Confessions From A Slow Learner

By Paul Edward Johnson

Back in November of 1948, at age seven, while sitting on the floor of Detroit's Franklin Elementary School's gym, awaiting the principal's announcement that Harry Truman had been reelected President of the United States, Sally, the prettiest girl in my world, sat down next to me and helped me learn how to tie my shoes.

You might say I was a slow learner. Well, I still am.

But I take pride, nevertheless, in my love of learning. I'm just not very teachable.

On my eighteenth birthday, June 10, 1959, I damn near didn't get to participate in my high school's graduation ceremony. Throughout my entire senior year my English teacher had given me nothing other than D-minus grades.

Several weeks before I graduated from high school, my senior English teacher asked me what I planned to do after high school.

I told her I wanted to become an English teacher.

She then asked, "Why in the world would you, of all people, want to become an English teacher?"

I said, "After spending the past nine months in your class getting nothing but D-minus grades, I figure there must be a better way to teach English to people who are high school seniors."

After getting a series of poor grades in college, I dropped out. But several years later, realized I was not going to be happy until I became an English teacher.

So, back in August of 1971, at age 30, I became a certified high school English teacher.

As eager as I was to help my seventeen-year-old students learn what I failed to learn when I was a senior in high school, I suspected if some were as slow to learn as I was, my aspiration to help them presented serious challenges.

What I had come to believe by age 30 was many of my teachers often didn't teach me. That does not mean they didn't help me learn. Some did. Some didn't.

While in kindergarten at Northwood Elementary School in Royal Oak, Michigan, I learned how to walk to and from the school; an eight block journey that included walking under an old railroad viaduct, then through a forested park, and then to a stop-lighted intersection.

On cold rainy mornings I would gaze up from that busy intersection at the warmly lighted school windows.

As a five-year-old kindergartener I vowed to myself that when I grew up it would be best for me to get a job within such a warm and sheltered building rather than work outdoors in the rain.

My favorite moment while being in kindergarten was when my sweet slender teacher would roll out the Edison Record Player, wind it up, and announce, "Since you've all been good children today, we will now play musical chairs."

When in first grade, my new teacher placed me in the back row of her classroom. I didn't yet know I needed glasses.

Maybe that's why I cannot remember what she looked like. All I recall learning in first grade was the word *red* is spelled *r-e-d*. And *gray*? Some insisted it is spelled *g-r-e-y*.

Following first grade I was relocated to Franklin Elementary School in Royal Oak, where Sally taught me to tie my shoes.

My second grade teacher placed me in a remedial reading group; about six of us seated in a circle together over in a corner of her classroom.

She called us the sparrows. The robins were seated in a circle in another corner. The bluebirds sat in a large circle in the middle of her classroom.

Toward the end of second grade I figured out three different ways to spell words that seemed to sound the same: *their*, *they're*, and *there*. And oh yes, I could also spell *through* and *threw*.

In third grade, while living in a wood tick infested village called Circle Pines, located about a half hour's drive north of Minneapolis, Minnesota, I enjoyed spreading the Sunday Comics on the living room floor and look at Dick Tracy shooting bullets through (not threw) the ugly bad guys' heads, and marvel at how sexy Daisy Mae appeared in her scanty shorts and blouse when chasing after Lil Abner.

Eventually, I figured that to figure out what Lil Abner and Daisy May were saying to each other, I had best learn to read more words, especially during one night at the dinner table when my younger brother Larry challenged me to recite the alphabet.

After failing to meet his challenge, he rolled out all 26 letters in less than ten seconds. And Larry was only in first grade.

During April and May, I didn't attend third grade.

My teacher had broken her back while falling down the staircase that led to my classroom in the one-room basement of a country school house.

The school house was not actually a school house. It was just a basement with nothing built on top of it.

When the substitute teacher read our names from the attendance roster to see who was present and who was absent, she did not say my name. Same thing happened the next day and the day after. So I decided to stop attending. And instead spent April and May wandering the fields and forests and creeks and lakes surrounding Circle Pines, Minnesota.

My mother would hand me my lunch in the morning, and then off I wandered toward the creek. The creek flowed into a forest and then into Golden Lake, where along its shoreline I found an old discarded rowboat, oars included.

On sunny days I would row it past the farm pastures that met the shoreline. On rainy days I would shack up in an old abandoned farmhouse, light a fire in its potbelly stove, sit in a moldy chair, and page through musty copies of *Saturday Evening Post Magazine* stacked beside the chair, gazing at all the photographs and trying to read the captions under the photos.

During one such afternoon, I opened a *Saturday Evening Post Magazine* containing several photos of adventurous people who had died trying to go over Niagara Falls inside barrels and strung-together rubber inner-tubes.

Unable to read all most of the words in the story, I took the magazine home, showed my father the story, and, with his help, learned how to read it.

He never asked where I got the moldy magazine, just as he never asked me why my coat and clothing smelled like smoke from being near the wood-burning stove in the abandoned farmhouse.

And, on one day in May, he never asked me why my coat reeked of smoke after I used my coat to unsuccessfully stamp out a forest fire I had started as the result of carelessly tossing a burning match across the narrow creek.

After hundreds of Circle Pines' pine trees had been burned down as the result of my pyrotechnics, I spent the entire summer worrying I might not advance to fourth grade.

But my family moved to Minneapolis that summer and I was enrolled in Robert Fulton Elementary School, where nobody figured out I never finished third grade. Or maybe nobody cared.

My teacher seemed to have an impossible mission. Her classroom was 40% fourth graders and 60% fifth graders.

She sat me in the back row, next to windows, where I spent hours squinting down at the kindergarten, first grade, second grade, and third grade kids dashing about on the playground during their morning and afternoon recesses.

She spent half her day trying to teach us fourth graders about Eskimos, Africans, Egyptians, and all about the birds some man named Audubon had painted. The other half of the day I would listen to her try to teach the fifth graders how to behave while they tried to add and subtract numbers.

I couldn't actually see her do what she did at her blackboard because I had yet to discover I needed glasses.

It was not until I was age ten, when my fifth grade teacher asked me to copy what she had been writing on the blackboard, that I was told I needed glasses.

Up until then, I had been pressing my nose into comic books and the Sunday comic strips, and eventually figuring out what most of the words were and meant inside the white balloons positioned above the heads of Dick Tracy and Daisy Mae and Donald Duck.

The best thing about getting glasses was not that I could suddenly see what was scribbled on the classroom blackboard. The best thing about wearing glasses was that I began to catch and hit a baseball.

As I entered sixth grade at age eleven, I doubt I could have written a one-page list of what I was taught during my previous years in elementary school. I couldn't write. About all I knew about writing was that sentences should begin with a capital (not *capitol*) letter and end with a period.

But my inability to write began to become overcome in sixth grade, as a result of my inclination to misbehave in the classroom. Whenever I misbehaved in the classroom, the teacher, Mr. Kerr, would have me spend the rest of the day in the cloak room, where among snow boots and coats and stinking gym shoes, he assigned me the task of writing 200-word "themes" describing what I must learn to do to stop misbehaving.

Each week I would spend several days writing 200-word themes in the cloak room.

During one morning in the cloak room, Mr. Kerr told me I could join my classmates for recess on the playground.

Sitting along the playground fence, my unfinished theme in hand, Jim Hutchins sat down beside me, snatched my theme, and began reading it.

Jim then stood up and motioned our classmates to all gather about him.

Jim held up my theme paper, and shouted, “Get a load of this! Paul has written here that he promises he will never again tie the laces of all our gym shoes together while he is in the cloak room. But he spelled the word *gym* J-I-M.”

After learning to improve my writing skills in the cloak room, I entered seventh grade at age 12, where I encountered and experienced my first English teacher: Mr. Carmen C. Caruso.

Mr. Caruso had to have been no taller than five feet.

He sat me in the back of the classroom, near the cloak room.

Although I could hear him speaking, I could hardly see him. I could often only see his hand extended somewhere above his hairline as he passionately diagrammed on the blackboard what he called “complex compound sentences.”

To me his diagrams of sentences looked nothing at all like what any normal sentence should look like.

Each diagram contained horizontal lines and lines extending below the horizontal lines, drawn at 45-degree angles; some extending downward to another horizontal line that also had more lines extending from them at 45-degree angles.

While diagramming sentences, atop each horizontal line and atop each 45-degree-angled line, he would perch a word or phrase from the sentence being diagramed.

Upon completing a diagram, Mr. Caruso would stand back from it, arms folded, one hand upon his chin, much like a portrait painter admiring his work; squat to retrieve broken pieces of chalk; wipe his chalk smeared hands upon his chalk smeared vest; stand on tip toes; turn toward us; and exclaim, “There you have it!”

Imagine how he would relish diagramming *that* sentence.

Sometimes he would have us walk to the blackboards to demonstrate he had taught us how to diagram sentences.

After we completed our attempts to diagram a sentence, he’d swagger toward us in the manner that a drill sergeant inspects his troops, each of us anxiously clinging to chalk and erasers.

"Johnson? Have you not been watching and listening to me? Adjectives and adverbs are never placed on horizontal lines. And you have nouns and verbs dangling from them? Erase this and try again. Or look at Richard's diagram. See how Richard's diagram looks? Richard pays attention."

When it came to trying to identify such things as nouns and verbs and adjectives and adverbs, I felt doomed.

Mr. Caruso insisted nouns were "persons, places, or things."

I insisted all words are things, thus all words were nouns.

Upon entering Minneapolis Southwest High School as a ninth grader in 1955, I was convinced I would never graduate if required to figure out "parts of speech."

But, lucky for me, I was assigned to Mrs. Haaland's English class. She only spent a month on grammar and then had us all busy reading stupid stories, such as the one about a miserable miser, Silas Marner, and a little girl he adopted.

To Mrs. Haaland, the big deal about that story was it was written by a woman whose portrait happened to look a lot like Mrs. Haaland.

This female author chose to use the name George Eliot instead of using her real name because, according to Mrs. Haaland, way back in the Olden Days female authors were not taken seriously by book publishers.

The only story I took seriously in ninth grade was *Tom Sawyer*. And for some reason, the author who wrote *Tom Sawyer* used a fake name, too. Even though he was a man.

On the first day of tenth grade in 1956, my new English teacher, Mr. McDonough, he asked if any of us knew what the Renaissance was. Nobody raised their hand.

So I raised my hand and asked, "A mountain range between Spain and France?"

During his class we discovered the Renaissance, and during the next year with him, too. His English classes became my rebirth or revival of learning previously ignored.

My two years in Mr. McDonough's English classes during tenth and eleventh grade were loaded with discoveries that changed my life for the rest of my life, mostly for the better.

We seldom looked at grammar books. Instead, we talked about what he said were some of the world's greatest writers.

When he assigned us Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, it took me what seemed to be maybe an hour to figure out what in the hell was written on just the first page.

After the first page, I tossed it aside and went outside and tossed a football around with my neighborhood friends. Friends were more important than some dead guy who had been a Roman.

But the next day in Mr. McDonough's English class, he surprised the hell out of me. Instead of quizzing us about what we were supposed to have read the night before, he told us what the entire play was about. From start to finish!

One of our star athletes, Jack Rice, raised his hand and asked, "Now that you have told us all about what happens in this old play, why do you want us to read it?"

Mr. McDonough adjusted his glasses, smiled, and replied, "So we may then, together, have a conversation about it. The play is not only about what happens during the play. It's about something far more important to all of us. It's about friendships."

He then said, "It's about the importance of friends and how we respect them, honor them, and love them. Yes, the play was written hundreds of years ago and is about something that happened thousands of years ago. It is also about what is important to all of us today and will remain important to all of us as we continue to live our lives: friendships."

That got my attention.

During the two years I enjoyed being among my friends in his classroom, I not only learned more about myself, I also learned more about my friends as the result of Mr. McDonough helping us talk with each other about what was and was not important.

What happened in Mr. McDonough's English classes became the most vital aspect of my high school education. And that is why I say with certainty it should remain a vital aspect of high school education, especially between ages 15 and 17, and especially when I read every day about how teenagers appear to have now become less sensitive than stones as the result of each sitting alone while focusing on violent video games, violent movies, and twit what seem to be abbreviated messages to photo faces they call "friends."

So what happened during my senior-year English class in which the highest grade given to me was a D-minus?

We never experienced conversations during that English class. Instead, Miss Williams told us to read travelogue stories about someone's trip to Spain, to France, and to other countries she had traveled to during her summer vacations.

After she gave us a daily quiz to see if we had diligently read each assigned story, she would drone on and on about her summer vacation experiences in each of the countries.

Somewhere between her tales of Parisian and Italian and Greek restaurants and museums, I would fall asleep, and then, upon being awakened by her, she would scold me and announce I had just received a "zero" from her for not paying attention.

Each "zero" lowered my grade in her class by one-third, despite the fact I had been somehow earning passing grades on her quizzes and tests and homework assignments.

After my dad went to visit her during the month of April to talk with her about my poor report-card grades, Dad told me at our dinner table that night that he doubted I would graduate.

With my younger brothers and sisters at the dinner table, my mother asked him why.

"Well," he said, "After she showed me how Paul had earned passing grades on his quizzes and tests and assignments, he had also received demerits for falling asleep in her classroom."

"So did she tell you that is why I am not going to graduate?"

"Well, Paul, let me put it this way. After she showed me all your D-minus grades have been the result of you getting zeros for falling asleep during her class, I said something to her that won't help you."

"What did you say to her?"

"I said, Miss Williams? You need to get laid."

My little sisters and my eight-year-old brother Ricky did not understand. And all that my mother said was, "It's time we all clean the dinner table and do the dishes."

Several days before what were supposed to have been my last days of high school, Dad doused me with a bucket of ice water while I was sleeping in bed. At three in the morning.

I sprung from my wet mattress and stood before him in a state of shock.

He said, "Dry off and get dressed. Time to go to work. There's a job waiting for you this morning that will pay you two dollars and ten cents an hour. Unloading a semi-truck filled with crates of tomatoes I've sold to downtown produce warehouses."

"But Dad, wait. Today is my high school commencement ceremony. Today I'm supposed to dress up in cap and gown and receive awards for what I've done with the school's organizations. And we're supposed to get our high school yearbook today."

"Forget that. School's over now. Today your real life begins."

Less than an hour later, before the sun had come up, he had me standing next to the cab of an 18-wheel truck as he woke up the driver who was sleeping inside.

I spent the day unloading wooden tomato crates, splintering and infecting fingers on my left hand.

That night at the dinner table, my younger brother Larry told me how the principal, Mr. Classon, had called out my name during the commencement exercise to receive awards I had earned, and because I did not come forward to receive them, the buzz in the school auditorium was that I would not be graduating.

After spending the next day unloading another truck of tomatoes, an infected finger on my left hand became swollen and appeared to have become a banana, and when I showed up for our class banquet at a ritzy hotel located near the shoreline of Lake Calhoun, I was unable to play my tenor sax with a group of classmates scheduled to entertain.

The next day, my 18th birthday, unable to learn from classmates at the banquet if I was indeed going to graduate, I unloaded a truck of bananas, took a bus home, washed up, and walked to the high school that evening, after my mother told me she had phoned the principal to find out if I should show up for the graduation ceremony to be held on the football field.

Mom told me Mr. Classon had told her I was to report to my English teacher, Miss Williams, to receive my report card, my high school yearbook, my awards pins, and my cap and gown.

Miss Williams was not in a good mood when she handed me my stuff, especially when I looked at my report card and saw how she had written in red ink the word *FAIL* for my grade in her English class.

But someone had tried to erase the word, almost rubbing it out, but failing because the card would then have a hole in it.

Appearing next to the almost obliterated word *FAIL* was *D-* and the initials of the principal: *RHC*.

All she said to me as I looked at my report card was simply, "Somebody likes you."

I joined my classmates as they were all forming up to march down to the football field, where parents and families were proudly waiting to watch us parade by them: 182 of us, two by two, with me marching beside Steve Juul, he being academically ranked 91st in the class and me being ranked 92nd.

The two of us were the "most-average students" in a class hailed by Mr. Classon as being "the most above-average class to have ever graduated from Southwest High School."

What I valued most from high school was not what I may have learned and later forgotten in the civics class, the algebra class, the mechanical drawing class, the architectural drawing class, the advanced algebra class, the American history class, the geometry class, the physics class, the biology class, the chemistry class, the solid geometry class, the trigonometry class, the modern problems class, and Miss Williams' damn English class.

What remained and remains valued is what happened within the two English classes conducted by Mr. McDonough.

Within his classroom we began to clarify and hear what we valued about our relationships with our families, our classmates, and our friends. As the result of Mr. McDonough's memorable classroom discussions, we saw how the poems, plays, novels, and short stories we were reading often portrayed many of our personal experiences with our families, classmates, and friends.

Following my third year as an English teacher for high school seniors, while sitting one summer evening upon a bar stool in a tavern in a town populated by 900 people, a young man sat down beside me, ordered a beer for himself and another for me, and cordially asked me how I was doing.

He was one of my former high school students, a guy who had been the star pitcher for his high school's championship baseball team.

While conversing with him, he suddenly surprised me by saying I was his favorite teacher. Surprised me because the highest grade he achieved in my English class was a "*D*."

When I then asked him how in the world he could possibly say I was his favorite teacher, his answer went something like this:

> I have to admit I had never really learned to read or write when I entered your classroom in 1971. I'd been attending school in this small town for 12 years. Always with the same kids.

> After those12 years we knew each other's names. And the names of each brothers and sisters and parents. And we knew the gossip about each other.
>
> But other than that, those kids were pretty much still strangers to me. Until we were all together in your English class. Within your classroom we came to understand who we were, what we cared about, who we cared about, who among us cared about us, and, most importantly, how and why we cared.

I damn near fell off my barstool. It was as though I could hear Mr. McDonough singing along with Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young as the tavern's jukebox played "Teach Your Children."

While I may remain somewhat "unteachable," I'm thankful I learned through Mr. McDonough what may be learned about the importance of friendships, and what I gradually learned from my caring friends . . . including how to spell the word *gym* and how to tie my shoes.

By the way . . . during the time I was teaching my English class for 17-year-old students, I soon discovered their individual reading "levels" ranged between the measurable third-grade reading-level to the measurable reading-level of college graduates.

After identifying 20 students who wished to become future teachers, I recruited them into the school's Future Teachers of America Organization.

I then dispatched them among the school district's elementary students, junior high students, and senior high students whose parents wanted their children to develop their reading and writing skills.

In the same manner that Sally helped me learn to tie my shoes, these future teachers helped kids improve their reading and writing skills, and in doing so experienced the great gratification that results from helping others learn to learn.

While doing a search on the internet about where I attended kindergarten and first grade (Northwood Elementary School in Royal Oak Michigan) I discovered this on their website:

> Students not responding to core instruction over time will be provided additional instruction by either the classroom teacher, RtI Coordinator, or ESL teacher in order to increase the struggling students' performance to the average of the class.
>
> Interventions will consist of one or more 10-week rounds of intervention, offered in small groups, one-to-one, or web-based programs, which does not supplant core instruction in the area of need.
>
> Tier 2 and/or Tier 3 interventions will be provided by one or more of the following: classroom teachers, RtI Coordinator, or ESL teacher.
>
> Students that do not respond to core instruction, and two or more rounds of interventions, may be referred to the Student Study Team to determine the next steps.
>
> Teachers will monitor student progress in grade level teams, according to the District Professional Development Calendar for 2013-2014, in order to adjust and differentiate instruction for students that are not responding to core instruction. Teachers will collaborate as a professional learning community to meet the needs of students struggling with reading.

Some incidental facts:

While doing a map search on the internet I found my family's house at 1202 Lawndale Drive in Royal Oak, Michigan, and then traced my steps to Northwood Elementary School: an eight-block journey I walked alone when I was only age five and age six:

http://www.bing.com/maps/?v=2&cp=42.502107~-83.155565&lvl=16&sty=h&q=1202%20Lawndale%20Drive%20Royal%20Oak,%20Michigan&form=LMLTSN

And then I moved down the map a tad and discovered our family's subsequent house on the corner of East Lincoln Avenue and Longfellow Avenue, and traced my steps down Longfellow Avenue, where Larry and I walked several blocks to Franklin Elementary School located on Longfellow Avenue, where I was in second grade and Larry was a kindergartener.

But it seems Franklin Elementary School is no longer there.

Plus I traced from the corner of East Lincoln Avenue and Longfellow Avenue to the corner of East Lincoln Avenue to South Campbell Road, where at that intersection still exits the baseball field where Dad tried to teach me how to hit a softball during the summer when I was age seven.

And then I discovered Bloomfield Corners, Michigan … next to Cass Lake, near Pontiac, and northwest of Royal Oak.

My folks rented a summer cottage on Cass Lake when I was age three.

One early summer morning I toddled down the cottage's lawn to the dock, to our family row boat tied to a dock post.

I jumped into the row boat, unfastened the rope from the boat and the dock, and enjoyed how the boat began to drift away from the shore. Until it dawned on me how I did not know how to row the boat.

But I sure as hell could yell.

My mother dashed from our cottage, tossed a rope to me, and tugged me to shore.