

From D's to the Emmy's: A Conversation with Sprague Theobald, Dyslexic

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We know that dyslexia affects up to one in five people. What we don't talk about often enough is that children with dyslexia grow up to be adults with dyslexia. Having worked in the adult literacy field for over twelve years, I am acutely aware of their pain and their long battles with various health issues, job issues and addiction issues because they were not identified as dyslexic and/or did not receive help for their dyslexia. We have an enormous amount to learn from these adults, both the successful adults and the adults who are still struggling. There are some cases where an adult will become successful because of (not despite) their dyslexia. In the case of Sprague Theobald, he has become wildly successful despite and because of his dyslexia. So, what makes Sprague so special? Well, two Emmys for one. He won an Emmy for his documentary *America's Cup Moments* and another Emmy for his latest documentary, *The Other Side of the Ice*. To add to that impressive list, he also wrote, that's right, he wrote a book, a best-selling book also titled, *The Other Side of the Ice*. But his road has not been lined with roses; in fact Sprague almost didn't make it down his current path because he had not been identified as dyslexic until he was an adult. Sprague has been gracious enough to share his story with me so that we can learn from it and learn from it we will.

Sprague's first memory of school as a hostile place was when he relocated to a small private school that had very small classes and he was no longer invisible. His dyslexia was on display for the world to see. Reading aloud can be anxiety-provoking for most people, but imagine being a child with dyslexia. Sprague wrote about it this way, "For reading aloud they had a system wherein each child would read a paragraph aloud and go up and down the rows in that manner. I distinctly remember when it was my time to read

for the first time. I couldn't. It was letter by letter, word by word, slowly sounding things out. Per usual all the sirens and flashing lights were going off inside of me. It was horrible. The teacher finally said, "Let's move on". I was crushed and humiliated. Worse, I was 'dismissed.'" Dismissed wasn't the only word he identified with as a child. Sprague also remembered being labeled lazy, dumb, disruptive, self-centered, lying, uncaring and stubborn. Those are some pretty harsh labels for a youngster to absorb.

As Sprague continued through school and continued to struggle, he did what so many kids do when they are struggling; he came up with tactics to cover up his reading issues. Sprague shared that, "When I had to write out a word with an "ie" or "ei" combination I scribbled it so that no one could read it. When I had to read aloud and came across a word I couldn't 'see,' I remember skipping it, saying something softly or perhaps even coughing. I banked on the fact that the teacher wasn't really paying attention, and most of the time I got away with it. It was all a very serious, an almost 'survival-like' game to make sure that I wasn't in a position to be called on or asked to go to the board." Sound familiar?

Sprague did not survive this constant day-to-day struggle in school unscathed. He knew he was bright and he knew he was actively trying to learn what the other kids were learning, but he began to feel rage and often felt furious. What happened next is the turning point for so many students with unidentified dyslexia – he began to believe them. He began to believe that he was dumb, unmotivated and lazy. Then he took the next step in the process, he began to act 'dumb' and D- was the standard he set for himself.

After twelve long years of trying and then not trying, Sprague found himself in community college. Again, using his coping skills, he found a college that did not require an entrance exam. By the time he got there, he had heard of dyslexia but was no longer interested in education and did not pursue a reason for his learning difficulties. That all changed with one video. At thirty years old, a friend gave Sprague a video of teachers being led through a simulation of what it feels like to struggle with reading and learning and this

left him dumbfounded. In tears and thirty years old, Sprague finally realized what had been plaguing his learning all these years – dyslexia.

We know how important it is to identify dyslexia for remediation purposes, but what about for emotional reasons? Sprague shared that the school system had, “truly and ruthlessly broken my confidence and spirit. The inner pain that it caused was huge. So much so that when I was 12, I found my first beer, my first joint and basically didn't have a straight day until I got sober when I was 27. Given the choice of a path that was bad for me or one that was good for me, ten times out of ten I purposely chose the one that was bad for me, just to ‘show them.’” Sprague’s story really resonated with me as I have heard this story from so many adults who came for help at the adult literacy program, the effects of unidentified dyslexia can be insurmountable.

But Sprague did succeed, in a major way. He attributes his success as an Emmy-award winning documentary maker to, “Seeing (figuratively as well as literally) the world a bit differently than others, music is very, very rich for me ~ art, beauty are so meaningful in my life, the sounds and feelings of nature. I couldn't read but I learned how to tell stories; rich, full exciting stories. Soon I learned how to tell them through a lens. I remember facts precisely, not just dim memories. My memories are rich and vibrant. I think in pictures and scenes which is wonderful for making documentaries and writing books. When I was young and we would get "Time", "Life", or "Look" magazines at the house I would pore over them for hours, not reading but looking at the photographs, absorbing them, the textures, shadows, richness. I'd make up my own stories to go with them. Hour after hour... I also have a persistence that drives people nuts!” This artistic nature comes in handy as he travels to exotically beautiful and remote locations where few have ventured before him and shares these magical places with us by showing us his perspective. He doesn't play by the rules and makes his movies using his intuition.

Adults with dyslexia have a lot to teach us about how to advocate for our children with dyslexia. Sprague’s advice to children who are currently struggling in school because of dyslexia? “It's all worth it, every single bump

and valley. Unfortunately, you have to learn the basics, the rules of grammar, spelling, math; just as every good musician has to practice their scales, so do you... for now... but the day is going to come, and soon, that you're going to be able to put your special spin on them. Don't give up, ever. Know that you're special; know that there is no one anywhere who can do what you can do and in your own special way. Trust, trust, trust yourself and do what it takes to get the voices of the naysayers out of your mind and be your best friend. When my documentary on the Arctic trip was released, the critics hated it, right across the board. A few were nice and said some good things but all in all they hated it. It hurt like hell but I was true to myself and did what I needed to do. I didn't abandon myself for something that would please the critics. I did my own work. One year later it wins an Emmy! Trust and love your foibles!" No one can say it better than someone who has lived it.

Sprague's story is inspiring; he emerged from a dark place to give us documentaries that are full of beauty and grace. He trusted his inner instinct that he was worthy and able. It is important for our struggling kids to not only be identified and helped, but to give them the opportunity to read about people like Sprague – he is a dyslexia hero.

More about Sprague Theobald

Sprague Theobald has received both national and international recognition for his writing, producing, cinematography, and editing. He won an Emmy Award for his America's Cup documentary. As a successful documentarian, he and his production company, Hole in the Wall Productions, have worked from Alaska to Zanzibar. His writing and commentary have been published in The New York Times as well as many major national and international yachting magazines. Sprague spent several seasons as a staff writer for two of the Showtime Network's episodic shows and worked as a successful screenwriter in Los Angeles. Sprague worked both in front of and behind the camera as a broadcast journalist/producer for eight years at an NBC affiliate.

The Other Side of The Ice is Sprague's second book; The Reach is his first. Sprague's sailing résumé includes twelve-meter racing in the America's Cup arena, several transatlantic races, one of which was the Two Man Transatlantic Race, a complete circumnavigation of North America, and over 40,000 offshore miles. He lives and works out of Manhattan, New York.

For more information about Sprague Theobald and his work visit his website at: <http://spraguetheobald.com/>