

God Leads The Handicapped, Too

By Dwain L. Ford

I am going to let you in on some secrets that I have never before discussed publicly and have shared privately with very few. I am doing this to increase awareness about a problem that faces us as teachers almost every day, yet usually goes undetected.

The National Institute of Health estimates that this problem afflicts 15 percent of American students. Since a large number of adults are also affected, I'm sure that I am not the only Adventist college teacher who suffers from the incurable affliction known as dyslexia.

Though I'd known for years that I had a problem, not until this school year did I confirm that my problem was dyslexia with mild dysgraphia. Dyslexia is a significant difficulty in using language at a level commensurate with a person's ability. People with this problem have varying symptoms. I'd like to share some of my personal experiences with dyslexia and how it has affected my life, my career, and my teaching.

Reading Difficulties

Early in my elementary school days, the teacher frequently called on me to read aloud because she thought I needed extra practice to overcome my reading problem. I was good at phonics and could pronounce new words well, but my reading was slow and halting. Sometimes I skipped a word.

In spite of her efforts and my lifelong attempts to improve, reading is still a significant problem for me. Although I have tried many recommendations to improve my speed, I still read an average book at about 20 pages per hour. This slow pace caused havoc in my schedule in academy and college, since I had significant outside reading assignments in Bible, history, and English. Today it severely limits the number of current publications I can keep up with.

Oral reading also gives me problems. Giving the Scripture reading for chapel was a real struggle during my years as academic dean. I generally read the verse several times before I left my

office to minimize the chance that I might leave out a word or invert the word order. I didn't want the student body to be embarrassed by attending a university where the academic dean had obvious difficulty in reading.

Writing Difficulties

If you examined my elementary school report cards you would immediately notice the string of D's in penmanship that stand in stark contrast to the other grades. This was the first evidence of my dysgraphia, or problem with writing. Although I have worked diligently to improve my writing so that it is clear and legible, it is still a problem. It takes me about twice as long as other people to write a one-page letter.

I have to watch every letter as I write it to make sure that I am spelling the words the way my brain knows they should be spelled. I also have to scrutinize every word I write on the blackboard. Several times in a typical class period, I have to erase part of a word because I omitted letters, reversed the order of letters, wrote a letter or syllable twice, or added letters having nothing to do with the word. Omitting a word or writing the same word twice is not uncommon.

My problems with misspelling are unrelated to the difficulty of the word or how well I know its proper spelling. Occasionally I even leave a letter out of my own signature. In preparing the rough draft for this article, I caught myself misspelling about a hundred words that I knew how to spell.

As you might expect, these writing problems reduced my ability to take notes in class or lectures. The problem that diminished my writing skills also markedly reduced my typing speed at a computer terminal.

My difficulties with reading and writing combine when I try to proofread what I have written. For example, I inverted the order of letters of an important word on the title page of my doc-

toral dissertation, and failed to discover it until after I had turned in the final copies and had to submit a corrected page.

Oral Expression

The third aspect of my language handicap has to do with oral expression. I know what I want to say, but I sometimes have difficulty saying it. Since dyslexia is hereditary, it is not surprising that my father and some of my brothers have exhibited similar difficulties. At a recent alumni gathering, some of the biggest laughs of the weekend came when members of the 50-year class mimicked my father's speech.

A few months ago a friend passed on to me a publication, that has nationwide circulation within the SDA Church, which illustrated the level of impact that dyslexia can have on both the speaker and listener. An article in this publication made it clear that the difficulty my father had in expressing his concern about irreverent behavior in religious services was remembered as clearly as what he said 58 years ago.

Personal History

When I was in elementary school I wanted to become a minister, so I took careful notes on the sermons at church. I had years of sermon notes by the time I finished eighth grade. At that age I decided that my communication skills would be an impediment to my success in the ministry. Consequently, I decided to follow in the footsteps of my older brother who became a medical doctor.

In 1946, while I was pursuing that goal in college, H. F. Halenz, my organic chemistry teacher, told us, "there is always a crying need for good teachers." The next semester I started to prepare for teaching. Though he had encouraged me to go into teaching, Dr. Halenz later admitted that he had not been confident that I could succeed because of my poor communication skills.

After graduation from Emmanuel Missionary College, I began my teaching career at Wisconsin Academy. I taught

algebra, geometry, physics, chemistry and biology, general math, and auto mechanics. Occasionally I was contacted by one of our colleges to see if I had a master's degree and was willing to teach at the college level. One time, when Dr. Floyd Rittenhouse visited Wisconsin Academy, I asked his advice. He urged me to go to graduate school, and so I did after much prayer and study.

After he saw my Graduate Record Examination scores, one of my chemistry professors remarked, "I would never have believed a person could earn the 99th percentile on chemistry and yet earn only the 1st percentile on the reading portion of the exam. But that is what you did." Apparently the National Science Foundation looked at my chemistry score rather than my reading score, because they gave me three different scholarships.

You may be wondering how a language handicapped person could succeed as a teacher or an academic dean, to say nothing of being honored for teaching excellence. The answer is, God still answers prayer and keep His promises.

Effects of Dyslexia

My limitation has affected me in several ways:

1. It has markedly suppressed my natural tendency to pride.
2. It has increased my dependence upon God to achieve my objectives.
3. It has given God more opportunity to fulfill His promises in answer to my prayers.
4. It has caused me to think more about why I am teaching and how success can be achieved in spite of my handicap.
5. It has caused me to seek His counsel on what to teach and how to teach it.
6. It made me realize that I may have to work longer hours than some others to achieve certain goals.

I would like to share with you some of Ellen G. White's counsels on Christian education that have become especially precious to me as a language-handicapped person who is seeking to be an effective teacher.

God is not dependent upon men of perfect education.... There is no limit to the usefulness of those, who put self to one side, make room for the working of the Holy Spirit upon their hearts, and live lives wholly consecrated to God, enduring the necessary discipline imposed by the Lord without complaining or fainting by the way.¹

It is a real encouragement to know that God can use me under the guidance of His Spirit in spite of my limitations. I'm thankful for the assurance of Romans 12:6: "God has given each of us the ability to do certain things well"

(TLB).²

I believe that Christ is the Master Teacher. Implementing His methods offers me the best chance for success in spite of my limitations. His example and counsel through the Scriptures point me to secrets of success.

The teacher's usefulness depends... upon the standard at which he aims. His life is one of continual growth. In the work of such a teacher there is a freshness, a quickening power, that awakens and inspires his pupils.³

In three of my advanced classes about 80 percent of what I present I have learned since leaving the dean's office in 1981. I design many class laboratory experiments to investigate questions to which no one knows the answer, so my students and I share the joy of trying to find the answers.

The teacher must *be* what he desires his pupils to *become*.⁴

With the dull pupil he should bear patiently, not censuring his ignorance, but improving every opportunity to give him encouragement. With the sensitive, nervous pupils he should deal very tenderly.⁵

Ellen White, in the quote above, indicated that we should use every opportunity to give encouragement. I know that some students feel considerable anxiety about enrolling in organic chemistry class. So on the first day of class I make it clear that I am there to help them. I want every one of them to be successful in the course.

I hand back my examinations the next class period after they were taken. I then go over the exam in detail. This helps the students see that they had the background to answer every question. I encourage the ones who have stumbled. I tell them that there is still hope, and offer suggestions and help. I know that if a student remains discouraged and gives up, he will fail or withdraw from the class.

Christ discerned the possibilities in every human being. He was not turned aside by an unpromising exterior.⁶

[Christ] watched the faces of His hearers, marked the lighting up of the countenance, the quick, responsive, glance, which told that truth had reached the soul.⁷

The greatest of teachers are those who are most patient, most kind.⁸

The teacher should carefully study the disposition and character of his pupils, that he may adapt his teaching to their particular needs.⁹

I frequently have students in my classes who show symptoms of dyslexia. Knowing that it takes them longer to express what they have learned, I arrange to give extra time if they need it. I want to base their grade on what they know and not on the severity of their dyslexia. I am willing to help them obtain lecture notes and take oral exams if that seems advisable.

He [the teacher] must have also the tact and skill, the patience and firmness, that will enable him to impart to each the needed help—to the vacillating and ease loving, such encouragement and assistance as will be a stimulus to exertion; to the discouraged, sympathy and appreciation that will create confidence and thus inspire effort.¹⁰

The teacher should pray with his students.¹¹

Many of my most memorable experiences have occurred when I prayed with my students regarding family or financial crises, career or life companion choices, conflicts with other students or faculty, unexpected losses, rape or pregnancy, or their personal spiritual or academic problems.

In conclusion, I want to share with you what I consider our ultimate challenge as teachers. This statement also offers hope of success in spite of our handicaps:

Do not feel that your work as teachers is done unless you can lead your scholars to faith in Jesus and love for Him. Let the love of Christ pervade your own souls, and then you will unconsciously teach it to others. When you as instructors commit yourselves unreservedly to Jesus, for Him to lead, to guide, to control, *you will not fail*. Teaching your students to be Christians is the greatest work before you. Go to God; He hears and answers prayer. Put from you questionings, doubts, and unbelief. Let no harshness come into your teaching. Be not too exacting, but cultivate tender sympathy and love. Be cheerful. Do not scold, do not censure too severely; be firm, be broad, be Christlike, pitiful, courteous.¹² □

This article is based on a January 27, 1991, devotional address to the Andrews University faculty.

REFERENCES

¹ Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1943), p. 409.

² The Bible verse marked "TLB" is taken from *The Living Bible, Paraphrased* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1971), and is used by permission.

³ Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1903), p. 278.

⁴ ———, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Assn., 1923), p. 58.

⁵ *Education*, p. 292.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

⁸ *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, p. 269.

⁹ *Education*, p. 231.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

¹¹ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1948), vol. 8, p. 61.

¹² *Ibid.*, vol. 5, p. 590. Italics supplied.

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