

# From dyslexia to poetry

*They laughed at my struggle to read, says Philip Schultz, but fighting back made me into a writer.*

**T**HIS MUCH IS clear: The mind of a dyslexic is different from the minds of other people. Learning that my problem with processing language wasn't stupidity seemed to take most of my life. Like every other important trade-off in life, giving up this negative image of myself has been complicated and difficult. I'd grown accustomed to seeing myself as someone who, if fallible and unworthy, had nevertheless managed to do one thing well enough to get recognition for it. I'd learned to accommodate and live around my compromised self in a somewhat comfortable and acceptable manner. Since I was 10, I'd taught myself to live a life of opposites—because I couldn't do *this* I learned to enjoy doing *that*, a compensatory way of swimming against constantly shifting currents. It worked well enough: I was happily married, had two terrific boys, a career as a writer, and a private school—which, I would soon come to understand, had been created out of the very thinking process I used to compensate for my dyslexia—all accomplishments of which I was very proud.

The act of translating what for me are the mysterious symbols of communication into actual comprehension has always been a hardship to me. I often read a sentence two or three times before I truly understand it; must restructure its syntax and sound out its syllables before I can begin to absorb its meaning and move on to the next sentence. And when I make the mistake of becoming aware that I am reading, and behaving in a way that enables this mysterious, electrically charged process to take place, my mind balks and goes blank and I become anxious and stop.

For reasons I'll never fully understand, or perhaps don't even want to, I dislike the peculiar, obstinate, slightly out-of-control way in which my mind behaves when I'm reading. I can never just sit down and begin reading, I must first trick myself into it by playing endless games of solitaire on my computer, or reheating my tea, or taking another walk with my dog, Penelope.

But once I'm actually reading, once I've convinced myself that it's in my best interest to engage in this struggle, I proceed haltingly at first, hesitating at the beginning of each new thought and sentence, as if accruing additional strength and courage. And while reading I must sell myself a

bill of goods, convince myself that what I'm reading is so fascinating and valuable, so compelling that it's worth the effort. I must remind myself at regular intervals that having to constantly reread sentences is both sensible and necessary, an act of self-discipline, fortitude, and concentration that ultimately will benefit me not only as a person but as a writer.

I often forget the meaning of words I've looked up many times before and must consult a dictionary, as I frequently consult a thesaurus while writing to make sure I've selected the right word. As I read, a kind of subtle bartering between uncertainty and hunger for knowledge goes on in my mind, in which I must conquer a feeling of hopelessness and anxiety. I've learned to read the way a runner learns to expect and find his second and third winds, the way an athlete pushes himself beyond where it is comfortable to go. I read word by word, sometimes congratulating myself on the completion of each sentence, each paragraph and chapter. Perhaps this is why it's particularly hard for me to read anything that isn't well written and moving; why I became a poet, because poetry is so compressed and is often beautifully written and moving.

All of which, without doubt, makes the fact of my being a writer even more strange and, to a degree, wonderfully preposterous.

I remember the first time I even considered the idea of being a writer. I was in the fifth grade when my reading tutor, whom I had been forced to see after my parents were threatened with the possibility of yet another expulsion, asked me out of the blue what I thought I might like to do with my life.

Without a moment's hesitation, I answered that I wanted to be a writer.

My reading tutor was a retired grade-school principal, a good-natured, slightly stern man who was so overweight that the opening in his desk couldn't accommodate the width of his belly and he sat so far away from it he couldn't easily reach anything on his desktop. When he laughed his belly moved in gelatinous waves all the way from his chin down to his knees. And now he was laughing, really laughing. What was so funny about a boy who couldn't read at the age of 11 saying he wanted to become someone who spends

most of his time doing precisely that? The fact that I couldn't read didn't mean that I never would, I thought. I always assumed I would one day, and what difference would it then make? But Mr. Joyce—and only many years later did I appreciate the irony of his name—couldn't stop laughing. He



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kept wiping the tears from his eyes, apologizing, and then starting up again, laughing even harder this time.

"Philip, my dear boy, why in the world do you imagine you want to do something for the rest of your life that has been so hard for you to do on its most basic level?" he asked, holding his belly as if to control further eruptions.

I could only manage a small shrug. I had absolutely no idea why. And I wasn't insulted, I was just curious.

"How long have you wanted to be a writer?"

"Not very long," I ventured.

"How long then?"

"Since you asked me. I never thought about it before."

Now he started laughing again, with even greater force and enthusiasm.

Later that night, in bed, after I told my mother what I'd told Mr. Joyce and we

another January day two years earlier when my mother had been called to my previous school by my teacher and the school principal.

**M**Y THIRD-GRADE teacher told my mother that I never followed instructions, paid attention, or obeyed the simplest directions. I left class when I pleased and got into fights with other boys, the principal told her. I'd rubbed a boy's face against a cement culvert in the playground the day before, cutting his cheek and mouth. What they didn't tell her is what this boy, along with other boys, had said to me to make me so angry: He said I was a dummy who couldn't learn anything. So I did what I saw my father and my uncle do when someone insulted them, what all the tough guys in all the movies and on TV did when insulted—I hit kids, with all my strength, to make them stop laughing shoat me.

The principal told my mother that he saw no other recourse than to expel me from school. As he spoke my mother's eyes grew small and hard. She was trying not to cry, I thought, because she didn't want him to see how much this was hurting her. But why didn't they tell her what those kids had done? They had mimicked my stuttering—why weren't their mothers called to school? He looked and spoke only to her, as if I weren't there,

standing next to her, as if I were invisible. It was the way I felt in school, listening to the teacher talk only to the other children, as if she didn't think I would understand what she was saying, as if it was a waste of time talking to me. Since I couldn't be expected to begin my next school at the fourth grade, the principal added, I was being held back a year.

It was snowing as we walked home, but my mother didn't seem to notice the snow, or that I was hurrying to keep up with her. She always held my hand, but not now. She was walking quickly, as if trying to

get away from me. When she slipped on ice and fell into a slush puddle and just sat there, looking up at me, sighing, I wanted to keep on walking.

My mother never lied to me. She'd told me what the big scar on her belly was, because they had cut her open to pull me out so I could be born. She told me that I didn't have a brother or sister because she had lost a baby girl the year before I was born and her doctor said it was too dangerous for her to give birth again. She wanted me so much she didn't care, she said. Each night while putting me to sleep she'd tell me how much she loved me, that I was the best thing that ever happened to her. And that she wanted me to do well in school because she'd loved going to school, loved learning with all her heart, but that her Polish immigrant father made her leave school to help support their family. She told me how much she hated being uneducated and not knowing things everyone else knew. I would change all that for her, she said. I would do everything she couldn't do. I would make something out of myself. I would make her proud.

And now I was being held back and kicked out of school and going to the worst school in upstate New York. I wasn't the one thing in her life that she'd done right.

She sat there, in the wet snow, looking up at me.

Anything was better than seeing her this way, I thought. Anything.

And now I was reading. And my mother was smiling at me.

"Philip," she said, "you're reading, all by yourself!"

"Yes," I said, "I'm reading!"

"Is it because you told Mr. Joyce you wanted to be a writer and he laughed at you?"

"I didn't care if he laughed."

"But you're reading, Philip. Like you always knew how."

Yes, I thought, like I always really knew how.

And if you can read, you can write, I thought to myself.

It was that simple.

*From the book My Dyslexia. ©2011 by Philip Schultz, reprinted courtesy of W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. Schultz is the author of seven collections of poetry, including Failure, which won the 2008 Pulitzer Prize in poetry.*



were reading my Blackhawk comic books together—she would read the words aloud and I would imitate the sounds, as if reading them myself—I surprised both of us by interrupting her and actually reading the words. I remember the way she sat there, staring at me, her eyes wide as I read without pausing for breath, afraid if I stopped I would never be able to begin again. I sang each word, smiling, looking over her shoulder at the January moon, which I could see through my torn window shade, big and gaunt-looking, smiling down at me, it seemed, as if with wonder. It was the same wonder I felt as I remembered