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Kylene Beers and Robert E. Probst

Literature as a 21st-Century Skill

August, 2010

The visit to the central Texas high school began as expected. The language arts coordinator for the district met us in the main office and escorted us to the cafeteria where we'd be working with language arts teachers for the day. The coordinator was enthusiastic about the workshop, hopeful that the teachers would begin the year with a better understanding of how to help readers think more deeply about the books they would read this year. We nodded as we unpacked our materials. This was exactly what we had discussed with her and we, too, were looking forward to the discussions we expected to have with the teachers.

But then things changed. The principal dropped by, said he was glad we were there because "we have to reach AYP this year, so make sure you show them how to do that."

The principal told her to focus her energy and time on the "pushables and slipables."

Then the assistant principals arrived and reminded us that "the focus this year is to make sure we make AYP." And then, in case we hadn't gotten the message, the deputy superintendent came by. He, too, let us know that "these kids need to pass the test. Sure hope what you'll be teaching the teachers will make sure they can do that. That's the goal this year. Passing the test."

He wasn't rushing off and seemed to want to make sure that we understood the point of the day's workshop. We said that we also hoped that teachers would find the strategies helpful in improving students' comprehension and vocabulary because—and the because was important—we wanted students to live literate lives, to be active participants in society, and we thought that best happened when students—all students—were highly literate. He stared and then said, "Well, that's fine, as long as they can pass the test."

Early September, 2010

A New York City middle school teacher who is helping us on a project met with us at Kylene's house. She's always cheerful, so her quiet demeanor caused concern. Finally, she explained that the previous week her principal had told her that this year she was to focus on the "pushables and slipables." The teacher was confused by the language, as we were. She asked the principal to explain what she meant. Seems that "pushables" are those students who, with a little push, will move from a score of 2 on their state test to a score of 3, and the "slipables" are those kids who, without a lot of support, will slip from their score of 3 to a score of 2. In this state, students receive scores of 1 (low) to 4 (high), and this

middle school had no 4s, too many 1s and 2s, and only a few 3s. So, the principal explained, the focus this year is "pushing the high 2s to 3s and keeping those low 3s from slipping to 2s." The teacher asked what that meant she was supposed to do with students who had scored a 1, the students who, it would seem to us as it seemed to the teacher, needed her expertise and time the most. The principal was reluctant to answer, so the teacher asked again whether this meant she shouldn't put students who had scored a 1 into a special after-school tutoring program the school had started to help students who needed the most support. "Should I just give up on those kids?" the teacher asked again. Finally, the principal told her to "focus her energy and time on the pushables and slipables." The 1s, it seems, were expendables.

Late September, 2010

Like most of the nation, we were stunned and deeply saddened when we read that a student at Rutgers had jumped off the George Washington Bridge, killing himself. The whole story may take a while to surface, but at the moment, from the news articles we've read, it appears that Tyler Clementi was driven to suicide by Internet postings made by his roommate. Reading the first reports left us both with a dismal sense of guilt.

Not that we were directly responsible. We never taught the young man who thought it fun or just cool or his right or—well, we don't know—to post the comments he did. We never met, saw, or heard of him until we came upon the story of Tyler's suicide. What we were feeling, we suspect, was our share of a collective guilt for the failure of our educational system to cultivate simple humanity in a student who graduated from one of our schools. That is, after all, one of the over-arching if seldom articulated goals of public education. We are teaching not simply to prepare businessmen and businesswomen, though the corporations may argue for that; we are teaching to prepare men and women, ethical participants in our society.

Perhaps we were reeling from the comments of the administrators in that central Texas school district; or perhaps we were still shocked that an administrator would reduce children to the labels "pushable" and "slipable." We know we were still stunned at all the other suicides of young teens this year, teens who took their lives because they were harassed by their peers for being gay. For being who they are. Justin Aaberg, age 15; Asher Brown, age 13; Seth Walsh, age 13; Raymond Chase, age 19; Billy Lucas, age 15. And now Tyler Clementi, age 18. But something happened when we heard about Tyler that caused us to stop writing this essay and begin again.

Today

We've just watched *Waiting for "Superman."* We know the administration speaks of education as a "race to the top," that there is a common core of standards that states had to accept, even before reviewing them, if they wanted certain federal dollars; we understand that there are demands to make students ready for the workplace. But surely someone must wonder whether talking about schools in these terms will help us graduate students who treat one another with simple respect. The parents of the children who have died because they were bullied, abused, and harassed probably wonder less about their school's test scores, less about AYP, less about 1s and 2s and 3s and 4s, than they do about what parents and schools are doing to produce humane and decent citizens. Surely they must wonder how schools, founded in part to produce citizens for a democratic society, could instead give us people responsible for all of this despair and dying. When we let ourselves, even for a moment, imagine the pain and confusion of these parents we have to wonder, too, how it has happened.

As English teachers, we had always thought the humanities should humanize us. That's why we called those studies "humanities." But we look across the educational landscape of this country and wonder if our schools, racing to the top and vowing to leave no one behind, have so embraced the lesser standards that can be measured by the number of correctly bubbled circles that they have forgotten that literate lives are better measured by higher standards of decency, civility, respect, compassion, or at the very least, ethical behavior. How is it that students who read about human endeavor and suffering can be casually, callously indifferent to the struggles and pains of the kids who sit at the desks next to them? Is it because *Charlotte's Web* is read to create a Venn diagram so students can demonstrate that they understand how Charlotte and Wilbur are alike and different? Is it because Narnia isn't a land where you discover your own courage but is a place to discuss how setting affects the plot? Perhaps it is because the *Bridge to Terabithia* has become a true/false question about sequencing: Jessie lost the race to Leslie before they crossed the bridge to Terabithia. In making sure the 2s become 3s, in making sure the school reaches AYP, in attending to the demands of 21st-century technology, with its split-second communication, with its global communities, with the capacity for words—hurtful and harmful words—to go viral far faster than any avian or swine flu ever could, have we lost one of the most important standards by which to judge any person: his or her humanity, compassion, empathy?

And Moving Toward Tomorrow

It would be odd that now, at a time when genres have proliferated—we have graphic novels, rap, realistic fantasy, music videos, and novels in verse sitting alongside the explosion of informational books, interactive books, and the to-be-expected range of fiction—that the study of literature has been constricted to a set of standards to be mastered. Some will say that because the media has changed—the three-channel, rabbit-eared television is now a 253-channel, high-definition

flat-screen, the radio has gone nano, and the book has turned Kindle; information and entertainment comes from computers, iPads and iPods, cell phones, YouTube, blogs, wikis, RSS feeds, Facebook, Twitter, and, well, wait a moment and new technology will have arrived—that literature and its reading are dwindling in significance as we move into the second decade of the 21st century.

As we have talked with teachers about 21st-century literacies, we've talked about the importance of collaboration; of managing, analyzing, and synthesizing multiple streams of information; of learning to solve complex problems for global communities; of developing proficiency with the tools of technology; of attending to the ethical responsibilities required in online environments. And now we know we should talk more, much more, of the critical role literature plays for students like Tyler and his tormentors in this bold new world.

Some will disagree. They will say that state and national assessments and college entrance exams require students to know how to read nonfiction texts and answer questions about them and so that should be the focus. In fact, in mid-October of this year, in Wisconsin, a teacher told us that her high school no longer allows English teachers to teach any literature. The district mandated they teach only nonfiction, informational texts. Other districts say that students are bombarded by information so that is what they must study. And others will say that because of the ever-increasing presence of online reading students must do, reading the novel simply is not needed.

We have always disagreed with that notion, but now, remembering Tyler, we are convinced that reading literature is the most important 21st-century literacy skill. Not learning to navigate the Web. Reading a novel invites students into an important conversation. Literature addresses the interesting and eternal questions about human experience. It asks readers to think about what they value, what they reject, what they accept, and what they would fight for. It takes the kid who has always fit in and lets him, lets her, at least for a while be the outsider. It takes the white boy and lets him be a young black girl walking along a dusty road in the early 20th century. It lets us hide in an attic because we are Jewish or be for a moment the gay kid or fat kid or sick kid or ...well, whatever we are not; literature lets us become. We become a part of the characters' lives and through their lives learn more of our own.

And it does that, not in the abstract, where it's easy to take a stand, but in the concrete, where it's harder to escape the consequences of events and of our choices. We can all agree that we'd do what we could to survive in difficult circumstances. But in *Hatchet*, we can watch an individual face not just the idea of difficult circumstances, but the crash of the

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small plane, the moose, the wolves, the loneliness, and the starvation. If we read well—if we are taught to read well—we will visualize the north woods, feel the cold, imagine the despair, place ourselves there, and consider what we might have done and how we would have fared in Brian’s situation. In the novel, the abstract issue becomes the concrete and specific problem, enabling us to think about matters in a way that wouldn’t otherwise be possible, short of diving our own plane into a lake, miles from civilization.

That thinking the novel provokes and sustains can lead to conversation. As students read *Among the Hidden*, they, too, wonder whether they would see their own home as a sanctuary or a prison. What is freedom and would they risk their own safety to be free? Do governments have the obligation to set limits on the number of children people can have? Are they as brave as Luke? What would they do if they discovered a family had a child that was a third—an illegal child? Would they fight against the constraints placed upon them? Would they stand up for the rights of all individuals? Would they be willing to label some “a third” and say those people should be eliminated? All of those issues are up for discussion.

And that conversation can lead to clarified understanding, our own understanding, which really means it helps us to learn more about ourselves, more about the person next to us, more about the world in which we live. True, Brian is a fictional character and his survival is entirely in Paulsen’s hands. Luke is an invention, an image and a voice that emerges from print on the page, and his society with all of its good and bad is imaginary. But the concerns are real. The student reader has to struggle to survive in whatever his or her circumstances may be. They won’t be identical to Brian’s, but they’ll call for similar courage and resolve and wit. Luke’s society is fiction, but the reader also is in a world that limits his or her choices and imposes its will upon him or her. The fictional world teaches us about the real world.

Literature offers our students the chance to think not only about the characters they meet in the pages of the books, but also about their own lives. At a time when our own lives are bumping up against those of people across the globe, at a time when a principal of a school would label a child a “slipable,” when a superintendent could deem passing a test to be the most important goal of the year, when a boy would feel such despair from his roommate’s actions that jumping off a bridge is his salvation, then we fear that the standards we have set for ourselves as a nation are far too low—common standards, indeed. We want better for our schools, far better for our students. We want students considering situations from another point of view, experiencing things they have never before experienced; we want them developing empathy. We want them reading literature. Reading literature, as quaint as it might seem, is a needed skill in this 21st-century world.

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