What Does It Mean to Be Truly Literate?

When our older son, John, was a sophomore in high school, I overheard him talking to his best friend on the phone. Andrew was apparently in the midst of some terrible adolescent angst, for John was dishing out advice worthy of Ann Landers. I was trying to be a good mother of four adolescents and not be too obvious in my eavesdropping, but he must have realized my intense interest because when he hung up, he turned to me. “Andrew is having trouble with his girl, and I just gave him some great advice.” “Oh?” I said. (A wise friend had told me that parents of teenagers should confine their remarks in dicey conversations to one-syllable words, preferably no longer than two letters long. Thus—“Oh?”) “Do you know how I did it?” “No.” “It’s because I’ve been reading Plato.” “Oh!” “You know,” he continued, “those guys back there—Socrates and Plato and Aristotle—were so smart. They’ve really taught me how to think problems through. No wonder Socrates was killed. People can’t stand it when someone is so wise. It’s really wonderful,” he said, heading out of the room and up the stairs, leaving me standing at the sink with my mouth still open to the “Oh!”

Oh, Socrates, as you were about to take the hemlock, could you have looked down the millennia and seen a young barbarian giving advice to the lovelorn on the basis of your wisdom? But my amazed gratitude was not confined to the wise Greek. It was mostly for the urban public high school history teacher who gave my son and his classmates an introduction to philosophic thought and a standard of excellence against which to measure the pop psychology of the day.

The human race has always tried to silence the disturbing voice—not just Socrates, but Jesus, Confucius, Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, José Marti, W. E. B. DuBois, Lucretia Mott. It’s easier now. We don’t need hemlock; we have high-stakes testing. Even the word humanities has become suspect as a relic of an oppressive Western culture. But this is because in the past, our view of humanity was too narrow. Those of us who have lived in Asia or Africa, the Middle East or Latin America, know the riches available in those cultures. The study of the humanities must not be dismissed; it must be enlarged. The humanities are all those subjects that make us more human, and we cannot be fully human unless our vision includes the breadth of human culture.

A few years ago, Earl Shorris started out to write a book about poverty in America and ended up writing quite a different book than the one he had intended, and it was the poor themselves that changed him. In a maximum security prison for women, Shorris met an African American woman called Niecie who was a former addict and HIV-positive. Niecie was a high school dropout, but she had, in her years of incarceration, not only finished high school, she had begun college. Her special love was philosophy.

It was in extended conversations with this remarkable woman that Shorris realized that the difference between the haves and have nots in this country is not so much a matter of race, ethnic background, or even of economics, but a difference in access to the humanities—what I like to think of as true literacy.

Shorris decided to teach a college level course in the humanities for the poor, believing with Niecie that “The best education for the best is the best education for us all.” His first attempt to recruit students was
a total failure. He was urged to aim lower, but he refused. Instead, he tried a different approach. “You’ve been cheated,” Shorris (1997) said to a group of potential students in the Bronx. “Rich people learn the humanities; you didn’t. The humanities are a foundation for getting along in the world, for thinking, for learning to reflect on the world instead of just reacting to whatever force is turned against you. Rich people know how to negotiate instead of using force. They know how to use politics to get along, to get power. It doesn’t mean that rich people are good and poor people are bad. It simply means that rich people know a more effective method for living in society” (p. 53). He got 50 applicants for the 30 positions in the course, which included philosophy, poetry, art history, logic rhetoric, and American history—all taught on the highest university level by eminently qualified professionals.

When Shorris told Niecie what he planned to teach, she said, “There’s something missing.”

“And what’s that?” asked Shorris.

“Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. How can you teach philosophy to poor people without the Allegory of the Cave? The ghetto is the cave. Education is the light. Poor people can understand that!” (p. 56).

And so the course began—there were losses along the way, but 16 of the original 30 graduated—from a course as tough as any they would have taken at an Ivy League university. These students recognized that the humanities were the door into a different quality of life. And they were willing to work like the Greeks of old to get through that door.

Science can split the atom or clone a sheep, but science is amoral. Those with business acumen can amass fortunes, but unless their caring extends beyond their own bottom lines, their greed will rob many of basic needs. What the world, what our society desperately needs is people who can think through the implications of their scientific knowledge and business practices and use them for the good of society as a whole.

Facts are important, but what we do with factual knowledge will determine the future of humankind. We won’t all agree on the best course of action, but arguing productively depends on one’s grasp of language. And for that we must look to philosophy, history, and literature—all part of the suspect humanities.

Of course, we must ensure that every child can read, but if they are only taught what will enable them to pass a dumbed-down multiple choice test, they will never get out of the cave. The people in Plato’s cave are so like modern Americans, content to sit in their darkened dens watching the shadows flick across the screen, that I shudder. Will our children remain there, passively watching, refusing to confront any reality that isn’t “virtual”?

Still, there are glimmers of hope. The studies that show what every good teacher already knew are already being published. The experts are saying to anyone with ears to hear that high-stakes testing has not taught our children how to think, nor even how to read, but it has taught many how to hate school. It has not given them the joy of great books or even the pleasure of a good story. It has taught the timid to be more fearful, the bright that school is a bore, and, tragically, it has convinced those most in need that they had better drop out before test day. But testing has not made our children love learning, it has not raised them up to be thoughtful citizens of a democratic nation, it has not made them wise.

Good teachers know all this. They know that only literacy in the fullest sense of the word is good enough for the young, and every day they are eagerly leading their students into this great adventure of the human mind and spirit.

Reference


Author Biography

Katherine Paterson is the author of more than 30 books for children and a collection of essays on reading and writing books for children, The Invisible Child (Dutton, 2001).