

SARAH'S STORY

Part 1:

As a child 60+ years ago and with a November birthday, I began 1st grade at age 6. By November when I turned 7, my teacher asked my parents for a Parent/Teacher Conference. At the conference, the Principal informed my parents that I needed to be placed in a special class for the remainder of 1st grade, and that I most probably would not finish high school. (Educators in our small Ohio town in the 1950's knew little about learning disabilities.)

When my parents got home, my wise father sat me down and told me exactly what the Principal had said. He then asked me, "So, Sarah Ann, what are you going to do about that?" According to my father, I thought for a minute, then replied, "I'm going to be the smartest one of the dumb ones, Daddy."

My 'special class' turned out to be fun — but not challenging for me. I had already memorized saying my ABC's and my numbers. I knew colors and shapes from Kindergarten. Therefore, I soon became the class clown, and I got into trouble on a weekly basis. My father was not pleased.

At the end of the year, I was passed along to the 2nd grade 'special class' — but I had not learned to read, write, spell, or do any arithmetic functions. Nothing on paper made any sense to me. I couldn't even read a clock. Again, my father was not pleased, but neither of my parents knew how to teach me.

In the 2nd grade, we sat in a large circle (in my special class) and pronounced spelling words printed on large cards that the teacher held up. I tried and tried to "sound out" the words as my teacher instructed — but the sounds made no sense, because the letters kept changing places. I became so frustrated, that I resorted to cheating — asking my friend next to me to whisper the word. Naturally, we got caught, and my father was again called in for a conference...

(to be continued)

SARAH'S STORY

Part 2:

My father attended the conference without my mother, because she had been hospitalized for ptomaine poisoning, not from food, but from cleaning our flooded basement. My father was overwhelmed and at a loss. He called my Aunt Sarah, my mother's sister in Pennsylvania.

My sister and I flew by TWA to Pittsburg the next day. My aunt and uncle picked us up at the airport. I remember that it was snowing, and my father had forgotten our coats. After a quick shopping trip, we traveled to Scottdale, where we stayed for many months.

My aunt enrolled us in the local elementary school — in regular classes! I was so excited and decided to try even harder to learn. My new teacher was Mrs. Geyer, and she was wonderful! She immediately recognized that I had some difficulties and suggested to my aunt that I have a few private tutoring lessons. Little did I know at the time, but Mrs. Geyer had similar difficulties learning as a child.

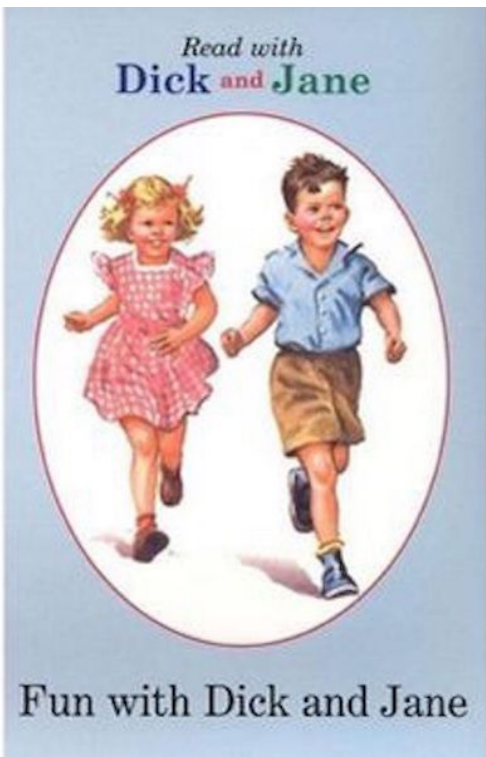
Mrs. Geyer's house was most unusual — a 'tiny' house, before its time. I loved her house and immediately felt comfortable. I recall that during the first visit we (Mrs. Geyer, my aunt, my sister, and I) had tea and cookies — no lessons. For the second visit, Mrs. Geyer asked that I was the only one to stay for an hour.

As I looked around her tiny home, I noticed she had a bookcase with lots of books. I so wanted to be able to read those books! Whenever my class went to the library, I would pick out 3 books — just like everybody else. I always opened the books and hoped for pictures, because I knew I couldn't read the words.

Mrs. Geyer took down a book and opened it. There were two children - Dick and Jane - and they had a baby sister, Sally! Sally was my nickname. Mrs. Geyer printed 'SALLY' on a card, then she printed 'Sally' on another card. She explained that they both said the same name, although they looked different. Wow! I tried to print both. Then she printed 'YLLAS' and

I smiled — yes, I knew that was the same. “You see,” she explained, “it’s always a good idea to look at words from all possibilities. Good for you!”

(to be continued)



Look, Jane.
See funny Sally.
Oh, oh, oh.
Funny little Sally.

SARAH'S STORY

Part 3:

Look, Jane.

See funny Sally.

Oh, oh, oh.

Funny little Sally.

Mrs. Geyer printed cards for each new word. She helped me to print cards to take to my aunt's house for practice. She also allowed me to take the reader book. I read the words over and over as Mrs. Geyer or my Aunt Sarah pointed to each one. Slowly, the words were staying together on the card and on the page. Slowly, my young brain was learning to try all possibilities and see all 'sides' of a word. That was me, funny little Sally.

Over the next few months, Mrs. Geyer and I worked together 2 to 3 times a week, both after school and in the evening in her wonderful home. I completed book after book from one of her bookcases. When my class went to the library, Mrs. Geyer helped me select books (with pictures and words) that I could read with her.

As spring approached, the principal met with my Aunt Sarah and suggested that I might be able to progress to an ADVANCED reading group! We immediately called my father with the good news. He too had good news, my mother was coming home from the hospital, and we would soon be able to return home for the next school year. I was so excited to see my parents and go back to school in Ohio — to read for my class!

When we returned to Ohio, I was given several tests for the next school year. They were hard tests, and I was scared. As a result of my test scores, I was placed in a regular 3rd grade class for reading, but a special class for arithmetic. Numbers were still quite a challenge for me.

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SARAH'S STORY

Part 4:

The first week of 3rd grade was a disaster. I had more trouble reading, and my classroom teacher suggested that perhaps I had just memorized words and not truly learned phonetics and the concept of sentences. A wise, logical, special math teacher was the key to my learning dilemma.

As a baby, I only wanted to use my left hand for everything. I ate with my left hand, I picked up toys with my left hand, and I sucked two fingers of my left hand. My father was upset. He said that the world was not set up for left-handed people. School desks were right-handed (back then), teachers made you switch hands for writing and punished you if you didn't. He was strongly opposed to my being left-handed.

Little did my mother know that my father had been left-handed as a baby, and as a child in school, he was forced to switch. That experience had caused learning problems for my father. Consequently, he felt it was better to teach me to become right-handed at an early age.

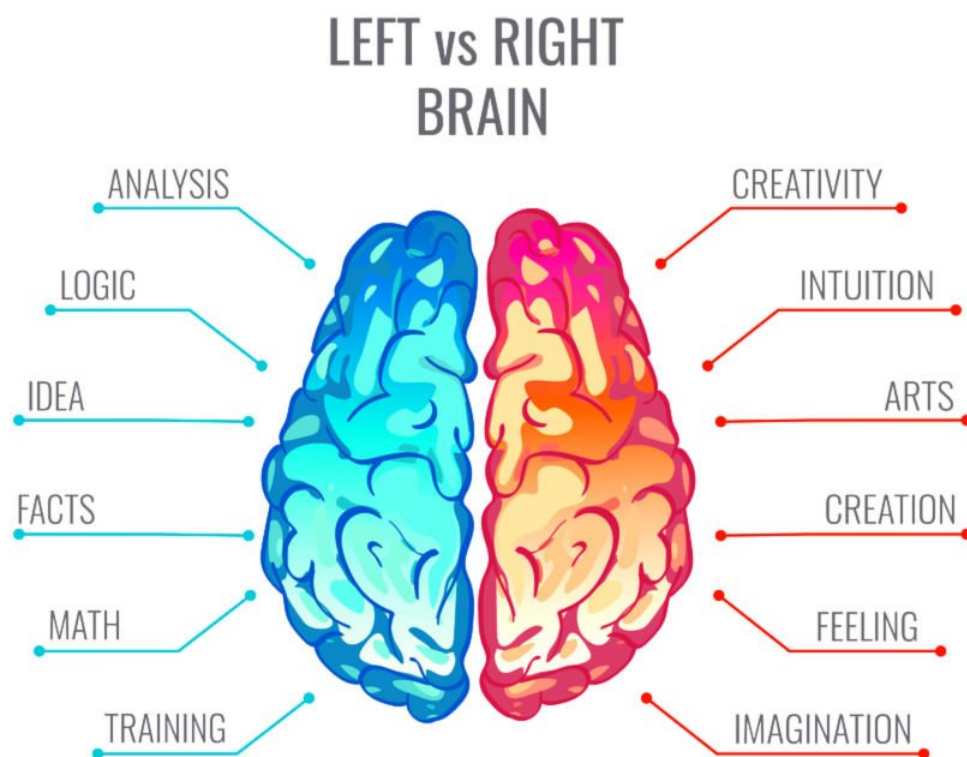
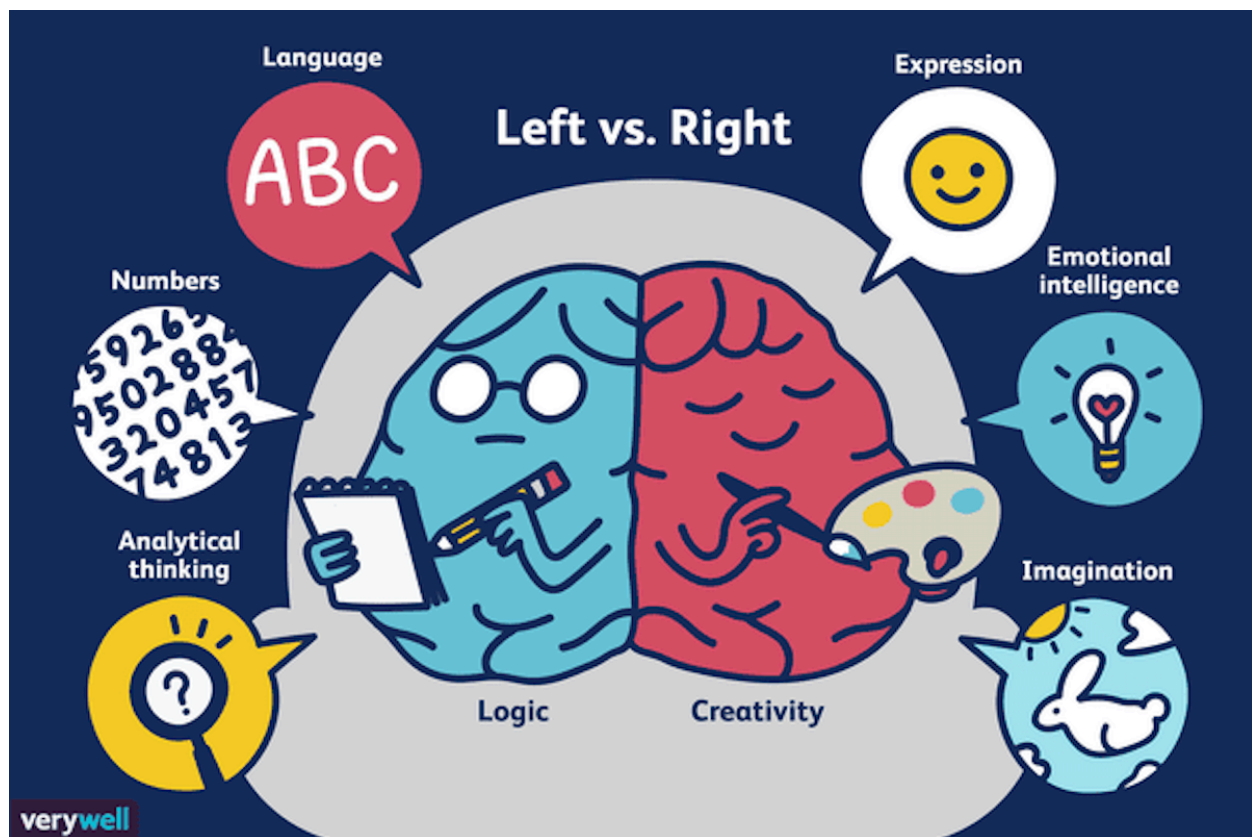
My mother's father Dr. Jack Horner was a left-handed surgeon (never forced to switch); therefore, my mother thought it was wonderful that I might also be left-handed, and she encouraged me to use my left hand.

Eventually, my father gave in (mostly because I screamed loudly when he tried to make me use my right hand) and then both he and my mother encouraged my left-handedness.

When my parents took me to kindergarten for the first time, my father had instructed my teacher that I was not to be made to switch hands. He said proudly, "My daughter is left-handed, period."

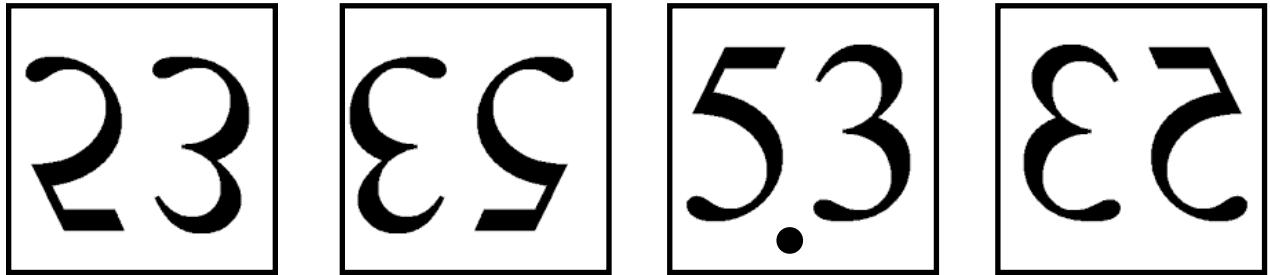
Being left-handed usually means that a child learns mostly through the right hemisphere of the brain — the side of the brain that governs expression, emotional intelligence, imagination, and creativity (I currently write children's mystery fairy tales). The left hemisphere governs language, numbers, analytical thinking, and logic. The pieces of my learning puzzle were finally starting to fall into place...

(to be continued)



SARAH'S STORY

Part 5



These are the possible ways I might see the number 53. How do you teach a child to add, subtract, multiply and divide (and let's not even think of teaching fractions!), when a child might view a number backwards, upside down, etc.? Dyslexia at its 'best' you might say.

Patterns. Similarities. Possibilities.

Again, my teacher (my special math teacher, wish I could remember her name) and I created flash cards. The correct view of the number had a small dot on the bottom. By showing me two of the same cards together (one being the correct view), I said the number and, believe it or not, my brain began to learn to turn the number around until it was correct. This took months and months of practice — but it finally worked for me. Some children eventually learn to do this on their own. To this day, I can see any number or letter written in any direction — even upside down and mirrored — and immediately, I know what it is. I can read and do math, written or printed in any direction. My brain now automatically 'flips' it to correct.

Did you know that Leonardo DaVinci wrote all of his private journals in mirrored letters and numbers? I wonder if perhaps he had a few special learning 'abilities' himself...

"Not only did Leonardo write with a special kind of shorthand that he invented himself, he also mirrored his writing, starting at the right side of the page and moving to the left. Only when he was writing something intended for other people did he write in the normal direction.

The purpose of his mirror writing is unknown, but one idea is that it may have kept his hands clean. People who were contemporaries of Leonardo left records that they saw him write and paint left handed. He also made sketches showing his own left hand at work. As a lefty, this mirrored writing style would have prevented him from smudging his ink as he wrote." (from **Museum of Science**)

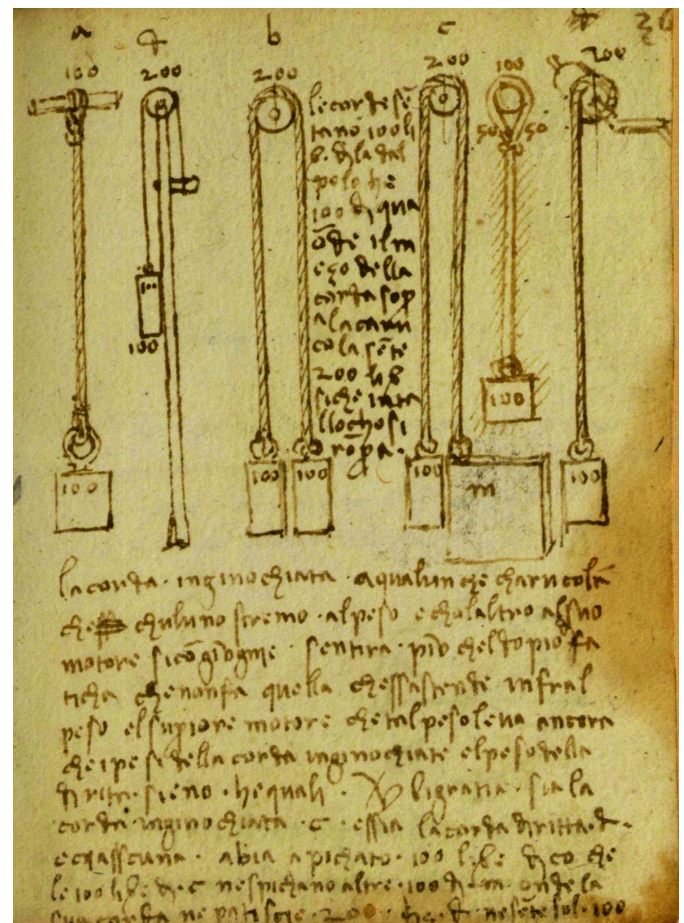
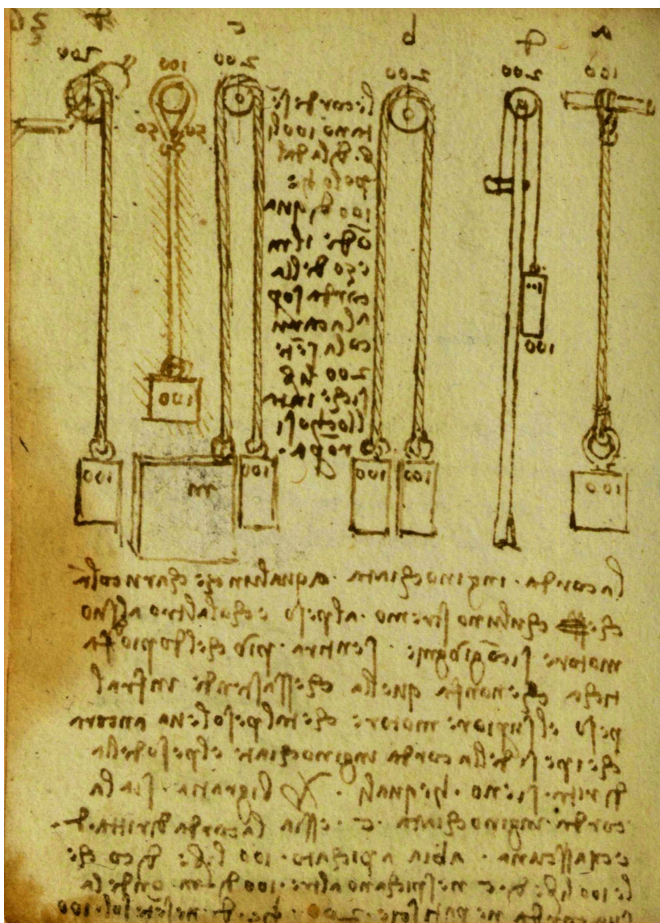
When I began teaching English and Latin, I sometimes used my special 'ability' on the very first day of class. I found that as an adult, after years of 'flipping,' I was able to write my name on the board using both hands at the same time, writing in opposite directions — and even upside down and backwards. (Not my handwriting below, but you get the idea.)

Sarah Ann Duncan *uocuuQ uoA dnoel*
Sarah Ann Duncan *uocuuQ uoA dnoel*

After I wrote a few more things, you could hear a pin drop in the classroom — and I never (well, almost never) had any discipline problems after that.

(to be continued)

Pages from Leonardo da Vinci's notes
(I have flipped horizontally on my computer)



SARAH'S STORY

Part 6

The key to reading for me was when I began to see patterns, similarities and possibilities on the printed page. That did not happen until the end of 4th grade. Up until that time, I had memorized words and phonics, but I was not truly reading.

I can vividly remember going to the school library one afternoon with my 4th grade class. I loved to check out books, and by now I looked for words and not just pictures. I'd found 3 books. As I checked them out of the library, a classmate asked me which books I'd chosen. She opened one book, pointed to the word 'island' and said, "What's that word?"

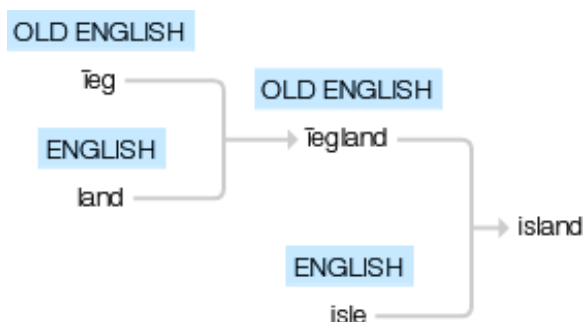
I loudly replied, "is land." My classmates all laughed, and I laughed too (even though I wanted to cry and run away).

"You mean ISLAND?" my classmate corrected me, and she laughed.

My teacher quickly came to my rescue, "Class, why is it pronounced 'island' and not 'is land' — does anybody know?"

Not a hand appeared. Silently, we all returned our classroom and our teacher explained about ancient languages forming English, and how the pronunciation of words changed over long periods of time. She thanked my classmate and me for discovering something we hadn't learned yet about language, but I noticed that my classmate didn't join us for recess.

That's when I began searching for word possibilities. That's also when I began my love affair with languages, especially Latin, Greek, and English. In case you're curious...



Old English *īegland*, from *īeg* 'island' (from a base meaning 'watery, watered') + land. The change in the spelling of the first syllable in the 16th century was due to association with the unrelated word **isle**. Isle: from **Old French** *ile*, earlier *isle*, from **Latin** *insula* "island," a word of uncertain origin.

