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Scott Peterson

Becoming a Reader in Lincoln

As soon as I walked in the front door, I knew school and I were going to have a hard time getting along. I could never get used to the yellow light flowing out of the long fluorescent bulbs like aged shellac, or the smell of stale sauerkraut and hot dogs still hanging in the air from Tuesday's lunch. Nor was there ever an inkling that I had an aptitude for school. The letters on the pages of my basal readers just wouldn't stay still long enough for me to make much sense out of them. Either that, or I didn't stay still long enough for the letters to slip into my brain. I didn't much care for the world of Dick and Jane anyway, and that wimpy little dog Spot wouldn't have lasted a week in my neighborhood. Nor was there any evidence that I had any ability to put pencil and paper together effectively, either. No cute little poems to hang on my mother's refrigerator at home. I was intensely jealous of the cute little girls who composed on command sentences that not only made sense but rhymed at the end. For someone who could barely wrestle together a few words to make a simple declarative sentence, such ability to form and shape words seemed inconceivable to me. Things didn't get better as time went on, either. No brilliant little essays, no outstanding pieces of scholarship or academic thinking, no brilliant and creative short stories sprung from my pen in middle or high school.

Somewhere along the line, though, I did develop a love of reading. It was an interest that ran along side of school, sometimes parallel to it, often in conflict with it, but rarely within the school structure itself. While my love of reading had little to do with my school life, it had a lot to do with growing up in Nebraska during the early 60's.

My life as a reader began when I was forced inside an air-conditioned library during an unbearably hot Nebraska summer. Summers in Nebraska always come early and stay late, but this one was unusual even by Great Plains standards. There was a ritual in Lincoln at the time where the local newscaster ventures downtown and, cameras rolling, fries an egg on a sidewalk outside the Cornhusker Hotel as a way of dramatizing the extreme summer heat. This momentous event is duly recorded as a way of measuring and comparing the severity of the summer heat. The summer I discovered reading, the

egg-frying ritual occurred in early June, one of the earliest dates ever recorded. The heat wave was so long and intense that by the time the Fourth of July rolled around, we easily could have grilled T-bones on the concrete.

Lincoln had a rather nice policy during those years where the libraries of all the middle schools automatically became part of the city library system as soon as school let out for the summer. The result was that every citizen of the city had a fine collection of books to read a short walk from his or her front door. As the only part of the school that remained open to face the onslaught of summer, they were air-conditioned. In the days before climate controlled, enclosed malls, and central air conditioning became standard in most houses, this was no small attraction. The result was that when the heat became too extreme to play baseball in the afternoons, or another polio scare swept across the city like a dark cloud, the library became a refuge, a place to escape the extreme heat and a mother's nagging to do something useful for a change.

Both fear and heat drove me to the library on an unbearably hot day in the middle of July. Despite the brand new Salk Vaccine, fear of polio and of life in an iron lung still lingered in the air, and that, along with the very real possibility of a group of teenage boys running themselves into a state of heat exhaustion and sun stroke, was enough for our mothers to put a clamp down on our afternoon activities. With my baseball buddies and I sentenced to house arrest until evening cooled the blistering air, life seemed hopeless. So, I was desperate to do anything to slip out of the confines of my house, so desperate that I offered to spend the afternoon at the library improving my reading skills. Groveling on my hands and knees, I pledged a sacred oath to my mother that I would spend the entire afternoon reading the day away in the company of our greatest authors and thinkers. How could she possibly deny me this opportunity to improve my mind and my academic station in life?

Normally, my mother saw through such patent absurdities as this in an instant. Perhaps haunted by yet another afternoon cooped up with a sulky, hormone-ravaged teenager, my mother, unbelievably, said yes.

It was like a gift from heaven, a special privilege granted by the gods. I was out the door and

on my way to the library before my mother had even a nanosecond to reconsider her decision.

Our particular library was run by a tall, thin man with a bald, shiny head. He had a nose like a hawk and wrapped around his neck like a badge stuck to his Adam's apple was a blue bow tie sprinkled with small polka dots. His job was to be constantly on the vigil for patrons not prone to the pursuit of knowledge, and to avoid his piercing,

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beady-eyed stare, I grabbed the closest book off the shelf. It had a plain green cover with the title and author's name stamped in gold across the top. As luck would have it, the book was one

of a series of young adult novels set around a fictional professional baseball team, a kind of Hardy Boys for teenage baseball fanatics, a description that fit me to a T. I couldn't have made a better selection if I had studied the stacks for a week. I sat down at a big round table and began to read. Soon I had fallen into a different world, a world of cut green grass, of the crack of the bat on warm summer evenings, of game winning hits in the bottom of the ninth inning. I came out of this world only when the shifty eyed librarian tapped me on the shoulder to tell me the library was closing but if I liked the book I could check it out and take it home with me. I was hooked.

I was surprised that I had never heard of the author of these classic pieces of American literature, a man by the name of Joe Archibald. Surely a man of his writing ability should have his work spread all through our middle school curriculum. Surely his name must be on the lips of anyone interested in good literature. So why had my teachers kept his name a secret from me? After all, the previous year in eighth grade, we had plowed through *Great Expectations*, a book so stupendously boring that I could barely get through the Cliff's Notes, much less the actual novel. Only the Classic Comic Book saved me from total disaster. If there was room for Dickens in our curriculum, surely Joe Archibald must rate a place on the right hand of God.

Later in my life I found out that Joe Archibald, like Caroline Keene and Frank Dixon, did not exist. He was merely a pseudonym for a stable of anonymous authors churning out books under the great one's name. Somehow, I felt betrayed, cheated out of a belief in a hero, as if someone had perpetrated a fraud on me. Most people of my generation developed their cynicism because of Watergate and the Vietnam War. Not me. I lost my in-

nocence years before, on the day that I found out the great Joe Archibald was a figment of my imagination.

My road to reading was not a straight path. I was a teenager, after all, and more pressing issues intervened - sports, girls, cars, friends, girls, paper routes, jobs, and girls. Long periods of time would pass without even cracking open anything other than a text book or something off a required reading list. But every now and then my reading path would take a strange little twist and a situation would present itself as an ideal place for reading to re-enter as an important part of my life.

My ninth grade Civics class was such an event. The class was taught by a veteran teacher so bad that her incompetence took on mythic proportions. It was the 60's and the Civil Rights movement was the backdrop to her class. She would lecture us in all seriousness how segregation was a just and fair solution to the "race problem." She had seen the schools down south and assured us with a straight face that they were just beautiful. Why, they even had swimming pools, she said, and if the federal government would just keep its nose out of their business, everything would be just fine. Even at this young age, I knew this to be a lie of grand proportion. I, along with most others, turned her out of our lives forever.

To survive this class, my friend and I resorted to the time honored practice of slipping a paperback book inside the regular textbook. Books on World War II were our preferred genre. The blood and guts of war appealed to our adolescent views of masculinity. We devoured such classics as *To Hell and Back*, *Guadalcanal Diary*, and *Bombs over Tokyo*. The unbearable ordeal of Civics class became a pleasure and reading once again became an important part of my life.

One day disaster struck, however. Walking into class, I discovered that my reading partner was absent and, horrors upon horrors, it was his responsibility to provide the reading material for the week. Getting reading material was not as easy in the 60's as it is today. Because of the violence and often risqué covers favored by pocketbook paperbacks of the time, war novels were not readily available to teenagers. We usually got these books by sneaking them from underneath our parent's bed, where our fathers usually hid them from our innocent eyes. This day it was my friend's day to do the dirty deed, and, by being absent, he left me in the unbearable position of having to face Civics class without anything to read. Desperate for something to get me through the class, I grabbed the first thing that looked like a book off the table in the back of the room. It turned out to be Teddy White's *The Making of a President--1960*, the first of many re-tellings of presidential

campaigns. Not exactly the best of all books for me, but at least something to get me through this one class period. As the teacher droned on, I dipped into the pages. Surprisingly, I became lost in the 1960 campaign. White's style is less like a historian or journalist and more like a detective novelist. His book read more like a who-done-it than the political journalism.

Would Nixon be able to overcome Rockefeller's money and head him off before the convention? Would Kennedy be able to overcome the Catholic question and beat off the Humphrey challenge in West Virginia? Thanks to White's rather breathless style, I actually began to care about the answers to these questions and was enthralled by the book by the end of the class period. I finished the book, but it left an imprint on my mind that lasts to this day. The irony of the situation, however, is truly amazing. The idea that the Civics class that squeezed any desire to learn more about political science out of my life was also the setting for my life long interest in the political process truly boggles the mind.

Reading once again slipped out of my life. Occasionally, a book would break through my general apathy to leave a personal impact on my life. A trip to Gettysburg led to an encounter with Bruce Catton. Combining poetic insight and a vivid writing style, Catton taught me that history is not a series of dates and facts to be memorized or about generals and troop movements. Rather it is a story of people and how they behave at certain times and under different circumstances. It is, in essence, the story of life, not a mere time line of events. I encountered *Lord of the Flies* through a teacher who cared passionately about the literature she taught. Her enthusiasm was contagious, and the idea that a book had a life of its own, a personal meaning that had relevance to life outside of school came through. Such encounters were rare and isolated islands in a sea of negative experiences. It wasn't until I was well into college and doing my best to avoid the draft and the Vietnam War that reading would once again slip into my life in a meaningful way. And this time it stayed.

The setting was an upper level English class taught by an instructor not that far out of graduate school. The class, like all others I had taken up to this point, centered on a required reading list. It began with Camus' *The Stranger* and, because existentialism was an "in" thing at the time, was well received by the class. The first faint rattle of discontent was heard, however, when we moved to *Wuthering Heights*, and out right rebellion broke out when the thousand plus pages of *Don Quixote* loomed as the next hurdle on the list. It was the late 60's after all, the heart and soul of the protest

movement, and we didn't have to put up with an outdated, antiquated reading list. We wanted something meaningful, something relevant to the turbulent times we lived in. With power to the people on our lips, we girded our loins for a long battle with the establishment.

In class the next day, we confronted our young teacher with our demand that the required list be abolished. We ranted, we raved, we pounded on desks and spouted slogan after slogan. Our professor listened patiently until we had spewed and vented our revolutionary dogma, then

I leaned back and asked only one question: "Well, what exactly do you want to

I sat down at a big round table and began to read. Soon I had fallen into a different world, a world of cut green grass, of the crack of the bat on warm summer evenings, of game winning hits in the bottom of the ninth inning.

read?" It was the one question no one in our class was prepared for. No other professor or teacher had ever asked us what books we might want to explore. First there was silence, then, slowly, responses came. Someone talked about how reading Richard Wright's *Black Boy* over the summer had radically changed his outlook on life. Someone else chimed that, if we were going to read that one, maybe we should read Wright's *Native Son* so we could compare the two books side by side. Another student suggested Phillip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, the controversial book that was burning up the best seller list that year. Herman Hess' *Damien* and *Steppenwolf* were thrown into the pot. The class was indeed a radical departure from anything I had experienced before. In school, I had been taught that books were inanimate objects, something with a meaning set in stone. Themes were handed out by teachers, memorized and regurgitated back on tests. This class suggested that meaning was not pre-ordained by teacher or author. In short order twenty-five books, ranging from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* to Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* and ending with Puzo's *The Godfather*, were put together and book groups formed. Each student was required to sign up for at least ten books, but many of us signed up for more. Assignments and papers were negotiated and off we went on a magical educational journey.

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life. Reading became something intensely personal, even intimate, a personal matter between me and the author.

Reading thus changed from something passively received from others to truth seeking, an active process solely under my jurisdiction. I took to this concept immediately, and I've been a reader ever since.

Now, almost four decades after I completed the class and graduated from college, I am in my study in the back of our house. Three of the four walls are lined with shelves filled with books. Only a row of sunny windows on the fourth wall keeps the room from being completely sealed in by books. To say that reading has remained an important part of my life doesn't exactly do justice to the topic. It's one of the few constants in my life, something deeply satisfying and fulfilling. It led to my career as an educator and fueled my humble attempts as a part time writer.

The books on the walls, the career in education, the dabbles in the writing process would disappear in a second, though, if it weren't for those years in the sixties growing up in Lincoln. There was something about the mix of the Nebraska heat, the fear of polio, the library that beckoned like a cool cave in the middle of the desert that would not have come together in any other setting or in any other place. Everything coalesced at one precise time to plant a seed that germinated and grew, and still flourishes more than ever in my life. For this I will be forever grateful.

Scott Peterson worked as an educator for the Mat-tawan Schools for almost 34 years. He currently teaches writing classes at Western Michigan University. He is a teacher-consultant for the Third Coast Writing Project and does professional development work for school districts in southwest Michigan.

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