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THE 1996 SAMUEL T. ORTON AWARD PRESENTED TO JEANNE S. CHALL
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THE 1996 SAMUEL T. ORTON AWARD PRESENTED TO JEANNE S. CHALL

by Roselmina Indrisano
Boston University

It is a great privilege to introduce my friend, Dr. Jeanne S. Chall, on this auspicious occasion.

For several months, I have been searching for the words that would do justice to our remarkable friend and colleague. To aid my search, I have reread Dr. Chall's major publications and her extraordinary curriculum vitae. With each reading, one word, timely to this season, recurs—thanksgiving. This evening, we who are her family, friends, and colleagues gather to offer thanks, on behalf of countless children, students, teachers, researchers, scholars, policy-makers, statesmen, television producers, journalists, publishers, readers, and parents, for the gifts of the life and legacy of Dr. Jeanne S. Chall, and for the continued intellectual energy and commitment that has her at work presently on several publications that will give us additional reasons for thanksgiving in the coming years.

We can begin by being thankful to Jeanne Chall, the teacher, the scholar, the teacher scholar. For more than 50 years, she has taught at colleges and universities throughout the United States. She spent 25 of these years at Harvard University, where she was also the director of a reading laboratory that served as a model for those that followed.

I am fortunate in being able to offer a first-person account of Dr. Chall, the gifted teacher. Following her appointment as professor emerita at Harvard, we at Boston University were grateful to have her join us as a visiting scholar to teach her legendary course on the history of reading research. During the first meeting, the students learned that when Dr. Chall teaches, she is concerned with the nourishment of the body as well as of mind and spirit. At the second class, and on other occasions when my schedule permitted me to join the group, I witnessed a feast for the eye and for the palette. One of the students quilted an elegant tablecloth to cover the conference table, and others took turns with food preparations in order to achieve a worthy presentation for their beloved teacher. In that seminar room, charged with the energy created by a rigorous teacher with en-

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cyclopedic knowledge and high standards, Dr. Chall made possible a weekly banquet for mind, spirit, and body.

When I think about Jeanne Chall's legacy as a teacher, I think of lines from Robert Bolt's *A Man for all Seasons*. While guiding a young man to consider his future, Thomas More asks, "Why not be a teacher? You'd be a fine teacher. Perhaps even a great one." To which the man responds, "And if I was, who would know it?" Thomas More responds, "You, your pupils, your friends, God. Not a bad public, that."

The public also thanks Jeanne Chall, the scholar. In a 14-page bibliography that accommodates only "selected" publications, there is an unprecedented number of books and reports that have had an influence as profound as any in the field. To name only a few, *Leaning to Read: The Great Debate, Stages of Reading Development, Becoming a Nation of Readers, The Reading Crisis: Why Poor Children Fail in Reading*, and most recently, *The Qualitative Assessment of Text Difficulty*.

Remarkably, Dr. Chall has also found time to establish an equally rich record of leadership on academic and public service advisory boards. She has served on the board of advisors of The Orton Dyslexia Society, and on the board of directors for both the National Society for the Study of Education and the International Reading Association. She has been elected as a fellow by the American Psychology Association and by the National Conference on Research in English, and as president of the Reading Hall of Fame. Jeanne Chall has been called upon by a succession of presidents of the United States and secretaries of education to bring her wisdom to national literacy efforts. She has been an advisor to projects conducted under the auspices of the Office of Education , the National Institute of Education, the National Academy of Education, and Right to Read.

For these contributions and more, Jeanne Chall may be the only person to have been honored by every scholarly group in the nation concerned with education. These include the American Psychological Association, the American Educational Research Association, The International Reading Association, the National Conference on Research in English, the National Reading Conference, and this evening, The Orton Dyslexia Society.

This record of accomplishment has been made possible by a unique blending of the finest qualities of teacher and scholar, qualities that reach their perfection in Jeanne Chall. I recall the words of Frank G. Jennings, which might have been written just for her.

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> Learning and teaching and study are the triple strands of the examined life. They are secure against accidental privilege. They shield solitude against loneliness. They enhance our uniqueness, defend our differences and place the power of equality at the service of the individual.

Let us now turn to Jeanne Chall, the visionary, the researcher, the visionary researcher. We celebrate tonight not just the range of topics that have engaged Dr. Chall to date, but her capacity to identify these issues decades before others. More importantly, we celebrate her tenacity in pursuing more than a few of these issues long after louder, if less thoughtful, voices proclaimed them unworthy. Consider this partial listing: the importance of phonics in learning to read, the plight of readers who through poverty or disability have yet to claim their right to literacy, and interdisciplinary insights into the processes by which we require the ultimate human achievement, the ability to read and write.

The distinguished journalist Muriel Cohen wrote in the Boston Globe in June 23, 1996 that Jeanne Chall has,

> encyclopedic knowledge of a whole range of disciplines, having done research in psychology, sociology, linguistics, pedagogy and history of education, all of which she regards as important to the understanding of how and why children learn to read.

I was fortunate to be among those interviewed for this article. When asked how it is that Jeanne has been able to hold steadfastly and silently to her principles through times of appreciation and times of criticism, I suggested that it is her unfailing courtesy and courage. She is the noble visionary, the meticulous researcher, whose regard for truth and those who depend upon truth is an unfailing guide to all who join her in the noble mission of education.

Listen to her own words written in the preface to *The Reading Crisis*,

> It is common today, as in the past, to look elsewhere than to educational research for an understanding of the literacy problems of low income children and for ways of solving these problems. Currently, cultural and political theories are offered as reasons for the low achievement of poor children and for the lag between mainstream and at-risk children.

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> Although cultural and political explanations may help us understand the broader picture, in the end they must be translated, in practical terms, into what can be done in schools and in homes. Such translations ought to consider the historical findings of educational research—that good teaching improves achievement and thereby can empower all children and especially those at risk.

Now, Jeanne Chall, the sage, the friend, the sage friend. Saul Bellow has spoken and written of the wisdom of knowing which ideas are worthy of our attention, and which are mere distractions. Throughout her remarkable life and career and to this very day, Jeanne Chall has attended tenaciously and courageously to the important matters. In this achievement, she has no peer, but is the model we all emulate. For she demands of her friends the same high standards she sets for herself.

Let me offer one anecdote. When Boston University joined the Chelsea Public Schools in a partnership on behalf of teachers, children, and parents, I searched the literature for insights into the ways I might be helpful. But I sought the advice of only one person, Jeanne Chall, one who cares enough about children and truth to be critical of the plan of a friend of many decades. During one of our regular dinners at a restaurant in Cambridge where members of the Harvard faculty are often present, I presented my plan to my friend. When she began to question me in her direct, penetrating way, the people at the adjoining tables, obviously scholars themselves, stopped eating and leaned toward us as if observing a doctoral candidate at an orals examination. After close listening and more questioning, she paused, thought, and finally declared the plan "promising." Whereupon our neighbors nodded in satisfaction, smiled, and turned again to their dinners. As it met with her approval, it is not surprising that the plan, characterized by serious teaching of critical skills and abilities, is working very well in the hands of our dedicated teachers.

As I am certain you understand, my challenge this evening was not to decide what I might say about the remarkable life and legacy of this extraordinary woman, but rather, what I might not say. And, alas, there is too much unsaid. So, I leave to each of you, the joy of recalling your own abundant reasons for thanksgiving.

On behalf of all who are here, and the countless others who have been blessed by Dr. Chall's contribution, I quote the words of the bard of Stratford-on-Avon, "I can no other answer make

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but thanks, and thanks, and ever thanks". I am delighted to introduce the recipient of the Samuel Torrey Orton Award, Jeanne S. Chall.

The Citation

The Samuel T. Orton Award
presented to
Jeanne S. Chall

Teacher
Scholar
Teacher Scholar

Visionary
Researcher
Visionary Researcher

Sage
Friend
Sage Friend

The Orton Dyslexia Society
November 8, 1996

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ACCEPTANCE OF SAMUEL T. ORTON AWARD NOVEMBER 8, 1996, BOSTON, MA

Jeanne S. Chall
Harvard University

Thank you very much. It is a great honor to be recognized for one's achievements—and a greater honor still that the award bears the name of Samuel T. Orton. I had known of the work of Samuel T. Orton early in my studies. But it was not until my research for *The Great Debate* that I became aware of his exceptional achievements in the study of reading and reading disabilities That a physician was able to delve so deeply into the theories of reading and language development was unusual enough. But that he found an effective educational treatment for reading disability and also a means for preventing it was rare indeed.

Unfortunately, he paid a price for his ideas. His contributions were largely ignored by the reading scholars of his time. He was hardly mentioned in college textbooks on the teaching of reading. But, as we know, he was right—and they were wrong.

I often wonder what he would say about what is happening in reading today. I think he would be content to know that his theories and insights had been confirmed many times by the research in reading, by clinical experience, and by student achievement. But I think he would also be saddened by our making the same mistakes again and again and again.

I am delighted to have this opportunity to thank Samuel Orton for his work and dedication.

And I should like to thank a few others who inspired and encouraged me in my work.

To Irving Lorge, of Teachers College, Columbia, the first educational researcher I knew, and whose fascination with research I caught early.

To Edgar Dale, my doctoral advisor at Ohio State University, I thank for encouraging my research and writing. Whenever we met, years after I received my degree, he would ask: "What research are you working on now? What are you writing? Don't wait for the perfect article. Share what you have done with others. Not all of your writing will be good, but enough of it will be."

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To Florence Roswell of the City College of New York, my colleague and collaborator, who encouraged my clinical work with children. "Do you have a child?" she would ask. "Never mind your research and writing, you must keep working with children. This is the only way you will know how little you really know."

I owe a great deal to my family. They did not always know where my studies were leading. But it was my mother who made it clear. During a time when I was engaged in full-time research and sending her reprints of my articles, she asked me, point blank, "What do these mean?" I told her, but she was not satisfied. "Could I tell my friends you are a teacher?" she asked. "Yes," I said. She was delighted and from then on she introduced me to her friends as her daughter, the teacher.

I should like also to thank my wonderful colleagues and students who have shared with me the great adventure of my life—to learn more about how children and adults learn to read, why many fail, and how best to teach them.

I learned recently from a colleague that in a survey on teacher morale, reading teachers had the highest morale—and the least burnout. I think it is because we are all able to see the fruits of our labor. And we know that improvement in students' reading has value for their overall achievement in school, for success at work, and for the good of our society.

This is a challenging time in education and in the field of reading. Academic achievement, which depends so greatly on the ability to read and write, is lower than our children are capable of. And it is also, sadly, lower than they need in order to function in a competitive world that demands increasingly more knowledge and skills.

We need to use ever more effective ways of helping those students who find it difficult to learn to read and to bring them to the highest levels they are capable of. We already know a great deal about how to do it and many are profiting from it. Ever larger numbers are able to go on to college and to have successful careers in the professions, the arts, and industry. But too many are not getting the help they need. Unfortunately, dyslexia and learning disabilities are still not understood sufficiently well by the public and by teachers and school administrators. And funds for working with dyslexic children and adults are not adequate for too many who need help.

Perhaps of greatest importance, the schools have not been sensitive enough in using methods and teaching procedures that are optimal for all children, including those who have diffi-

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culty learning. Our knowledge of how children learn to read and of the problems of those with dyslexia is sufficient for us to put more thought and work into prevention—into classroom reading programs that work well for all children, including those who have difficulty. This is what Samuel Orton tried to do some 60 years ago, and this is what we must continue to do today.

My deepest thanks for this beautiful award.

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