

Steven's Story

Dyslexia: Opening the Door: Auditory Stimulation and the Tomatis Method

by Steven Woodruff

Someone would have to tell me at least three times before I “got it.” But even then, I would forget. It was like statements would not stick, like I had difficulty learning or comprehending. At school it took me a long time to formulate my thoughts into a composition assignment. Sometimes my thoughts were fuzzy, unclear, almost like they weren't there. It was difficult to concentrate, to absorb. I started daydreaming, and that grew. During recess, I liked being by myself, mostly talking to my imaginary friendly ghost. Reading was a strenuous chore because it was so frustrating to remember what the whole story was about, and it took so long to read. Having to read in front of the class made me feel embarrassed and self-conscious because I stumbled on words and hesitated in the middle of sentences. The harder it was for me, the harder I tried.

Though I received remedial help in reading, spelling, and math, and made it through as an average student in grammar school, deep down I knew something was not right with me. I didn't know what. I knew I could perform better and quicker, but that wasn't happening; I didn't know how to change it. I really began to believe what I was called: “a slow learner.” Much later, I discovered that the frustration that I felt inside was because I did not feel the confidence I knew I could feel. I questioned my own competence and security. I learned to pretend well enough to keep all that from showing. I became a master at not paying attention to what was going on around me. The friendly ghost of my imagination became my best friend. I was nine.

By age forty, I had spent years in psychotherapy, had taken Elavil, Stellazine, and Tofranil for depression, had survived an intense three month psychological “marathon,” had practiced advanced meditation, and had gained expertise in hypnosis. Even the knowledge and techniques I had learned in graduate school from a Master's program in counselling failed to yield the unlocking of a major door within myself, behind which I continued to feel smothered. Feelings of heaviness, a severe lack of confidence and difficulties articulating my own thoughts felt very conspicuous to me; yet, I had developed a convincing facade.

Even after having successfully operated my own business for fifteen years, I felt my personal potential remained untapped. All the time I had the nagging feeling that I had to play catch-up with myself. I had mastered pretending that everything was “okay,” but deep down I felt like a Mexican jumping bean, a squirming caterpillar inside a hard shell, burning itself up to get out, to feel my own age. The beginning of each day was still complex, unclear apprehension of just making it through. It was with me at work, at a cocktail party, even on vacation. Years and events had all changed, but I still felt like the same nine year old. I was desperate to find what was not right, if there were an explanation, an answer.

In January, 1988 I discovered there really was a “shell”; abstract, yes, but it could be and was translated into something physical. From a friend in Paris, I learned of the Listening Centre. Dr. Alfred A. Tomatis, an ear, nose, and throat specialist, had begun his research in 1940 on the role of the ear as it related to the voice. There was a sister Centre in Toronto, Canada, whose director had trained with Dr. Tomatis. I wrote to the Toronto Centre, requesting information and giving them a brief history of my life. With the literature that I received, there was also a published autobiography written by the director, Paul Madaule entitled, “The Dyslexified World.” Upon reading his paper, I felt stunned. It was a precise description of what my life, inside and out, had been like, and still was. Finally, I thought, there was someone else who

knew what it was really like! I made an appointment at the Listening Centre in Toronto for a consultation, fearing that I would discover a confirmation of my own dyslexia. After a one-half hour, specially-designed listening test, then an interview with Mr. Madaule, I accepted the possibility that the Tomatis Method, as Mr. Madaule said, “could remove the cast in which I found myself, that gradually I would experience the confidence, the esteem, the competence, and verbal expression that for so long I had sought.” I knew I had no choice, but once again, to try another therapeutic avenue.

As I proceeded through the treatment, a specially-adapted, high-frequency, music-sound therapy using headphones, I met other adults and many children with their mothers from parts of North and South America, Like myself, the other clients seemed caught in an unending, confusing spiral of dissatisfaction, all at various stages of difficulties communicating with themselves; and therefore with relating and fitting into the world around them. Many children were dyslexic, and some autistic. Others were heightening their communication as well as their artistic and musical abilities.

As I heard through the special filtered, high-frequency sounds with the use of Tomatis’ Electronic Ear, I began to write and draw with my right hand, retaining the natural use of my left, and so became ambidextrous. I prolifically wrote emotion-charged material from my past, and drew and painted spontaneous colorful images of abstraction, then later drew realistic symbols of people and events. I began relating to people in and out of a kind of semi-absentmindedness as I had done in my past. My concentration became directed and focused, not scattered and easily distracted as I had experienced before. My perceptions about myself and others began to shift, as I became more objective and positive and accepting, less self-absorbed and negative. I became more dependent upon myself, and took pride in that, rather than as before quickly looking to another person for my authority and answers then resenting it. My confidence in my own competence with others and with my life experiences began to grow. Something very different and very good was happening to me. I began enjoying reading, and listening for words from others. I noticed the timbre and vibrancy in my voice became richer. For the first time, I enjoyed listening to myself speak. Most importantly, I felt motivated and took pleasure and pride in assuming responsibilities for positive actions in my daily living with people. I was beginning to feel that I was growing up, no longer the needy lost ‘child’ at forty; but rather, an emerging adult who had confidence, competence, and desire to lead his own life. A crack had appeared in the “shell,” and I realized Paul Madaule at the Listening Centre had been right: “the cast would fall away, and there was hope.”

Though the treatments at the Listening Centre have ended, I have continued to, and must always read aloud to myself at least thirty minutes each day, with my right hand in front of my mouth like a microphone. My ear, having been trained to listen for certain frequency sounds, has facilitated my voice to reproduce those frequencies, so that a natural feed-back loop of amplification is created from my voice. Hence, according to Dr. Tomatis, the middle-ear muscles continue to be exercised, and energizing of the brain’s cortex is maintained. Through this continued practice, many other clients and I have become our own Electronic Ear apart from the Listening Centre.

For many school children today, supplemental remediation for academics has become available. Along with the formal remedial schools, there has evolved public recognition and acceptance of children with learning disabilities. The taught-skills and specialized cognitive approaches of remediation are vital for LD children to function in today’s world. As important, also, is the child’s basic ability to listen, to focus actively on the environment, to properly integrate the incoming information he is offered, and not tune out.

According to Dr. Tomatis, much of the dyslexic's problems, his confused thought patterns, his slowness, his immaturity and dependencies, are directly related to listening, which is influenced by the condition of the middle ear. Tomatis approaches dyslexia and autism from a broad view, seeing the handicaps as "a difficulty with properly apprehending and correctly deciphering the world around oneself. One's laterality and listening attitude are also insufficiently structured" (About The Tomatis method, 1988, p. 88). The audio-neurophysiological treatment using Tomatis' Electronic Ear greatly affects this broad condition of the "dyslexified world." Through the sophisticated use of musical stimulation, rather than verbal direction, the Tomatis Method affects a significant depth in the treatment of dyslexia. "Listening," says Tomatis, "isn't everything, but so many things unfold because of it."

Steve Woodruff has an M.A. in counselling and also does professional stage and television work as an actor. He is very active in bringing people to the Tomatis work as well as introducing the work to organizations serving learning disabilities.

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