ED LEARNS TO READ

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As I am still forbidden to work, I turned on the television to hear interesting news. There were plenty of them. One told of how there are 33 million people living below the poverty level. They figure that a family of two, earning less than $5000 per year, is often hungry. A family of four requires $10K per annum and still experiences some hunger. The worst message in these figures is that ever larger groups of children are going hungry.

A second shocking item of news followed: there are over twenty million adults in America who are illiterate. That means that they cannot read in any language. What could be the reason for this?

I shut off the television and began to think about how in the early days in Finland we obstinate boneheads were taught to read. The Finnish populace became literate long ago and that brought other positive assets with it. Today Finland ranks 4th for newspaper readers. In Japan 575 out of a thousand read newspapers; 530 in East Germany, 524 in Sweden and 515 in Finland. How would the rankings change if they included local weeklies and magazines?

In Finland mothers were the first teachers on both sides of 1900. I remember how my mother pointed out the letters with a stick in the ABC primer and I had to repeat the sounds after her. When I learned the letters, then I began to make words and thus on to read.

There were only a few elementary schools in each parish but the need was filled by circulating schools and parish catechism meetings. That’s what they were called. The final approval came from the confirmation school. If you were not confirmed, you could not have your wedding banns read. Church laws also contained other ways to promote literacy.

To attend a catechism meeting for the first time was a memorable event in the life of a youth, one which was etched into your memory. If the meeting was held at the farm to which your croft belonged, then you too could partake of the festive meal. It was quite a moment for the youngsters to sit at the same table with the pastor and the parish clerk.

Of course, there could be some difficulties. At home we had learned to eat with a spoon and now there was a fork and a table knife. We had to watch carefully how the gentry used these tools so that we would not look too inexperienced.

Memories of confirmation school are fresher for we were almost adults by that time. When I attended confirmation school, I met a young man who had a beard which we barefaced ones greatly envied. I never asked him how many times he had been to confirmation school, perhaps he had just been too busy.

He had reached the age when he had a need or perhaps just a desire to marry. We considered him to be our leader for, during breaks there behind the bell tower, he related his adventures with girls and gave us rolled up cigarettes. We tried to help him with his readings and Bible stories and we succeeded for he was confirmed and well on his way to marriage.

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