

FOR THE LOVE OF WORDS

Fostering a Love of Reading in the Electronic Age

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“For the desire to read, like all other desires which distract our unhappy souls, is capable of analysis.”

Virginia Woolf, “Sir Thomas Browne”, 1923

Other mothers must look at me, sigh, and say “Jeez. Just let it go.” But I cannot. I am a mother on a mission - one that I find to be worthwhile and compelling. In an age where children spend much of their time watching TV and playing video games, when the hard questions of life are buried under fancy clothing, cars and toys, I am trying to teach my children something I cannot quite explain. It is a respect for stories of all kinds, and for the writers whose voices and inspiration are contained within them. It is a love for thin white paper with plain black lettering - for the simple act of reading for pleasure. The thing I want most of all to gift to my children is a love of words.

The question is how?

My children live in very different world than I did as a child. Literacy among children and adults in our country is at an all-time low. The 2003 National Adult Literacy survey, sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics, adopted the following definition of literacy developed by Congress: “Using printed word and written instruction to function in society, to achieve one’s goals and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.” Using this definition, the survey determined that more than forty million American adults performed in the lowest level of prose literacy, and another fifty-two million Americans could barely read at all.

The NEA's "Reading at Risk" survey of 2002 showed sharp declines in the number of book-readers in our country. Their 1992 poll of 13,000 adults showed that 60.9 percent of people had read a book in the past year, but in 2002, only 56.6 percent had; in 1992, 54 percent of adult Americans admitted to having read a work of literature that year; ten years later only 46.7 percent did. The declines were most severe for younger readers. The report states that: "While all demographic groups showed declines in literary reading between 1982 and 2002, the survey shows some are dropping more rapidly than others. By age, the three youngest groups saw the steepest drops... The rate of decline for the youngest adults, those aged 18 to 24, was 55 percent greater than that of the total adult population."

The most recent survey completed in 2003 also found that only 31 percent of college graduates can read a complex book and extrapolate from it. In 2008, Mark Schneider, the U.S. Commissioner of Education Statistics, said: "The declining impact of education on our adult population was the biggest surprise for us, and we just don't have a good explanation. It may be that institutions have not yet figured out how to teach a whole generation of students who learned to read on the computer and who watch more TV. It's a different kind of literacy."¹ We must ask ourselves what in the last few decades has changed. To answer this question, we need to go back to a time when things were different.

¹ Interview by Lois Romano, Washington Post, December 26, 2005

Reading as a Young Child

When I was a child in the late 60s and 70s, I learned to love reading. The love affair began in my local library. I found stories tucked into the pages of old dusty books, their multi-colored spines laid out before me in the hazy comfort of the library basement, and at home on my father's shelves. Each one spoke to me as a person might, singing or shouting or just plain ignoring me with disdain for my youth and naiveté. Every book was like a meal, to be eaten slowly and savored, sometimes with undesirable after-effects, its words clinging to me and refusing to go away.

Inside each volume, some dull with age, tiny black letters filled the pages. The stories left me breathless with a longing for something indescribable, and provided me with answers to questions I hadn't yet thought of. I was swiftly transported to the dark carnival of Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. I made up secret wishes while crossing the Atlantic during a terrifying balloon ride in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Balloon Hoax*. I saw through cards without my eyes and used my magic to cheat the casino in Roald Dahl's *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar*. Darkness surrounded me as I huddled under my wrinkled sheets with my father's flashlight, quietly turning each page, burning to know the ending, and more importantly, hoping not to get caught.

I remember that *want*, that need to know, that connection with someone who is only alive in the music and rhythm of a story. I spent hours exploring my father's books, row after row of philosophy, history, and science with a myriad of words that I didn't understand. I was surrounded by page after page, chapter after chapter; pounds of bound paper lived among us and lined the shelves of our home. One day, I discovered my father's

science fiction collection on a low shelf behind the couch. These books took me away from my life and out into other worlds: worlds where it was always winter; where Aslan the Lion battled the evil White Witch and saved the children of Narnia; where people spoke from under the earth; where aliens were real and elevators flew through space and time. In these worlds, anything could happen.

I couldn't help but wonder how my father had felt as he read these same books. Had his mind lit up like mine? I think it's possible. These books forged a fragile but real connection between us. For the first time I remember feeling like I was not alone. Books served as a bond between myself and others I didn't even know, a way to think about the world, and a vehicle to contemplate new ideas.

A Different Kind of Literacy

Clearly, our culture has changed since I was a child. The rise of the internet, digital TV and iPods has snatched our attention away from traditional art forms which require more effort to consume. Reading literature has taken a backseat to Nintendo, TiVo and Google. These interactions tend to be highly paced and very different from the quiet contemplation of reading literature or observing art.

A recent longitudinal study carried out by the CIBER research team at University College, London, found that although young people demonstrate an apparent ease and familiarity with computers, they rely heavily on search engines rather than traditional

literary research². The students do not possess the critical and analytical skills needed to assess the information that they find on the web. We must ask ourselves: does the evolving digital landscape cause our children to miss out on learning essential skills like critical thinking and problem-solving? How has the decrease in “reading for pleasure,” and the increase in fast-paced interactive activities, affected our kids?

Sven Birkerts, in his book *The Gutenberg Elegies*, explores the effects of the electronic age on literacy. “Our era has seen an escalation of the rate of change so drastic that all possibilities of evolutionary accommodation have been short-circuited. The advent of the computer and the astonishing sophistication achieved by our electronic communications media have together turned a range of isolated changes into something systemic. The way that people experience the world has altered more in the last fifty years than in the many centuries preceding ours.” With so much change in such a small period of time, there are bound to be ripple effects. One such effect is the decline in the time spent reading traditional literature. The question to examine is this: does this trend have a positive or negative impact on our society? If the impact is negative, what can we do about it?

No Child Left Behind

Common Core is a Washington-based, non-partisan research and advocacy organization devoted to promoting and enhancing education in America’s elementary and secondary schools. Their 2008 survey found that “a significant proportion of [US] teenagers live in

² *Information Behaviour of the Researcher of the Future*, CIBER research team at University College London, January 11, 2008

'stunning ignorance' of history and literature." The report went on to theorize that "President Bush's education law, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), has impoverished public school curriculums by holding schools accountable for student scores on annual tests in reading and mathematics, but in no other subjects." The No Child Left Behind act of 2001 continues a trend in education that has been occurring more frequently over the past few decades – the process of rewarding schools and students based on the results of standardized test scores. Since the NCLB was signed, a string of studies have documented the significant narrowing of school curriculums across the country.

On the surface NCLB makes sense. The premise is that we can measure the schools and students who are doing well and reward them, and at the same time improve on those who aren't. But the devil lies in the details. Standardized tests work well to measure basic and foundational skills, but are weaker when it comes to harder to measure skills such as critical thinking, reading and writing complex thoughts and problem solving – the very skills children learn from reading and connecting with literature.

According to Antonia Cortese and Dr. Diane Ravitch, co-chairs of Common Core, "the nation's education system has become obsessed with testing and basic skills because of the requirements of federal law, and that is not healthy." The Common Core survey also found that many young Americans do not possess basic knowledge about U.S. history and culture, and exhibit stunning knowledge gaps. "There are parents all over America for whom this is no surprise. They know that the focus of their child's school day is increasingly on preparing for basic skills tests, not on learning history or geography, reading literature, or participating in the arts."

The Center on Education Policy, a research group in Washington that has studied the NCLB law, estimates that 62 percent of school systems have added an average of three hours of math or reading instruction a week. This is at the expense of time for social studies, art and other subjects. If children are spending *more* time in the classroom focusing on reading skills, what's causing the marked decline in literacy rates?

In his recent best-seller, *Real Education*, Charles Murray explains why NCLB cannot be correlated with actual learning or the quality of teaching. "The quality of public schools just doesn't make much difference in student achievement. This is not to say that a good teacher cannot make a big difference in an individual student's school experience... Rather, the mean scores of large numbers of students are not sensitive to the differences that exist in the real world. Once a school reaches mediocrity, a lot of the slack has been taken out of the room for improvement for the average student. An excellent school with excellent teachers will do better than a mediocre school with mediocre teachers, but the average effect on test scores will not be dramatic."

It's obvious that being rewarded for better test scores does not bode well for today's students. Additionally, the schools that receive more funding based on standardized test scores are reluctant to raise awareness about literacy problems in their student populations as there is no incentive to do so. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor makes another valid point about NCLB: "One unintended effect of the No Child Left Behind Act, which is intended to help fund teaching of science and math to young people, is that it has effectively squeezed out civics education because there is no testing for that anymore and

no funding for that. At least half of the states no longer make the teaching of civics and government a requirement for high school graduation. This leaves a huge gap, and we can't forget that the primary purpose of public schools in America has always been to help produce citizens who have the knowledge and the skills and the values to sustain our republic as a nation, and our democratic form of government."

We can agree in hindsight that NCLB has not been beneficial to the quality of education in our country. "We're lifting the basic skills of young kids," said Bruce Fuller, an education professor at the University of California, Berkeley, "but this policy is not lifting 21st-century skills for the new economy."³ With the election of a new president, there is hope that the days of NCLB will soon end. We are left to forage a new vision for our future. The question we must ask is: do we want to increase literary awareness in this country, and how do we accomplish this feat given our current culture?

Is Technology the Answer?

With the advent of new educational software approaches and the myriad, innovative electronic devices available to our children today, we all hope that there will be a positive impact on our children's reading. Fortunately, today's technology has been proven to be helpful in teaching children to read. There are many educational computer programs and devices which have proven successful in teaching letter recognition, phonics, vocabulary and basic comprehension.

³³ *'No Child' Law Is Not Closing a Racial Gap*, By Sam Dillon, New York Times, April 28, 2009

Leapfrog is a company on the cutting edge of teaching young children to read. Founded by Michael Wood from the University of California, Berkeley in 1995, Leapfrog began selling the first electronic teaching devices which blended phonics with interactive, multi-sensory techniques that are quite effective in helping pre- and early readers develop solid language and reading skills. Leapfrog has continued to dominate this market, introducing new devices like the recent Tag Reading system which allows children to touch a word or phrase and get a response from the book. The touching device is in the shape of a pen and it elicits words, songs and various sound effects when applied to the surface of the page. "I've seen these products work in lots of settings, and nothing beats them," says Amy Dendy, a speech language specialist at Sterchi Elementary and Claxton Head Start in Knoxville, Tennessee. "They do the kinds of things every teacher dreams of. For example, I was working in a Head Start program with a student with a communication deficit. We were working with the My First LeapPad® learning system, using the Animals around the World cartridge, and he suddenly said 'dog' and 'pero.' Because he was able to 'drive' his learning experience, access the content as often as needed, and enjoy himself while doing this, he was able to identify and communicate the animal name--in English and Spanish!"⁴

SCORE Learning Centers has developed a computer program that is customized to a child's specific reading level, strengths and weaknesses. The system uses a type of artificial intelligence to continuously monitor the child's progress and present them with lessons that are appropriate for their level, and geared to the child's specific areas of

⁴ Create Learning Breakthroughs in Multiple Settings, Leapfrog Schoolhouse, Educator Resources.

interest. The SCORE system received recognition by the United States Department of Education as a model program because it has been shown that SCORE students enroll in colleges and universities at rates higher than their peers, need less remedial course offerings and are more likely to graduate.⁵

Though there are many learning devices and technologies that are effective in teaching children to read, they are limited in what they can do. The 2004 Report *Technology and Teaching Children to Read*, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, states: “Knowledgeable and dedicated teachers [and parents] are the critical element in successful reading instruction programs. While technology can support these teachers and help them be more successful with all children, it can never replace qualified teachers because teaching children to read is too complex — it requires insight into children’s cognitive abilities and emotional needs, and is dependent upon the types of reinforcement, guidance, and support that can only be provided by caring, knowledgeable teachers.”⁶

Technology is merely one of many tactics that can be used to teach children to read, but it does little to instill and foster a real *love* of reading – an essential component for a mature literary life. It is still necessary to resolve the question: how can we teach a fundamental love of reading to our children?

⁵ Department of Education – Program Effectiveness Panel, 34 CFR Part 701, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), Conduct and Activities Evaluation Standards; Designation of Exemplary and Promising Programs.

⁶ Report developed by the Northeast and the Islands Regional Technology in Education Consortium (NEIRTEC) project, a collaboration of Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC), TERC, Education Alliance at Brown University and Learning Innovations at WestEd, funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

Give the Children More Books?

In the late 1990s, the U.S. Department of Education published the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLA), which measured the progress of more than twenty thousand students from kindergarten through fifth grade. This study found that children who have many books in their home have better school test scores, and other studies have validated this theory.

It makes sense that children raised with books in their home do better in academics, ultimately becoming more successful in their lives. Unfortunately, this possibility seems less and less common. As a parent, I've observed that most of my children's friends have few books in their homes. What books they do have sit stagnant on a shelf, a token purchase or gift that is read once, if at all. Most of the shelf space is dedicated to trophies, stuffed animals or other toys.

As young children, my friends and I had shelves in our bedrooms which housed highly organized and frequently read collections of books. We exchanged them often and spoke excitedly about the stories that weaved through our days. We couldn't wait to come home from school to our beloved books. The fascination we held for books seems rare in today's children. We must ask ourselves: with *more* focus on teaching reading skills than ever before, why are today's children not excited about reading?

Motivation to Read

Researchers from the University of Maryland published a study in 2006 to find out if motivation for reading was correlated with high reading comprehension. Using fourth

graders, they found that “the intrinsic motivation predicted text comprehension.”⁷ In other words, the more children are motivated to read, the better they understand the material.

What motivates a child to want to read? There are many techniques parents and teachers use in order to teach reading skills. One of the most common techniques is to encourage parents to spend time reading to their children. Commenting on the poor showing of America's youngest children —especially minority children— in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Education Secretary Richard W. Riley urged parents to “slow down the pace of your lives and help your child grow.”⁸

In 2004 the Governor of Illinois announced a plan to mail one book per month to every child in Illinois from the time they were born until they were five years old. Governor Blagojevich argued that this was a vital intervention in a state where forty percent of third graders read below their grade level. “When you own books and they’re yours,” he said, “and they just come as part of your life, all of that will contribute to a sense... that books should be part of your life.”⁹

Surprisingly, the science doesn’t back this up.

The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLA) found that the amount of time spent being “read” to as a young child does not correlate with better test scores. It’s possible that the pure act of reading to a child does not create the motivation needed in the child to do well in school, just as it does not imply reading engagement or enjoyment in the child.

⁷ Guthrie et al (2006), Influences of Stimulating Tasks on Reading Motivation and Comprehension, *The Journal of Educational Research*, March/April 2006.

⁸ National Center for Education Statistics, US Department of Education, 2008

⁹ *Freakonomics, The Hidden Side of Everything*, The New York Times, December 10, 2008

So what causes a child to become motivated to learn to love reading? Baker and Scher published a study in 2002 that examined the beginning readers' motivation in reading, and found that "parental identification of pleasure as a reason for reading predicted children's motivation for reading." This finding resonates with my own early reading history. My parents were very open about their love for books, and treated reading as a luxurious and pleasurable activity. Spending time at the library every week was a treat - something my siblings and I begged to do. Reading was used as a reward for good schoolwork and good behavior. Every year for Christmas my father selected a new book for each of us, wrapped it in fancy paper, and put under the tree. These books were more special than our usual library books, since they would be permanently added to our collections. As a result of this type of reading environment, books were perceived as treats - every bit as desirable as eating dessert or watching TV. Reading was rarely considered "schoolwork," as is common with children today.

It's clear to me that we as teachers and parents do not do enough to create the perception that reading is a pleasurable experience for a child. Kelly Gallagher, in her book *Reading Reasons*, considers why children today are not motivated to enjoy reading. "Unfortunately, many of our students see reading as just another assignment, something generated by the teacher. We prove otherwise by demonstrating to our students that reading is worthwhile and show them that there is a world of reward in it for them." Most people would like to motivate children to read more, though it's not always obvious how this can be accomplished.

In their study published in 1997, Baker and Scher show that “children whose early encounters with literacy are enjoyable are more likely to develop a predisposition to read frequently and broadly in subsequent years.”¹⁰ It’s easy to see how a child could perceive that reading is “work”. Children spend many hours of classroom time being taught fundamental skills like spelling, phonetics and grammar. Exploration of literature has taken a back seat to learning basic comprehension and recall, competencies that can be easily tested. In basic terms – reading has moved from the realm of “entertainment” and relegated to mere “homework” – something children must do *before* they can do anything fun. Are there effective methods to change this negative reading mindset?

Reading by Example

The first thing we can do to help children learn to love reading is to change our own reading behavior. Young children are quite observant, and pick up on cues like body language and behavior that give away our true thoughts and intentions. We can’t tell children that reading is fun, and then spend almost no time enjoying reading for pleasure; children will correctly perceive this behavior as an indictment of reading. Ultimately, if reading isn’t seen as something desirable, there is no other way for a child to view it than as an obligation or requirement. Everybody knows that “homework” usually isn’t pleasant.

In *The Gutenberg Elegies*, Sven Birkerts explains the strategy he uses with his five-year-old daughter in order to foster a love of reading: “We promote the pleasures of the book by example, by forever reading. And we try to make the encounter enjoyable. We

¹⁰ Baker, L., Scher, D., & Mackler, K. (1997). Home and family influences on motivations for reading. *Educational Psychologist*, 32, 69-82.

buy books, borrow them from the library, and read to her regularly. But we also try to avoid any association of the medicinal – that books are good for her and that reading is a duty. So far it seems to be working. She is eager; she recognizes that books are a place away from routine, a place associated with dreams and fantasies.”

We need to bring the principle of reading for pleasure back to its rightful place in a child’s life. Instead of being “homework,” reading could be a reward a job well done. Trips to the library and the bookstore could become cherished family traditions from a very young age. If we change our thinking and our behavior around reading, our children will too.

Allowing for Individualization

As a reader, I’ve established a few habits when it comes to my reading life. Before I decide a book might be worth reading, I typically survey the title and cover imagery. I decide from these two factors if the book might be worthy of a few more minutes of time. If it is, I’ll open to the first page and read the first few paragraphs. In many cases, I’ll put the book down because it didn’t hold my interest. If I am still intrigued – I’ll open to a random spot in the middle of the book and read some more. If this read proves interesting, the book will enter the “queue” – i.e., the pile of books on my nightstand or bureau, and wait its turn to be read. Even when I begin reading a book, I use what I call the “fifty-page” rule. If I’m not completely entranced by the book after the first fifty pages, I’ll stop reading and move on to the next book. My philosophy: life is short, and I

want to read as many books as I can in the time I have. More importantly - I want the books I read to matter to me.

In today's world of reading education, it's easy to forget that each child has his or her own unique set of interests and tastes. With ever larger class sizes, and the growing trend of standardized curriculums, many teachers are forced to use the same reading materials for every child in their classroom. In a typical English class in America today, each child reads the same books, and writes essays on the same topics. While this may be easier for the teacher, forced reading and writing does not take into account the child's interests. "Most problems arise in school settings when too many mismatches [in interest] have been bound into one big fat textbook that the child is assigned every day, or if the literature made available to that child is of poor quality or incongruous with the child's ability and interests," writes Esmé Codell in her book *How to Get Your Child to Love Reading: For Ravenous and Reluctant Readers Alike*. "When this happens, no one can accuse a child of being unjustified if he forms negative associations with books and takes that bloodcurdling leap into the world of 'I hate reading.'"¹¹

The solution to this problem is obvious: allow children choices when it comes to reading. Children should be encouraged and rewarded for reading anything of interest to them, and given access to a diverse array of literature. This will require some changes in the way we teach reading, but the potential payoff is huge: a heightened engagement with literature.

¹¹ *How to Get Your Child to Love Reading: For Ravenous and Reluctant Readers Alike*, Esmé Raji Codell, 2003

In addition to teaching reading, creative writing should be an essential part of every child's education from the time he or she learns to write. This would allow all children to learn the value of creating an original story. "If a child understands that a book is an extension of an author, then the child will also understand that he may not always like everybody he meets. And he will understand that he can always get another book and read what someone else has to share," writes Esmé Codell.

If students were allowed to choose what they read, and taught to appreciate storytelling by becoming authors themselves, they would be much more likely to identify with the material itself. This, then, would form the foundation for a lifetime of reading.

Differential Instruction

In the past few years there has been a lot written about the concept of differential instruction, the technique which teaches children at their own level and speed. In a classroom where children are differentiated, teachers take into account their mastery of the content as well as their capability for learning, learning style and educational needs. Well-known educational thinker Barbara Gilman advocates for differential instruction, especially when it comes to gifted, or above-average intelligence, children. "All gifted children, typically 98th percentile and above, have difficulty with educational programs planned for the majority of students. Their learning rates outpace such programs, they

need higher-level material earlier, and they can and need to reason abstractly before most children are ready for it¹².”

Though the concept of differential instruction is appealing, and in many ways can improve the educational experiences of many children, it also raises serious concerns. If children are separated into groups based on their levels of intelligence or readiness, this could easily mean that only *certain* students are taught the skills of reading, writing and critical thinking. Who determines which children have access to this kind of education? Some would argue that IQ scores should be used as criteria for separating children into groups, and in fact, this is how many differentiated, gifted programs are implemented. The problem here is that the IQ score is merely one element of a person’s intelligence and capability. Additionally, *every* child should be taught literature, writing and reading skills, no matter what level he or she is determined to be.

The Lost Art of Reading Aloud

At Bennington College, sitting in the Red Barn on a summer evening, I’ve gained a new appreciation for the art of reading aloud. No matter what the genre - poetry, fiction or essay – there is a substantial amount of energy and engagement that results when a gifted storyteller captivates an audience. The ebb and flow of the spoken word has the potential to convert even the most stalwart reading detractor.

A love of storytelling and listening to a person read aloud is inherent in children. As a society, we *are* willing to invest our time reading aloud - to very young children.

¹² *Empowering Gifted Minds*, by Barbara Gilman

Teachers in pre-schools and kindergarten schedule “story time” into their school day. Parents cuddle with their children before bedtime with a favorite picture book, reading aloud while the child eagerly flips each page. Children at this age assume they will love reading forever; I’ve never met a child younger than six who hated the concept of books or stories.

The problem arises when the child begins to learn to read by herself. Commonly, parents and teachers spend less time reading aloud and more time assisting the child in the *skill* of reading: phonics, spelling, sentence structure. It is assumed that the child should do her reading independently, without the assistance of a parent or teacher. This logic makes sense, but in reality, the abandonment of being read to, of shared reading, is the beginning of the downfall for many young readers. Their mindset about reading changes from “reading as pleasure” to “reading as work.”

In her book, Esmé Codell writes: “Reading aloud is kind of an education unto itself, like travel would be, which makes sense, since reading is mental travel. Older children need this trip as often as younger children do, although reading aloud tends to drop off as children age and adults become afraid to interfere in a child’s reading self-sufficiency. The fall-off of read-aloud can be correlated to the fall-off of interest in reading, with 90 percent of fifth-graders spending less than 1 percent of their time reading. Eighth-graders average a little less than two hours a week reading, including homework.”¹³

There are many ways we can continue reading aloud to children, even after they are old enough to read themselves. Family story time can continue, as it does in our home

¹³ *How to Get Your Child to Love Reading: For Ravenous and Reluctant Readers Alike*, Esmé Raji Codell, 2003

every night. Children are given a choice to either read aloud or listen to someone else read aloud. They are encouraged to pick books which they find interesting or unusual. Children can become their own writers and storytellers, writing and illustrating books themselves. They can be encouraged to write and perform in plays, or create video movies or audio stories with sound effects. The key is to continue enhancing the child's appreciation and enjoyment of story-telling, and to allow the stories to deepen the child's relationship with themselves and the world around them.

Conclusion

Katherine Paterson, appointed last week as the new National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, was interviewed recently for an article in the New York Times. She said "I want people to be reading about children of other places and other races and religions. I think novels are a wonderful way to do that because you get in somebody else's psyche and you see things quite differently than the way you see things simply through your own eyes." Like Katherine, I believe in fighting illiteracy. I view literacy and the love of reading as a substantial advantage I can foster for my children. I want them to experience this pleasure in the way that I did, and still do. I believe that literature and reading are critical skills for children to learn at a young age, as they serve to promote intelligent dialogue, allow for creative problem-solving and build connections between diverse groups of people in a way nothing else can.

In his recent best-seller, *Three Cups of Tea*, Greg Mortenson chronicles his experiences building over 78 schools in rural and often volatile regions of Pakistan and

Afghanistan. These schools currently educate over 28,000 children, including 18,000 girls, who had few educational opportunities before. When asked why he did this, especially given the amount of danger involved, he said: “I don’t do what I’m doing to fight terror, I do it because I care about kids. Fighting terror is maybe seventh or eighth on my list of priorities. By working over there, I’ve learned a few things. I’ve learned that terror doesn’t happen because some group of people somewhere like Pakistan or Afghanistan simply decide to hate us. It happens because children aren’t being offered a bright enough future that they have a reason to choose life over death.” Mr. Mortenson illustrates an important benefit of an educated, literary, and intellectual society: the ability to communicate intelligently, leading to less war and terrorism, and ultimately a more peaceful society.

It’s clear that there are improvements we can make to our public schools that will help raise literacy in our children. Some insightful recommendations can be found in the report by Common Core, the same one that illustrated the decline of literacy. “By reading great works of literature, grappling with the triumphs and tragedies of history, writing essays and poems, mastering a foreign language, studying the visual and performing arts, and learning the discipline and joy of creating their own art, children are challenged to think and grow.” The study of art, literature and writing are critical subjects in the academic program of any young student. These are the subjects that teach us to “learn how to think.”

Phillip Lopate, in his book *Being With Children*, describes his experiences as a progressive teacher of creative writing and art in the New York public schools in the 1960s. After years of teaching, Mr. Lopate learned how valuable these subjects are to the intellectual growth of developing children. “Instead of viewing human creativity as the source of strength out of which all learning flows, the average public school sees it as something cute to put on bulletin boards or in assembly programs. This is particularly true of creative writing... The most important discipline we can try to teach our young people is how to identify and stay with things they want to investigate, but which they are inclined to drop too quickly because of fear of failure.” As a mother, I know intuitively that my children profit immeasurably from the studying and experimenting with creative subjects like literature, writing and art. The benefits are clear, both in their obvious enjoyment of these subjects, and in their elevated discourse and intellectual growth.

Ursula Le Guin, in her 2008 essay “Staying Awake”, published in Harper’s Magazine, begins by questioning the concern over the decline in literacy. She writes: “I also want to question the assumption-whether gloomy or faintly gloating-that books are on the way out. I think they’re here to stay. It’s just that not all that many people ever did read them. Why should we think everybody ought to now?” Ursula takes us back to the Roman times when most people couldn’t read, and the Dark Ages and Middle Ages when male priests read, but women and the lower class did not. She describes reading’s “high-point” as follows: “I see a high point of reading in the United States from around 1850 to about 1950-call it the century of the book-the high point from which the doomsayers see us declining. As the public school came to be considered fundamental to democracy, and

as libraries went public and flourished, reading was assumed to be something we shared in common.”

Ursula makes a good point. There’s a rather unique aspect to reading another’s stories that enables us to connect our own mind’s dialogue to an ongoing communal conversation. Lynn Sharon Schwartz, in her book *Ruined by Reading: A Life in Books*, writes: “I’m not sure my mind could be free without reading, or that the action books have on it is properly termed ‘interference.’ I suspect the interaction of the mind and the book is something more complex. I can see it encompassing an intimate history and geography: the evolution of character, the shifting map of personal taste.” What happens in the process of reading that is different and unique than other media - like TV, movies or interactive games? In “The Gutenberg Elegies”, Sven Birkerts describes what he calls “deep reading” as: “the slow and meditative possession of a book. We don't just read the words,” he says. “We dream our lives in their vicinity. The printed page becomes a kind of wrought-iron fence we crawl through, once we have wandered, to the very place we started. A book is a solitude, privacy; it is a way of holding the self apart from the crush of the outside world.” Ursula Le Quin has her own description of the difference between reading and other media. “Readers aren't viewers,” she says. “They recognize their pleasure as different from that of being entertained. Once you've pressed the ON button, the TV goes on, and on, and on, and all you have to do is sit and stare. But reading is active, an act of attention, of absorbed alertness-not all that different from hunting, in fact, or from gathering. In its silence, a book is a challenge: it can't lull you with surging music or deafen you with screeching laugh tracks or fire gunshots in your living room;

you have to listen to it in your head. A book won't move your eyes for you the way images on a screen do. It won't move your mind unless you give it your mind, or your heart unless you put your heart in it. It won't do the work for you. To read a story well is to follow it, to act it, to feel it, to become it-everything short of writing it, in fact. Reading is not "interactive" with a set of rules or options, as games are; reading is actual collaboration with the writer's mind.”

Storytelling is one of those age-old traditions that enable us as human beings to connect with other people and with the continuous dialog in our own minds. There is no replacement for the act of reading, listening to or creating a story; nothing else has the same power to stimulate our thinking or bring us together as human beings. Alberto Manguel writes in depth about this topic in his book “The History of Reading.” He asserts that “...the history of reading one particular author often finds a beginning not with that author’s first book, but with one of the author’s future readers... Told that we are threatened with extinction, we, today’s readers, have yet to learn what reading is. Like the act of reading itself, a history of reading jumps forward to our time – to me, to my experience as a reader – and then goes back to an early page in a distant foreign century. It skips chapters, browses, selects, re-reads, refuses to follow conventional order.”

I think Edith Wharton said it best in her essay *The Vice of Reading*, written in 1903. “There is, indeed, something peculiarly aggressive in the virtuousness of the sense-of-duty reader,” she wrote. “If the book enters the reader’s mind just as it left the writer’s – without any of the additions and modifications inevitably produced by contact with a new body of thought – it has been read to no purpose.” If she were still alive, Edith would

likely tell us that in order to change the way our children read and create the right environment to build a solid foundation for a fulfilling literary life, we need to go back to the basics. Though today's technology can be utilized effectively to teach foundational skills, we know it does little to foster a true love of reading or literature. As teachers and parents, we must give our children an opportunity - away from the diversion of multi-tasking and electronics - to allow for the pleasure of reading plain, old-fashioned literature. Given today's culture of busyness, we must take a stand and create the time and space necessary for good reading to happen. Most importantly - we must model, through our own behavior, a literary life.

Though Ursula Le Guin acknowledges and bemoans the decline in literary today, she is, in the end, hopeless and optimistic. While resigned to an age of large conglomerate publishing houses with a focus on the bottom line and little concern for quality, she finds solace in her assertion that some small percentage of us will continue to read. For her, this is good enough. I respectfully disagree. I assert that the future lies in the attitudes and choices of future generations, which are still ours to shape and refine through parenting and education. If we as a society don't take the time to teach our children to love reading, how will they come to appreciate the benefits we all know exist? If they grow up with an ambivalence towards reading, Ursula's prediction will surely come to fruition - as there will be less of a reading audience, less of a reason for publishing houses to continue publishing literature, and potentially less writers willing to dedicate a life to this art.

Years have passed since my early reading days and yet I am still infatuated with words. It is my hope to make a difference with what I read and write, with the ink that transfers from pen to paper. It's these words, and the stories that shape them and give them shelter, that sustain me and allow me to persevere each day. It's these words that fill a need within me for beauty and knowledge and peace. They live with me in my home, sitting in corner chairs and huddling under my bedcovers. They walk with me along tree-lined streets, and each day they become truer, and more alive. When I think of my children years from now, as teenagers and adults, I am hopeful. I envision them lying awake at night, pondering a recent book they've read, with its distinctive voice, surprising idea or unique point of view. Pondering life's pathways and questioning the universe, and maybe, just maybe, writing some stories of their own.