



**A newsletter for members of the York University Retirees' Association (YURA)**

**Summer 2022**

**No. 59**

**YURA is a member of CURAC/ARUCC, the federation of the College and University Retiree Associations of Canada/Associations de retraités dans les universités et collèges du Canada**

## **Contents**

Message from the YURA Co-Presidents .....	Page 2
Erratum.....	Page 3
The YURA Website Has Been Redesigned To Be Accessible, Steve Glassman.....	Page 3
Are YURA Members With Disabilities Invisible? .....	Page 5
Life As It Was Back Then: Reminiscence, Marika Kemeny .....	Page 7
Dyslexia: Learning Disability or Teaching Disability, Magarete Wolfram.....	Page 10
The Drug Cartels and Environmental Destruction, Anne-Marie Ambert .....	Page 12
Good Reads, Marika Kemeny .....	Page 13
Environmental Curiosity .....	Page 13
YURA Executive.....	Page 14
YURA Office Hours.....	Page 14

## Message from the YURA Co-Presidents

Dear YURA members,

The term is finished, grades have been submitted, York is preparing for Graduation Ceremonies, and summer is knocking on the door. As York employees, these were all things that marked the academic year for us. While as retirees we are no longer active participants, no doubt these are activities we will continue to use to mark in our own years. While COVID has not disappeared, it does look as if, with summer, we will come more freedom for all of us. Let's hope so.

While we have not re-established office hours on campus yet, the Executive Committee has been busy with regular meetings and behind the scene activities. Prominent among these is setting the agenda for the fall, with the **Annual General Meeting scheduled for Friday October 28<sup>th</sup>**. It is likely that we will host this meeting in the Zoom format that we have used for the last two AGMs.

We are happy to announce our guest speaker this year will be Irvin Studin, Editor-in-Chief and Publisher of *Global Brief* magazine, and President of The Institute for 21st Century Questions. He is also the Chair of the Worldwide Commission to Educate All Kids (Post-Pandemic). He has been called one of the leading international policy thinkers and strategists of his generation. He holds degrees from the Schulich School of Business (York University), the London School of Economics and the University of Oxford, where he studied on a Rhodes Scholarship. His PhD is from Osgoode Hall Law School, where he was a Pierre Elliott Trudeau Scholar and won the Governor-General's Gold Medal. In a past life, Studin was a two-time, All-Canadian soccer player, captained the York University's varsity soccer team. He played professionally with the Toronto Lynx (predecessor to Toronto FC), and earned two 'Blues' with the

varsity soccer team at Oxford University. Dr. Studin will explain Canada's multiple crises coming out of the pandemic, and how Canada can survive and succeed, in domestic and international terms alike, in a wicked post-pandemic world.

As it is that time of year, there are **many people to thank** for their continued contributions to our programming. Thanks to **Frances Wilkinson** for her coffee hours. This has been a wonderful way to spend an hour once a month for many of us and we will continue to provide this opportunity in the fall.

Thanks goes to the **Planning Committee** for setting up the great tour of Osgoode Hall (virtually) this winter. Currently the committee is reviewing different outdoor activities which members may enjoy. You should be hearing about these later in the summer and early fall.

Special thanks go out to **Steve Dranitsaris** who has taken ownership of the web site and continues to refresh it and keep it up to date. This has become one of our best ways to get information out to the membership. Stay connected to the web site for upcoming events, seminars and on-line speakers who may be of interest to you.

<https://yorku.ca/yura/>.

**Ian** and his Research Assistant have been analysing the YURA survey data and will be making a report to the Executive in the coming months. Further details will be reported at the AGM.

Congratulations to **Anne-Marie Ambert** who received the Tribute Award at the May meeting of CURAC. The full text of the nomination can be found on the home page of the YURA website. We are so lucky to have Anne-Marie on our team.

We are currently gearing up for this year's **Charity Challenge 5km walk**. This year, the date set is October 16, 2022 for those participating in the Waterfront event. Again, our walkers can choose to do a "virtual" 5 km walk anytime before October 16, and we will have subsets of YURA members walking in different areas of the city and north of the city. If you are wanting to walk and help with the fundraising, please contact Steve Dranitsaris ([yura@yorku.ca](mailto:yura@yorku.ca)), who has agreed to be team captain for this year's team. The more of you who get involved in this activity, the better we will do. All money raised will go to the YURA Graduate Student Award Endowment.

We do not want to lose touch with you so please make sure that we have the appropriate email and street address on file for you. The [yura@yorku.ca](mailto:yura@yorku.ca) email is where to send any changes. The YURA email is checked every day and, thanks to **Agnes Fraser**, the phone line is checked once a week to make sure that there are answers provided to those of you who make enquiries.

We hope you will stay safe and continue to be engaged with YURA and that the summer brings more mobility and opportunity to spread our wings. Stay safe.

--**Ian Greene and Charmaine Courtis**, Co-Presidents

## ERRATUM

In the *In-Memoriam* notice in the Spring YURA *Newsletter*, the name should have been Doris Nicholls, Emeritus Professor of Biology (and not Ralph Nicholls, Emeritus Professor of Physics, her late husband who passed away many years ago).

---**John Goodings**

## THE YURA WEBSITE HAS BEEN REDESIGNED TO BE ACCESSIBLE

"It's a free concert from now on" the announcer at the Woodstock festival said on Friday, August 15, 1969. It meant that all barriers, fences, gates and ticket-taking were eliminated. Woodstock, and the 60's, marked a time of social change and it is the open fields of the Woodstock festival that come to my mind when we talk about *barriers and accessibility*. And yet change for the disabled did not happen in the 60's. In large measure, for most of our work lives, the barriers remained. The Ontario Human Rights code was introduced 40 years ago, yet **the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA)** was only enacted in 2005.

York University has one of the oldest programmes in critical disability studies and has advanced the cause for decades – in keeping with our tradition of social justice and using multidisciplinary approaches. The AODA focuses on the public realm, which includes universities. There are five areas of concern to make the province accessible by 2025 (customer service, employment, information and communications, transportation, and design of public spaces). Timelines were established for implementation. When AODA training started at York, in 2012 as I recall, some of the deadlines seemed futuristic. The good news is that we are living in the future. See *Living in the Future* on YouTube.

The other good news is that your YURA web team (Steve Dranitsaris, Ian Greene, Alex Neumann and Steve Glassman) have rebuilt the YURA website and regularly check each newsletter to ensure compliance with the AODA standards. The goal of web content accessibility guidelines (WCAG) is to remove any barriers that people may encounter

because of a disability, both mental and physical, when consulting websites and web content. **We want to make the YURA website your go-to place, with information and links that are relevant to all of us navigating the world of retirement benefits, activities, and our continued interests as part of the University community.**

We do a few things to make sure our YURA documents pass the accessibility test. The standards are established by AODA follow the international Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). We simplify the number and types of headings and fonts, simplify the hierarchy of our websites for navigating them easily, and add descriptive text to photos. When your cursor hovers over a photo, a good screen reader recognizes the object reads out the “alt text”, so that you not only hear the caption, but the alt text describes the picture. There are many free sites that can be used to check documents or web sites for compliance with AODA standards.

I contacted Paula Kimpton at York (LAPS). She spoke with one of her colleagues, who reported that “I just use the text to speech function on the MacBook Accessibility. However, this only assists with documents that are designed accessibly.” Paula concludes that “I think that my colleague’s comment highlights that when we design things accessibly, then people who use assistive devices are able to use free software to support them rather than incur high costs to get software.” Not surprisingly, computers, even basic home computers powered by Microsoft, Office 365 or Google, have fantastic features to enlarge type and provide text-to-voice features. And there are many readers now available. This information came up from a quick Google search: 10 Helpful Text-to-Speech Readers for Back to School | Dyslexia Help at the University of Michigan (umich.edu) The readers will be able to interpret WORD files, pdfs, and so on.

## **e-Readers and Accessible Technologies**

I am not an expert on accessible technologies, although I was happy to work with our student services and our Library over the years, providing files that were useful for students and faculty with print disabilities. The most well-known reader is the Kurzweil reader. The Libraries’ web site (LAS- Library Accessibility Services /York University Libraries) mentions Kurzweil as the common reader. Kurzweil does more than just assist those with visual impairment. My son, fully sighted, had a learning disability and the public school provided Kurzweil software to assist him with his readings in the 90’s. (He went on to earn an honours degree from our dear York U.)

The Kurzweil reader facilitated larger type, review and highlighting text, and text to voice. Ray Kurzweil is famous for his music synthesizer/ keyboard that he built with Stevie Wonder, his OCR work; he was also a science advisor in the Clinton era. Kurzweil wrote a massive tome about the merging of humans and machines in *The Singularity is Near* (Viking, 652 pp, 2005) and apparently an update, *The Singularity is Nearer*, is scheduled for February 2023.

I spoke with Claudio Iacoe who works at LAS. One of the principal services offered to qualified students is scanning full print books to make digital files available for technologies including Kurzweil. Some files are used to create Braille format. Years ago, we were excited to learn that major publishers were expected to provide files as an alternate to print copies for students requiring alternate formats. This was in the day when digital formats (eBooks) were rarely available to the public but could be generated easily from the publisher. I hoped that the various repositories/consortia would be well-stocked and functional for our students by now. Claudio reports that LAS has about 20,000

## ARE YURA MEMBERS WITH DISABILITIES INVISIBLE?

titles in its database, but scanning is still done for about half of the requests which increasingly involve graduate-level students. Of course, the problem for us is that textbooks used in courses change frequently while the publishers and various consortia could take weeks to deliver while students need books quickly. The consortia work better for K-12, as they use standard and predictable textbooks.

Let's switch from text to speech to look at other technologies for the disabled. Just as AODA compliance simplifies navigating web sites for all persons of all abilities, other assistive technologies are useful for everyone. ("Hey, Siri, type the following and save it as my grocery list for tomorrow"). Now I retreat to my television. A few weeks ago, I switched on the captions option, and now captions appear for most shows and even commercials. The captions are pretty good in most cases, and obviously the captions are done by machine. (Not so fast! It can be a combination of pure machine-driven speech to text, as a person with clear diction repeats the words into a computer that is familiar with the voice, or a stenographer. It's pretty obvious when a human is involved in the captioning, as machine-generated captions have comical errors and bizarre spellings.)

I happened to be watching a You Tube video recently, and there's a button to turn on captions. It worked and helped me understand otherwise hard-to-understand accents, speech, commentary, and garbled lyrics.

Accessibility is a huge issue. What we are doing at YURA is a small part of this massive, worldwide effort. If it does its part and serves our members, then we will feel that our work in this area is accomplishing its objective.

--Steve Glassman

The editor's opinion on poverty among some of our YURA members in the Spring *Newsletter* gave rise to many feelings and considerations. It was the first time that I can recall that the *Newsletter* contained an article focusing strictly on the personal needs of our members--and relevant to all other retirees at other universities in Canada as well, I would assume. It brought to mind the consideration that elderly people with disabilities acquired with age are invisible and largely unrepresented in organizations such as ours.

I am sorry that I could not fill out the survey sent to our members because it was, in my opinion, a very good one. Because we never speak of disabilities and their personal consequences, let me explain my situation. Although I am in my early 90s, I am otherwise very healthy. But my disability substantially reduces the range of the activities I can engage in and is also somewhat socially isolating, especially during Covid times. But I am blessed with a very helpful family of son, daughters, granddaughters and even teenage greatgrandchildren. I can walk well without any help, even though I use a walker when I go outside, just in case my balance would fail me. I always suffer from pain, but I would rate it at 3 on a 10-point scale: annoying but quite bearable.

The gist of it is that I can only stand up, walk, or lie down. I cannot sit because the pain becomes so excruciating and unbearable that I honestly let out screams. And then it radiates throughout the spine and legs for about 15 unbearable minutes. I would rate this pain as a 10 out of 10. My son has bought me one of those computer desks that is raised to my standing height and this is how I read my email as well as other interesting documents such as the

*Newsletter* and the *PTP*. However, because I have to hold on to the desk, and I can even walk with the desk as it has rollers, I cannot respond to my emails from my computer. I do so on my cell phone by dictating into my cell phone which transforms my voice into a text I then send to my correspondents. In the case of this article, I simply incorporated it into a letter to my granddaughter who formatted it and sent it to the editor.

You may ask, how do I eat, get into bed, and go to the bathroom, if I cannot sit down? As for eating, I have another small raised desk on which I put my plate and eat standing up or even walking because I have a lot of space in my condo. As for cooking, I mainly use the microwave! My grandchildren often bring me take-outs and various meals for variety's sake.

How do I get to bed? Well, another contraption. It's sort of like a Murphy bed in reverse: at the push of a button, the head comes up and the feet go down and it meets me so to speak: I step on the baseboard and lean on the bed, a bar comes in front of my waist to prevent me from falling and then the bed goes back horizontally. Then the bar opens up. With the push of another button, the feet can be raised slightly to help circulation. Each time I have to go for tests to the hospital or see a specialist, I have to go by ambulance. My grand-son-in-law has volunteered to be my GP, which was a little awkward at first but we both got used to it. It is thanks to him that I got all my Covid shots.

As far as going to the bathroom is concerned (you may be cringing), my son who is an engineer (fortunately for me) has redesigned a similar but narrower bed as above in soft leather into a commode. This narrow bed is next to my toilet in the bathroom and I can do my "duty" on my own without any help or anyone to supervise me. It's quite clever and helps me remain totally

independent as I can also take a shower and shampoo with several grab bars standing up. My clothes and shoes are specially made so that I can dress and undress without bending down. I must emphasize, returning to the initial article which brought all of this into context for me, that I am lucky to be financially able to pay for all of these contraptions and a cleaning lady who comes once a week.

But you do realize that I cannot be taken out for a ride, cannot socialize much outside of my family, and would not be able to go to the theatre for instance. I cannot walk more than two blocks outside my condo. If it were not for the fact that I have so much wonderful and cheerful help from my family and the fact that I am mentally very fit, I probably would be in a long-term care facility by now.

A woman who used to be a YURA member has become a very close friend although we belonged to two different unions. She is in her mid-80s and her low income makes her disability more difficult than it should be. She has allowed me to speak on her behalf: she suffers from serious mobility problems caused by severe arthritis and has difficulty getting up from her seat. She has to put her walker in front of her and uses it to help her get up with great pain. This disability has worn her health out. She walks with difficulty and very painfully. But she can go out and my son and his wife often take her shopping and just drive around. She also feels that she is invisible in this Association. As she no longer can afford a computer and the Internet, I print both the *Newsletters* and *PTPs* for her.

As most people spend a great of time sitting, I spend most of my time lying down to read, talk over the phone, dictate, and watch TV on a set which is high up the wall. I am sure that the contents of my article is somewhat unorthodox, and I am thankful

to the editor for having allowed me to write it without divulging my name, which would have prevented me from explaining the intimate details I gave. However, I am sure that other people who have disabilities in our and other similar associations. Given that this *Newsletter* is posted on the YURA website, I hope that members with disabilities will find my article very relevant to them and their situation.

– **Invisible YURA member**

## **LIFE AS IT WAS BACK THEN**

*Our 38<sup>th</sup> Reminiscence is written by Marika Kemeny who retired from Glendon College in 2011. During the last seven years of her career, she was the Glendon's Communications Officer, a unique position which enabled her to report in both English and French on faculty appointments in many domains and on campus events. She was also the liaison with York's Keele campus and was a frequent contributor to YFile, York's daily electronic magazine at that time. She has entitled her Reminiscence, "I remember 1956."*

My grandson, Nicholas age 12, asked me to write my story of escaping from Hungary in 1956, during the Hungarian revolution, when I was twelve years old. The account below was what I wrote for him.

Dear Nicholas, you know me as Marika Kemeny, but when I was born in Budapest, Hungary, my official name was Lándori Mária. You may know that in Hungarian, the family name comes first. I was also never called Mária by anyone who knew me, Marika being a diminutive of Mária and that has always been what I preferred.

In 1956 I was 12 years old, only a little older than you are right now. School started in September as usual and I liked school, especially because, as an

only child, that was where I could socialize with other children. We lived in a two-room apartment, my parents and I sharing one of the rooms, while my grandmother lived with us in the second room.

On Sunday, October 21st, we returned from a hike in the hills of Buda to find my grandmother unconscious in her room. She was rushed to hospital and we were told that she had had a stroke. Two days later, when I returned home from school, there were urgent announcements on the radio about demonstrations in the centre of the city, mostly by high school and university students, protesting against the Russian occupation of the country and against a government that was basically a communist dictatorship. I was frightened, especially when I saw that the grownups around me were so scared: it was only a few years since the Second World War had ended.

Later that evening, there were lots of announcements, interviews, loud music and political statements on the radio. And there was shooting in the distance. The next day brought chaos in the city, people with rifles and guns driving around in open trucks, many workers joining the students. I didn't really understand the reasons why all this was happening. What I did understand was that we couldn't go shopping for food and we couldn't visit my grandmother in the hospital. It was too dangerous to go out.

This went on for several days. We huddled inside, listening to the radio and trying to understand what was happening and who was now in charge of the country. My mother was devastated that she couldn't visit her mother. She announced that whatever was happening outside, she was going to the hospital to find out how my grandmother was doing. It was decided that all three of us would walk there (streetcars and buses were not working), regardless of the danger. We set out on the street, eerily quiet except for the occasional shot we heard

in the distance. That was when I saw a dead person for the first time, lying on the ground, covered with newspapers.

We walked and sometimes ran from doorway to doorway, bullets at times whizzing dangerously close, but we made it to the hospital. There we learned that my grandmother had died and was buried somewhere, along with the many dead who were the victims of the fighting. We never found out where she had been buried.

For a number of days, we were again in our apartment, not daring to go out. When shooting got closer, we hid in the building's cellar along with other residents. There was lots of talk and days of quiet outside. The Russians had temporarily left the city, but did not go far. Everyone expected that they would be back, but during this time the talk was about leaving the country. Rumours were going around that the country's border was unguarded, although until recently, there had been landmines and soldiers with weapons keeping the population inside.

After many worried and excited discussions, my parents decided that we should take this chance and leave the country in hope of a better, more peaceful future. Had my grandmother lived, she would not have been able to join us, and we would never have left her behind.

One morning, I woke up to my parents' whispering and putting together three small cases, not much bigger than backpacks. We were leaving, but it had to be a secret. If discovered, we might have been put in jail or worse. We put on our warmest coats and hiking boots; it was getting to be winter. We closed the door behind us, leaving all our belongings, our home. I took three small treasures with me in my coat pocket: a tiny teddy bear and a little monkey, both about two inches long in one pocket, my multicolour ball-point pen (a very

re object in 1950s Hungary, a birthday present from my uncle) in the other pocket.

Outside, there was a truck waiting to take us to a village near the border. The driver knew my father and was ready to make the trip, which had its own dangers. It was illegal to be within a few kilometres of the Hungarian-Austrian border without a special permit. My father sat with the driver, my mother and I huddled in the back of the truck under a tarp for what seemed like forever. At a checkpoint, Hungarian soldiers with rifles stopped the truck asking for identification. They looked into the back, but never moved the tarp and we went on.

People knew that there were thousands who were ready to take the chance to leave a country, which represented only danger and hardships for them. We gathered in the yard of a local border guard, along with about fifteen others. The guard wasn't guarding, he was leading groups walking across to Austria during the nights for a lot of money, almost everything we had. When darkness fell, we set off.

Darkness really was absolute blackness, no lights anywhere, no road either. We were walking across frozen cornfields at great speed, in total silence, because although the borders were temporarily unguarded in most places, there were some spots where soldiers with rifles were watching.

After a while, we could make out some of the landscape, flat fields with huge clumps of frozen earth. The pace was so fast, we had to drop our little suitcases, it was impossible to keep up and carry anything. I fell into a shallow hole. My mother grabbed the sleeve of my coat, which tore away. I was able to keep going, but that is probably where my special pen fell out of my pocket, lost forever.

As we were marching on, I had one thought: we are leaving! That means I won't have to do my homework! We walked all night; it was fourteen

kilometres to the nearest Austrian village. At some point, the border guard leading our ragged little group stopped and said: you see those lights in the distance? That's Austria. Keep going in that direction. I am leaving you and returning home. We were devastated, but there was nothing else to be done, we had to keep going.

We walked for what felt like a really long time, when we arrived at a paved road. There were cars and minibuses parked alongside and a friendly voice said: guten abend - good evening. Welcome to Austria! We were driven to the village, whose name I never found out and in the local school's gym, there were straw pallets on the floor. Quite a few refugees were already sleeping there. We were so exhausted, that as soon as we lay down, we were asleep. We made it! What our future would be had to wait until the next morning.

**Part 2:** Early the next morning, we were gently herded towards a nearby railway station, where our ragged, disheveled group was helped onto a long train. It was an electric train, not like the wheezing, steaming engines we were accustomed to. Once all the cars were filled with refugees, the doors were locked - a frightening scenario for the survivors of World War II, who remembered the cattle cars taking people to concentration camps. There was a hush among the group, but the officials assured us that this was merely a safety measure, making sure that no one got off before our destination. This was only part of the story, though, because the locked doors also kept us from leaving the train as we passed through Vienna, the Austrian capital which was already brimming with refugees. As we started off, we were led to the dining car, one compartment at a time, to serve us breakfast. By the time it was our turn, word got around: they are feeding us cake for breakfast! Cake, as it turned out, was sliced white bread - never seen in postwar Hungary. It was starting to get dark when we arrived at a station, whose sign read: Ried im Innkreis. As we

found out later, this was a small town in upper Austria, near Linz. Our tired group was led through the gate in a chain-link fence and we were herded in a yard in front of a large, empty barracks. As we entered, each person was handed a rough sack and instructed to fill it with the hay from the haystacks nearby. The barracks were empty and completely unfurnished: Austria had gained its neutrality only a year earlier, resulting in the demobilization of its army. Clearly, Austria receiving such an avalanche of refugees that the officials were scrambling to house us and process us. My parents had planned for us to join my uncle and his family, who had arrived in Toronto several weeks earlier. We had to get through the next while somehow, until we could emigrate, but the road ahead was not clear.

**Part 3:** The Austrian camp was struggling--not enough food, not enough warm clothes, too many people jammed together. My parents decided that we would go to whichever country would take us as soon as possible and try to get to Canada from there. We were lucky. Switzerland offered to take in thousands of Hungarian refugees. We signed up and in a week's time were marched to the local train station. We didn't know our destination, but Switzerland sounded safe.

I will never forget that overnight train ride. We hurtled through the night, occasionally stopping at train stations with unfamiliar names. On the platforms, local people were waiting to hand their gifts to us across the windows. I received some chocolates and a slightly used pencil case with colour pencils and an eraser. The pencils are long gone, but I still treasure the metal pencil case, a souvenir of long ago. As dawn appeared, the most amazing sight met us: the high Alps sparkling in pink and golden light. We had never seen such mountains before.

It was evening when we arrived at another empty army barracks in a town called Sion, in southern

Switzerland. The organizers here had been expecting us and the situation was much better than in Austria. We were assigned to dormitories, several families together, but the food was good, and we were given extra clothes. We spent several weeks in quarantine, the careful Swiss authorities making sure that we, wild Hungarians, didn't bring some dreaded disease in the country. At last, each family was assigned to a location. Every Swiss community offered to take on some refugees, villages would accommodate only one or two families, bigger towns accepted many more according to their capacity. We were sent to a village of 1000 inhabitants in the French-speaking Jura Bernois mountain region.

The mayor of the town and many inhabitants welcomed us at the railway station. The school choir sang the Swiss national anthem. We spoke no French, but the mayor spoke some German and could thus communicate with my parents. The village offered us two rooms in the municipal hall free of rent and we could shop for food in the village stores, without having to pay, for three months. This was incredible generosity and there was more. My father could work in the local electrical firm, whose owner spoke German, my mother would be a housewife, as expected of women there at the time. I would go to school. This was the start of our new life.

We were very grateful for all the kindness and generosity we had received from our Swiss hosts, but our goal had always been to rejoin our family in Canada. It took about six months for the Canadian authorities to provide us with the necessary visas to emigrate to Toronto. We left Europe by ship on the S.S. Ascania, departing from Le Havre on the French coast and arriving after a stormy 12-day sail in Quebec City on August 12th, 1957. I was 13 years old.

–**Marika Kemeny**

## **Dyslexia: Learning Disability or Teaching Disability? A Personal Experience**

I was taken aback by a statement issued by the Mayo Clinic in 2017 regarding diagnosis and treatment of dyslexia: “There's no known way to correct the underlying brain abnormality that causes dyslexia — dyslexia is a lifelong problem.”

To start with, what is an abnormality? By definition, it is something that is different from the norm. However, something that is different does not necessarily need to be corrected. Rather than forcing left-handers to use their right hand or to subject gay people to conversion therapy, we have over time come to accept and appreciate individual differences. And yet, children who have difficulties learning to read are routinely described as having some disability, because they do not respond to the teaching method designed for the norm.

My interest in dyslexia has two roots. As an educational psychologist, dyslexia is part of my professional domain. As the mother of a son who had severe difficulties learning to read, dyslexia is a phenomenon that used to haunt me, keep me awake at night and fill me with dread, worrying about my child's future. I say, "it used to" because my son, who at the age of eleven still had not mastered the consonants, in spite of grade repetition and years of remedial help from “experts” did learn to read. He is now an internationally renowned scholar. What made it possible to produce the change? It was not by "correcting the underlying causes of learning disability." After his teachers explained that “the child may not have what it takes,” I came to suspect that the reason for his lack of progress may be a **teaching disability**, i.e., a failure of the educational system to respond to the cognitive style of a dyslexic. I knew very well that, despite his difficulties in reading, he was a gifted child, and I developed a teaching method that worked for him.

My hypothesis that failure to read may be caused by a teaching disability was suggested by personal experiences. I had had no difficulties learning to read. My mother had pulled me out of school for safety reasons (wartime air attacks over Germany), shortly after I had entered grade one in the Fall of 1944. I knew that my peers were learning to read and, not wanting to be left behind, I decided to teach myself. I did so in a very short time and with a minimum of assistance from an older brother. It undoubtedly helped that my native tongue, German, has more phonetic consistency than English.

Only decades later did I realize that maybe not all was well with my literacy skills. I never managed to overcome my difficulties in spelling. Even simple words that I had seen hundreds of times and looked up repeatedly did not leave a stable image in my memory. During my childhood, my written work was often penalized because of spelling mistakes; however, this did not bother me, since my essays still got fairly high grades on content.

There was another problem that emerged in grade five and could not be swept under the rug so readily. I had unsurmountable difficulties learning foreign languages. English was bad, and French was worse; I had trouble figuring out when a word ended and a new one started. My teachers said that I could never be admitted to a high-school that required Latin, as most German high-schools at the time did. I failed grade eight with rock-bottom marks in both English and French. Since I had reached the age where I could leave school, I refused to continue, but at the urging of my mother, I continued in a different school where I could complete grades eight, nine and ten, which meant a middle-school graduation. I passed these three years not because my skills in foreign languages improved. They did not. I got through, because I was good at mathematics, and my two classmates on either side of me were not. The three of us came to an agreement. Friedel, to my left, helped me

with my English exams, Hanna, to my right, helped me with my French. In exchange, I provided both of them with the solutions for their math exams.

I became very fast and managed to write three exams in the time allocated for one. I never felt an iota of guilt about the way I made it through middle school. I saw it as a case of skill exchange, and I worked hard. As an aside, the arrangement I made with my classmates paid off in more ways than one. In the immediate present, it allowed me to get through middle school. While doing so, I took special care to hone my math skills, which was the currency with which I paid for the help I needed. Having to work very fast further increased my fluency in math as well as my confidence. Years later, when I had to take a statistics course delivered by an instructor of limited competence, I was able to skip the classes and figure things out on my own. I excelled on my final exam and was offered a position as a teaching assistant. The well-paid appointment allowed me to support myself throughout my years of university studies. Teaching statistics became a reliable source of income to which I could return on various occasions. My first job as a new immigrant in Canada with limited command of English was that of a teaching assistant in statistics at the newly opened Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, B.C.

Sailing through middle school made me want to continue my education and graduate with a high school diploma. The closest institution that offered a high school diploma without Latin was a residential convent school. It was too far for daily commuting. As a non-Catholic, I was not eligible for residency in the school and the extra help that such an accommodation would have entailed. The only alternative was moving into a rented room in town. It was a relief that French was no longer on the agenda. As for English, I had to come up with a new strategy.

It was difficult to improve my English spelling while living alone without anybody to give me dictations. I resorted to memorizing passages from a book that I got from the school library, writing the text down from memory and checking my spelling. I don't remember how much this practice helped my spelling or even if I kept it up for long. However, I do remember that I became absorbed by the story told. I did not know at the time that this book, *The Good Earth*, by Pearl S. Buck, had earned its author the Nobel Prize for literature. It was a work of several hundred pages, but I read it from cover to cover, not bothering to look up all the unknown words. I then went to find another book, *East Wind West Wind*, by the same author, and I devoured it as well. By this time, I had picked up the meaning of many words from context. I had also become more accustomed to English sentence structures. One day, my teacher remarked that I seem to have a knack for English, and this comment came from a woman with the reputation of being unusually competent.

I became fluent with relative ease in both French and English to study and later teach in these languages. I later enrolled in several university courses in linguistics as well as Italian and Spanish language and literature for the sheer fun of it. It also helped that I already understood a lot of the vocabulary from languages derived from Latin.

In essence, I could learn languages as well as other people, if not better; I just could not acquire them the way they were taught in school. It probably was my good luck that I attended grade one for only a few days and then taught myself to read in a way that worked for me. If I had relied on school instruction, I might have suffered years of frustrations as a dyslexic, just as my son did.

In conclusion, differences in cognitive style do last a lifetime. They are an asset rather than a handicap to get rid of. My son became successful not despite his cognitive style but because of it. He has a

distinct facility to look at problems from angles that are different from the norm. The problem is not the individual with a different cognitive style but the environment that forces educational practices made for the norm onto those who learn in ways that are different from those of the majority. It is time to stop blaming the lack of teaching success on children by labelling them as "learning disabled." It is time for the educational establishment to learn about approaches that work for those who function in ways other than the norm.

--Margarete Wolfram

## THE DRUG CARTELS AND ENVIRONMENTAL DESTRUCTION

In Mexico and other Latin American countries, the cartels cause a great deal of harm to the environment. Let's talk about avocados, first. It may be hard to believe that a small fruit such as the avocado is both related to deforestation, drug cartel control, and danger to our Monarch butterflies which hibernate in pine forests in the area towards the Southwest of Mexico.

On November 18th, 2021, a French reporter began his documentary on the subject by talking about a brave Mexican who was killed because he tried to protect the pine forests in which the Monarch butterflies winter. There are legitimate farmers who grow avocados, but they have to pay a tribute to the drug cartels so that their trucks can pass and their avocados which are sold in North America and even in Europe can reach their market. But neither the police forces nor the government help them because they receive money from the cartels.

But, above all, under the control of the cartels, pine forests are being cut down so that more avocado trees can be planted. The reporter was able to talk to a cartel member who was wearing a hood and whose voice was camouflaged because he was also

a policeman! He admitted that the cartels are ready to kill in order to control the avocado trade and cut the forest down to grow more avocados because there is a great deal of money in this.

In a subsequent documentary, the same journalist was in the Sea of Cortes on the *Sea Shepherd* ship which patrols to prevent illegal fishing in a protected area. Cartel-controlled fishermen were fishing and depleting several endangered species, one of which the Chinese buy at incredible prices because they consider it an aphrodisiac. More money for the cartels. In this case, however, whenever the *Sea Shepherd* captain was surrounded by fishing boats which were throwing Molotov cocktails at them, Mexican navy ships would come to their rescue. But the *Sea Shepherd* and the navy can't be everywhere, especially at night. (Source: *Sur le Front, TV5, Nov. 18, 2021 and Jan. 20, 2022*).

--Anne-Marie Ambert

## GOOD READS

*Uncommon Type (some stories)*, published by Alfred A. Knopf in 2017. Did you know that in addition to be an outstanding actor and director, **Tom Hanks** is also an excellent, award-winning writer? Recently, I happened upon one of his books when I was browsing in our condo building's wonderful library. Being a big fan of his movies, I was curious to find out what he had written, and I ended up with several hours of delightful reading.

*Uncommon Type* is a quirky collection of 18 short stories which was on the New York Times Best Seller list for quite a long period upon its publication.

Now, you need to know (and I did not know) that Tom Hanks is a passionate collector of old typewriters and the overarching theme among all

these stories is that, somewhere in the text of each one, there is a typewriter and/or a typist featured, either front and centre, or hidden among the details. The topics of the stories vary greatly both in content and in style. There is even one in the format of a stage play. As the inside flap of the cover states, this is "a collection of stories that dissects, with great affection, humour and insight, the human condition and all its foibles". An extra delight is the reproduction of a different typewriter from the past at the beginning of each story.

In these days of anxiety and isolation, what more can you ask for than a diversion from today's issues, spend time with a writer in command of his craft, examining people with a twinkle in his eye? Be sure to read the comments and reviews on the cover (inside and back) by famous writers and actors. His close friend, the writer Ann Patchett commented: "Reading Tom Hank's *Uncommon Type* is like finding out that Alice Munro is also the greatest actress of our time." I rest my case.

--Marika Kemeny

## ENVIRONMENTAL CURIOSITY

In Japan, the handwash sink is attached to the toilet, so that you can wash your hands and reuse the water for the next flush.



In this way, Japan saves millions of liters of water every year.

(Contributed by **Rosemarie Nielsen**)

## **YURA Executive**

### **Officers**

Charmaine Courtis, Co-President  
Ian Greene, Co-President  
David Smith, Treasurer  
Diane Beelen Woody, Secretary

### **Members at Large**

Angus Anderson  
Sheelagh Atkinson  
Bruno Bellissimo  
Marla Chodak  
Agnes Fraser  
Jane Grant  
David Leyton-Brown  
Savitsa Sévigny  
Donna Smith  
Peter Victor

### **Ex-Officio members:**

Anne-Marie Ambert, Editor  
Steve Dranitsaris, Administrative Support  
Fred Fletcher, ARFL  
John Lennox, Past Co-President

## **York University Retirees' Association**

101 Central Square, York University  
4700 Keele St., Toronto, ON Canada  
M3J 1P3

Telephone: (416) 736-2100, ext. 70664

E-mail: [yura@yorku.ca](mailto:yura@yorku.ca)

Website: <http://www.yorku.ca/yura>

---

### **YURA Office Hours (in non-Covid times)**

Tuesday 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.  
Wednesday 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.  
Thursday 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

---

The *YURA Newsletter* is published by the  
York University Retirees' Association.  
YURA is a member of **CURAC/ARUCC**.

**Anne-Marie Ambert, Editor**

[yura@yorku.ca](mailto:yura@yorku.ca)