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An Historical Perspective Fond Memories of Dr. Samuel T. Orton and His Family

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Have you ever served on an Archives Committee? Probably not unless you are at least a Senior Citizen plus! We know that our memories are very selective. Older people tend to forget names, but we do remember people, and events, especially those close to our hearts.

Dr. Orton and his wife June, came into my life (or rather I burst into theirs) in the fall of 1939. My husband and I came from Seattle to New York that fall so he could attend graduate school at Columbia University. I was headed for the Orton's office, though Dr. Orton was definitely not expecting me! My own graduate work was in psychology at the University of Washington, specializing in the field of learning and language problems. An earlier summer spent working with Dr. Grace Fernald at UCLA changed my life. Dr. Fernald, an outstanding psychologist, was pioneering a program with a group of non-readers from Los Angeles elementary schools using a multisensory approach. The results were fascinating and exciting. To think that this was 1935, 65 years ago that teachers were already crying out for answers. Why were intelligent children failing in the classroom, especially in the language areas?

Meanwhile, on the East Coast, in 1936 Dr. Orton was invited to give the prestigious Thomas W. Salmon Lectures in New York City. The research for these lectures started at the University of Iowa's College of Medicine where he established a Department of Psychiatry in 1925. His Mobile Mental Hygiene Unit discovered several children with what seemed to be a specific reading disability, including a 16 year-old boy he called "M.P." Dr. Orton was so impressed with the extent and significance of this learning disorder that he arranged to study "M.P." intensively. His book, "Reading, Writing and Speech Problems in Children" published in 1937, offers a condensed summary of the findings of a ten-year period in which he studied disorders in the acquisition of language encountered by certain children, such as "M.P."

A Diagnostic schedule of tests was formulated with the Iowa Test among them. Speech disorders were studied throughout the research program. A speech therapist was an important member of the clinical team. This is very interesting because reading problems had been thought to be only a visual disability. The phrase "Word-blindness" was often applied to the reading disabled, even in England. It was Dr. Orton who realized it involved much more than the visual sense.

Reading Dr. Orton's book while in graduate school at the University of Washington answered so many questions about these children I so wanted to help. His theory relating specific language difficulty to a faulty pattern in brain functioning and his important conclusion that these children could be taught by an approach and by a method specific to their needs was a new concept. In other words, they need not fail!

It was with high hopes that, in the fall of 1939, I found my way to the Orton's office in the Croydon Hotel at 12 East 86th Street, just off Central Park Avenue in a very nice area between Fifth Avenue and Park Avenue. I wanted to see if they would let me work with them. Fortunately for me, their assistant was just leaving at that time, and I became a member not only of the office team but of the Orton family. In their warm way, they included this young couple in many a weekend at Hwimsy, their rustic retreat in Wappingers Falls, near Poughkeepsie. Dr. Orton loved the outdoors and especially loved to work with his hands. He designed and built their home, complete with a large swimming pond and many cabins throughout the woods for their guests. The house itself was not only a retreat from New York City but with war just breaking out in Europe, Dr. Orton reinforced the foundation to serve as a bomb shelter!

Being a top-notch neurologist and psychiatrist, Dr. Orton had a large practice of very well-known people who would come to him with their children's speech and language problems. My two years working in the office in New York with Dr. and Mrs. Orton was a wonderful learning experience for this budding psychologist! Dr. and Mrs. Orton were a remarkable team. In their years together since meeting in the Iowa project, and their subsequent marriage and move to New York City, she became literally his "right-hand man." Her goal was to protect him as much as she could from routine business affairs so he could concentrate his strength on personally seeing and advising heads of independent schools such as the Forman School, Gow School, and many an anxious parent.

Dr. Orton did all of the diagnostic testing of the children who were brought to the office. He and Mrs. Orton would then go over all aspects of the test results and she would dictate most of the letters for me to type. Their offices on the second floor of the Croydon and their apartment higher up in the building made an ideal arrangement.

As I look back almost 60 years later, I remember this remarkable man as a brilliant pioneer in his profession and a warm, sympathetic human being, keenly aware of and interested in everything and everyone. He personally kept in touch with every patient who came to him for help. He supervised the teaching in several independent Schools, such as the Gow School. He worked with many parents teaching them how to tutor their children. At that time there were very few trained teachers. Helene Durbrow, who lived in Baltimore, is a marvelous example. I was lucky enough to spend the summer of 1959 at her camp in Mansfield, Vermont, testing, tutoring and learning more about these wonderful children from an expert.

Dr. Orton always felt indebted to his father for his real education. As a boy growing up in Ohio he would tag along with his father's classes on their geology trips. His dad was a noted geologist who was also president of Ohio State University. Although rather a delicate child, Sam was described by an older sister as an "imp" at the age of four! His participation in the activities of his neighborhood seems to have been one of the reasons his parents decided to send him east to Taft School for his college prep years. Although he did not shine as a scholar there, his pranks in pursuit of "science" were long remembered. He developed a lifelong interest in Nature as well as a keen sense of observation and the ability to write precise scientific reports, so helpful in his career as a neurologist.

Dr. Orton always felt deeply the problems of each child, parent, and teacher who came to him for help. His quick mind, his vast experience, his understanding of the crippling blow that a language disability deals to the image and self-confidence of children and adults, all gave him the strength and inspiration to keep on with his research and his practice long after his own health was failing. He died November 16, 1948, at the age of 69.

He wanted to establish the clinical scientific basis for language disability, to promote understanding of its importance to the medical and educational professions, to create the educational procedures and materials necessary for these children and adults, based on sound neurological principles, and to train teachers in awareness and techniques.

Dr. Orton's ideas were far in advance of his time. It was no small part of his genius that he was able to detect what the educational needs of his patients were. He devised a basic plan for meeting them. He enlisted the support of talented colleagues from several professions including Anna Gillingham and Bessie Stillman, to develop methods and materials for teaching students or patients, privately and in schools.

Dr. Orton taught me to respect the uniqueness of each child and to teach to his intelligence, to observe and determine how each child learns, what are her areas of strength and weakness, and then to plan the training with flexibility and creativity. He was convinced that these children he called strephosymbolic (twisted symbols, and now referred to as dyslexic) were not defective but were different in their own growth patterns. This led to the supposition that appropriate teaching would aid in these children's development into capable students and adults. Their thought processes were generally strong, but their rote memories were weak, especially in matters of symbolic forms and sequences. By reducing the amount to be memorized to the basic elements of the language and to teach these thoroughly through all the participating senses seemed to him to be the obvious answer!

Being a part of the Orton family and the Orton Society all these many years had meant a great deal to me, personally and professionally. We are all deeply indebted to these two brilliant, caring people, Sam and June Orton. May we continue to honor them by helping these wonderful children find joy in the world of books.