**Name**: Helena Björnsdóttir REDDING

**Gender**: Female

**Age**: 53.

**Country**: Iceland

**Ebu national organisation**: Blindrafélagið (The Icelandic association of the visually impaired),

**Words in the original language**: 778

**To braille or not to braille – that is the question.**

For 20 odd years, I’ve had this exhausting love-hate relationship with braille. As most things in life seem to evolve in cycles, so does this relationship. It brings me now full circle, and even beyond my initial awe of the stroke of genius, this dotted language is.

Learning to read printed matter was rather a painstaking experience. Though a slow reader at first, I got to grips with it in time. Little by little, I threw myself into the wondrous world of books.

As my sight deteriorated, so unfortunately did my relationship with literature. A friend introduced me to braille, teaching me the alphabet, and I suddenly saw the possibility of reading again. My patience, however, was limited. As rheumatism crept into my fingers, the alluring sound of the synthetic speech took hold. It was easy, self-explanatory and meant I could get back into the true joy of reading book upon book in no time at all. I was in bliss; Dickens, Shakespeare, Bronte and Dickinson, all visited frequently, and I would rest in the soft sound of their shared thoughts and characters.

When grandchildren arrived, they each took my heart into their hands whilst wrapping me around their little innocent fingers. I tried to introduce audiobooks to them, but they brought their own books, wanting me to read them aloud. This was heartbreaking. I was studying literature at the time and getting positive feedback on the work I handed in. Good grades for everything except for my spelling! That came as a total shock to me. Being trilingual, I had always put a lot of effort into grammar and spelling. How could I be losing my grip on the language?

After an elongated, woeful slumber party, I concluded that my lack of actual physical reading was causing me to lose control of the written language. On the one hand, it was difficult to check for spelling mistakes on my computer using synthetic speech; on the other hand, it seemed to be a classic case of knowledge seeping out due to lack of use. Something had to be done, and quickly at that!

I signed up for a course in braille. There were seven of us on the course in all, all at different reading levels. It was tough getting back into the hang of it, but with an inspiring teacher and fellow students, the dotted symbols started making sense again. By the end of the course, I was almost up to the level of my grandson’s reading ability – him being a first grader at school.

Back home I tried to practise reading daily, and slowly but surely I got the hang of it. I signed up for a second Braille-course and as luck would have it, there were only four participants. The entire course was spent learning shorthand-like contractions. At times I felt my 53 year old brain was overloaded, but it was really exciting to realize how this could increase both my reading level and save a lot of space when written.

A couple of weeks after my return home, I read my first book to my grandsons. The experience was overwhelming. Not only that, but as the book I read had the text in both braille and print, my grandson and I could take it in turns reading and thus practising our reading together. It was an amazing moment, and I’m unsure which one of us was prouder of our achievement.

I’m still only at stage one in shorthand, but boy am I looking forward to getting further into this new world. I gave my first speech using shorthand braille the other day, and it was one of the most rewarding moments in my grown-up life. With hard work and perseverance, I hope to build on this knowledge and be able to keep up with my first grader grandson as his reading develops. We both plan to become first class readers in the not so distant future.

My next goal is to reach a standard of reading that will enable me to read the lyrics on my Active Braille, fast enough for me to sing them out with my choir, without stumbling on the words.

The question of “To braille or not to braille” is in fact no longer a question. “Brailling” is giving me the chance to lead a full and active life in the way I want, using braille as my source to gather information, read for pleasure, take notes, write, and to soon sing my heart out with the local gospel choir.

Life is good, and I truly think it’s getting better!