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Tom Cruise: My Struggle To Read

By Tom Cruise and Jess Cagle

Graduating high school in 1980, "I was a functional illiterate," says Tom Cruise, who hid his problem for years. Cruise, who showed signs of a learning disability beginning in grade school, says he finally learned to read as an adult through Study Technology, a learning method developed by L. Ron Hubbard, founder of the controversial Church of Scientology. Last month Cruise was honored by MENTOR/The National Mentoring Partnership for his work with the Hollywood Education and Literacy Project (H.E.L.P.), a nonprofit organization whose volunteers offer free tutoring, using Hubbard's system, in 26 communities around the world. Though H.E.L.P. has its detractors (see box), Cruise, a Scientologist, has provided financial and public-relations support for the program. "I don't want people to go through what I went through," says Cruise, who sat down with senior editor Jess Cagle to talk about his painful, private struggle as a child and his fight for literacy.

One of my dreams, as a child, was to be able to fly an airplane. My whole life we moved around a lot. As a young child, everywhere we went, these are the things that traveled with me: a stuffed animal for the first few years and pictures of planes—a Spitfire and a P-51. When I was 22, when I was making *Top Gun*, I got the chance to make my dream come true—to become a pilot. I thought, "This is the time to do it," so I had a couple of lessons. But then I just blew it off.

When people asked what happened, I told them I was too busy preparing for the film, just didn't have time. The truth is, I couldn't learn how to do it. When I was about 7 years old, I had been labeled dyslexic. I'd try to concentrate on what I was reading, then I'd get to the end of the page and have very little memory of anything I'd read. I would go blank, feel anxious, nervous, bored, frustrated, dumb. I would get angry. My legs would actually hurt when I was studying. My head ached. All through school and well into my career, I felt like I had a secret. When I'd go to a new school, I wouldn't want the other kids to know about my learning disability, but then I'd be sent off to remedial reading.

I made new friends in each new school, but I was always closest to my three sisters and my mom. As a kid I used to do ad-lib skits and imitations for my family. I always enjoyed making them laugh. My mom kept saying, "You've got so much potential. Don't give up." She worked three jobs and took care of my sisters and me, but with everything she had on her plate, she would also work with me. If I had to write an assignment for school, I would dictate it to her first, then she would write it down, and I would copy it very carefully. I went to three different high schools, so I was always given the benefit of the doubt for being the new kid. And I had different techniques for getting by in class. I raised my hand a lot. I knew that if I participated, I'd get extra points and could pass. If I had a test in the afternoon, I'd find kids at lunchtime who'd taken the test that morning and find out what it was like.

I went out for athletics—baseball, wrestling, soccer, football, hockey, you name it—and really blew off a lot of steam there. My senior year in New Jersey, I got the part of Nathan Detroit in the school’s production of Guys and Dolls.

I graduated high school in 1980 but didn’t even go to my graduation. I was a functional illiterate. I loved learning, I wanted to learn, but I knew I had failed in the system. Like a lot of people, though, I had figured out how to get through it. I did the same thing when I moved to New York City, and then Los Angeles, to become an actor. When I auditioned for parts and was given a script to read cold, I’d get the director and producer to talk about the characters and the film. I’d glean information from them and I’d use that. I got pretty good at ad-libbing. In 1981 the door cracked open for me with Taps. Risky Business came out in 1983 and my career took off. I wanted to produce movies. I wanted to know more about my craft. I wanted to work with writers. I had stories I wanted to tell. But when I backed out of the flying lessons while making Top Gun, I thought to myself, “What the hell am I going to do now?”

I’d gotten to where I was operating on the force of sheer will. But I knew I was flying by the seat of my pants. I knew that if I didn’t solve this problem, the trapdoor was going to open up and that would be it.

In 1986, the year Top Gun came out, I became a Scientologist. A friend gave me a picture book on Scientology, and through this I was introduced to the writings of L. Ron Hubbard, who had founded the religion. Mr. Hubbard was also an educator who had been researching the field for decades. He had found that literacy and comprehension levels were declining worldwide, so in the 1960s he had developed “Study Technology.” It pinpoints three barriers to learning: Lack of mass (you can’t learn to fly a plane by just reading about it—you have to sit in the cockpit or at least have a picture of a plane); skipped gradients (trying to master skills or information without mastering or understanding that which comes before them); and misunderstood words (the most important one and a cause for stupidity).

Once I started focusing on those problems, everything fell into place. I had a lot of catching up to do, but that was it. I had run the gamut, hiring specialists for myself privately, bringing in tutors and hearing why I would just have to “learn to deal” with being dyslexic. Many people had tried to teach me, but no one had taught me how to learn or how to study; I had been told I had all the symptoms of dyslexia, but no one had given me a solution.

I realized I could absolutely learn anything that I wanted to learn. In 1989 I learned to race cars while preparing for Days of Thunder. And about 10 years ago I learned to fly. When I was studying for my pilot’s license, I kept a model airplane nearby as reference and pictures of a cockpit in front of me so I could study the instruments. I would often go over to a shop where mechanics were working on planes. Finally I took off on my own from the Santa Monica Airport. After the flight I called my mom, and she started crying. My family is very close and they were so happy for me.

I’m now a founding board member of the Hollywood Education and Literacy Project (H.E.L.P.), which opened its doors in 1997. H.E.L.P. is a non-profit program that uses the Study Technology in a totally secular setting to provide free tutoring in communities all over the world. Before this, I was supporting Applied Scholastics, H.E.L.P.’s parent

organization, which was started by teachers to make Study Technology available broadly. When you consider that schoolteachers are sometimes dealing with four or five different levels of literacy in one classroom, you can see what they have to contend with. I had so many different teachers and I really feel for them. I see how they struggled with me. They were rooting for me and cared about me and wanted to see me do well, but they didn't have the tools to really help me.

I don't want people to go through what I went through. I want kids to have the ability to read, to write, to understand what people are saying to them, to be able to solve life's problems. If you're flying a plane, and you are using all you know, and yet barely keeping it in the air, you're not truly flying that plane. When the fuel gauge gets down to "E" and you haven't paid attention, your engine is going to stop. When you know how to fly, you're watching the instruments. You can properly prepare for landing. You can keep your view outside. That's the view of life people should be able to have.

Understanding Learning Disorders

What is a learning disorder?

It is an unexpected difficulty in learning—unexpected, because the problem is not linked to intelligence or motivation.

How common are learning disorders?

The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that 4 million school-age children—including five percent of public school students—have some form of learning disorder. But researchers say the problem is vastly underdiagnosed and that many more children are affected.

What are the major types of learning disorders?

Dyslexia, also known as a developmental reading disorder; dyscalculia, a math disorder; dysgraphia, or handwriting disorder; and nonverbal learning disorders, which relate to spatial reasoning. Dyslexia is by far the most common, affecting perhaps as many as one in every five children, according to Dr. Sally Shaywitz, a professor of pediatrics at the Yale University School of Medicine and author of the book *Overcoming Dyslexia*.

What is dyslexia?

It is a myth that dyslexics see words backward. Instead, dyslexia reflects a difficulty in attaching the written letters of language to the spoken sounds they represent. "It is not a problem of not understanding words," says Shaywitz. "The real problem is in being able to sound out the word that's on the page." It is treated by emphasizing the individual sounds of spoken language and how letters represent those sounds. "If people could understand that you can be highly intelligent and creative and still be dyslexic," says Shaywitz, "we could get rid of the stigma."