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Vol 6, No. 1
April 2003
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BOOK REVIEWS

How Dumb Can I Be? by Edith Fitch. Published by Skytone Printing and Graphics Limited, Red Deer, AB, Canada, 2002 (160 pages).

Just what is it like to have a disability in an environment in which no one understands handicaps? In the book *How Dumb Can I Be?* author Edith Fitch narrates a lifetime of poignant and thought-provoking answers, based upon her own personal experience.

Recently retired from a highly successful lifelong career as a primary-grades school teacher, Fitch has revealed a “cross” which she personally bore so well in her adult life that only her family and a few of her closest friends ever knew that she was totally deaf in the left ear and had very limited hearing in the right. In addition, her limited hearing caused a speech impediment which at times was an even greater “cross” to bear. Born to a western Canadian farm family during the Great Depression, during an era when the general attitude was that “abnormalities” were a disgrace or something for families to hide, during a time when there existed only a distorted conceptualization of the nature of handicaps and very little sympathy for those with handicaps, during a time when there was limited understanding of the psychological effects of many handicaps and scarce resources to deal with their consequences; she grew up in an atmosphere of secret shame and denial.

The book is written from the perspective and with the age-appropriate vocabulary of a growing child. In the small multigrade school which she attended, she was the only student with a handicap, and the only girl in her grade. One of her early experiences in school she describes this way:

My teacher . . . teaches us phonics. She makes me say the sounds over and over. The boys [in my class] do not have to say the sounds over and over. I must be dumb. It makes me sad.

“Say the word *take*,” she says. I say *cake*.

“No Edith! It is *t - t - t - take*. Try again.”

I do not understand. To myself I say, “That is what I said.” I don’t like phonics. What can I do to be smart like the boys?

Although there were happy times in her childhood, the awareness that she was “different” hung like a heavy cloud over most of her days. The fact that no one was really able to understand her reality, and neither was she, produced a feeling of guilt for being different—a feeling which only added to her childhood misery. She found

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it impossible to hide her speech impediment, because there were many times when she simply could not avoid speaking. Early in her childhood she learned to lip read, but it was not until in second grade that she made the discovery that there was a relationship between the letters written on a page and the sounds persons were forming with their mouths. This discovery of phonetics she has characterized as the “eureka!” of her language development. She very early learned to cope with her inability to hear by imitating others, trying to act like she was hearing the things that they were hearing. She attempted to hide her hearing loss by saying what she thought was expected regardless of its relationship to reality. For example, on one occasion her father tried to determine the extent of her hearing handicap by asking when she could or could not hear a pocket watch held at different distances from each of her ears. Her inability to guess when she ought to be able to hear the watch produced such erratic results that her father became frustrated and angry, exclaiming, “How dumb can you be?”

How Dumb Can I Be? is not a scientific treatise, nor is it a textbook. It is rather the story of the melancholy childhood of one tenacious girl who could not understand nor be understood by those closest to her—a childhood that could have been so much happier had there been that understanding. The book also makes a positive statement regarding the indomitable spirit of that young girl—in overcoming an amorphous handicap and demonstrating to the world that those with handicaps do have much to offer. And that is the real value of the book. It is a “must read” for teachers and parents, indeed for anyone and everyone who will ever find themselves involved in the life of a child with a disability. Re-living that bittersweet childhood through the eyes of that growing girl will help all to better understand the nature of handicaps, to be more cognizant of their psychological impact upon the persons least equipped to understand them (i.e., those who have the handicap), and to be more tolerant and better prepared to help. Author Fitch has done educators everywhere a monumental service by bringing her aphotic past out into the open to help us better understand the world from which she has emerged triumphant—the world of living with a disability.

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Teaching Cross-Culturally: An International Model for Learning and Teaching, by Judith E. Lingenfelter & Sherwood G. Lingenfelter. Published by Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, USA, 2003 (134 pages).

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The Lingenfelters, a husband-and-wife team, bring to this volume appropriate credentials. Both have doctoral degrees in the subject area and both are currently teaching: Judith at Biola University, Sherwood at Fuller Theological Seminary. Both have extensive experience in cross-cultural teaching, at home and abroad. This is Sherwood's fourth book on the interplay of culture and mission published by Baker (*Ministering Cross-Culturally*, 1986; *Transforming Culture*, 1992, revised 1998; *Agents of Transformation*, 1996).

The intended audience is "the western-trained educator who is working or planning to work in a non-western school setting or in a multicultural school or university in a major city of North America" (p. 9). The authors set out their goals: to "help teachers understand their own culture of teaching and learning" (p. 9), "to equip teachers to become effective learners in another cultural context" (p. 10), and to enjoy the experience. This they do "using the perspective of Scripture and faith in Jesus Christ" (p. 10).

Throughout the book, the Lingenfelters urge cross-cultural teachers to become "150-percent people"—75 percent culture of birth and 75 percent culture of ministry (pp. 22-23). Telling their own story, they show how this can be done.

Each culture has its own agenda for learning. Each has its traditional way of teaching and learning. Solutions from one culture do not solve problems of another culture. What works in my group will probably not work for those, even in my own place, who have different cultural traditions. While some learn by observation and imitation, others learn by doing. For some rote learning is the style, while others insist on questioning and discussion. In some cultures, students learn in a group; in others learning is individual.

The definition of intelligence varies from culture to culture. In a Zambian tribal group intelligence encompasses "wisdom, cleverness, and responsibility (p. 62). The Lingenfelters note how Gardner's original seven different kinds of intelligence are valued differently in different cultural groups.

Teachers are variously seen as facilitators, authority figures, parents, or outsiders. But all teachers should teach for change. While we need cultural stability, as Christians "we seek to measure our lives and ministries against the standards set forth" by Jesus (p. 89). Thus, we cannot conform to certain cultural patterns. One of the most powerful tools for achieving change is experiential learning, which involves doing and reflecting (p. 90).

Efforts to teach well may be hindered by false expectations about resources, curriculum, testing, visual learning, status, and planning. The novice at cross-cultural teaching needs to face these and devise coping mechanisms, not judging but using "the fundamental principle of a loving relationship—ask, seek, and knock" (p. 111).

The final chapter presents suggestions for becoming an effective Christian, cross-cultural teacher. Important among these are those that indicate ways of creating a place for oneself in the community, finding fellowship with locals, and coping with culture shock.

The book is a very readable combination of scholarship (in-text references and bibliography) and story (the authors' own and that of others). Each chapter closes with research and reflection questions. Useful figures help to visualize information presented.

From my perspective of years of international teaching, the Lingenfelters are right on target. Those planning to teach cross-culturally—especially those who wish to do so from a Christian perspective—would do well to carefully study this delightful and useful volume.

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