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Malcom X - Short Write

Literacy wasn’t guaranteed for me. I didn’t speak much as a child, and didn’t think much either. Between failing eyesight, comprehension, speech, and hearing tests, I found myself placed in special education for much of my elementary school experience. Other kids thought I was crazy, which was keen of them because I most likely was. I used to steal chalk from my kindergarten teacher, because I wanted to make a chalkboard at my house. In third grade I brought my grandfather’s WWII pocketknife to show and tell, and then spent several months attending hearings with my mother to appeal being expelled. I didn’t like reading or multiplication tables, and would dread every encounter with tests of any sort.

I remember the day that I was slated to get my first speech test, which eventually lead to the others, and then to four years of special instruction. I was on the bus, going to school. I told someone my name for one reason or another, and then got teased because I had said “Cwis” instead of “Chris.” Michelle, my next door neighbor and sole friend, mentioned it to a teacher, who confirmed that I couldn’t pronounce a single word containing the sound ‘err’.

I remember the lady who was my special-ed teacher. If I saw her today I would probably recognize her, but for the life of me I can’t remember her name right now. She was my all-in-one aid for hearing and speech therapy, and was always passionate in her belief that we were making progress. We had a small room, and one of those weird U shaped desks where the teacher sits on the inside and five children sit around the perimeter. One day she read the story of “Hooway For Wodney Wat,” which was unsurprisingly about a rat who can’t pronounce R’s correctly. The story stuck though, because I could relate to it. While she had been reading, I had been swinging my legs under the desk, and kicking off of what I thought was a table leg. She asked the five students around her to please stop swinging their legs a few times throughout the day but I didn’t make the connection and stop. Then she got upset by the child in front of her who couldn’t process the directions to sit still. She actually became substantially angry with me and yelled at me to pay attention. That clicked for me.

It doesn’t make much sense even to me, but in that moment I finally got the awareness of myself versus people around me. I remember it like the feeling of breaking water to take a breath. Having someone be honest and level with me that I wasn’t doing the whole human thing correctly and jarring me out of my introverted shell literally changed my life, and it still scares me to think that the moment could have slipped past without the epiphany to accompany it. Though I can’t cite her as having a profound impact on my understanding of the English language and writing, I can say that she allowed me to make that progress into literacy and general consciousness (which is even better than being literate).