Dvorak Typing Part I: With Fingers Struck Dumb

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December 23, 2009
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Dvorak Typing Part 1 demonstrates from the inside the unnerving process of rewiring your brain in order to save your wrists. It is NOT a pleasant experience…but the results are worth it.

I have been, for the past three weeks, lost in a morass so painful that (having worked for years with stroke victims) **I would almost describe my condition as a form of self-inflicted stroke**. With the exception of the three people I live with, I communicate almost exclusively through my fingertips, through the medium of a keyboard. My work is typing, as is much of my recreation, and until two weeks ago, I typed about as fast as I thought, and with no real awareness of the actual process of typing that moved the words from my brain to the page. I thought, the words appeared. A simple form of magic, like speech, and one that I took for granted.

Then I switched to the Dvorak keyboard layout, and in the blink of an eye, my fingers fell mute, and lay helpless in front of me, and I had to learn to speak again.

I don’t consider myself especially subject to whims, and in fact when I do most things, I’ve been thinking about them so long on and off that I’ve almost forgotten when the idea first

occurred to me. Sometimes the original idea occurred so far in the past that when I do make the change, I think at first that I jumped spontaneously. This is one of those times—no real warning that I was going to make this switch, not for me or anyone else.

But my sudden leap to Dvorak isn't really; I've had some pain in my wrists for years after long bouts of typing, and I've already moved to the ergonomic keyboard and the ergonomic desk and chair and I occasionally wear wrist splints and do all the other things that people trying to fend off long-term damage from repetitive-stress injuries do. I knew that the Dvorak layout would help, and I filed that fact in the back of my mind, and at some point, something triggered in me the knowledge that the time to make the change had finally arrived. And I jumped all at once, knowing that if I tried to shuttle between the two systems, I would only slow down my progress and render the whole process more difficult.

I wasn't expecting this to be so hard. I already knew how to type; this was simply a more intelligent way of typing. I'm intelligent, I've always caught on to things quickly, I expected that this would come to me with just a bit of time and application on my part.

But my analogy to stroke victims goes deeper than the mere loss of speech. It connects directly into the heart of how we learn the things that we know so well that we know them with our bodies and not just with our minds. That was how I knew to type. My fingers knew their own way home, and went there without any effort from me. And then everything that they knew became scrambled, and now my neurons have to train themselves to new patterns of firing. **I have to rebuild a part of my brain,** tracing new pathways through old terrain, convincing nerve endings that what was once "s" is now "o", and that no matter how many times the left ring finger returns to the home row, it will always find "o" there, and never again "s".

This might seem a small subject for an essay. On the face of it, I'm relearning to type—who cares?

But the small subject has larger implications; I'm struggling to regain my ability to communicate, after having lost the way I knew. I have been subject to fits of anger and frustration and feelings of inadequacy and even self-hatred on occasions when I tried to make myself understood and couldn't. I've avoided chatting on-line at any cost, because my crawling, fumbling pace and endless errors made me feel stupid. I've cut back on the amount of mail I answer and the length of my replies—e-mail became for a while a source of anxiety and a monumental task, and is still difficult. I pulled deeper into a shell while trying to find a way out of it. In other words, I replicated in exact detail the stages and emotions that the post-stroke patient relearning speech goes through.

And the effect this has had on me has been large. **I've come face to face with the knowledge that the communication I so value—the communication I have built my life around—is so fragile and easily disrupted that the simple act of moving the locations of keys on a keyboard** (or slightly scrambling the electrical impulses in my brain) can render me mute—temporarily or permanently. I now know that my mind can be walled off intact behind a barrier that neither desire nor will can break through; I can be the same person inside, thinking the same thoughts and feeling the same feelings, yet to everyone else suddenly cease to exist in any familiar form.

I did not expect, in the simple act of switching from a poorly-designed keyboard to an intelligently-designed one, to have my own frailty as a human being thrust at me, nor did I expect to have to look from the inside out at one of the devastating illnesses that strikes tens of thousands of people in the U. S. every year. But then I guess that was the value of the experience. **No one expects to wake one morning to find his fingers struck dumb, his words fallen away.**

NOTE: If this article resonates with you, and you want to meet other writers who share your passion and who are working in a friendly, supportive environment, come hang out with us and make progress on your writing in my free writing community. Some of us there are Dvorak typists.

Dvorak Typing: Part Two—Dvorak and Me Three Months Later >>

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