

**Words were a jumble, numbers a blur.
His parents worried...**

"What'll Become of Fred?"

by Fred J. Epstein, M.D.

That day stands out starkly in my memory. I was at the blackboard, carefully printing the words my first-grade teacher had asked me to write. As I stepped back from my work, the laughter of my classmates told me I'd done something terribly wrong. What was so funny? I was confused. "Fred," the teacher admonished, "you've reversed all your e's!"

During second grade at Riverdale Country School near my home in Yonkers, N.Y., things grew worse. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't grasp simple math—even adding two and two was difficult. *What's wrong with me?* I kept wondering.

By the third grade, my parents were increasingly concerned. "What'll become of Fred?" my mother asked plaintively. Both my parents were high achievers who prized academic excellence. My father, Joseph, had graduated from Yale University and Yale Medical School and was a prominent psychiatrist. My mother, Lillian, was a psychiatric social worker who had received her master's degree. Simon, my older brother, had no problems in school. My younger brother, Abram, was also destined to be an excellent student.

And here I was, struggling, barely able to keep up. To avoid school altogether, I often faked illness. By fifth grade I was grudgingly giving in to the thought that maybe I wasn't all that bright. But Herbert Murphy, my teacher, changed that. One day, after class, he called me aside, showing me the test paper I'd turned in. I hung my head, embarrassed. Every answer was marked wrong.

"I know you understand this material," he told me, "so why don't we go over it one more time?" He sat me down and asked the same questions that made up the written test. One by one, I gave him the answers orally.

"That's right!" he said after each answer. His smile could have lighted up the world. "I *knew* you understood this!" He marked all my test answers correct, changing my failing grade to a passing one.

Mr. Murphy also showed me how to use different word associations to recall information. Whenever I saw the word *social*, for example, it stopped me cold; I simply couldn't pronounce it. "Try to remember it this way," Mr. Murphy suggested. "Say you have a friend named Al who knows how to fix bicycles. Then one day your bike breaks down. 'So see Al' to get your bike fixed. And you'll remember how to say it." It worked.

Before long, I even looked forward to staying after school with Mr. Murphy. He was always so patient and encouraging. "You're intelligent, Fred," he once told me. "I just know things will turn out well for you." Still, I felt I was facing a seemingly insurmountable barrier.

After fifth grade, I transferred to a local public school. There my new teacher, Miss Shaw, also saw that I was trying to improve, and did what she could to help me. After laboring long and hard on a penmanship exercise, I was thrilled when she suggested I show the principal—who had always belittled me—how much my handwriting had improved. *Now she'll know I'm smart*, I thought, racing to her office.

The principal, however, misunderstood why Miss Shaw had sent me. For a full half-hour she criticized my penmanship. "Your problem," she concluded, "is that you have no motivation. You just don't care." She couldn't know how much—and how painfully—I *did* care.

Returning to the classroom, I was so shaken that I never told Miss Shaw what had happened. I was too embarrassed—and just too beaten-down.

At home, however, I drew hope from a curious skill that I had in abundance: a vivid memory. I could clearly recall what we ate for dinner or what the weather had been like three or four weeks earlier. In junior high one of my biggest triumphs came when I memorized Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. *How can I do this?* I kept wondering. *How can I be good at one thing—and so bad at another?*

Puzzled, my parents had a psychologist test my intelligence. To their amazement—and mine—I scored quite high. Now I really *was* confused.

Then there was Aunt Lottie, my mother's younger sister. A gentle, kind woman, she was a first-grade teacher who often assisted children with reading problems. Every Saturday and Sunday during junior high, I pedaled my bike two miles to her home. Sitting me down at her dining-room table, Aunt Lottie drilled me endlessly and patiently. "Don't worry," she urged. "We'll try again tomorrow, and you'll get it."

Whenever I wrote anything, it came out a jumble of words. So Aunt Lottie would ask me to write what I'd done each week. If she couldn't praise the writing, she at least praised the thinking behind it. "That's a wonderful idea," she'd say. "Let's put it down on paper." After that came hugs and cookies and ginger ale.

Slowly, I achieved a few small successes. I developed a strong speaking voice and began acting in school plays. Because of my good memory, learning lines was easy. I also did well in the sciences, and this encouraged my first big dream. I wanted to study medicine and, like my father, become a psychiatrist. I knew it

was an impossible dream for someone with all my school problems. Still, I decided that if I was going to dream, I'd reach for the moon. The greater the challenge, the harder I vowed to work. For every victory, however, there were many more setbacks—and the mystery of my problem only deepened.

"We'd like you to attend the Halsted School," my father told me the summer before tenth grade. "We think it would be best for you," my mother added.

A small, private school in Yonkers, Halsted educated kids with serious academic shortcomings. Here, for the first time in my life, I became a top student. I was also elected president of the student council and captained Halsted's six-man football team, playing offensive end. At the end of my senior year, I was named outstanding student-athlete and awarded a large trophy.

During that year, Halsted's headmistress wrote a strong letter of recommendation to the dean of admissions at Brandeis University in Waltham, Mass. When I was accepted, I thought it was a miracle. But going up against academically strong students at Brandeis was chilling. My grades and ego plummeted. I managed to perform acceptably for two years, but then decided to transfer to New York University for my junior and senior years.

After an important organic-chemistry exam, I felt like a man on death row. On the day the grades were posted, I rushed to the chemistry building. As I scanned the grade sheet, my shoulders slumped. I'd failed. "There goes medical school," a friend remarked. Determined, I arranged for a tutor and managed to earn a C+ in the course. And I went on to graduate.

Getting into medical school, I knew, would be difficult. Sure enough, turndowns came from school after school. "You don't belong here," the dean of a well-known medical school told me. "Your academic record shows you're emotionally unstable." But I knew I wasn't unstable. I just had great difficulty in mastering certain subjects. With my father's help, I managed to get into New York Medical College. "It'll be hard," my dad warned, "but I know you can make it." *If he feels that, I thought, maybe I can.*

I loved medicine. In my third year, as I got further into patient care and began a neurosurgery rotation, I knew I'd found my place in life. Almost daily, I saw patients suffering vascular malformations or life-threatening tumors made whole again by the skill and caring of a surgeon. Most of all, I was touched by the children—their innocence, their vulnerability, their unspoken fears and longings. This deeply influenced me, and during my later training I chose to concentrate in pediatric neuro-surgery. More than any other field of medicine, it offered everything I'd ever dreamed of—meeting an important challenge and, above all, helping others.

In the spring of 1963, graduation ceremonies were held at Carnegie Hall. As I

walked across the stage to accept my medical degree, I saw tears in my mother's eyes—and in Aunt Lottie's. I saw the pride in my father's smile. I hugged them all. With their support I had made it. But why I'd had to work so hard was still a mystery to me.

Twenty years later, my wife Kathy and I sat in a psychologist's office discussing our daughter, Ilana, a ten-year-old fifth-grader. The psychologist confirmed her high intelligence, yet Ilana had to struggle to keep up with her classmates—just as I had had to do. When Ilana's tests came back, the psychologist told us she suffered significant learning disabilities—and suddenly I was ushered into a new world of understanding.

Every year, I discovered five to ten percent of American school-age children are tested and found to be learning-disabled. These are children with average to superior intelligence, who have difficulty with any one, or a combination, of the four stages of learning: recording, processing, memory or expression of verbal or oral information. What's more, learning problems are often overlooked or may be difficult to diagnose. Many children who have them are labeled lazy, emotionally disturbed or even retarded.

When I heard all this, it was as if a light came on in a dark corner of my childhood. "Now that I realize what's been troubling Ilana," I told Kathy, "I understand something about my own struggles in school."

Today, after years of research, educators are more sophisticated about detecting learning disabilities and teaching children how to compensate for them. Because of this, many kids have been helped. Ilana, now a junior at Syracuse University, has made the dean's list and is considering a career in medicine.

For years, I'd lost touch with many of my teachers and friends who had helped me along the way. Then last year, following the publication of my book *Gifts of Time*, I decided to send a copy to Herbert Murphy, now retired in North Carolina. In it I wrote the inscription "To Mr. Murphy: You're my favorite teacher of all time. I will always remember your kindness when I was a struggling fifth-grade student at Riverdale. I will always remember you." _

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