



# Learning Lifeline

A LETTER ABOUT LEARNING FROM ESTHER WILKISON

How do we help someone who is convinced that he or she is never going to be a good reader?

For that matter, how do we help anyone who is stuck because of a limiting core belief?

A recent coaching client got me pondering those questions. Tim (not his real name) was doing far better in high school than you would expect for someone who struggled with reading comprehension beyond a fourth-grade level. His mom found me because she wanted him to advance in school and life beyond where his listening and guessing skills would take him.

I explained to Tim that, in the categories from Richard O'Conner, Ph.D., our brains function on 3 levels:

1. Intentional Focused
2. Automatic Habit
3. Core Belief or Underlying Assumption

It appeared to me that, way back in elementary school, Tim's childish brain assumed that there are readers and non-readers — and he was in the second camp. That *core belief* kept him from understanding that with *intentional focus* on the right skills he could eventually develop the *automatic habits* of skilled readers.

Tim was indomitable in other areas. When I found out he was a skilled golfer, I asked if he had ever played so badly that it made him think he could never play well again. He told me about how awful he played in one competition and how it left him convinced he was going to keep blowing it. I asked him, "What did you do to get over it?"

He said, "Oh, I just had to keep practicing."

Ah—notice that? He did something with *intentional focus* that led to *automatic habits* and eventually that changed his *core belief*. Sometimes a change in a core belief leads to action, but often our core belief changes only after we develop habits that move us beyond where we are stuck.

The keyword Tim used was *practice*. He didn't change the fear in his head by playing more high-pressure games right away, but by practicing. If only we could get readers to realize we are not asking them to perform each day in school, but to practice. Of course, to do this, we've got to design practice activities that feel like practice and not like high-pressured performance.

To build athletic skills, we need a coach who will break down a skill into smaller parts and give us ways to master the partial skills so that we can work up to greater competence. Tim needed practice visually scanning lines of text so that he would move past stopping on every letter or even every word, and gather groups of words into units of meeting. He needed a great deal of practice doing this on text that was easy to understand. When his automaticity of eye sweep increased, he could move with confidence into more challenging reading.



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Tim never got the chance for this kind of practice because his school and his parents wanted him to work on an advanced reading level. He didn't get to drop back into the shallows to develop the skills he had missed, so he was left to slog forward in work that was not interesting to him, in part, because it was so far beyond his comprehension skill. The harder work meant that reading always took intentional thought, which burns more calories and zaps the energy needed to keep going.

In the little time I worked with Tim, I was able to help him gain some forward momentum which, unfortunately, moved him into even more rigorous work. His parents were frustrated at his lack of motivation, but his motivation was lacking because he was in over his head. Floundering in the deep end does not produce the results that come from enjoyable practice in the shallow end.

In my last meeting with Tim, I tried to interest him in a fantastic story that some may believe lacked sufficient rigor. Yet, it was a story that would hold his interest and help him develop the skill he needed. I encouraged him to find similar books to practice on so that, eventually, he could enjoy reading with confidence. I hope he took my advice.