

## **The Privilege of Orality**

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Giving up illiteracy is never a easy choice. Those who fully depend on orality to understand their world often think they can do without full literacy. Because, contrary to popular belief, orality can feel like a privilege. If you are able to survive in a world that puts so much emphasis on literacy, then not needing to read and write to survive can feel kind of special. It can feel like a privilege.

I will try to explain this to you so we can better understand why so many people are unwilling to give up their illiteracy. Why do they choose to stay illiterate? And what do they gain by staying illiterate? I think we should be aware of what is going on here if we want to fulfil a significant role in changing perceptions. Only then can illiterate and literate alike benefit from the progress made in bridging the gap between orality and literacy.

The privilege of orality has been haunting me for almost 40 years now. I come from illiterate parents of whom one, my father, had a very successful career as a butcher in Holland without being able to read and write Dutch well. Till this day you could not ask him to write a love letter to his wife. It is not because he doesn't know what love is, it is because he doesn't need to write it down in order to get the message delivered.

So when I look at that generation I feel I have made a huge step, not only because I can read and write, but also by the fact that I make a living with my writing. I am a writer who published his first book at a very early age; I was not even 21 years old. This premature debut has, I strongly feel, a lot to do with the fact that my parents were illiterate and I felt ashamed, and that in order to correct this "backwardness" I had to be progressive, which meant:

write as soon as possible. When I wrote my first novel, now translated into more than 15 languages, I felt very special just for writing. The book was about my family and just by writing about it felt as if I broke with a family tradition of orality, not illiteracy.

I associated illiteracy with not knowing how to write and read and for that reason not fully being a member of society.

I associate orality with being part of an old tradition of storytelling and poetry. All great poetry is oral. So from an early age I was obsessed by the difference between orality and illiteracy.

And since I am a young father - my daughter is 5 months now - I feel that she is the first of my kin to grow up in a fully literate environment. My father never wrote my name down, whereas the first thing I did was text our friends to let them know that our daughter Amber was born.

She will have no access through her parents to full orality, but she will want to know what it means to be part of the oral world. So I have something to explain to her, sooner or later, because for her the kingdom of orality will feel like a strange place. I want her to understand that I come from a special place.

The first time I found out that paper was used for writing things on that resembled the things we say, I was amazed. My family seemed to do without. In the household I grew up in nobody seemed to care for paper. And the day I learned how to write I had the feeling that I was entering a new space that my parents never entered: that of written language. To my surprise my parents were barely even proud of my achievements in writing and reading. They accepted it as a fact of life.

It didn't change anything except in one way: it made things harder for me, because from that day my father expected that, because of my education, I had to be much, much smarter than he was. He started seeing me as an intruder in his oral space.

Which I wasn't, by any means. So every time I said something or pointed at something I had read he considered how much my literate view changed things for him. Not an inch. The opposite: it confirmed his belief that he was doing alright. He just didn't see the extra bonus I got from giving up illiteracy. The fact that I was a child and he a grown man didn't change much for him; he was seventeen when he left his parents and village for a long and arduous journey through Europe. To be a child was not part of the equation. Grown-ups who one day give up illiteracy mostly come from a background where the elders expected children to play an important role in the household. Children were little grown-ups.

So my literacy only increased his sense of privilege. And in a way he was right. He came as a young man to Holland and started working in a butcher shop, took over the shop and had excellent contacts with his customers and business partners without ever consulting a paper. And he found out that in his environment, although there were a lot of people using paper, the best business was done without. He concluded that this society he was living in, gave opportunities to literate and illiterate people alike. Anyway, he just didn't see the problem. And never in his life did he become emotionally attached to literacy. So people will not decide to give up illiteracy through the argument that it is a good investment. In a way it is a bad

investment because the connection to more information means you can become incredibly insecure. And who wants to leave the warm bath of orality?

So how did I manage to make the transition from orality to literacy without feeling a sense of loss? I do think of this often because I feel that the moment one gains literacy - and something is gained - one is adding to the power of the spoken word. Suddenly the world becomes full of signs that can be read. But because my parents could not read what I was discovering they could never manage to become partners in my adventure. It felt as if they belonged to another world, where books and written text played no part. For us as people of orality books were kind of magic: they contained a hidden knowledge that stayed closed. Being able to read meant that you were able to unlock what was in those books. So a reader was a kind of savant. At an early age I became a savant just by being able to read. Every child that learns to read is a child prodigy.

You are illiterate as a group, never alone. You cannot be illiterate in a literate group, because living becomes unbearable there. It's not because you are illiterate, it is because you have a secret. It is the keeping of the secret that kills the spirit, not being illiterate in itself. With the secret comes shame. That is the next step towards literacy at an older age. One feels ashamed that there is a secret that has to be kept at all costs. Acknowledging the shame as an impediment to change takes time. The next step after the "coming out" is seeing what one gets back from literacy. Leaving the shame behind is not enough, because people feel vulnerable the moment they come out in the open with their secret. It is hard to become part of the literate world as a former illiterate.

But for us, the illiterate, we looked at the literate world through our own looking glass. For us, it really didn't seem to change anything at all. We the illiterate read the world as if not being able to understand what was being written didn't matter. The fact of being illiterate makes the world, in an absurd way, bigger. We just didn't see the problem of illiteracy. If one took time to listen and ask one could solve any problem. One could survive relying on neighbours, family and even the comfort of strangers. There was always someone to help us. There is also a semantic side to this "not seeing the problem".

In the eighties my father bought a VCR-recorder and started renting Bollywood films. These films made in India are in Hindi, a language we didn't understand, that we couldn't understand, but we watched these films, hundreds of them, in the comfortable space of my family, as if we understood what was said. The interesting thing is not that we thought we understood the films - that was easy because the films were about universal themes of love, suffering and overcoming hardship - the interesting thing is that we watched these movies as if we were literate. Never one stood up to say: "isn't it strange that we have spent hundred of hours watching these Bollywood films without understanding an iota of them". No, we felt utterly comfortable watching them, and in a strange way not understanding made us enjoy the movie more. We concentrated more on the songs, on the images and on the facial expressions. The fact that we were illiterate in Hindi made us better viewers.

So, for the illiterate person there is no real problem. He feels at ease until the day he finds out that to reach a new goal he has to give up his privilege of illiteracy. But he or she will go to great lengths to postpone the moment of giving up. I will give you an example. I met a reading group of middle-aged men and woman in Nijmegen who had overcome their illiteracy.

We exchanged our experiences with illiteracy. I asked why they decided to learn to read and write. The answers surprised me because of their very practical nature. As I said before, for the illiterate there is no illiteracy until the day he discovers his own form of literacy is not sufficient anymore. So there was this man, really a very interesting person, who worked for the national Telephone Services managing telephone lines installation in the streets. We are talking about the nineties; he told us that he had trained himself in remembering the streets and when he got home he would go back with his wife who wrote the street names down for him. I think they had a wonderful relationship based on mutual respect and understanding. Then I asked him why he chose to give up his illiteracy and he had a very simple answer. He and his wife were planning a trip to London, England. To be able to navigate in a foreign country they wanted to learn English. To be able to do this he had to read and write. So in way he found a very practical motive to bury his shame in. He didn't go to great lengths feeling miserable about his illiteracy, about the fact that he had to fool his colleagues all those years. A trip to London made him change course. Simple as that.

But it is never simple when it comes to the conquering of language. It is a mountain where we never really reach the summit. What we gain by our hard won literacy is a sense of well-being. We feel well because we don't have to rely on lies anymore, we feel well because we don't have to rely, like children, on our family, relatives or friends, we feel well because we don't have to go out of the way for fear of being caught. And we gain something precious: language makes us connect with other people in a very deep and direct way. A couple of years ago I met an older woman who had worked in a library for years as an illiterate. The irony of it cannot escape us. She learned to catalogue books with a whole string of tricks. She was a heavy smoker and life had not been kind to her. But one thing life had given back to her was being able to read and write. She told me that her literacy gave her the

pleasure to read books out loud to her grandchildren. As she was telling this she fought back tears. Reading meant not just technical reading, it meant connecting in a very intimate way to the next generation.

Which brings us to the responsibility for the next generation, which touches my own personal life story.

Because although I understood how this grandmother felt, I didnt really feel it until I became a father a couple of months ago and understood how strong the desire can be to connect with your children.

### **Conclusion**

During labour I texted my wife's friends and kept them updated about developments. The sensation of birth is for literate and illiterate people alike. During my wife's pregnancy I started to write a letter to our unborn child. Not only to tell her that we were happy that she was becoming our daughter, but also to understand what it means to become father. What I said to my daughter in the letter is that the fact that she will be able to read this letter is something of a miracle. Thanks to education I became the first one to be able to read and write properly, and my daughter will be the last one to have parents that can remember their period of orality. What I was telling my daughter is that she, in a way, is the first fully literate person in our family. She will have no memories of orality. The consequences are big. For her culture will be a written world, not an oral one. This a nuance people that have learned to write and read at an older age will understand. For my parents the literate world was a hostile world.