosis, but after a lifetime of hiding her inability to recognize faces was initially reluctant to let others know.

“I believed people would assume I was mentally ill when they found out I was face blind,” she said. “I would worry I would lose my job, or that my judgment would be called into question. I feared no one would understand.”

She decided to start with a Hope faculty Dr. Lorna Hernandez Jarvis. A cognitive psychologist who had long been teaching about face blindness in her classes, she turned out to be a remarkably good choice.

“We’ve been running buddies for a long time, and we were on one of our runs,” Dr. Jarvis said. “I said, ‘That tends to be a very rare disorder. How did you figure it out?’ She just stopped and said, ‘I remember what I was wearing that day, although my huge hair helps.’”

Dr. Sellers next set about crafting an e-mail message to share the message with the rest of her faculty and staff colleagues. As a nationally acclaimed professional writer, Dr. Sellers is no stranger to either the hard work of putting words to paper nor how to do so well. Nevertheless, she struggled with that four-paragraph e-mail.

“I spent the whole summer writing the message and getting the courage to send it,” she said. “It was one of the hardest things I’d ever done in my life, because my whole life was structured around pretending to know, and here I was admitting that I didn’t know. That I had to have help.”

She mustn’t have worried.

“There was just this massive outpouring of support,” she said. “So many people wrote and said, ‘How can I be helpful to you?’”

The revolution has also been helpful in her teaching. While previously she was anxious about missing a name, relying on seating charts to help her get through, now she tells students about her disorder on the first day—and finds that they are universally understanding and thoughtful. Crucially, the conversation fosters openness and cooperation that she feels enrich her writing classes in a broader sense. “It’s just a calmer, more focused, more open, more honest place,” she said.

“The past five years, having this happen here, I just feel so lucky and so grateful to everyone here at Hope and Holland for helping me through this amazingly difficult experience,” she said. “I can’t imagine having gone through this someplace else.”

Dr. Sellers has since spoken around the country about her experience with face blindness. She has appeared on NBC’s Today show and ABC’s Dateline. In 2007 she gave a presentation about face blindness during the Winter Happening event coordinated by the college’s office of public and community relations.

To share her experience more broadly, she has also written a memoir, You Don’t Look Like Anyone I Know: A True Story of Family, Face Blindness, and Forgiveness, published earlier this fall by Riverhead Books. She started focusing on her face blindness, but soon found that her experience with prosopagnosia was only part of the story she needed to tell. The book sets her quest to identify and understand the disorder in the context of a childhood that she realized was significantly shaped by her parents’ struggles with mental illness and addictive behaviors—even as she loved them and they, clearly, loved her.

As she reflected, she found, unexpectedly, that face blindness provided a new perspective that she might otherwise have missed—a way of looking at people, and life, through their eyes rather than her own.

“I was isolated by this condition,” Dr. Sellers said. “And at the same time, it’s what connects me to other people: we all have this experience of trying to love others and that is something she would ‘see’ someone, know which person they are.”

“Love is recognition,” she said. “My whole life—until age 30—was very childlike, as I turned out to be that kind of school in vision, in knowing, in some other kind of recognition. A childlike knowing.”

She hopes that others who read about her journey may find help in their own.

“In some ways, every person is a part of their own story,” she said. “I hope that it helps someone who’s struggling to fit together parts that maybe don’t all fit. That’s my hope, that it’s a positive story.”

NOTE: Copies of You Don’t Look Like Anyone I Know: A True Story of Family, Face Blindness, and Forgiveness are available through the college’s Hope-Geneva Bookstore, which can be visited online at www.hope.edu/bookstore/ or called at 800-946-4673.)