

# ADAM

## A Mother's Story

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By Valerie Halliwell-Smith

"Errors are windows into a child's mind," says Margaret Rawson, who champions support for dyslexics and campaigns to educate the general public. Her comments at the 1990 annual fall conference of the Orton Dyslexia Society in Washington, D. C., jettisoned me back five years to my son's first-grade experience.

Though I had worked for 11 years as a guidance counselor with both high schoolers and college-age students, I lacked even a hazy understanding of Specific Learning Disabilities (SLDs). Looking back, I recall many students who struggled unknowingly with learning problems. Even now they probably define themselves as failures and as less intelligent than their peers. Their potential remains locked within them, waiting to be recognized and released.

Five years ago I had my own consciousness raised. Career opportunities took me from the West Coast to employment as a guidance counselor for two large Adventist elementary schools in the Washington, D.C., area.

To prepare for my new responsibilities, I took some professional workshops and classes at the National Institute of Dyslexia in nearby Chevy Chase, Maryland. These courses introduced me to variant learning styles, learning disabilities, teaching strategies, and diagnostic tests.

At that time my seven-year-old son, Adam, was making slow progress in his new world of reading. Frustrations mounted. Suddenly I realized that he was exhibiting many characteristics of the specific learning disabled. I remembered earlier criticisms from a well-meaning onlooker who thought my child should be more restrained in church. I recalled that the night nurse had advised me following his difficult delivery, "Be sure to

get your sleep. You'll need it. Your son is doing pushups in the nursery."

Adam acted out his frustration through occasional hostile acts such as hitting other children in preschool and kindergarten. Teachers thought he might be hyperactive, but the pediatrician assured us, "He's just all boy."

Near the end of kindergarten, Adam's teacher, Mrs. Tungesvik, called us for a conference. She suggested kindly, "Another year of kindergarten would help Adam a lot."

Since we have always put a great deal of confidence in teacher observations and judgment, we eagerly gave Adam "the gift of time." But even entering first grade as a seven-year-old did not solve his learning problems and frustrations.

Near the end of his first-grade year, Adam and I sat in a noisy Italian restaurant awaiting my husband's arrival. Laughter, boisterous talking, and the clatter of dishes reverberated through the room. Adam cradled his head between his hands, burst into tears, and announced angrily, "I don't like it here. I want to get out. My head hurts."

At the time I wondered why he didn't appreciate the opportunity to eat out. Only later did I realize the problem. His oversensitivity to sounds and inability to filter unimportant stimuli signaled a learning disability.

But this vigorously athletic child seemed so precocious! His first word at six months was "Hi." Though I was warned that he might not walk until well into his first year because of his weight (30 pounds by one year), he ran across a lengthy living room at nine months. How could a child assemble intricate Lego designs, but not tie his shoelaces until late in the second grade?

Adam's language development appeared normal. He often engaged in

very adult chatter, quite wittily structured at times. Teachers and other adults commented on his humor and cleverness. The inconsistency of his behavior puzzled us.

In looking back over the years, I believe that our move to Washington, D. C., was truly providential. God and I have usually been on quite practical terms. My experiences as a partner with Him have convinced me that nothing less than a miracle transported us to "the right place at the right time" for Adam's sake.

Sligo Adventist School was until recently the only SDA elementary school in North America employing a full-time academic therapist to work exclusively with children who learn to read nontraditionally. Using the Orton-Gillingham method of language retraining (sometimes referred to as "Alphabetic Phonics"), Lucilla Ranzolin takes children with specific language disabilities through this highly systematic, phonetic approach to learning each sound of the English language. This unique program introduces the learner to sounds by using all four senses (auditory, visual, kinesthetic, and tactile) *simultaneously*. It is this distinct feature that sets the program apart from all others and ensures its effectiveness.

For example, the learner who processes visual information incorrectly (reversing symbols and transposing letter or word sequence) can rely on the other three senses to decode an apparently confusing world. Since 90 percent of the English language is highly consistent, this technique introduces the student to the linguistic structure of the language.

Adam was diagnosed as "learning disabled" in late January of first grade. This

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occurred just as both his veteran first-grade teacher and I were receiving special training from the National Institute of Dyslexia.

Adam had been referred for testing because he hadn't achieved the typical progress in reading that most first graders should have by that time of year. Since his teacher, Betty Lunsford, had to do a practicum connected with our course, she chose him and another child from her classroom as subjects. The practicum consisted of 30 sessions of 45 minutes each.

Thus began Adam's journey through the Orton systematic approach. Three months later at the end of first grade he had achieved some success in decoding.

Adam continued with his academic therapist throughout second grade. This gave him the foundation he needed for success in an academic environment.

Third grade found Adam functioning at an average to above-average level at school. Behavior problems recurred from time to time, but persistent efforts and a consistently enforced system of rewards helped to make it a successful year. Adam, his principal, homeroom teacher, and parents all signed contracts. This helped him to focus clearly on a few specific behaviors such as staying in his seat and not talking without raising his hand.

Adam's fourth-grade teacher adeptly built on his past successes. Imagine our amazement when we received report cards with all "A's" the third and fourth quarter. And the grades were well-earned. Adam's teacher had confidence in him, and it showed. Her careful structuring of many hands-on science and social studies experiences was exactly what he needed to make school enjoyable. Being required to read a half-hour a day also helped Adam to improve his reading skills. He had now developed many good coping strategies.

As a fifth grader Adam still occasionally reads "saw" as "was." He does not read for fun. He needs help in refining his social skills, but his frustration level is a lot lower than several years ago.

Adam knows that his biology has left him with a less-than-perfect nervous system. He also realizes that with persistence and hard work, he can overcome most of the challenges he will meet in the classroom. Excelling in a number of areas has given him a healthy self-concept.

Adam's "disabilities" will probably always be with him, according to the research. However, he has gained effective coping skills. These help him organize his world in a less frustrating, more meaningful way. He knows there is more than one way to do a task or to learn a lesson.

Like the rest of us, Adam is on a journey. He has not arrived at a destination. New obstacles will surely test our patience. However, as his parents, we can teach him to be his own advocate and to accept responsibility for his own learning. □

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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the security of denial ("This doesn't happen to me and mine—she must have brought it on herself"). We are numbed by a topic like rape, and paralyzed in our attempts to deal with it.

So I wondered: Could a book from a church press honestly address the topic of rape? Could a book with a sweet title like *Laura* (in pink letters) deal with such a vicious topic? Could a book by an evangelist's wife allow needed room for pain without being too quick to "praise the Lord"?

To my surprise, yes, it could.

I can now say that I recommend this book. I extol it to others for their own awareness and protection. I recommend it to my friends so they can better understand the terror I experienced. I believe its insights will help them learn how to relate to me and to others who have been abused.

The book states unequivocally that rape is a crime of violence, not sexual satisfaction. Rape is not the victim's fault (no matter where she was or what she was wearing). Anyone of either gender, of any age can be raped. Rape victims often suffer from shame, although they have done nothing wrong. They fear for their lives during the attack and long afterward.

For those who feel helpless when they learn that someone they care about has been raped, Laura Fisk offers some helpful suggestions: Believe them. Congratulate them on what they did to survive (no matter what it was). Don't tell them what they should have done differently. Listen to them even though that is difficult and uncomfortable. Respect their extreme fears and help them secure their surroundings. Help them find appropriate counseling. But most of all, *believe them.*

Three chapters of the book deal with incest and spousal abuse. The author points out misunderstanding of Scriptures that contribute to the rate of abuse in evangelical Christian families, which is higher than in other families.

For whom is this book written? Women and men of all ages, including those of high school and college age. With guidance, even younger people may benefit from it since, sadly, they and/or their friends may be subject to abuse and rape. However, for pre-high school age and some older students, the book should be supplemented with other materials on incest and abuse written from a child's perspective.

The book does not replace parents and teachers who are willing to listen and be supportive. Parts of the book that describe how victims have been controlled or set up are very frightening and may need to be omitted or presented with supportive discussion.

Some rape and abuse survivors will have trouble relating to Laura's particularly vibrant relationship with God. But even if their own spiritual walk differs, they will find dozens of helpful and affirming observations in her book.—Sarah Wolf.

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*Sarah Wolf is a pseudonym for an Adventist pastoral-care professional involved in counseling. Ms. Wolf lives in the North American Division, holds an Ed.D., and has worked for years with teenagers.*

**Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary, Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1989. Hardcover, 319 pages, \$25.95.**

If a Pulitzer Prize were available for the best book about the rise and current condition of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the United States, Bull and Lockhart would win "hands down." The authors did not write this interdisciplinary book in scholarly detachment, since they both come from Adventist homes. Lockhart's firsthand connection is stronger, as a former student at both Newbold College and Andrews University and as an Adventist teacher before becoming a newspaper reporter.

Capitalizing on a two-decades-long interest in church history among Adventist historians such as Ronald Graybill, Don McAdams, Ronald Numbers, and Richard Schwarz, and further informed by the publication of *Adventist Heritage* and *Spectrum*, Bull and Lockhart provide the most original thesis yet developed to help sew the separate strands of Adventist studies into a seamless garment.

Although the book is based on the best