



Mining the Riches of Story:

Young Adult Literature and the Peaceable Classroom

Adapted from Dr. Monseau's keynote address at the 2003 ALAN Workshop in San Francisco.

How can we teachers help our young people cope with the increased violence we are seeing in the world today? I find this question haunting me more and more as I watch the television news and read the daily newspaper. What must it feel like to be growing up at a time when death and destruction have made their way from the somewhat more distant worlds of movies, TV, and video games to the more immediate worlds of school, church, and neighborhood?

In an attempt to answer these questions, as editor of the *English Journal* I devoted an entire issue to the subject back in May of 2000. The theme of the issue was "A Curriculum of Peace." I hoped that teachers would submit articles that would help all of us learn to teach for peace in our classrooms. This was shortly after the Columbine incident, and in my editorial I lamented what I saw as "a lack of respect and understanding among teenagers toward difference, their uncontrolled frustration when faced with disappointment or rejection, and the resulting violent acts we were seeing in our schools" (15). This was more than a year before the events of 9/11. Since that horrific day when thousands of people lost their lives in the World Trade Center destruction, our young people have not only had to face the violence and death of others in their schools and neighborhoods, but they have been forced to face the possibility of their own death at the hands of terrorists striking at random, bent on destroying them and their way of life.

I ask myself, "What does a fourteen-year-old know about infidels? What does a fifteen-year-old know of a god that supposedly rewards people for killing others? And how can even an eighteen-year-old rationalize the murder of classmates by an alienated peer? What is our responsibility as adults to help?"

Reading the opening passages from two young adult novels may help us explore this last question. You may recognize the works from which they come:

I don't know just why I'm telling you all this. Maybe you'll think I'm being silly. But I'm not, really, because this is *important*. You see, it was different! It wasn't just because it was Jack and I either—it was something much more than that. It wasn't as it's written in magazine stories or as in morning radio serials where the boy's family always tease him about liking a girl and he gets embarrassed and stutters. And it wasn't silly, like sometimes, when girls sit in school and write a fellow's name all over the margin of their papers. I never even wrote Jack's name at all till I sent him a postcard that weekend I went up to Minaqua. And it wasn't puppy love or infatuation or love at first sight or anything that people always talk about and laugh. (Daly 3)

Then there's this opening passage—a famous one that may sound familiar:

Sybil Davidson has a genius I.Q. and has been laid by at least six different guys. She told me herself, the last time she was visiting her cousin, Erica, who is my good friend. Erica says this is because of Sybil's fat problem and her need to feel loved—the getting laid part, that is. The genius I.Q. is just luck or genes or something. (Blume 9)

I've chosen these two particular stories because, in my experience, they evoke such different reactions in readers, especially female readers. You may have recognized the first passage, which comes from

Seventeenth Summer, written by Maureen Daly in 1942 when she was a college student. The story takes us back to a time when girls waited patiently at home for boys to call for a date, when premarital sex was taboo for young women, when smoking and drinking were something only “bad girls” did. The second passage comes from Judy Blume’s 1975 novel *Forever*, which treats premarital sex among teenagers matter-of-factly, emphasizing the importance of protection rather than abstinence, getting a progressive grandmother in on the procurement of birth control, and even adding a bit of humor to the sexual experience by referring to a certain appendage as “Ralph.”

Both of these books were on my classroom shelf for an Independent Reading class I taught to eleventh graders some years ago. They were magnets for the females in the class once word got around about their content, and eventually just about every young woman in the class had read them. I always required the students to have a conference with me after they finished a book, and I was quite surprised one day when Kelly, who happened to have a less than virtuous reputation around the school, began talking passionately about *Seventeenth Summer*. She loved the book, she said, because it made her see that not all boys “want something” from girls when they go out with them. She especially liked Jack because he respected Angie and didn’t force her to go beyond kissing him as they sat together on a particularly romantic date. “I wish things could be like that today,” she said, adding, “Boys don’t respect girls anymore.”

In their book *Literature for Today’s Young Adults*, Ken Donelson and Alleen Nilsen classify *Seventeenth Summer* as a “wish fulfillment romance.” If my experience with Kelly is any indication, they are exactly right. Though Angie’s experience in the book is the polar opposite of Kelly’s real-life boy/girl experience, Kelly found the story engaging and heartening because it fulfilled a need that she may never have realized in herself—the need to find love based on respect.

To my surprise, she didn’t care for *Forever*, saying that she would never let her thirteen-year-old sister read it because she didn’t want her to start having sex with boys. Though she avoided talking about her own experience, she clearly felt protective of her sister and perhaps saw this book as hitting a little too close to home.

I tell Kelly’s story because this experience changed my thinking as a teacher. I’ve always believed that adolescents gravitate to books that reflect their lives and to characters that resemble them or people they know. Interestingly enough, the opposite was true in Kelly’s case. But I hadn’t thought that much about a story’s power to fulfill an unrecognized emotional need. Being an admirer of Louise Rosenblatt’s work and an advocate of reader response in the classroom, I always start class discussions with the students’ response to a story and work toward a deeper examination of the work we’re reading, but my experience with Kelly has prompted me to pay more attention to the “why” of student reaction. Rosenblatt’s book, *Literature As Exploration*, has had a great influence on me as a teacher, yet I think I’ve focused too much on the “literature” and not enough on the “exploration.”

I think back to all the family stories I heard growing up, listening to adults reminisce around the dinner table. At the time I felt bored at hearing the same stories over and over, but I did listen, maybe because those stories fulfilled my unconscious need to know about the early lives of my parents and grandparents; and now, as an adult taking time to explore my reactions to those stories, I realize just how valuable they are to me. I remember feeling angry and sad when my father told of being attacked as a ten-year-old by a gang of boys who stole the small chocolate cake my grandmother had allowed him to buy as a reward for going to the grocery store for her. And I remember admiring my grandmother’s courage in approaching the owner of a local department store during the Depression when my grandfather was out of work to ask for credit so she could buy my father a suit to wear to his high school graduation. When she told that story, she always emphasized that she paid off her debt in full as she had promised. As a child, I was annoyed by her repeated emphasis, but as an adult I realize that she was making a statement to us about her character—a statement she felt the need to repeat each time she told the story.

So stories, whether fictional or true, can satisfy the emotional needs of both the teller and the listener or reader. In the case of young adults, however, those needs can be difficult to determine. I was a bit surprised to learn, on doing a survey recently with ninth and eleventh graders in a suburban school, that

most of them were primarily concerned about immediate needs such as grades, parental expectations, and relationships with friends. Out of fifty students surveyed, only three or four mentioned war or terrorism as primary concerns. Somehow I had expected more students to share these concerns, given what's been happening in the world. But then again, maybe they do. Maybe it's safer and easier to list the usual concerns teens are expected to have. To go any deeper is risky—and not cool. So they keep their fears to themselves.

But there are other young adults whose deep-seated concerns manifest themselves in frightening ways, and some of them may have been sitting in those classes I surveyed. Jon Katz demonstrates this disturbingly well in his book, *Geeks: How Two Lost Boys Rode the Internet Out of Idaho*. A roving journalist, Katz writes for a web site called Slashdot, which, he says, “became the focal point for geek misery in America” after the Columbine killings. According to Katz, the site collapsed repeatedly under the weight of e-mailed stories from kids all over the country. One boy told of standing up in social studies class and saying he could understand on some level the kind of hate and rage the Columbine killers felt after being made fun of and excluded time and again by their peers. As a result of his comments, he was called to the principal's office and forced to undergo five weeks of counseling or be expelled. A girl told of being escorted by two security guards to the nurse's office upon entering the school building wearing a trench coat, then being told by the nurse to undress in a private room, while the guards outside went through her coat. She was then grilled by the principal, who asked her if she was a member of a hate group (she wasn't) or if she played games like Doom or Quake (she didn't). Though she was determined to be brave and defiant, she told of falling apart during the questioning and crying uncontrollably.

Katz tells of other stories he's heard:

From police in a Massachusetts town I heard of a fourteen-year-old boy sitting in his bedroom with his father's shotgun in his mouth, a computer screen open to Slashdot. His life was simply unbearable, for all the usual reasons, and the Columbine coverage persuaded him it would only get worse. It took the cops and other frightened adults three hours to persuade him to put the gun down. It was an incident I declined to share with Slashdot readers, nor did I tell them about a fifteen-year-old in the Midwest with a history

of emotional problems who e-mailed me every day for weeks after Columbine asking for help. He routinely had his books stolen, got punched and kicked, was laughed at when he spoke in class and ignored by teachers He said he had twice tried suicide. (154-55)

We all have students like these in our classes. But what, if anything, can we do to help them? And how would we try? As Katz tells us, “Unhappy, alienated, isolated kids are legion in schools, and voiceless in media, education, and politics. But theirs are the most important voices of all in understanding what happened and perhaps even how to keep it from happening again” (149). When I read that, I thought of one of the articles that appeared in the *EJ* peace issue that I mentioned earlier. In developing a Hip-Hop-influenced slam poetry unit that teaches for peace, Heather Bruce and Bryan Dexter Davis worked with their students to help them express their emotions verbally rather than acting on violent impulse. The teachers note, “This is particularly crucial for male students, who are much more likely than females to act in violent and aggressive ways” (120). Bruce and Davis point out that, while emotional development is usually supported for girls, it is discouraged for boys, and research has shown “a high correlation between lack of facility with verbal expression and aggression and delinquency” (120).

An excellent article that I think is a must-read for any English teacher is G. Lynn Nelson's “Warriors with Words: Toward a Post-Columbine Writing Curriculum,” also in the May 2000 *English Journal*. His essay won the NCTE/*English Journal* Hopkins Award the year it was published, and I must admit that when I first read it upon submission to the *Journal*, I was filled with emotion. Nelson says that we must have personal story at the center of our curriculum. “Deny me my stories,” he says, “. . . and I will eventually turn to the language of violence” (43). He adds:

We don't seem to understand that our stories *will* get published, one way or another. In a society where our own voices cannot be heard over the shouting of commercials and the blare of entertainment and within a curriculum that values a heartless critical essay over personal story, our stories sit in us, waiting to be told, to be acknowledged. . . . In such a society and in our schools we are literally dying to tell our stories. The tragedy of Columbine High School, like all such violence, was a publishing of untold stories, unheard needs, unhealed hearts. (43-44)

Not content with just telling us about the importance of story in the English class, Nelson shows us, concluding his article with a poem written by a student in his Native American first-year composition class at Arizona State University:

**Broken Arrows, Broken Hearts:
I Will Fight No More by Kyle Wilson**

When I was twenty years old, I found myself away from
Dinetah,
Away from my mother, away from my home.
I found myself filled with rage, violence, and anger.
It led me to the back of a police car, caged like an animal.
While the handcuffs cut into my wrists, my heart bled,
and I
thought back to when I was eight years old:
I played Cowboys and Indians.
Always the heroic Cowboy.
I was never Geronimo,
never dreamed of Crazy Horse . . .
While my father was fighting his own war against
himself,
40 miles away in the arms of another lover,
I chased my brother, shooting silver bullets out of my
forefinger.
When I was out of rounds, he fell and lay on the earth
and bled.
As he lay in the dirt, I asked, "Why didn't the Indians
fight back?"
Colen smiled, formed two fists, one behind the other,
drew back the bowstring and shot me with a magic
arrow.
The cowboy died young.
At the precinct, Officer Carson took off the cuffs without
noticing
that I was bleeding. I formed two fists and shot him with
Colen's
magic arrow. An Indian warrior was born. Officer Carson
laughed
and told me those days were over; then he left to round
up more Indians.
In the holding cell, I realized I was fighting a war with
Geronimo,
Crazy Horse, and my father.
No, I was behind Basha's in Pinon, Arizona,
drinking Kool-Aid flavored hairspray.
Or was I in the hospital in Fort Defiance, treating
an old Navajo man because his grandchild
beat him up for ten dollars. Ten dollars.
Or I could have been burying my friend Rodney
Johnson who went AWOL—or was it MIA—
and then DOA.
An Indian murdered Rodney. The same killer stole
the lives of Chris and Fernando. Indians
fighting Indians.

Senseless violence. Broken Arrows. Broken Hearts.
Earlier that night, I had waged a war with
my brother.
I formed a fist and hammered at his face with
clumsy rage.
For many nights before, I dreamed I was fist-
fighting my way through life.
Some of my opponents were my own people, my
brothers and sisters.
We all fought for our lives. Communal efforts
didn't exist in these cages. There were only
bloody mouths and bruised hearts, clenched
fists and clenched teeth.
Then my brother grabbed my shoulders and shook
me from my dream to exorcise the demon that
possessed my body. My soul.
I felt like taking my baptismal vows all over again. I
was reborn.
Heroic Cowboy turned Young Indian Warrior.
This savage wanted to end this war.
I wanted to be a doctor,
Travel back in time,
And cure Christopher Columbus of the disease
that ate his soul.
Exorcise the demon.
I wanted to cook frybread and eat fried potatoes
with corn stew like Grandpa.
I wanted to kiss my mother on the cheek as she
held me close.
I wanted to hug my brother and say,
"I love you."
But most of all, I wanted to fight no more. We all
have bled enough
while fighting with Broken Arrows, Broken Hearts. (45-
46)

Nelson adds that, for the logo on his portfolio, this student had drawn a bow, stretched taut—but in place of the arrow he had drawn a pencil.

In some ways this young man was both the speaker and the audience for his story. In telling it, he fulfilled a need to put his life in perspective and move forward positively. I can't help but wonder: if Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold had been given the chance to tell *their* stories, would the Columbine massacre have ever happened?

Just how different are the needs and concerns of adolescents today from thirty or forty years ago? "Not much," we might say, if the students in my survey are any indication. "Very," we might say, if the young people John Katz writes about are indicative, and probably Angie Morrow of *Seventeenth Summer* and Sybil Davidson of *Forever* would agree.

As people who work with young adults, we have to recognize that, although today's students seem to have many of the same concerns we had about grades, friends, and social standing, these concerns take on a different dimension when placed in the context of a world where young people have unfettered access to adult information and where retaliation against bullying can take the form of shotgun blasts from easily acquired weapons.

In her book *The Peaceable Classroom* Mary Rose O'Reilley asks, "Is it possible to teach English so that people stop killing each other?" (9). I want to answer, "Yes! Yes!" But, as we know too well, the challenge lies in putting such a huge leap of faith into action. I've always been troubled that we focus so much more on competition than cooperation in our schools. Students compete for grades, they compete for awards, they compete for a place on the team. Even in the arts students compete for first chair in the orchestra, for the meatiest part in the play, for first prize in the art show. Yes, I know, we have to prepare them for what they'll encounter in the real world, and I suppose some degree of competition does have its place, but who says the real world must dictate what happens in our schools? Could it possibly be the other way around? If we're educating tomorrow's leaders, why can't we make more of an effort to teach them how to understand and get along with others, both in their immediate world and beyond? Perhaps we can lead by example.

As I say this, some of you may be thinking, "I have state standards to meet, and I have to get my students ready to pass the proficiency tests. I don't have time to listen to their stories and worry about whether they know how to get along with others." But in the midst of state standards and mandated testing, isn't it more important than ever to remember our shared humanity as we teach? (And, as O'Reilley points out, isn't it curious that the word *rigor* is common to the vocabulary of both teachers and morticians?) A softer approach to teaching need not be at odds with concerns about standards and assessment, as the wise teacher will find ways to incorporate relevant content into the pursuit of goals for a more cooperative classroom.

Think for a minute about our classroom discussions of young adult literature. Who's asking the questions? If we are doing the asking, then we're most

likely not going to get much in the way of storied response. Students are smart enough to know that any question a teacher asks must have a "right" answer somewhere, which plays right into the competition model. On the other hand, if our *students* are asking the questions, those questions are most likely based in their own curiosity about a story and, when explored more fully by others in the class, may result in students learning more about the work and about each other. And they're exercising their critical thinking skills, as well, one of the most essential skills students must have to pass any test.

Now let's think about accountability measures. How do we make our students accountable for the reading they do in our classes? Do we give them an objective test on, say, *The Chocolate War*, with perhaps an essay question thrown in at the end? Do we ask them to write a paper on an approved topic of their or our choosing? Would we ever consider letting students take a partner or group test with classmates, where they would have time to discuss each question and write their answers collaboratively? Would we consider asking our students to work cooperatively writing questions for the test? Of course, the first thing we worry about is cheating—back to the competitive model again. But would it really be so bad if the student who hadn't done the reading really learned something from other students by answering questions cooperatively or writing test questions collaboratively? After all, isn't student learning our goal? Maybe we need to think more about how we try to achieve it.

We have a long academic tradition of thinking that reason is king, criticism is all, and that feelings and emotions have no place in the pursuit of knowledge. The academy has always valued the "hard" sciences like physics, chemistry, and biology over the "softer" disciplines of literature, music, and art. Yet it is these "softer" pursuits that allow us to explore what it means to be human—not in the way our bodies are constructed or how their forces act on each other, but in the way we respond to beauty, to love, to tragedy. I will never believe that it's more important to compete with other human beings than it is to understand them.

Mining the riches of story in our classrooms will certainly take time and patience, whether we're encouraging students to write about their lives, or inviting them to speak their stories in response to the

young adult literature they read. But in teaching this way, we are taking a step toward a more peaceable classroom. Young adult literature is the perfect vehicle for achieving this goal, for good YA literature helps young people make sense of their lives. I'm not talking about a touchy-feely encounter group approach or a hand-holding session. I'm talking about creating an atmosphere of reciprocal respect and compassion, where students can discover that their stories are as significant as the fictional ones they read, and that they can learn from each other as well as from books. If I've learned anything in my twenty-five years of teaching, it's that students *want* to tell their stories—and they want to listen to ours. The surest way to get the attention of a class is to tell them about something that happened in your life—whether it's a revelation of an embarrassing moment, an amusing experience you had with your children, or just an admission of a shared fear or concern. All of a sudden you become “human” to them. I can't help but regret the many times over the years that I've felt uncomfortable in class discussion when a student began connecting his or her story to the literature we were reading. Instead of listening, I was mentally scrambling to find a way to redirect the conversation. “We have to stick to the text,” was my rationale. I was too goal-driven to realize that those students were creating their *own* text in response to a need.

I'm not Pollyanna. I know that we have material to cover and accountability to worry about. But there are lots of studies out there that show that *how* students are taught affects learning more significantly than *what* they are taught. Giving more attention and credence to story in the classroom may result in unexpected gains—and may be a small step toward Mary Rose O'Reilley's wish that we teach English so people stop killing each other.

Mitch Albom, the author of *Tuesdays with Morrie*, has written another book called *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*. It's about an old man named Eddie, who dies trying to save the life of a little girl when a ride at the amusement park where he works goes haywire. Eddie discovers that heaven is a place where you meet five people from your past who help you understand the meaning of your life on earth. At the end of the book, Albom writes:

Lines formed at Ruby Pier—just as a line formed someplace else; five people, waiting, in five chosen memories, for a little girl named Amy or Annie to grow and to love and to age and to die, and to finally have her questions answered—why she lived and what she lived for. And in that line now was a whiskered old man, with a linen cap and a crooked nose, who waited in a place called the Stardust Band Shell to share his part of the secret of heaven: that each affects the other and the other affects the next, and the world is full of stories, but the stories are all one. (196)

Regardless of what our concept of heaven is, or whether we even have one, stories make us human. They satisfy our need to connect. Why not fulfill this need by making a place for story in our classrooms as we pursue the kind of knowledge that will surely make our students richer in their understanding of one another—and the world?

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