Words Failed, Then Saved Me

OPINION

BY PHILIP SCHULTZ

A winner of the Pulitzer Prize for poetry and the author of the forthcoming memoir "My Dyslexia."

I WAS well into middle age when one of my children, then in the second grade, was found to be dyslexic. I had never known the name for it, but I recognized immediately that the symptoms were also mine. When I was his age I'd already all but given up on myself.

Repeating third grade at a new school, after having been asked to leave my old one for hitting kids who made fun of my perceived stupidity, I was placed in the "dummy class." There were three of us, separated from our classmates at a table in the corner of the room. One day, the teacher, who seldom spoke to us since it was understood that most of what she taught was beyond the reach of our intelligence, placed books in our hands and whispered that we should sit there quietly "pretending to read." The principal was coming.

It was not the most outlandish thing she might've said, given how little was known about learning disabilities in the early 1950s, and how little training a teacher in the poorest section of Rochester would have received. And her request seemed reasonable to me. I couldn't tie my shoes, tell time or left from right, or recreate musical notes or words. I not only couldn't read but often couldn't hear or understand what was being said to me — by the time I'd processed the beginning of a sentence, the teacher was well on her way through a second or third. When I did have something to say I couldn't find the words with which to say it, or if I could, forgot how to pronounce them.

My situation then seemed hopeless; I had no idea what a learning disability was, or that it had nothing to do with intelligence. Being asked to pretend I wasn't as stupid as I feared made perfect sense. Only in recollection does the pain of such a moment make itself felt.

So this summer's news that research is increasingly tying dyslexia not just to reading, but also to the way the brain processes spoken language, was no surprise to me. I found many ways around my dyslexia, but I still have trouble transforming words into sounds. I have to memorize and rehearse before reading anything aloud, to avoid embarrassing myself by mispronouncing words. And because learning a foreign language is sheer torture to dyslexics (even though it's a requirement in many schools), to this day I can't attend a High Holy Day service at my synagogue without feeling I don't belong there, because I can't speak Hebrew and must pretend to read my prayer book.

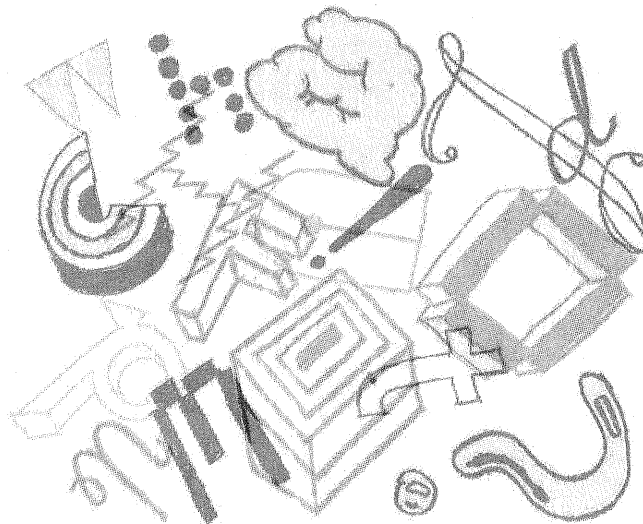
When I did finally learn to read, my teachers didn't have much to do with it. I was 11, and even my school-appointed tutors had given up on me. My mother read the one thing I would listen to — Blackhawk comics — over and over again, hoping against hope that by some leap of faith or chance I would start to identify letters and then learn to arrange them into words and sentences, and begin the intuitive, often magical, process of turning written language into spoken language.

One night, lying in bed as she read to me, I realized that if I was ever going to learn to read I would have to teach myself. The moon glowing outside my window, I remember, seemed especially interested in my predicament, perhaps attempting its own kind of encouragement. Was it a dummy, too? I wondered. If only I could be another boy, a boy my age who could sound out words and read and write like every other kid I knew.

I willed myself into being him. I invented a character who could read and write. Starting that night, I'd lie in bed silently imitating the words my mother read, imagining the taste, heft and ring of each sound as if it were coming out of my mouth. I imagined being able to sound out the words by putting the letters together into units of rhythmic sound and the words into sentences that made sense. I imagined the words and their sounds being a kind of key with which I would open an invisible door to a world previously denied me.

And suddenly I was reading. I didn't know then that I was beginning a lifelong love affair with the first-person voice and that I would spend most of my life inventing characters to say all the things I wanted to say. I didn't know that I was to become a poet, that in many ways the very thing that caused me so much confusion and frustration, my belabored relationship with words, had created in me a deep appreciation of language and its music, that the same mind that prevented me from reading had invented a new way of reading, a method that I now use to teach others how to overcome their own difficulties in order to write fiction and poetry. (It's perhaps not surprising that many famous writers are said to have struggled with dyslexia, including F. Scott Fitzgerald and W. B. Yeats.)

For years dyslexia kept me from learning to read. Then it made me a poet.



We know now that dyslexia is about so much more than just mixing up letters — that many dyslexics have difficulty with rhythm and meter and word retrieval, that they struggle to recognize voices and sounds. It's my profound hope that our schools can use findings like these to better teach children who struggle to read, to help them overcome their limitations, and to help them understand that it's not their fault.

We knew so much less when I was a child. Then, all I wanted and needed, when I learned so painstakingly to read and then to write, was to find a way to be less alone. Which is, of course, what spoken and written language is really all about.

But poetry should be a matter of passion, not survival.