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Gender: Male

Age: 90.

Country: Sweden

EBU member: Swedish Association of the Visually Impaired

Number of words in original language: 720

The Straggler

"The Guinness Book of Records," I thought as, at the age of seventy-eight, I started my first lesson in Braille. I had lost one eye to glaucoma and much of the other eye, too. But I had enough sight left to manage my life independently. Two years earlier I had joined the local branch of the Swedish Association of the Visually Impaired. I had seen how my blind colleagues in the club had read page after page of Braille running both hands from line to line down the page. Now I was about to acquire that skill.

But why should I learn Braille? After crumpling up and throwing away my morning newspaper, two years earlier, I had explored the world of talking books and found that, on the whole, Sweden was well-supplied. We had the official library of Daisy talking books, organized and funded by the government. We had a wide range of commercial talking books and we had access to an on-line service from the United States. Furthermore, we had radio and the television sound track. None of these things existed when Louis Braille was inspired to invent his wonderful system.

Why then was I sitting with my fellow students, all of them far younger than I, poking tentatively with my index finger at the tiny point that stood for the letter ‘a’?

Listening is all very well. And I was grateful for it. But an inveterate page-turner needs some activity, too. And activity is what Braille gave me. Further, learning Braille gave me a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood. I was deeply aware of the community of Braille readers out there in the world. It was a community that I felt a deep respect for. And now I was joining that community.

To run both hands lightly from the top of the page to the bottom was my expectation. it did not work out like that. My first discovery was that my hands were not equally apt for the job. They were like a pair of carriage horses – one willing and the other unwilling. In vain did I entrust the task to my right hand. It could do that job but at the same time it sent a signal of discomfort and awkwardness to my brain. But my left hand welcomed the task and sent signals of joy and usefulness. After a while I found that my most comfortable method was to use one or other of the first or second finger of my left hand. I tried to bring the other fingers, and the right hand, into action. But it was all in vain. I was like one of those people who have never learnt touch-typing and type with the index-finger waltz, as we say in Sweden. I would never be in the front ranks of that gallant column of Braille readers. I would forever be a straggler. But half a loaf’s better than no bread, I sighed.

There was, too, another, very interesting use for Braille. You could label things. I set to work with a Braille frame, a pointer and a special tape. Working from right to left was not a problem and I enjoyed the mental effort of visualizing the mirror image of the letter. Using this image, there I was at the kitchen table, feeling the contours of the frame and stabbing with my stylus. I derived great satisfaction from opening the frame, checking what I had done and finding it perfect, or almost perfect. For what did it matter if what I had done turned out to be Moxart instead of Mozart?

Soon I had all my CD’s and talking books labelled. All my pin-codes were in Braille in the drawer of my bedside-table. No burglar has ever been, or ever will be a Braille reader. It remained only to label my spices and my work – at least for the moment – was done.

Nowadays, when I pick up my medication at the drug store, I move the index finger of my left hand lightly over the label and proudly – even boastfully - hope that someone will notice that I am that very special creature – a Braille reader. For even a straggler is part of the column.

THE END

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