

Theater Of Thought On Literacy

by Cary Edwards, Student

Literacy has played an important role at challenging stages of my life. As a child I would watch from across the room as my mother would read the Bible each evening. I watched her turn page after page as she sat silently for hours. At that young age I could not figure out what held her interest. I was impressed at how my mom could read so much and still sustain concentration. There were times I would ask her to read to me but it seemed that she always preferred to read to herself. What she would do is vividly recite amazing stories about our relatives. I felt special that she took the time out for me. It was comforting just hearing her soft voice. I would finger through the Bible when I thought she was not paying attention but I had no comprehension of the words on the pages. What made matters even more frustrating was the fact that I could not recognize many of the words. Later in my childhood I came to realize my mother had less than a sixth-grade education. Her reading level was not very high and she felt self-conscious reading aloud. As an adult, it was clear to me that her lack of education affected not only my mother's reading skill but it also had an effect on our family environment.

As a single parent of six, my mother struggled to provide a stable lifestyle for our family. The lack of education and financial resources within our household would present itself as a challenge to the academic growth of the family. It was almost impossible for my mother to offer us any of the luxuries of the time. Our entertainment was limited to games we created from paper we found lying around the house. We would sometimes play school and create fictional names for ourselves. As a child I never liked my own name so I selected "Joe" for myself. I remember leaning over to my brother Norris and asking him, "how do you spell my name?" On one chilly April morning when I awakened to the sounds of snow shoveling, I began to prepare to dress for school. As I began to close my pants I realized there was no button to fasten them up and even worse, there was a split in the rear. Mama said that she wanted me to stay home from school anyway insisting that I was running a fever. I knew there simply were no other clothes for me to wear that day. This event was not uncommon in the Edwards household.

The environment that I lived in had a direct effect on my ability to learn. Learning to count always came easy for me. One night I lay awake counting rodents as they patrolled the kitchen with a sense of ownership. By now I was not afraid of the darkness or the rats, it's what lurked beyond the bedsheet-covered broken windows that had me on the alert. The only light I could see in the house came from a slightly wedged bathroom door. The hunger that accompanied me on the floor was normal and even though there was a chill in the house I felt lucky just having a roof over my head. One fall morning Mama was serving oatmeal for breakfast. With five brothers and sisters you need to get to the kitchen table on time. Well, on this day I was late. Apparently no one was concerned as all the oatmeal was gone by the time I pulled up a chair. Mama was quite upset at the others then she looked at me sadly and said, "They will give you graham crackers and milk at school." School wasn't exactly the priority for me that morning. My hunger certainly would not help to raise my reading or concentration

skills. Throughout elementary and middle school I was placed in special reading classes. I really despised being separated from the others because the kids would tease, singing “special Ceee.”

Despite my difficulties, I continued to make an effort to read because I had a strong sense of curiosity. Children are more apt to learn from material that they are interested in and familiar with. When I was in the sixth grade my older brother gave me a book about a little boy growing up in Harlem under what were similar circumstances as my own. *Man Child in the Promise Land* an autobiography by Claude Brown, turned out to be the first novel I ever read. Norris is naturally smart and I always wished I could be like him. My initial reason for opening the book was to prove to him that I could read it. As it turned out, I ended up proving something to myself. As a young boy, Claude Brown had to fend for himself as he dealt with the hardships of life in Harlem’s ghettos. Yet he did not allow his environment to stop him from attaining his goals. When a subject matter is presented to you in a familiar way and is also interesting you are more likely to embrace it. I remember taking most of the summer of 1965 to read the book but it kept my interest because I was able to connect with the main character. By identifying with my brother’s book I was able to practice my reading skills while being encouraged to achieve my goals.

I continued to struggle as a high school student. My mother was always working so I was home alone much of the time spending many hours reading the homework that most students probably read in less than half the time. Reading and writing are less of a challenge when there are people around you to share in the experience. One Sunday afternoon while playing tennis at the lakefront I met Robert who turned out to be an instructor at a local community center. He introduced me to filmmaking and photography. The Milwaukee Inner City Film Workshop was an organization that provided specialized training to youngsters over the summer months. I was so intrigued by this art that I would spend all of my time and effort learning all I could. That meant a lot of technical reading and creative script writing. I had help with much of it but the activity kept me connected. I had a hard time with the text but a co-worker, Claude, seemed to take it all in like a sponge. He would then share what he read with me. Having that experience improved my abilities and interest in reading. Though I still had reading struggles while in college my maturity level and networking skills allowed me to attain success through time management and just a lot of hard work. Today I do not consider myself a strong reader but I understand how to go about reading and comprehending material when I have to.

Literacy allows one to function successfully in any discourse community. According to Christopher Jordens and Emma-Jane Sayers who wrote an article for “Health,” an online journal, “Discourse communities are groups of people who share common ideologies, and common ways of speaking about things.” This is especially important because it allows one to communicate effectively in a workplace environment. In my profession it is essential that I keep up with current events and skills. Reading is an important part of that process. The news media carries with it heavy demands on reading. In addition, reading in solitude is a form of relaxation for me. Spiritual reading early in the morning in front of the fireplace sets the tone for my entire day. In today’s world there is so much to read on the Internet that one can easily become consumed by it. You start out researching one subject and you find yourself engrossed for hours. The subjects I enjoy reading about the most are references to history, self-improvement, spirituality, education and realism. I have no favorite authors though I did read a couple of books by Dr. Wayne W.

Dyer. His book *Your Erroneous Zones* was so interesting that I read it twice. I found his book to be very telling of myself and how I deal with the environment around me. It helped me to see the importance of accepting myself and of allowing people to be who they are without trying to change them.

Having the ability to read and write not only puts you in the position to successfully function in the world around you, but it also provides you with a private theater of thought. Since the early days of my film career Gordon Parks has been a mentor for me. *The Autobiography of Gordon Parks* was especially interesting because he made me feel that I could achieve my goals which were similar to his accomplishments. *Malcolm X* helped me to take pride in who I am. *Winning Through Intimidation* by Robert J. Ringer showed me how to use a source of strength that I wasn't aware that I had. My mother's favorite Bible verse is also mine. *The Lord Is My Shepherd* by Harold S. Kushner keeps me close to my mother's spirit. It's important to acknowledge how you have been able to reach life's accomplishments. *This Far By Faith* by Juan Williams opens your heart to that kind of acceptance, and *I Like Jazz* by Donald Myrus fills your soul with the knowledge of music.

Literacy can make you or illiteracy can break you. It affects such a large aspect of our lives that we are literally shaped by it. While reading has been a major challenge throughout most of the younger part of my life, embracing it has been the source of great accomplishment. Very often the embracing is not self-induced. Most times we are supported by family, friends and unforeseen circumstances.

Works Cited

Brown, Claude. *Manchild in the Promise Land*. Simon & Schuster 1965.

Jordens, Christopher F.C. and Sayers, Emma-Jane "Discourse Communities and the Discourse of Experience" *Health*., Vol. 7, No. 1, 73-86 (2003)