

To Read or Not to Read... Now That's a Question!



Yesterday one of my apprentices brought me a gift. She simply handed me the sunny little package and smiled. Actions really do speak louder than words, but in this case the action was sparked by the whisper of words. And that whisper was echoing all the way from Elizabethan England, a whisper from the Bard himself.

This particular apprentice has been part of my high school literature and composition workshop for three years. When her parents came to me for help at the beginning of her sophomore year, she was on her school's "at risk" list. But, after meeting this girl, I knew she was not at risk. This girl was not interested in words—not the reading of words, not the writing of words, not the speaking of words. This girl was not interested because she could not imagine what in the world words had to do with her.

I receive calls on a regular basis from parents deeply concerned by apathetic, and often dangerous, behavioral tendencies in their uninspired adolescents.

My heart breaks each and every time.

The solution to this dilemma is a complex choreography that can only be accomplished longitudinally, one step at a time. But the dance can't begin until I teach the dancer to read. I'm not talking about phonics—this is not about learning to decode language on the page. Truth is, illiteracy is much more than an inability to decipher letters on a page. I'm talking about the insidious kind of illiteracy that begins with three small words, "Books are boring." This is the kind of illiteracy that shrinks possibility.

Choosing to read is courageous.

More than one parent has asked me, "What does learning to read and write have to do with promoting individuality?"

Great stories are chock-a-block with possibility.

Possibility has the potential to spark curiosity.

Curiosity leads to imagination.

Imagination fuels dreams.

Over the years I've mentored countless young people whose GPA does not reflect their potential. And this particular apprentice was no exception. So I began as I always do, I handed her a book.

Great stories contain the potential to be instructive and experiential. For those who know how to use them, books will spark curiosity, evoke imagination, and foster creative critical thinking. Because the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual

components of a story are inseparable, a single story can profoundly impact an individual. A great story may encourage us to revel in the beauty of creation, coax us to embrace heroism, fight injustice, may inspire us to love our neighbor as ourselves. No matter the case, great stories hold the potential for the reader to glean wisdom. Great stories encourage us to persevere in the complex tasks we encounter while reaching for life's potential.

I took this high school sophomore by the hand and stood with her at the first page of a book, "In this particular story, as seventh grade comes to a close, Allegra Leah Shapiro has been selected as a finalist in a prestigious violin competition and this stirs up all sorts of inner conflict..."

Why does summer have to be so hectic?

What does it mean to be half Jew and half gentile?

Why is soprano, Diedre, crying?

How can I be a twelve-year-old violinist and have time to be a friend?

Why is my brother so annoying?

How has Mr. Trouble lost his song?

What is this gift from Bubbe Raisa?

And what of this great-grandmother I've been named after?

Will I be able to dig deep enough for Mozart?

Can I undo what has been done?

I read this to my apprentice believing with all of my heart that Allegra, might be able to inspire her, if she dared to read between the lines and listen, "You are not alone."

"*The Mozart Season*," I tell her, "is a quiet story, one filled with resounding music that just might change your life." I leave it there, hand her the book and ask her (well, okay, require her) to read a bit so we can discuss the story in a week.

I'm always hopeful, but when a week has passed, I know she might still be at the starting blocks. This particular type of race is never a sprint.

A week later I ask, "So have you completed the reading?"

"Well, no, not really, I mean, well..."

"This was required reading."

"I just really don't get it."

Obviously this is not about decoding the words on the page. This girl knows how to read, thing is, she has no idea how to be inspired by a story, has no idea how to embrace the universal truths, let alone apply them to her life. This girl has no idea how to animate a character like Allegra.

So I read the opening paragraph on the first page of chapter one: "In Mr. Kaplan's studio is a needlepoint pillow, on a chair. On one side of it is a violin. The other side says, A teacher is someone who makes you believe you can do it. Somebody who took lessons from him a long time ago made it. When I was little, I couldn't read it clearly because needlepoint letters have odd shapes."

"Seems to me Virginia Euwer Wolff is using pretty plain language. This is not Shakespeare!"

"Um, I don't know."

"Has anyone ever told you that a great story is a mentor?"

She is about to roll her eyes, but surprisingly trusts me instead, "What?"

With a sigh of relief, I don't miss a beat, "If we dig deep enough into the heart of a story, dig to its very core, we always discover a treasure. And I believe that this treasure has the power to inform our life. A book leads us by the hand on an exploration of discovery that will make us a richer person."

"But my mind wanders when I read."

"Mine too."

"Really?"

"Yes. I've worked to slow down when I read, worked to build habits that help me ponder words, phrases, passages, peculiar shape, sound and meaning. And this work, this habit of being, has enabled me to value reading. Truth is, I've learned to love stories because I've discovered that stories enrich my individuality. I know you can too. I want to help you through this book because there is embedded treasure just for you. I want to help you do the work of extracting that treasure because your individuality matters. You matter"

She is beaming, but only for an instant. Then the work began.

That was three years ago. We made it though *The Mozart Season* in much the same way that Allegra got through the violin competition, gathering strength along the way. We read *Pictures of Hollis Woods*. We read *Milkweed*. We read another and another. Last fall we read *The Screwtape Letters*. This fall we tackled Shakespeare. *Romeo and Juliet*.

So when my apprentice handed me the bag of snacks smirking the slogan, "Much ado about Mango," I knew she had learned to read, really read. I hear the violins and see Allegra smile, "Remember, what's down inside you, all covered up—the things of your soul. The important, secret things . . . The story of you, all buried, let the music caress it out into the open."

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