

To Teach a Dyslexic

Dyslexic

A Dyslexic Tells How Luck
Enabled Him to Learn to Read
& How His Blissful **Ignorance &
Stubbornness** Enabled Him to
Discover an Easy, **Common Sense Way**
to Teach Other Dyslexics to
Read and Write

Don McCabe

needed glasses. Now, not only was I the shortest kid in my class, I was “Spec’s.” The nickname was not an affectionate one. I was an Altar boy and sang in the choir. That helped. But I never was invited to the other kids’ parties. I was an outsider. But I felt I could make it into the inner circle if I were able to demonstrate my athletic ability. So in the spring of my ninth grade I went out for two different things, forensics and the high school baseball team. Forensics, I made. I won a dictionary for winning the district in extemporaneous speaking. For baseball I had the same coach, but that was a different story.

It was a cold, wet spring. So cold and so wet that the coach Tom Smith could have only one day for tryouts. His idea of a tryout was to line everybody up by height and count off 1-2-1-2-1-2. The 1’s went to bat. The 2’s went to the field. I played second base and never made an error. At the plate I scraped up a walk and three singles. I stole second base twice. I would have stolen second four times except that twice there was a teammate standing there. Remember my friend Aaron Miller who went to speech class with me at Cook? Well, he struck out every time at bat. But he made the team, and I didn’t. True, he was six foot one and two hundred pounds and his foul balls were out of sight. Tom Smith could see his potential. Me? I was so small and scrawny he couldn’t see any reason to put me on the team even though I was perhaps the best infielder, the best hitter for singles, with my almost microscopic strike zone the most likely to get walked, and the fastest base runner. That did it for me. No way was I going to return to St. Michael’s in the fall. And I didn’t.

Flint Tech—a high school without a gym.

INSTEAD OF RETURNING TO St. Michaels, I went to Flint Technical High School. It was a different kind of school. It had no gym. It had no library. It had no cafeteria. It had no auditorium. It didn’t even have a single foreign language class—not even Latin. And yet, this school, was by far the best high school in Genesee County.

Flint Tech was really a creation of General Motors with a good deal of help from Citizens Bank and other members of the Flint Chamber of Commerce. GM supplied the equipment for the machine shop. Tech supplied graduates who went into the skilled trades for GM. The businesses in Flint provided part time jobs in the afternoon for the co-op students.

Flint Tech had the best high school teachers. The only weak teachers were the football, baseball, and basketball coaches, all two of them. But that’s not why I chose to go to Flint Tech. I chose to go there because it was the closest high school to where I lived. I could walk there. And besides, my brother Jack had graduated from there. To be painfully honest about it, I think the real reason I went to Flint Tech was that Flint Tech was the arch rival of St. Mike’s in football and basketball. If I couldn’t play ball for St. Mike’s, I’d play against them.

I didn’t know that to go to Tech every student had to have at least a 3.0 average in junior high and to stay there had to maintain at least a 2.5! But what a difference it made. At Flint Tech they had good discipline, good students, and good teachers. We didn’t have to worry about drugs or guns or violence. In fact, I was perhaps the biggest trouble maker for the teachers in my class.

I enjoyed baiting teachers. My favorite stunt was to look out the window while the teacher was talking and to pay attention. Inevitably, the teacher would try to make an example out of me. The teacher would call on me fully expecting me to say “What?” And then she could tell me to pay attention. Only it

never worked that way. I would answer the question without bothering to turn my head! More than once the teacher was so furious that I could look out the window and still answer the question that I was sent down to Mr. Mehring's office.

In the spring of my tenth grade at Flint Tech, I tried to go out for Forensics and baseball again. This time, forensics was out. The school had dropped it. But I did go out for baseball. And this time, I made the J.V. team. In one game, I stole nine bases: second base three times, third twice, and home four times. Of course, I was stealing off the pitcher. His coach hadn't taught him how to properly take a stretch. He would pull both hands back which is a wind up and then he went into a stretch. By the time he threw the ball I would be standing on the next base.

Did I get congratulated by my coach? Was my feat ever recognized? No. In fact, the coach was furious. You see, he wasn't there for the game! And he had left strict orders that no one was to steal without being given the sign. And every base I stole (which was every one available to me) was without a sign. I was told I would have to sit the bench for the rest of the season.

In high school I was into all kinds of things. I was on the student council. I was on the Junior Town Hall of the Air. I became president of the Hi-Y (a YMCA organization for high school boys). And I got a job at Herrick's Drug Store. Most of my jobs were custodial such as sweeping the floor, burning the papers, stocking the cigarettes, wrapping up the Kotex and Modess. In those days, women never bought Kotex from a man, and certainly did not want anybody to know what it was she was buying. And condoms were hidden away in drawer out of sight where generally only the pharmacist on duty would be. These, I didn't stock. But I knew where they were. I had seen the owner open that drawer and fish out the Trojans and the Sheiks. I even knew that sometimes they were referred to as rubbers or three-for-fifties. But the words *condom* and *prophylactics* were not in my vocabulary. As I said before, my sex education was conducted in the University of the Gutter. That's how things were back in the 40's. One day when the

pharmacist was out eating his supper a man came into the store. The fact that he walked by Shirley and Joan and came straight toward me should have been a clue. But it wasn't. Dyslexics aren't always that fast on picking up on things like that. Clue number two was that he *whispered* to me, "*I'd like some prophylactics.*" But all I heard was the word *prophylactic* and I had seen it someplace. Yes, on some toothbrushes. But I was new. I couldn't remember where the toothbrushes were. So, I turned to Joan and in my normal loud voice said, "*JOAN, WHERE ARE THE PROPHYLACTICS?*"

The man's face turned beet red. So did Joan's face. Finally, it dawned on me what he wanted. "Oh, you want some Trojans not toothbrushes?"

It was working at the drugstore that enabled me to grow up and be cool. I could learn to smoke while burning the papers in the alley behind the drugstore. Oh, what I went through just to be able to be cool. But I wasn't about to smoke in public as a kiddy-puffer. I was going to be cool. I would be able to inhale and hold it and then let it out slowly. I would be able to blow smoke rings. But first I had to be able to stand up! The first puffs made me dizzy. But I was stubborn. Just like learning to swim, I was flat out stubborn. I kept coating my lungs with tar until I could inhale without getting dizzy.

My dad didn't like it. My mother didn't like it. But grandma secretly shared that vice and whenever mom was out of the house, the two of us would sit around and smoke and talk. My dad said smoking would stunt my growth. Sure. As if my growth hadn't already been stunted. Mom said it was a sin. Yet, she couldn't explain why all the priests at St. Michael's smoked.

Just like I had believed in the advertising about Santa Claus and believed in Santa Claus long after my classmates had become skeptics, I believed in the cigarette advertising. Cigarettes are for the mature, for the cool. The leading men in the movies always had a cigarette. Heroes smoked. And so would I.

In my junior year, I made sure we had forensics. I lined up a teacher to be the sponsor. I went from homeroom to homeroom explaining what forensics was and recruiting students to try out for it. My efforts paid off. We ended up with a good team. I decided to try out for Oratory and help coach someone else in extemporaneous speech. The coach, Helen Massey, helped the other students with their declamations and dramatic declamations.

1948 and 1949 was a time of communist conspiracy hysteria. My oration was timely. It was: "Wake up America before it's too late!" It started with those words and ended with those words. In between I was almost a junior Joseph McCarthy. The difference was only that I was quoting from magazine articles out of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Reports*. I wasn't making things up. I was repeating as gospel things that Joseph McCarthy and those of his ilk had made up and had been dutifully reported by the news magazines of the day.

I now am a little more skeptical about what I read in the newspapers and magazines than what I was then. Just as I am a little skeptical about "out-of-body" experiences that I hear reported. The reason? My oratory evoked one. I had an out-of-body experience caused perhaps by stress and full knowledge of failure.

What had happened was that I had won the district in oratory and now was in the regional. The night before the contest, I attended one of our basketball games. McCabe, the one man cheering section, cheered the team on to victory. When I woke up the next morning, I could barely talk. And I had to compete in oratory!

I went. I was determined to win despite my laryngitis. When we got there, I was horrified. The contest was being held in a regular classroom. No stage. No audience. Just judges seated in the front row. I started with my "Wake up America before it's too late" and the next thing I knew I was watching myself and hearing myself delivering a flat monotonous speech. Needless to say, I didn't win.

Even though I had never played tennis before, I went out for the tennis team. Chutzpah, for sure. Believe it or not, I made the team. Dyslexics sometimes do the strangest things. Just as Tech didn't have a gym, didn't have a football field, or a track, it also didn't have a tennis court. We practiced at Flint's Ballenger Park. It was only two and half miles away. Nobody had cars at school. To get there by bus would have required bussing downtown and then transferring. By bus it was at least an hour away. We could walk it in a half hour. And we did.

I wasn't a star. The only reason I made the team was that so few went out for it, that all I had to do was to beat out two klutzes for a spot. But I do remember one great victory playing doubles. We were playing Flint Central (one of the state's better tennis teams) at our home court, Ballenger Park. Keith Emerick and I were partners. We served first. I never could hit a hard serve, so I used a cut serve which came as a surprise, I suppose, to my opponent. He hit it high and way out. Knowing Ballenger, I knew where that ball would go if I let it bounce. It would go up and over the fence. So I stepped back about three steps behind the base line and caught the ball. "Our point! Our point!" screamed our opponents. "You have to let it hit!" We gave them the point. They were right. Those are the rules. But, oh, what a controlled adrenaline flow it gave me. I never stroked the ball so hard and so straight AT opponents as I did that game. They knew I was trying to hit them. And I was! And I did! And Keith and I were the only Flint Tech players to win a match against Central. It's amazing how brain chemistry can work. There's no way Keith and I should have won. Our opponents were clearly much better than we were. But controlled anger will beat fear every day of the week. We were angry. They experienced the fear of getting hurt. Fear of losing. Fear. Later on I was to incorporate the concept of eliminating fear of failure into my method of teaching spelling to dyslexics.

During my senior year, my brother Jack who had graduated from Tech married Thomasina Barone, a St. Michael's graduate. Their marriage took place on the same day that Tech and St. Mike's had their annual football game. What a day that was! I was one of the altar boys and I watched my Uncle Ted,

who was best man, do something absolutely unforgettable. The wedding ring had been tied to a little pillow so that the ring bearer wouldn't lose it. When the pillow with the ring was handed to the priest, the priest couldn't untie it. But no problem. Uncle Ted just reached into his pocket and pulled out an unwrapped double-edged razor blade. The priest's eyes just popped. The wedding was in the morning and the reception followed soon thereafter. It was at Brookwood Golf Club. It was a festive Irish-Italian wedding. The booze was flowing. That day no one said a word about my drinking except my sister Betty June.

"Don," she said, "Every time I see you, you have a different drink in your hand. You'll get sick doing that." I didn't. Just like I started to become a skeptic about cigarettes, I was beginning to be skeptical about the myths surrounding drinking.

My dad wasn't concerned about my drinking. Social drinking was part of our family life. I was a senior in high school, and it was time that I joined the adult family. All he said to me before the reception was, "Don, don't you dare drink so much that you embarrass the family." Later on, he told me he was disappointed in my behavior at the reception.

He said, "Don, every time I saw you, you had a cigarette either in your hand or dangling from your mouth." He didn't mention anything about my drinking. I didn't stay until the end of the reception. I had a big football game to attend. I almost was thrown out before I got in. The ticket taker could smell the alcohol on my breath when I was about ten people back in line. When I got up there to get my ticket, I recognized the ticket taker. He was my math teacher. He looked at me, shook his head, and warned me about getting into trouble. I didn't. Not that night anyway.

The next week in student council I did get in trouble. The assistant principal came in and abruptly announced that the senior class would not be able to have their annual winter Snow Ball. That really upset me. I snapped angrily at him, "But we

reserved that date way back in February. You can't do this to us."

"Oh, yes I can," Mr. Mehring said. "And there's nothing you or I can do about it. It's just a matter of priorities and commitments. There are only so many Friday nights available for dances and we can't have dances when we have home games or games that are in town. We have promised the holders of Student Union cards five dances. Right now there are only four. The only night available for the fifth student union dance is the night that the seniors have planned to have the Senior Snow Ball. Sorry, but that's the way it has to be."

I was not easily turned away. Dyslexics can sometimes be as stubborn as bulldogs. And sometimes just as vicious. I then said to him in a very sarcastic tone of voice, "I notice you didn't say anything about Saturday nights." His answer was we couldn't have a student union dance on a Saturday night. There's no way they could get teachers to chaperone.

"That's a lie!" I said to him. "I already know of two teachers who said they would be available to chaperone." And as president of the Hi-Y, I wasn't bluffing. During a Hi-Y meeting we had discussed the possibility of a special Saturday night dance to raise money for Bruce Jepson, a football player who broke his leg in a game and whose family didn't have any medical insurance to cover his bills. And besides," I said, "there's no reason why we can't have parents as chaperones. I know my parents would chaperone a student union dance. And I'll bet most of the parents on this council would chaperone if asked."

Mr. Mehring sputtered, "I don't care. We can't possibly have a school dance on the eve of a religious holy day."

"Mr. Mehring," I said in even colder and harder tones just dripping with vicious sarcasm, "Just what kind of a religious bigot are you? You're willing to have dances on Fridays, the eve of the religious holy day of Jews and Seventh Day Adventists, and not on Saturdays?" What I said was not kind. The way I said it was absolutely cruel— but effective. Mr. Mehring stormed out of the room.

Fifteen minutes later he came back with the principal, Mr. Olsen. Mr. Olsen assured the student council that something could be worked out. The Senior Snow Ball would be held as scheduled.

Mr. Mehring never forgave me. And even though I ended up graduating 2nd in a class of 174, I never was inducted into the Tau Sigma, the national honor society. Any faculty member could blackball any applicant. I suspect Mehring did that to get even with me. But it could have been almost any of my teachers. I was far from the model student.

Tech was a small school and class schedules weren't very flexible. In my senior year, I went on co-op working in my father's accounting office in the afternoon. Unfortunately, the only time trigonometry was offered was in the afternoon. As my lowest grade in math at that point was an A, I felt I could take the class without going to class and pressed my point with the principal. Little did I know at the time that I was putting the principal on the spot. I didn't know that he was a golfing buddy of my dad's. I didn't know that he kept my dad informed about my progress in school. I didn't know then that it was my dad's friendship with the principal that got me into Tech in the first place. It also allowed me to be the only student in the school that was neither on a technical curriculum or a business curriculum, the only two that were offered. I was taking courses from both curricula so that I had basically a college prep curriculum minus the language requirement but with business and technical courses thrown in.

A conference with the trig teacher was arranged. As long as I did every homework problem in the book and handed in the homework before I left for co-op and as long as I could maintain at least a B average on my tests (for which I would have to go to class), he would allow it.

So I quickly formed an alliance in study hall with five other trig students to study together. We divided up the problems six ways and did them. We didn't just copy from one another. We taught one another. The proof of our ability to work together and teach each other was demonstrated on the tests. The six of

us were the only ones to get A's on all the tests. This experience was really the basis for how I taught a class called Modern Grammar years later. See Part 3, Chapter 11, p.97.

So I spent my afternoons working for my father in his office in the Mott Foundation Building. At that time, my dad shared an office with an automotive parts sales firm that was owned by Harry Eiferle who was the manager of the Mott Foundation Building. Because it was convenient for Eiferle, my dad's office was right across the hall from the office of Charles Stewart Mott. He was the largest single stockholder in General Motors and was a well known philanthropist. Mott was also quite a character. He always wore an old fedora, a wrinkled suit, and carried a battered old brief case. He had his own grass tennis court and loved to play tennis in his bare feet. And he always had a smile for me when I passed him in the hall. He knew me by name. And I'm sure that if he would have lived long enough, like to the age of 130, he would certainly have seen to it that the AVKO Educational Research Foundation which I started would have received a large start-up grant from his foundation. But at least I got to know personally one of Flint's best known and best loved personalities when I was a senior in high school.