

Jim Forgione

The Reading Disability

When I was 43, I realized that I have reading problems. Two things still surprise me about this: the random way I found out, and that I didn't figure it out sooner. Rather than its being the result of a formal test or diagnosis, it was simply due to a friend's response when I told him, "When I read, I count the words and syllables. It slows me down like you would not believe. I can't make it stop."

"You have a reading disability," he said.

Hearing in an offhand manner what had been hiding in plain sight for years, I was struck: "Oh my God, you're right." Continuing on, I said, "With books, I add up the sounds in lines of type and compare totals. If they don't match, I try again, beginning in different places. With movies and TV shows, I add up the letters and words as the actors speak their lines." It was a relief to say out loud what for so long I'd been embarrassed to admit, although after years of ruminating about it, it was nevertheless difficult to find the appropriate words.

If I were reading these sentences cold, I would already have counted them in numerous ways by looking for patterns in the stressed syllables and in the vowel and consonant arrangements. As my eyes pass over words, I also search for anagrams; it's satisfying when I find a good one! Outside = tedious. I check out what words spell backwards. Desserts = stressed. My brain can't help deconstructing and rearranging text as I read. My first recollection of doing this is at age seven, and over time I've developed a whole roster of "counting games" — some too convoluted to describe.

Combined with all this is my unwavering propensity to see patterns, calculate numbers, and follow rules. I'm not good at "thinking outside the box." A total grammar and spelling nerd, I'm a good proofreader in spite of being a bad reader. If there's a chronological inconsistency in a book or film, I'm likely pick up on it. But iambic pentameter was made for me. All the line lengths and patterns already in place, all the Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) work done before I get there!

I realize that specialists in this field might use different terminology for what I discuss here, but the key point is that my brain doesn't react like that of a competent reader when I try to comprehend words on a page. It has affected my life in innumerable ways, including my employment history. Ninety-five percent of my jobs — like gardening, event and party installations, and cooking — have been glorified manual labor, and in my family, that was not respectable enough. Part of me believes that my multi-tasking abilities, my eye for numbers, could have qualified me for better jobs, but I never found a profession that fit those talents.

If only my counting were limited to just words! At all sorts of gatherings, I repeatedly count the attendees in the room, on top of counting the syllables in their conversations. I also count the tiles in the wall behind them while we're talking, the panes of glass in the window, the slats in the plantation shutters, over and over again. But don't think that means I'm not hearing what they say, because I am — I can do both. In my attempt to hide the appearance of distraction while my brain is adding things up,

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/3

I subtly assure I'm listening by nodding and making eye contact. Sometimes I change position to uncomplicate my line of vision, and people wonder why I'm moving.

So do I have only a reading disability? Some type of dyslexia? Or do I actually have OCD where I count everything in existence, and my reading problems fall under that larger category? Whatever it is, if I could explain it, my motivation would be for people to understand why I come off the way I do.

The strange workings of my brain at times give me a preoccupied or distracted appearance, causing folks to assume I'm not paying attention or in some kind of funk when it's not necessarily the case. This has had negative effects, often with coworkers, back before I began working alone as a gardener, but it was never an option to explain to them my brain's foibles. I kept the convoluted confession to myself, seeing it as a lose-lose situation.

Telling people, "I'm not a good reader," is as far as I usually get, but it doesn't communicate the bigger issues. I feel as if my reading problems and their associated quirks mark me in some negative way, that they sit on me like a freaky halo. Yet in spite of assuming that people are onto something but can't quite pinpoint it, I still try to cover it all up. I have no idea how old I was when I realized everyone didn't do what I do. If anyone else practices these weird activities, I'd like to meet them. Perhaps by writing this I'll find someone.

People say that a problem stated is partly solved, and while I'm open to this concept, there's rarely a proper setting to reveal mine. Telling a select few has slightly appeased my feelings of inadequacy, but does not alter my condition. I can't say why I didn't zero in on it sooner, but maybe it's not atypical. When I was a kid in parochial school in the '60s, much less was understood about these sorts of issues, and it was common to believe certain kids simply weren't trying. "You're not applying yourself," was all you'd hear, or, "If you'd just pay attention." Plus I came off as an intelligent child — good at math, spelling, grammar, I could memorize anything — which inadvertently covered up my disability. In many subjects I had to work several times as hard as other kids just to get a "B."

Scrabble, a game I'm good at, has contributed further to my problems: I use the values assigned to each letter in the alphabet, even when the game's nowhere in sight, and add them up while reading or while folks are talking. The letters in the sentence "Everything is fine now," total 35 points, for example. I've gotten fast at it. At times it's so second nature, as involuntary as my breathing or my heartbeat, that I barely notice I'm doing it.

My counting during dramatic or tragic events feels over-the-top excessive, even for my brain. Is nothing sacred? But what did I expect — that my OCD would abide by certain restrictions during funerals or other bad news? I long to make it stop. I wish my friends and family could spend one hour in my head to understand me better. "Wow — you live with this every day? Every hour!" I expect they'd say. I'm not looking for pity or sympathy, just for them to know under what conditions I'm operating.

With my reading problems come comprehension problems. In junior

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/3

year of high school we were assigned *The Grapes of Wrath*, and I practically cried struggling to read that book (one of many titles that has elicited this reaction). Over 400 pages of small type! I would read the same sentences over and over, but they just would not go into my brain and gradually lost meaning. I felt like such a loser. I thought it was my fault, something I was doing wrong, and this feeling increased five-fold when I got to college. I was in way over my head and lacked the language or knowledge to tell anyone or to let myself off the hook for being so damn stupid. I took refuge in as many foreign language and art history courses as were allowed; they were dependent more on visuals or memorization than on intimidating, academic readings.

Current events, politics, and history don't come easily to me. I was in my forties before I could say "Who is such and such?" without fear of appearing ignorant. I still see the looks and hear the comments, but I no longer care what people think. Even when they say, "Have you been living under a rock?" I simply reply: "Just tell me who they are please." It's astounding how integral reading is to so much of life — those who can read well are spared this realization.

One irony is that I love books, literature, stories. I crave the ability to hunker down with a novel on a lazy Sunday afternoon and experience the escape reading can provide, but the best I can do is 30-40 minutes (sometimes ten is pushing it). Maybe that's one reason I love cinema; with much of the work done for me, the stories are more accessible. Maybe that's why I've been known to ingest edible cannabis on occasion — not to get "blown away" like we did as teenagers, but just to take that edge off. It lessens the constant barrage and downshifts my thought patterns into a more manageable gear.

In spite of my disability, I refuse to give up reading, but it must be on the simpler end of the spectrum. The prose of authors like Toni Morrison or those 1000-page sagas by James Michener are out of my reach. I'd love to delve into lengthy works about the Civil War or one of our first ladies (even the Wikipedia entries take forever), but I'd easily need a year and it would be a depressing slog. Nope — give me shorter books with easier language by writers like Larry McMurtry or Anne Tyler.

Reading for me is not like lifting weights — I don't gradually get stronger. Although about twice a decade I go through a period where I steel myself and read more challenging books like *The American*, by Henry James. I inevitably run out of steam after several months, but my approach is this: read ten pages a day religiously, that way you'll finish this 400-page book in 40 days. I have to measure it out and do it methodically. It's as much assignment as diversion, but I need that feeling of accomplishment now and again.

I find it fascinating that an offhand comment 24 years ago changed how I view myself. Writing this essay, I feel like I'm "coming out" in some way. At age 67, I don't have it all figured out, but I have longer stretches of perspective that lessen my discontent about my disabilities. I'm still here, and in spite of the turmoil and mistakes, I've arrived at a good place. I try to use my experience to remind myself that you never know what's going on in someone else's head nor what they've been through on a particular day.