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## Zero

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## Zero

By: Amber Brandau

My strong suit wasn't reading. No, it was far from it. In fact, I had the lowest reading level in my first-grade class. I loved listening to my grandpa read though. I loved books but I couldn't figure out how to put those incoherent and foreign scribbles into spoken words.

I could listen all day to my grandpa read. I loved how he told stories. His voice would change to the right pitch and tone, which would put me on the edge of my seat wanting... no needing to know what happened next. When I was younger how I wished I never had to read because my brain just couldn't figure it out. I stumbled over words and my anxiety would spike. It was like my brain turned to mush.

In first grade my best friend was at the top of the class in reading, and I was at the lowest. I was always last in everything. I told myself it was fine, and I would learn at my own pace, but kids weren't that kind and understanding. They couldn't fathom how I couldn't read the simplest of words. I had become so embarrassed and disappointed in myself. It was pushing back the slight progress I had made. Mrs. Swiheart was understanding looking back, but at that time I thought she was getting tired of trying to teach the unteachable.

I remember that day as clear as glass. We had our weekly group readings and the small group of us were all sitting around the crescent shaped faux wooden table. When I say small, I mean at the most five of us. This week's book was about tree frogs. I remember this because I thought they were cute, and I kept getting distracted by the bright colors of the different species of tree frogs. Of course, the easiest word I had to keep getting stuck on I don't know if it was from my anxiety building up waiting for my turn to read and me being extremely shy about public speaking, but I kept tripping up over the word 'and'. Yes, a three-letter word that is so easy to read. I could feel the burning of eyes on me as I kept stupidly trying to spit that darned word out. To no avail and my face heated and my mouth became dry. I looked down and shook my head. My anxiety once again won.

After that I told my grandpa to stop reading to me. I didn't want to hear his comforting voice reading words that I thought were out of my reach. That I could never attain to reach that goal in my learning progress. After all, by this time I thought I was stupid. That I was unteachable. Maybe I was challenged and needed to be put into another class with people who too couldn't fathom words and phrases.

The only person who noticed the change in my demeanor was my grandpa. Maybe only because he always read to me or maybe because he actually noticed. My grandma, bless her heart, was too busy with housework, my older sister really didn't care about my academics, my mother was too busy working herself to death, and my younger sister was too busy hanging out with friends and concentrating on her above average academic level (which my mom and her loved to remind everyone how smart she was). In reality I was thoughtfully processing how to get this reading thing down. How I could go from zero to at least average. I wanted to be normal. That was all I wanted to be able to read normally like the rest of my peers.

Well, it started during summer break, before second grade. I was still in last place. I grabbed every book I could from the library that seemed easy enough to read. I slowly approached him. With my nerves spiking to high heaven. I looked at him as he sat in his favorite armchair that was placed in front of the focal wall that was coated in plaster and rocks. My grandma always hated that wall. It was trendy in the 70's but was a safety hazard she later realized. I focused on the brown plush carpeting that coated the upstairs living room as I mauled

over how to start the conversation about me wanting to read. All my words left my mushed brain at the point I approached the armchair. So, I just stood there holding a beginner's book about marine life out like an offering.

He asked me, "Do you want me to read that book to you?"

I shook my head and I looked up mustering enough courage to say wanted I wanted and needed to say, "No, I want to try to read it."

I was serious too. I remember my grandpa being taken aback by my forwardness, even though I still sounded like a little mouse. After all I was a huge pushover growing up. So just me saying "no" was a huge deal no matter how quiet I had been.

He smiled at me. "Okay, do you want me to listen?"

I nodded and I started butchering the book with my attempt of reading those beautiful, sculpted words of information. Which happened to be about all sorts of interesting animal facts, about marine life. I kept trying and my grandpa just helped when I needed him. He finally allowed me to struggle without automatically wanting to correct me. Even so I didn't feel like he was judging me for not being able to read those simple but effective words. Far from it, I felt the most comfortable I've ever been with reading, and I thanked him from the bottom of my heart for that.

I kept reading every day. Until finally I could at least muster a few sentences without any help. I could read something and that it didn't come out butchered. I was thrilled, so much so, it felt like I was flying through space. I was proud and so was my grandpa, that was the biggest smile I had seen from him that was directed towards me. I can't think of any other time I was that proud except for when I had gotten my short stories published in literary journals. I guess though that wouldn't have happened if I didn't nurture and grow my love of reading.

I can relate to the literary narrative written by Malcom X, titled Malcom X, because he too took advantage of his newly found spare time to learn a new skill, and it happened to be the same skills I needed to improve and expand on as well. I felt like when I was reading his story, I was being heard and understood for the first time, by peer that was a stranger and not a relative.

I did end up learning to read that summer. I couldn't believe the feat I had just accomplished and that was just the beginning. I ended up going from the bottom of the reading totem pole to the very top. That's right I went from being in the lowest reading level to the highest in just over a few months. I utilized my time over the summer instead of excessively hanging out with my friends I ended up learning a skill I would need and ended up enjoying it very much. More so than I ever thought possible.

My grandpa had a huge influence on my reading not just because he helped me learn to read and read to me from a young age. He influenced my love of reading because he didn't give up on me when I felt like everyone else did. He was the only one to take the time and help and listen with his full attention when I needed him. After I was able to read on my own, he wanted to know what I was reading he engaged with me about the books I picked up and the facts I learned about, like about how a narwhal's horn or tusk is a gigantic tooth! So, I guess he also influenced my love of learning and really shaped me into who I am today. Not on just academics either, but that can be another story for another day.

My love of reading became a love for writing poetry to flash fiction to creative literary fiction. Unfortunately, my grandpa passed before he could see me, physically, accomplish most of my feats. However, because of him all those feats were possible and accessible because he made me believe in myself. He was my first real supporter and sometimes I feel like he's still my only supporter. Every time I look at words I remember his face, even though his voice is now

fading from my memory his image is still burning in my mind and that gives me motivation to keep looking at words. I need to remember something at least besides having physical pictures of him because as we all know physical items can become lost over time. Memories if we keep them in the forefront of our mind can last a lifetime and he deserve to be remembered for more than just my lifetime.

## References

*"Learning to Read" by Malcolm X*, <http://accounts.smccd.edu/bellr/readerlearningtoread.htm>.