Braille and Lockdown

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We have been locked up at home for too long now as a result of of a pandemic that’s devastating the whole world. We can’t do the shopping or go to social gatherings or events where we can interact with others. A few months ago, we didn’t have time to watch television, phone a relative to ask about their health or play with the kids…now, we have more time than we need.

Having said this, I find the methods we use to communicate with others at a distance cold and boring. The synthetic voices in my computer annoy me. The press and TV bring us more than enough information and shocking figures about the number of deaths and infection rates. I can’t stand the WhatsApp messages with videos and photos I can’t see but have no text and, quite often, the jokes are in bad taste. But how can I fill these days of forced loneliness? My mind is sombre.

Then suddenly a marvellous genius by the name of Louis Braille, inventor of the tactile reading and writing system of the same name, based on just six dots, a system that has saved so many blind people from illiteracy over the past two hundred years, brings me a ray of light.

“Where are those books you bought as part of the “A book a month” collection? The ones you stopped reading when you discovered new technologies. And where are those folders with your most intimate memories of when you were a child and a teenager?”

Fantastic! Thanks to Louis’ suggestions I have something to keep me entertained for several weeks. I switched off the TV and the computer right away, went up into the attic and, in a matter of minutes, I was in my room with those boxes full of books, folders and memories. I put on a CD of relaxing music and let it play.

Oh, a letter from Julia, the teacher in the village. Alphabet in hand, she taught herself braille and sent this letter to the school where I was studying. It caused me more than a few headaches as I tried to read it in every direction - vertically, horizontally and perpendicularly – but it was impossible to decipher. It was written using a slate and stylus and after a few attempts I reached the conclusion Julia had written it from left to right, just as sighted people write using a pen. So, I had to read it the other way round, from right to left. It was tough work but with a happy ending because I was able to understand what she had written.

And here, in this other compartment, are my never-ending maths exercises, with the equations and calculations Tomas, my teacher, set me, the ones I always got wrong! Now I think about what it would be like to do these exercises on a computer. I’m sure it would be impossible for me because I’m incapable of working with Excel rows, cells and columns.

I go on looking through the box with my fingers and a laugh from my throat echoes around the room. Pepe’s assignment! I asked him to do it when I had the bright idea of working as a braille monitor at the ONCE branch office in Cuenca. He had to write five words related to braille and, when he had finished, he handed it to me: stylus, paper, brailler, slate and…

“There’s a word missing”, I said with a smile.

He read the words several times and insisted everything was correct, but I insisted it wasn’t so he gave me the piece of paper again to check it.

“There’s one missing. It says “cot” here.

Pepe’s embarrassment and everyone’s laughs make for a great story. Without meaning to, he had given us one of the funniest moments of the course, and so I decided to keep that amusing memento.

I go on reading and, at the same time, listening to the music, which comforts me more and more. Then I realise that if, instead of reading braille, I had been listening to a voice synthesiser, I wouldn’t be able to listen to both at the same time, because the sound would come from the same loudspeaker. Braille and technology are not at odds; they go together, complement each other and can help a blind person learn more and better and be more independent. But there are times, like this one I’m telling you about, when we need to choose one system or another.

What’s this? Ah, it’s my little book of mysteries and litany of the holy rosary! That’s what I called this manuscript I wrote with the help of my mother’s dictation. I caress it and take the firm decision to pray from it every day, after going out onto my balcony to applaud as hard as I can the health workers who are looking after us and giving their all to save us from the coronavirus.

I lift the cover of my watch and, on the braille dial, I see it is five minutes to eight. That’s when I drop everything and clap my hands enthusiastically for a good long time. I return to my room and, rosary and book in hand, I pray fervently, asking Louis to intercede with our father for all the sick people who are suffering, all the relatives who fear they will pass away, and all the health workers who, at the risk of becoming infected, work tirelessly to cure us.

I finish my prayers and grab something for dinner, then I go to bed with a braille book I’ve read a hundred times but will read a hundred times more. I am completely overcome by a sense of inner peace and tranquillity I have never felt before. And now, more than ever, I understand what braille means to me. Thanks to braille, which will always be there when we most need it, I feel surrounded by friends, teachers, family and characters from the books I read.

And, little by little, I fall asleep. I hope my dreams are sweet.