

A Kind of Courage: A Tutor's Story

It wasn't until I began tutoring a student I'll call J, two or so years ago, that I began to understand the terrible distances that separated those who could read from those who could not. J's dilemma, he would flinch at the word *victim*, was a result of the public school closings that began in 1959 and ended in 1964 in Prince Edward County. His story, which one day he'll write himself, is a tale of doors opening, of light pouring into what was once a darkened closet.

Those of us who take education for granted cannot really know what it is like to be unable to make sense of the labels on prescription bottles or the containers of fruits and vegetables in the supermarket, to fill out a medical questionnaire or an application for employment, to read the menu in a restaurant, simple tasks which we do automatically, without thinking. We don't really know, because we haven't been deprived (at least of the opportunity), what the experience of those shut out from an education is like, what shape it takes, where the deprivations and the costs are. We know these people are handicapped but we seldom grasp the more insidious dimensions of just what that means.

Perhaps the most valuable quality in learning is intellectual curiosity. When J and I began the American Lives series (he has since moved on to the Voyager series) what I heard most often was: "I didn't know that." The granting of suffrage to women, the Lewis and Clark expedition, the Underground Railroad, these and similar stories of people who shaped the character of this country gave J a dimension that was the mental equivalent of shining a light into a darkened room. Perhaps just as valuable, these stories illuminated the kind of courage needed to force change.

There's really very little that doesn't interest him—that's where intellectual curiosity comes in—but some topics are more compelling than others. When we dealt with the themes of slavery, he checked out Uncle Tom's Cabin from the library. When we began, in the Voyager series, to read about diet and fitness and good health, he joined the YMCA and is working out regularly. It's this kind of application that separates ongoing success from half hearted mediocrity.

J once said to me, "Sometimes I have to remind myself I can read." The habits of illiteracy are hard to erase. But he taught me something about that closet, how narrow and dark it is, what people confined there have to deal with. Recently, J offered up this wisdom. I've heard it from others shut out by the school closings, although it's equally useful in the broader sweep of injustice: "You let yourself be bitter, you just hurt yourself. You've got to make sure it never happens to anyone else."

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