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# Learning Lifeline

A LETTER ABOUT LEARNING FROM ESTHER WILKISON

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This week, I talked to a teacher who teaches study skills to middle schoolers. She decided to include keyboarding since her students struggle to type without looking at the keys. Some of her students want to skip over the practice. They don't enjoy drills that require them to hit the same few letters over and over.

As I listened, I thought—Oh, dear middle schoolers, while there are many topics in school that you just need to become familiar with, there are some specific skills that, should you master them, will forever change you and your future.

If you've read *The Magician's Nephew* in the Chronicles of Narnia, you might remember the Wood Between the Worlds where travelers enter different worlds through various portals. Mastery skills open doors for learners sort of like those portals.

Take a look at this list of mastery skills: walking, talking, reading, writing, riding a bike, swimming, typing, and driving a car. While this list is not comprehensive, it is helpful.

Maybe you don't remember much about life before you could walk, but if you have ever watched someone in the process of learning this skill, you know they fall a lot. At the beginning, a new activity usually feels awkward and unnatural because your brain is forging new pathways.

At first, new pathways are a bit like dirt roads. The more you practice the skill, the more that road gets paved (or, more accurately, coated with myelin—a fatty substance that allows mental traffic to move around on your pathways). Once the pathway is fully paved, you can do this activity automatically (or while on autopilot). This means that traveling on the pathway no longer takes your focus.

Before you master a skill, you need to give a task your full attention. Giving anything full-focus burns all kinds of calories and leaves you with less energy. That's why practice works best in small segments.

Practicing is not easy or creative. The letters on a standard qwerty keyboard don't move around or dance. Yet, because the letters stay put, if you practice using standard fingering over and over, you gain mastery. When you have mastery over the letters, your fingers seem to move automatically. Automaticity is your friend! Once you have it, your brain can do the work without much thought—which means you can think on creative things worth writing about. One reason many people struggle with writing is that they lack automaticity in getting their thoughts on paper through typing or handwriting.

Automaticity is crucial in multi-tasking. Many say there is no such thing as multitasking. Others multitask all the time. The truth? Once we develop automaticity, we can multitask, but we cannot multi-focus. This is why texting and driving is such a bad idea. If the focus drifts off driving, the results can be deadly.

One challenge in getting to automaticity is how long it takes to practice. It's tempting to feel discouraged when you look at others who don't seem to need as much practice as you need. Please don't compare yourself with others. God designed you to be you in order to do the good works He planned for you. He will give you all the help you need to master what He wants you to master—no matter how long it takes.

God is not upset that some things take you longer. Some may think that fast equals smart, but things that are higher quality typically take longer to develop. Stress over feeling behind will only slow you down. Keep practicing. Automaticity will develop.



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The first time I took a typing class, I failed. The second time, I started to fail, but the teacher had a better idea. She picked me up from home early in the morning so I could have an extra half hour of practice before the school day began. With that extra practice, I eventually mastered the skill and entered the world of those who could pour their thoughts onto a page without stopping to think about the keys on the keyboard or the fingering.

Once I could type with automaticity, I was inside a new world. I could multitask by both thinking and typing at the same time because typing no longer required focus. I could develop as a writer, in part, because I no longer had to hold onto thoughts while my brain also thought through where to put my fingers to hit the letters.

When practice feels hard, dear middle schoolers, I feel your pain. New skills are hard. But I'm encouraging you to do this hard work because the reward of mastery is worth the investment you are making.

For all non-middle-schoolers reading this, chances are you may be trying to learn a new skill as well. If you can do any of the following—walk, talk, read, write, ride a bike, swim, type, or drive a car—you have proof that you are capable of learning things with automaticity. Give yourself time to learn and practice.

And, if you are a parent, teacher, or spiritual leader who is laboring to help others develop essential skills—know that you have a vital role in the Wood Between the Worlds. Keep introducing others to all that lies ahead for them on their journey through the portals. You may never see how far they go in the world you help them into, but your magic is working!