Braille in the Past and Present

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It is a warm, clear sunny day in the beginning of June 2020. I am standing, holding a heavy cardboard box.

I am going to help sort through some items, after the unexpected passing of a close and dear friend. A friend, who both privately and through his employment for many years, worked passionately for the rights and opportunity of the blind and partially sighted to acquire the knowledge and use of Braille, whether it be in paper-format or digitally.

To sort through someone´s possessions is emotional on so many levels. It brings forth countless memories. As I read Braille, I am an important part of the process.

We put the box down and open it carefully. There is a distinctive fragrance of Braille rising from it. That familiar aroma from the great joy of reading throughout my childhood.

I pick up the first book. It is both big and heavy, as I remember books in Braille used to be.

“The Lord of the Rings,” by Tolkien. Good choice. I browse through the pages. Read little bits here and there. Feel my fingers following the lines. The sun shines on my face and for a few minutes, time ceases to exist.

Today, this book would have been stapled together, without covers. Produced for discarding after use. Back then, they were produced to last.

I used to like having a good sturdy book in my hands, even though I both understand and support changes and development. Especially as the production these days offers the opportunity of producing customized material for our hectic society.

Next book, new experiences. Hands meet the book cover. It is obviously old. The mere fact that it is sewn together, tells me it is an historical treasure. A book with a long reading history. I smile and open it, my hands meet the crisp old paper and read that it is produced in 1906.

It is made through a continuing process, before mass production. Most likely many pairs of hands have worked on it during its production.

Back then, it was written one dot at a time. Meticulous and thorough. Before me, the fingers of many a reader have touched and read these words.

At this moment in time in 2020 all these other hands meet mine. My fingers, which due to Covid19, have been cleansed with necessary hand-sanitizer four times today. Emotions arise through the scent of the book, the tactile experience and all the thoughts that wash over me. The wonder and pure joy over this treasure of a book that lies here. The hope that it will be a part of new reading experiences in the future. The pleasure of it having received such good care. The feeling of humbleness over generations of shared reading experiences, make my fingers tremble.

Letters forming words, which always gives me the feeling of astonishment. I feel a smile coming. I turn the pages slowly and my thoughts are filled with appreciation. A deep wonder at the effort of the people who spent all that time transcribing the book, to give others the access to new and positive reading experiences.

Little did they know that a woman in 2020 would stand here reading the same text they carefully transcribed.

I am amazed and feel the joy of being able to touch these same dotted pages with my fingers, made accessible by these diligent people, some 114 years earlier. Back then, obtaining information in this way was very rare. Today we take both reading and the gathering of information for granted, but it shouldn´t be. Many have felt that Braille has no functionality or value. Luckily others have dared invest in Braille, making reading possible. Although much is now being read digitally, Braille is still necessary.

My thoughts go to the persons who have owned or read this book. Who were they? What did they do in life? How did they use Braille? What has made them take care of the book through the years? By passing the book on, they have conveyed the importance and value of Braille to new readers. Can I also be a part of that influence so this will be passed on to new generations? Yes, I believe and truly hope I can!

I wish I could go back in time to enable me to tell Louis Braille what he, and his groundbreaking work, has given me and so many other blind and partially sighted people.

I remember vividly how I cracked the reading-code. The feeling and understanding of the words being «mine» and that I myself, could understand the letters and combine them to create a comprehensible text. We, as users of Braille, must never stop fighting for new visually impaired people being given the chance to experience the freedom and the important independence Braille provides us with.

Being read to, be it by a synthetic voice or living person, neither shall or can replace being able to master the words yourself and the ability to acquire knowledge through tactile measures.

Few things will surpass the calm experience of sitting down with a book in your lap, feeling the summer breeze touching your face as your fingers run across the text. Pausing, maybe smiling a little as you read the sentence one more time. It is my belief that being able to read yourself, also contributes to the understanding of language and it certainly makes it easier to understand the layout of a text.

Even though we have a lot of great digital and technical solutions today, it is still a very powerful reading experience to have Braille in its physical form in your hands. I have an intense wish for others to experience that freedom. I dream of someone, in the year 2106, sharing my experience of pulling out that old physical book I had in my hands today, and being able to both read and understand its contents. To feel the joy of the experience generations of blind people have shared. Enjoy the fact that blind and sighted people have combined forces to communicate information and can restate to their contemporaries, “I love Braille!”