

Literacy: A Lineage

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IT WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE to discuss my path to literacy without talking about my literary guardian, the person who inspired and encouraged my love for reading and writing: my father. I spent a lot of time with my dad as a child, but one of the most important experiences we shared was our Sunday afternoon bike rides. We nearly always took the same route, down to the bike path by the river, circling around, and breaking at Carillon Park under the bell tower. We would just sit, rest, and think under the bells. Etched at the bottom of the bell tower was part of a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:

*It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn
The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!
And in despair I bowed my head;
“There is no peace on earth,” I said;
“For hate is strong,
And mocks the song*

MELANIE LUKEN was a senior French and English major at The Ohio State University at the time that she wrote this literacy narrative for an English course in which she was being trained to be a writing tutor.

Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"
 Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
 "God is not dead; nor doth he sleep;
 The Wrong shall fail,
 The Right prevail,
 With peace on earth, good-will to men." (lines 21–35)

My dad would inevitably read it aloud, but we both knew it by heart; it is one of the many poems that have come to mean something to me. As I got older, my dad didn't come riding as often with me. He was older and more tired, but I still went by myself. Each time I arrived under the bells, I would recite the poem to myself, even when the weather was cold and my breath made the air foggy. It had become part of me, this poem, this tradition of riding and reading and thinking. In the same way, my passion for reading and writing developed in me through the influence of my father who has a deep love of literature himself. For this reason, my definition of literacy involves more than the ability to read and write; for me, it is also a tradition, an inheritance I received from my father, and an ability to appreciate language because of him and because of many other writers who came before me.

You could define my dad as a jack-of-all-trades artist. He has dabbled in almost every art: novel-writing, poetry-writing, songwriting, painting, sculpture, and acting. He was originally in graduate school for English with hopes of becoming a professor. After a couple of years, however, he tired of academia. His tendencies towards creativity and individuality did not mix well with the intense analysis and structure of university life. Eventually, he ended up as a stay-at-home dad, my stay-at-home dad, who continues to this day to work on his art and writing. Although our relationship has not always been simple and easy, I benefited greatly from having such an intelligent and imaginative father as my primary caretaker.

For my whole life, my father has quoted the "greats," the "classics," or at least the authors that he admired, in normal conversation. It has become a joke among me and my brothers because we can all recite from memory his favorite lines of books and his favorite poems. Because of him I can quote, "If you can keep your head when all about you / Are losing theirs and blaming it on you" (Kipling lines 1–2), "And early though the laurel grows / It withers quicker than the rose" (Housman lines 11–12), "I grow old . . . I grow old . . . / I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled" (Eliot lines 120–21), and of course, "Call Me Ishmael" (Melville 3), among many others. Sometimes he

will quote things far out of context, and yet I understand and enjoy it because these quotes evoke intense feelings of tradition and love. My father's love of literature pervaded my young mind the way it must pervade his own, and it has stayed with me.

From the time I could read and write, I wrote and acted out princess stories all on my own. I read vociferously, and I loved being told stories. I attribute all of this to my father, who taught me to read and to write, who put *Little Women* in my hands when I was ten years old, and who continued to introduce me to his favorite authors as I got older. The only reason I picked up books like *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* or Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, is because he suggested them or handed them to me. I realize that I did not have a particularly normal American childhood in terms of my relationship with books and literature (most of my friends preferred playing sports or watching TV to reading), but I am blessed to have a father who sees art in language and stories and who passed this gift to me. I have a greater understanding of the diversity of books, authors, and the ways in which language is used because of my father. He always pushed me to read literature other than what I read in school and particularly encouraged me to read female writers like Carson McCullers, Zora Neale Hurston, and Flannery O'Connor to empower me as a young girl and to expand my perspective. Now, everything I read is within this tradition that he and I have established.

Another thing that I vividly remember as a child is spending quite a bit of time in public libraries. My brothers, my dad, and I would visit the library at least once a week, and more often in the summer when we were out of school. We were never allowed to play video games or watch much TV, so our entertainment consisted of what we could create ourselves or what we could gain from books. Our ability to use and understand language proficiently was very important to my father. Although I am the only child who has displayed a penchant for creative writing, I think my father has always held on to the hope that each of his children will spring into novel-writers. Since we were about twelve or thirteen, he has consistently demanded that we each write a story for him at Christmastime rather than buy him a gift. His favorite is a story I wrote for him in high school; it was my own personal version of *A Christmas Carol*.

I began seriously writing creatively towards the end of high school. I have kept journals since I was eight or nine, but in high school, I discovered my true capacity for poetry. I wrote poetry for English classes and for our high school literary magazine. When I got to college, I naturally began taking creative writing classes. I have taken Beginning Poetry, Intermediate Poetry twice, and the

Honors 598 seminar with a creative writing component. I improve constantly and with each class my relationship to language changes and grows. Anyone who has taken a workshop knows that, in these courses, you have to be able to stand criticism and to pick out which suggestions are beneficial and which are not. It was my father, the constant in my literacy narrative, who encouraged me through all of these classes, telling me that no matter what anybody thought, I was a poet, a better poet than he had ever been.

I believe that my choice to major in French is also rooted in this tradition of language and literature. Studying a foreign language can, at times, be just like learning how to read and write as a child. Studying French intensely became for me the perfect, impossible challenge: to read and write French like I read and write English. However, it seems that as long and hard as I study French, I will never be quite so comfortable nor quite so capable of understanding it or placing it within a context. I believe that this is partially because tradition plays no role in my study of French. It has nothing to do with my family or my background, and it cannot move me emotionally to the extent that English language can. Unlike French, I have a tradition of reading, speaking, and writing English, and I have a much vaster appreciation for English literature in general.

Because of my father and our shared love of literature, my definition of literacy is intimately linked to the idea of tradition. In a way, my literacy is part of my lineage, part of the legacy of my father. My love for literature and writing, my poetic tendencies, my passion for language are all gifts from him. I think that I tend to have more of an imagination than my peers, and I also love to write and create using words. The reason for these qualities is that my father once inspired in me his own creativity and instructed me on the understanding of human experience through writing. In turn, this literacy experience is something I want to pass on to my children someday.

Literacy is generally known as the ability to read and write. My definition of literacy is: the ability to read, write, and understand within a tradition. For me, this is a familial tradition that has permeated my literacy experience. Parents have an incredible power to influence their children through their own behaviors and attitudes, and it is certainly true that my father has impressed upon me his own attitudes towards literacy and literature. Now, every time we talk he asks me, "What are you reading? What do you think about it?" We talk about what each of us is reading, as well as our thoughts and impressions. In this way, the tradition continues.

Some daughters inherit a certain amount of money from their fathers. 10
Some inherit a car or a house. Others inherit jewelry. My father will never

have much money or a nice car or many material goods at all. I have, however, received something from him that will last my whole life and will continue to give me joy as long as I live. He has passed on to me his love of language and literature. It is within this tradition that I understand literacy, a tradition that causes me to sometimes think “God is not dead; nor doth he sleep!” (Longfellow 32) when I hear bells ringing.

Works Cited

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Thinking about the Text

1. What is Melanie Luken’s main point, and how do you know? How does she support her main point?
2. How does Luken use **PRIMARY SOURCES** in her narrative? How did you react to her use of these sources?
3. Why does this story matter? To the author? To students like you?
4. Luken wrote this piece for a course in which she was learning to be a writing tutor. How do you think this **CONTEXT** helped her shape her narrative? In what ways might she have written this piece differently for a class focused on writing memoirs?
5. Write a **LITERACY NARRATIVE** in which you tell the story of one or two of your favorite moments related to reading or writing. Connect these individual moments to a larger discussion of what they taught you about the role of literacy in your life.