

EBU Onkyo braille essay contest 2010

Theme: Being able to read and write in Braille changes my way of life

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Braille, my freedom

A soft touch under my fingers. Thick, light brown, vellum with a firmness, a structure; a guide to follow. A familiar smell which reminds me of something I felt a long time ago. The first dots come to me, lingering under my finger tips, caressing my skin. Telling a story in my mind and recalling a feeling in my body. A minuscule dot with an enormous impact on those privileged to be able to feel it.

Hello. I am Maarten. And I can see quite well.

Well... that's not completely true. I should say I can see *well enough*. Although my rest vision in percentage terms sounds rather depressing, the value of my sight is high. The world around me is not hidden. Faces laugh at me. Photo's and films love me. And, above all, all printed books are within my reach, I am so full of gratitude. I cherish my eyes, even though they are a little weak. But what I cherish even more is my ability to touch. I cherish Braille.

As short as my birth lasted, as long the doubt about my sight was. My parents just didn't know what to do with my little eyes. One seemed normal but stared into space and the other one was clouded; it looked out into the world, but perceived nothing. My mother was blind, so if I had been borne without eyes this wouldn't have been anything new to her. However by some devilish compromise I presented the precise situation to my parents that they had had no experience of; this created a lot of insecurity. You can't ask a baby what he can see; even if you could ask him, he wouldn't know what to say. And when you are a toddler, an infant and a child, your sight is hard to test. And even if you're tested: weak eyes are always sensitive to failure. For my parents, every day was full of concerns/doubts about my eyes, a never-ending confrontation with hopelessness, with questions, with sadness. They didn't know what to do and promised themselves that they would play safe, take no risks. This cautiousness was a huge gift. They taught me Braille.

I was 4. While my classmates were playing outside, I was indoors learning Braille, for a full year. My fingers danced playfully over the paper, absorbing what was underneath. When my classmates came back indoors I took out my little folder and learned print with them. Sometimes that was hard, because I couldn't see as much as they could. Sometimes they laughed at me because my eyes were so close to the page. But it didn't bother me at all because I had a freedom that they would probably never discover.

Braille is freedom. An ability to feel, to experience language in a new way. Every morning I feel a world opening itself up on paper; thoughts and feelings coming through my fingertips to me. A moment of rest, of recollection, of touching.

The world around us, pulls us, forces us to switch quickly and relentlessly from one thing to the next without noticing the magnificence around us. Braille respects that magnificence and re-creates it as dots on the page. You feel what you read; to be able to have it slide into your soul like this makes you feel complete. Experiencing Braille isn't as quick a process as reading print. And this is precisely what makes it one of the treasures of my life. The calm pace provides an experience

that connects better with someone who wants to be himself and to distinguish himself. The ability to feel language is invaluable, and gives it new dimensions. Words are little poems; Braille makes this touchable, in each little dot. That has an effect on my life, even if I do not read. And when I talk to someone I am ahead of them when it comes to feeling language. Precisely because of Braille.

Braille was invented for people who needed it in daily life. I have no direct need of it, but consider it to be an enrichment of my life. Everyone benefits from feeling language. That I am one of the lucky few who can experience this is a privilege, and I am grateful for that. Braille has changed my life. Braille is my freedom.