

Wanting or Needing Braille?

By Jennifer Streisand

Recently, I listened to a recording of a discussion group, entitled, Embracing Braille, produced by the Hadley Institute for the Blind and Visually Impaired. One of the hosts asked the participants, why do you want to Learn Braille? Then she went on to explain there are many different ways to use Braille, and it does not have to be an all or nothing endeavor.

The question of Why do you want to Learn Braille, got me to ask myself, Do I Need or Want Braille? and why do I like it so much, or even love it, as in the title of another popular discussion group, I Love Braille, produced by the East Bay Center for the Blind, Berkley, California.

I decided the answer is both. As a person with a small amount of vision, more formally referred to as low vision, I have come to need and rely on Braille in my daily routine. It saves me a lot of time and frustration in identifying items I use on a daily basis. Each of us who has experienced vision loss must find their repertoire, or personal list of best practices, to help us in our daily lives. Many of us think of accessible technology as a good way to save time and frustration, and screen magnification and audio are excellent tools. But I have added Braille to my repertoire of tools to make life a little easier, and less frustrating.

Perhaps Braille has helped me the most in organizing my list of contacts: household contacts, family members, friends, and professional contacts. I write the name of the contact in Braille with my slate and stylus, and then in large print, have the full contact name, phone, and addresses. Having the name in Braille saves me a lot of time in finding the contact in my index-card file. In addition, writing the contact names in Braille is good practice for learning Braille letters and contractions. Another way Braille saves me a lot of frustration, is in finding specific kinds of clothes, such as undergarments, and socks. I have each of these types of clothes in a satchel, with a Braille label on it. Each morning I am then spared the frustration of rummaging through my drawers to find what I need. Increasingly, I found it difficult to identify these types of clothing, and the Braille labels in this context have changed my life.

Another way I need Braille is to help me organize and read my notes. Increasingly, I have a lot of trouble reading my own handwriting. So, I have begun to write a short Braille version of my notes, alongside the regular written text notes, and the Braille version helps me to identify and read the text notes much faster and reduces my frustration in trying to read what I have written.

As I expand my skill level in Braille, I am sure I will find other ways I will come to need it in my daily routine.

I want Braille, or enjoy it, for so many reasons. I like the study of Braille. Perhaps part of that has to do with my Braille tutor, Tonya Johnson Drew, one of the editors of The Blind Perspective, who I found when she was the presenter in an Embracing Braille discussion

group. I work with her via email and phone, and her love of Braille, in addition to her expertise, has helped me learn.

I no longer work outside the home at all, and it is through my Braille studies, that I have met other blind and visually impaired people such as Tonya, to ask questions, and be in contact –all remotely—so that I have professional contacts without leaving my home.

I look forward to my short Braille study period each day, almost as much as listening to audio books. Tactile reading gives my eyes a rest, while learning something new.

So, the answer is both: I need Braille in my personal list of best practices to cope with my vision loss, and I want Braille for the feeling of happiness it gives me in learning it.

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