

Earl Flowers can read.

He can read this sentence.

He can read every word on this page.

If he doesn't immediately recognize one of the words, he can sound it out phonetically – or, if it's completely unfamiliar, he knows how to use a dictionary to teach himself.

When Earl read out loud – when he reads a story to an interested listener – he pronounces with feeling and passion. When a sentence ends with an exclamation point, he reads with even more feeling and passion than usual. When he sees quotation marks in a story, he knows it usually means a character is talking, and he proudly displays this knowledge by changing his speaking voice to a higher octave.

The stories Earl Flowers reads are not merely words on a page. They spark his imagination, and he usually has something thoughtful to say about what he has learned.

I mean, the man can *read*.

I tell you this because less than two years ago, when Earl was 44, he couldn't. He knew the alphabet, and he could maybe fake his way through a fourth-grade-level text, but job applications, road directions, bedtime stories for his grandchildren – those were all beyond his grasp.

But Earl decided to change all that.

When he went to his local library in Los Angeles, he told the interviewer from LARP (the Library Adult Reading Project) that the main reason he wanted to learn to read was so that he might understand the Bible better. He was – and still is – a pastor at his church, the New Directions Christian Center, in Los Angeles, and he couldn't fully experience the one text that filled his life with joy and purpose.

Never mind my dyslexia, Earl told the people from LARP. Never mind my lack of schooling. I want to learn. Teach me, because I want to learn.

Since what Earl Flowers did was in no way related to saving people from a burning building or standing in front of onrushing government tanks, his decision may not seem like the bravest gesture you've ever heard. But sometimes the greatest act of courage is to stand before the mirror of our heart and admit to ourselves, to the world, the secrets that we desperately don't want to acknowledge. In Earl's case, he had to look at his life, filled with a loving wife and grown children and an appreciative congregation, and

acknowledge that he couldn't do something most Americans take for granted. He had to say, "I am forty-four. I have owned businesses and raised children and become a man of God. But I cannot read."

I want you to know about Earl Flowers because he is a brave and inspiring soul. I hope you will want to meet someone like him, someone who wants a teacher, and that you will help make that person's dreams come true.

When I met Earl, I had just completed training, administered through LARP that would enable me to be a volunteer literacy tutor for adults. The course, taught over two consecutive weekends, covers everything from sensitivity training to how to use the *Laubach Way to Reading* textbooks, primers that for decades have been the most reliable method for coaching those who are unable to read. Having a school-teacher mother who taught me to read at a young age, not to mention working my entire adult life as a writer, I treasured the gift of words, of stories that lived on pieces of paper. And I wanted to share that gift.

I did not view my volunteerism as charity. I don't particularly like charity. I especially don't like it when writing a check becomes an easy substitute for doing something more useful. I told the people at LARP, who pair each tutor with a single client, that I wanted a fiercely motivated student, someone who wanted to help himself or herself as badly as I wanted to give my time. That was my chief criterion. Subordinately, I told LARP that I would prefer to teach a person of color. Here in Los Angeles, post-riots, post O.J., many of my liberal friends talk about building bridges, about reaching out to the "minority community," as they say. But the truth is, about the only contact most of my white friends in Hollywood have with blacks and Hispanics is when members of the "minority community" are watering their emerald lawns or bagging their groceries.

Earl, I quickly ascertained when we met at the local library, was just the student I had hoped for. Born in the Central American country of Belize in 1950, he had the wherewithal to emigrate and build a life in the United States. He was smart – you don't successfully skate through life lacking reading skills unless you're terribly clever – and he had an almost evangelical zeal to succeed. This, I learned, was no accident: Earl told me at our first meeting that he was a deeply religious man, a born-again Christian, and the reading abilities he hoped to develop would be used to spend many happy hours with his Bible.

I told him that with hard work we could make that happen together.

Earl smiled broadly. "I've been prayin' for this day," he said in his lilting accent as he glanced skyward. "Praise God, I've been prayin' for it. Thank you, Jesus."

I asked Earl if there was anything he wanted to know about me. Anything at all.

He wanted to know why I had chosen to be a volunteer reading teacher, why I would give up two afternoons a week for someone I didn't even know. I told him my motives weren't entirely selfless, that I expected I would feel very proud and satisfied if I could help someone learn to read.

Earl nodded thoughtfully, but I could see he wanted to ask something else: "And I was also wonderin'. What religion are you, Mike?"

I told him I was Jewish.

"Ah, I thought so," he said. "I don't think I've ever really known a Jewish person before. Just remember, Mike, Jesus loves you, too."

Earl and I did not immediately become close friends. I didn't immediately confide in him that I was going through the shattering pain of a divorce. He didn't immediately reveal to me the scars of being abandoned as a young boy and having to live for a time in a horse stable with nothing but the clothes on his back. But over time, as he learned to trust me and I learned the most effective ways to communicate the idiosyncrasies of written English, we became a team: Triumphs and failures were *ours*, not solely his or mine. Whenever Earl made an important breakthrough – recognizing certain consonant clusters, mastering the silent "e," identifying root words – you couldn't tell who was prouder, the smiling student of his beaming teacher. And when Earl successfully read his first story, a one-page tale about a father and son taking a fishing trip, our eyes both welled with tears.

"Earl," I said, resting my hand on his broad shoulders, "you did it. You read that story."

He nodded his head in wonder and exclaimed, "I did it. Praise God, I did it."

The next time we met, a week later, Earl stood up from his chair to greet me, as was his custom, and said, "Hello, my brother." He has called me that ever since. And each time he does, I feel a bolt of love – the love born of a profound friendship – pulse through me.

One day, shortly after demonstrating his newly acquired proficiency, Earl opened his black briefcase, the one in which he kept a calendar prominently listing his appointments for "school," as he

called our lessons, and handed me two tickets. “I want you to have these, my brother,” Earl said. “I want you to be there.”

The tickets were for the New Directions Christian Center’s annual celebration banquet, where, Earl told me, he had been selected to read his church’s mission statement. “I was wonderin’, could we practice this a little?” he asked, showing me a one-page document espousing the church’s goals for the coming year. This was far past fourth- or even eighth-grade stuff.

The banquet was in two weeks. “Let’s start practicing right away,” I said. Earl made his initial attempt, while I took notes, compiling a list of words and phrases we need to improve. It was nearly 40 items long.

I asked Earl to read the mission statement at home every night. And each time he stumbled on a word, I wanted him to write it down and practice it individually. “You can do it, my brother,” I told him.

“Praise God, I know I can,” Earl said.

A week later, Earl’s list of problem words had shrunk to 20. And three days later it was four or five.

On the night of the banquet, I arrived at Earl’s church. Looking over the evening’s program, I saw that, following a series of testimonials, singing performances, and “words of encouragement,” my friend Pastor Earl Flowers would be delivering the keynote address, the mission statement. A wave of stage fright washed over, even though I was there only to listen. Knowing the most important people in Earl’s life would be in the audience, I tried to imagine what must have been racing through his mind – years of self-doubt? paralyzing fear? – and then I realized he would probably say a silent prayer and do as well as he possibly could. And no matter the quality of his reading, he had his congregation and his beliefs, and that, I hoped, would be enough.

I could barely breathe.

After the singing and the testifying, moments before Earl’s introduction, his wife, Marcy, leaned over to him and whispered, “You sure you want to do this? I can do it for you.”

Earl said, “I can do this. Praise God, I can do this.”

And he did.

He stood before his congregation and he read that mission statement. Every word of it.

To the assembled crowd, it sounded like just another man reading just another speech. To me it was Olivier doing Hamlet, Domingo singing Verdi. It was poetry. It was living affirmation that anything in this world is possible. Because Earl Flower could read.

Not long ago, Earl arrived at our weekly lesson and told me that he had passed his test to become an American citizen. “All those years you’ve been living here and you’re not a citizen?” I asked.

He laughed and explained, “Well, I would’ve been, my brother, but I couldn’t read the test. It’s funny, ‘cause actually that test was easy, praise God. I got twenty-four-out of twenty-five!” Then Earl took my hand in his and said, “Ah, Mike, I want to thank you for what you’ve done. You’re my angel. I’ve been prayin’ for this, and God sent you to me.”

One day, not long from now, thousands of people will fill a government building in downtown Los Angeles, people from Asia and Africa and Europe, people of all hues and native languages, people with myriad biographies. They’ll raise their right hand and repeat after an appointed official, and they’ll be sworn in as citizens of the United States. Shouts of joy will echo through the auditorium, and more than a few tears will surely be shed. Pride will shine in the air, like so many stars.

And on that fine day, when thousands of immigrants from distant lands will legally call the United States their home, nobody will be prouder to be an American than a white, Jewish man who has lived in the land of opportunity his whole life.

#### “How You Can Help”

According to the National Institute for Literacy, of an estimated 40 million American adults with significant literacy needs, only about 4 million receive the help they need through either public or private sources. To become a volunteer reading tutor, call your local library or the NIFL (880/228-8813 or 202/632-1500; on the Web: [www.nifl.gov](http://www.nifl.gov))