

John Corcoran's Secret

April 14, 2018

John Corcoran grew up in New Mexico during the 1940s and 50s. One of six siblings, he graduated from high school, went on to university, and became a teacher in the 1960s - a job he held for 17 years. But, as he explains here, he hid an extraordinary secret.



When I was a child I was told by my parents that I was a winner, and for the first six years of my life I believed what my parents had told me.

I was late in talking, but I went off to school with high hopes of learning to read like my sisters, and for the first year things were fine because there weren't many demands on us other than standing in the right line, sitting down, keeping our mouths shut and going to the bathroom on time.

And then in the second grade we were supposed to learn to read. But for me it was like opening a Chinese newspaper and looking at it - I didn't understand what those lines were, and as a child of six, seven, eight years old I didn't know how to articulate the problem.

I remember praying at night and saying, "Please Lord, let me know how to read tomorrow when I get up" and sometimes I'd even turn on the light and get a book and look at it and see if I got a miracle. But I didn't get that miracle.

At school I ended up in the dumb row with a bunch of other kids who were having a hard time learning to read. I didn't know how I got there, I didn't know how to get out and I certainly didn't know what question to ask.



The teacher didn't call it the "dumb row" - there wasn't any cruelty or anything - but the kids called it the dumb row, and when you're in that dumb row you start thinking you're dumb.

At teacher conferences my teacher told my parents, "He's a smart boy, he'll get it," and they moved me on to the third grade.

"He's a smart boy, he'll get it," and they moved me on to the fourth grade.

"He's a smart boy, he'll get it," and they moved me on to the fifth grade.

But I wasn't getting it.

By the time I got to the fifth grade I'd basically given up on myself in terms of reading. I got up every day, got dressed, went to school and I was going to war. I hated the classroom. It was a hostile environment and I had to find a way to survive.

By the seventh grade I was sitting in the principal's office most of the day. I was in fights, I was defiant, I was a clown, I was a disruptor, I got expelled from school.

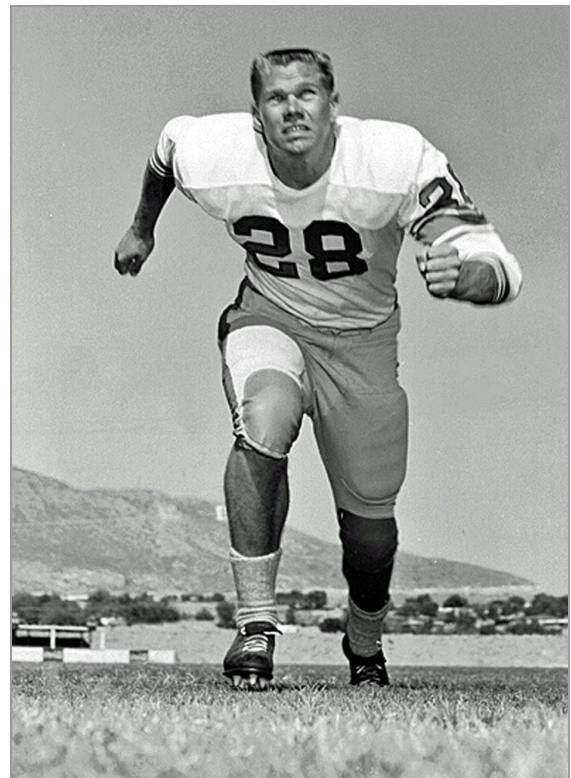
But that behaviour wasn't who I felt inside - it wasn't who I wanted to be. I wanted to be somebody else, I had a desire to succeed, I wanted to be a good student, but I just couldn't do it.

By the time I got to the eighth grade I got tired of embarrassing myself and my family. I decided I was going to behave myself now - if you behave in high school you can find your way through the system. So I was going to be a teacher's pet and do everything necessary to pass that system.

I wanted to be an athlete - I had athletic skills, and I had maths skills - I could count money and make change before I even went to school and I learned the times tables.

I had social skills too - I ran around with college kids, I dated the valedictorian - the student with the highest grades who gives a speech at the graduation ceremony, I was the homecoming king, I had people - mostly girls - do my homework for me.

I could write my name and there were some words that I could remember, but I couldn't write a sentence - I was in high school and reading at



the second or third grade level. And I never told anybody that I couldn't read.

When I was taking a test I would look at someone else's paper, or I'd pass my paper over to somebody else and they'd answer the questions for me - it was fairly easy, amateur cheating. But when I went off to college on a full athletic scholarship it was a different story.

I thought, "Oh my gosh, this is way over my head, how am I going to be able to get through this?"

I belonged to a social fraternity who had copies of old exam papers. That was one way to cheat. I tried to take classes with a partner, somebody who would help me through. There were professors who used the same test year after year. But I also had to resort to more creative and desperate things.

In one exam the professor put four questions on the board. I was sitting at the back of the room, near the window, behind the older students.

I had my blue book and I painstakingly copied the four questions off the board. I didn't know what those questions said.

I had arranged for a friend of mine to be outside the window. He was probably the smartest kid in school, but he was also shy and he'd asked me to fix him up with a girl by the name of Mary who he wanted to go to the spring formal dance with.

I passed my blue book out the window to him and he answered the questions for me.

I had another blue exam book underneath my shirt and I took it out and pretended I was writing in it.

I was praying that my friend was going to be able to get my book back to me and that he was going to get the right answers.

I was so desperate. I needed to pass courses. I was at risk.

There was another exam that I couldn't figure out how I was going to pass.

One night I went by the professor's office about midnight, he wasn't there. I opened the window with a knife and I went in like a cat burglar. I'd crossed the line now - I wasn't just a student that was cheating, I was a criminal.

I went inside and I looked around for the exam. It had to be in his office but I couldn't find it. There was a file cabinet that was locked - it had to be in the file cabinet.

I did the same thing two or three nights in a row looking for that exam but I still couldn't find it. So one night, about one o'clock in the morning, I brought three of my friends with me and we went to the office. We carried out a four-drawer file cabinet, put it in a vehicle, and took it off campus to a college apartment.

I had arranged for a locksmith to come. I put my suit and tie on - I was pretending to be a young businessman who was leaving for Los Angeles the next day and the locksmith was saving my job by opening it.

He opened it, gave me a key, and sure enough, to my great relief there were more than 40 copies of the exam - a multiple choice paper - in the top drawer of the file cabinet. I took one copy back to my dormitory, where a "smart" classmate made a cheat sheet with all the correct answers.

We carried the file cabinet back and at five o'clock in the morning I was walking up to my room and thinking, "Mission impossible accomplished!" - and I was feeling pretty good that I was so clever.

But then I walked up the stairs, lay down in my bed and started weeping like a baby.

Why didn't I ask for help? Because I didn't believe there was anybody out there who could teach me to read. This was my secret and I guarded that secret.

My teachers and my parents told me that people with college degrees get better jobs, they have better lives, and so that's what I believed. My motivation was to just get that piece of paper. Maybe by osmosis, maybe by prayer, maybe by a miracle I would one day learn to read.

So I graduated from college, and when I graduated there was a teacher shortage and I was offered a job. It was the most illogical thing you can imagine - I got out of the lion's cage and then I got back in to taunt the lion again.

Why did I go into teaching? Looking back it was crazy that I would do that. But I'd been through high school and college without getting caught - so being a teacher seemed a good place to hide. Nobody suspects a teacher of not knowing how to read.

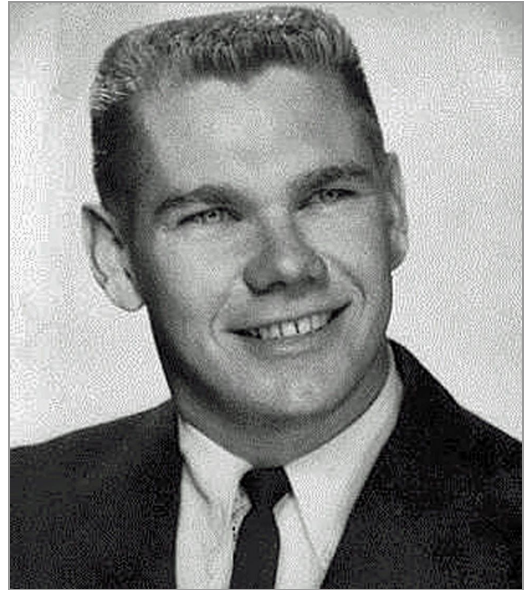
I taught a lot of different things. I was an athletics coach. I taught social studies. I taught typing - I could copy-type at 65 words a minute but I didn't know what I was typing. I never wrote on a blackboard and there was no printed word in my classroom. We watched a lot of films and had a lot of discussions.

I remember how fearful I was. I couldn't even take the roll - I had to ask the students to pronounce their names so I could hear their names. And I always had two or three students who I identified early - the ones who could read and write best in the classroom - to help me. They were my teaching aides. They didn't suspect at all - you don't suspect the teacher.

One of my biggest fears was faculty meetings. We had them once a week and if the teachers were brainstorming the principal would call on somebody to get those ideas on to the board. I lived in fear that he would call on me, every week I was terrified, but I had a backup plan.

If he had called on me I was going to get out of my chair and take two steps, grab my chest, drop to the floor and hope they called 911. Whatever it took not to get caught, and I never got caught.

Sometimes I felt like a good teacher - because I worked hard at it and I really cared about what I was doing - but I wasn't. It was wrong. I didn't belong in the classroom, I was trespassing. I wasn't supposed to be there and sometimes what I was doing made me physically sick, but I was trapped, I couldn't tell anybody.



I got married while I was a teacher. Getting married is a sacrament, it's a commitment to be truthful with another person and this was the first time I thought, "OK, I'm going to trust this person, I'm going to tell her."

I practised in front of the mirror: "Cathy, I can't read. Cathy, I can't read."

And one evening we were sitting on the couch and I said, "Cathy, I can't read."

But she didn't really understand what I was saying. She thought I was saying that I didn't read much.

You know, love is blind and deaf.

So we got married and we had a child and years later it really came home to her.

I was reading to our three-year-old daughter. We read to her routinely, but I wasn't really reading, I was making the stories up - stories that I knew, like Goldilocks and The Three Bears, I just added drama to them.

But this was a new book, Rumpelstiltskin, and my daughter said, "You're not reading it like mama."

My wife heard me trying to read from a child's book and that was the first time that it dawned on her. I had been asking her to do all this writing for me, helping me write things for school, and then she finally realised, how deep and severe this was.

But nothing was said, there was no confrontation, she just carried on helping me get by.

It didn't relieve anything because in my gut I felt dumb and I felt like a fake. I was deceitful. I was teaching my students to be seekers of truth and I was the biggest liar in the room. The relief only came when I finally learned to read.



I taught high school from 1961 to 1978. Eight years after I quit my teaching job, something finally changed.

I was 47 going on 48 when I saw Barbara Bush - then Second Lady of the US - talking about adult literacy on TV. It was her special cause. I'd never heard anybody talking about adult literacy before, I thought I was the only person in the world that was in the situation I was in.

I was at this desperate spot in my life. I wanted to tell somebody and I wanted to get help and one day in the grocery store I was standing in line and there were two women in front of me talking about their adult brother who was going to the library. He was learning to read and they were just full of joy and I couldn't believe it.



So one Friday afternoon in my pinstriped suit I walked into the library and asked to see the director of the literacy programme and I sat down with her and I told her I couldn't read.

That was the second person in my adult life that I had ever told.

I had a volunteer tutor - she was 65 years old. She wasn't a teacher, she was just somebody who loved to read and didn't think anybody should go through life without knowing how to.

One of the things that she had me do in the early stages was to try to write because I had all these thoughts in my mind and I'd never written a sentence. The first thing that I wrote was a poem about my feelings. One of the things about poetry is that you don't have to know what a complete sentence is, and you don't have to write in complete sentences.

She got me to about sixth-grade-level reading - I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. But it took me about seven years to feel like I was a literate person. I cried, I cried, and I cried after I started learning to read - there was a lot of pain and a lot of frustration - but it filled a big hole in my soul. Adults who can't read are suspended in their childhoods, emotionally, psychologically, academically, spiritually. We haven't grown up yet.

I was encouraged to tell my story by my tutor to motivate others and promote literacy, but I said, "No way. I've lived in this community for 17 years, my children are here, my wife is here - she's a professional, my parents are here, I'm not going to tell this story."

But eventually I decided I would. It was an embarrassing secret and it was a shame-based secret, so it was a big decision.

It wasn't easy but once I'd made up my mind I was going to tell the story I told it all across America, I spoke to anybody that would listen. I guarded this secret for decades and then I blasted it to the world.



I was on Larry King, I was on the ABC News magazine show 20/20, I was on Oprah.

It was uncomfortable for people to hear the story of the teacher who couldn't read. Some people said it was impossible and that I was making the whole story up.

But I want people to know there is hope, there is a solution. We are not "dumb", we can learn to read, it's never too late.

Unfortunately we are still pushing children and teens through school without teaching them basic reading and writing skills. But we can break this cycle of failure if instead of blaming teachers we make sure they are properly trained.

For 48 years I was in the dark. But I finally got the monkey off my back, I finally buried the ghost of my past.

Written by Sarah McDermott. Photographs courtesy of John Corcoran.

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