

Good Teachers Save Lives:

Speech Delivered at the 2015 ALAN Breakfast, Minneapolis, Minnesota

It's hard to overstate what an honor it is to speak at an ALAN Breakfast honoring Lois Lowry. In my world, there are no humans with more grace and no writers more deserving.

On this occasion, I feel compelled to tell my favorite Lois Lowry story. A number of years ago, I was once again staring at my bright white, blank computer screen, praying to the email gods for that *ding* that signals the urgency to check my emails *as they come in*—because who knows when another Ugandan prince will need my financial information so he can unload fabulous wealth upon me—when an email arrives from Lois. She has contacted some of her most trusted author friends, and me, for advice regarding an ongoing situation. A classroom of sixth graders has begun emailing her, one-by-one, with comments and questions about *The Giver* (1993). As any author knows, when this happens, you get 40 versions of “Where do you get your ideas?” For many years, I answered that question with the name of some obscure town: Potlatch, Idaho; Bear Creek, Michigan; Rome, Georgia. It was never a satisfactory answer, but it kept me somewhat geographically savvy. Then I started answering with, “From people who want me to read their manuscripts.” That actually *did* work among a certain subset.

But Lois is smarter and far more practical than I am, so she asked one of the kids to send her the teacher's email so she could ask the teacher to screen the questions, allowing her to answer the oft-asked ones just once and spend more time on the creative ones—the ones where the kid really wanted to know

something. What came back was a scathing rejoinder from the teacher telling Lois she should be happy to have her material used in her classroom and that from now on, it wouldn't be, and behind that came responses from the students filled with “I hated your book,” “You suck,” and the like.

Lois was asking this select group of writers how *we* might respond. I don't know exactly what kind of grown-up responses she received from the others, but I told her there were a number of men in the drug court group I was leading who had served long prison terms, some of them for particularly violent crimes, and that she should figure out how to get the teacher's home address so I could send them to terrify her in the middle of the night . . . and then kill her.

Later that morning, I received word from an untraceable email with nothing but a home address.

There may very well be one fewer English teacher here today . . .

What could I do? It was Lois Lowry.

Many years ago, when Chris Crutcher could just as easily have been a guy named Chris who made walking sticks for people with broken legs as a guy who wrote books about smart-ass adolescents, I was invited to Simmons College in Boston to deliver a keynote and then participate on a two-person panel with Robert Cormier. Suffice it to say, I knew exactly who Robert Cormier was, and he probably thought I was a guy named Chris who made walking sticks for people with broken legs. But Bob (he told me to call him that) was as gracious to me as he was to all who entered his sphere of influence, and when the day

was finished, I felt something like a writer. At dinner, we talked about our experiences with the business of book censorship and, among other things, agreed that the folks who really take the heat are *you*. While you're pushing your shopping cart through the supermarket getting a late dinner for your family because you stayed after school an extra two hours grading papers, or walking a student through some horror, or listening to the whispers of conservative parents who know absolutely nothing about education or child development talk about how you're purposely corrupting their children by assigning *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*. (Blume, 1970), we're alone in the safety of our homes writing another book you're gonna have some 'splainin' to do for assigning.

But good teachers save lives.

It has been recommended to me by editors, marketers, and other authors that it's a good idea when speaking to teachers or librarians from all over the country to push your latest work. Well, my latest work is two years past due because I have the same excuses for my editor that I had for my sophomore English teacher. But it's really, really good, and when it comes out, be sure to buy it. In hardback. There.

Now I get to talk about teachers. And about *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* (1993), which is fast becoming historical fiction.

Many years ago, at the same time I was desperately trying to find the voice for Sarah Byrnes, I was in a meeting at the Spokane Mental Health Center with a group of therapist colleagues and the Center's child psychiatrist, who met with us once a week to discuss our toughest cases. In the course of the meeting, one of the therapists asked for permission to expel a 16-year-old female client from the Center. Now, I get it about being expelled from school, but *expelled from a mental health center? What kid needs that on her resume?* The psychiatrist asked why he would expel a person from our mental health center, and the therapist, who I'll call Jim because that's his name, said it was because she punched him in the chest. Now I'd been wanting to punch this guy in the chest for a long time and figured this kid might have some saving graces, so I volunteered that I'd worked with some pretty tough kids in a dropout school down in Oakland, and I'd be willing to take a shot at this one, you know, before we expelled her from a mental health center. Jim was resistant, probably because of

the dent in his chest, but he acquiesced.

The client, who I'll call Brenda because that's *her* name, showed up at our appointed time, and the first thing I noticed was this kid had had about as much therapy as she could stand. She was court-ordered, so not showing up would have caused her way more grief than compliance, but it was clear our relationship would start out adversarial. She stood in the door to my office, one hand on the knob, car keys in the other, glaring. I thought, if I'm any kind of therapist, I can get her all the way into the room before the hour is up. I dug down for my most engaging, embracing, tolerant self and got nothing from her but *very* short answers. Yes, no, yes, no, maybe, who cares, it's in my file, kiss my ass. I noticed as she was adding nothing to my fund of knowledge about her that she was digging along the seam of her jeans with the tip of her car key. Halfway through the session, the seam was open from just below the waist to halfway down her leg, and the tip of the key was red. By the time the session was over, she'd made it all the way to the knee.

And she had not moved one step toward me. I silently admitted defeat and began to wrap it up. I said, "Are you pissed off at me?"

She said, "No. Why?"

I pointed to her damaged jeans and bleeding leg.

She told me to do something that's actually anatomically impossible to do, fired the keys at me, and stormed out.

I did it! I thought, clutching her keys. *She's got to come all the way back in here to get these.*

And I just found my Sarah Byrnes.

Sometimes progress is measured in baby steps.

But over the next several sessions, I got a foot in the door to her pain. She moved farther into my office, actually took a seat. Little by little, she tested my willingness to hear and not judge, and pieces of her story came to light. Her parents had adopted her as a playmate for her older brother (*that didn't pan out; he hated her*). Her adopted father, whom she loved, often beat her so that her adopted mother wouldn't beat her

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harder. She had always had to get to the one thing she loved—sports—any way she could, often walking up to five miles to get to the gym or track or field. Like a lot of kids in her situation, foster care created at least as many problems as it solved. Things would get violent at home so she'd get removed, but being away created so much anxiety she'd blow out of foster

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home after foster home until there was nothing to do but send her back into this crazy family. In, out, in, out. I can't tell you the number of times during a session when all I could do was tether myself to some solid anchor in my own life and jump off the cliff with her. And this kid was tougher than kids get.

But sometimes, if you listen closely enough and allow your imagination full range, a truth arises; an anchor for *her* life. In Brenda's case, it was Mrs. Richardson, her third-grade teacher. Smart as she was, Brenda hated school and

had succeeded in driving most of her teachers away, or at least keeping them at a safe distance. But not Mrs. Richardson. Bit by bit, Mrs. Richardson would float to the surface of Brenda's stories about her elementary school life. "She just listened to me," Brenda told me once. "She believed me and didn't judge me or tell me that everything would be all right." On weekend days when Brenda couldn't get a ride to her soccer or softball game or her track meet, Mrs. Richardson would magically show up, maybe a block away from Brenda's house, at exactly the right time with a ride. On the way home, there would be time for ice cream. She would keep Brenda after school some days to get her studies done, knowing the chaos of home would never produce finished homework.

Somehow Brenda made it. She graduated from high school and was able to get scholarships in soccer, softball, and cross country, which let her piece together a college education. She met a guy, another

athlete, who, like Mrs. Richardson, saw through the white hot fog of her rage into her heart and hung in there with her.

Brenda and I had sporadic contact through her college and early working years. She'd call in a crisis, and we'd dig through her bag of tricks for something that would allow her to get a handhold long enough to pull herself back up. I remember one day as we walked down the hall past the kids' playroom at my private practice office, she glanced in to see a young guy punching the heavy bag while he cussed out his "bad dad." On our way out at the end of that session, she walked into the now-empty playroom and went after the heavy bag. I tried to give her the gloves, to no avail, and stopped her when the heavy bag began spotting red. Her knuckles were ragged, but her soul was now quiet.

Then one day I opened my mailbox to find an elegant, engraved envelope containing her wedding announcement. I remember thinking, either she has a really good job or this is going to be a small wedding because this announcement is *expensive*. She must have read my mind because inside the card was a scribbled note saying, "Don't be a dumbass. I only sent two of these expensive ones. To the two people who saved my life."

Truth is, I came along way too late to save Brenda's life. If it hadn't been for Mrs. Richardson, I'd have never met Brenda. At best, I was a conduit.

The wedding was held in a local park in summertime. Brenda was decked out in an elegant white wedding dress, complete with wedding veil and a long train. And running shoes. She and I stood waiting for the ceremony to start, talking about the curious path leading here through the chaos of her life, doing a quick fist bump celebrating her TKO of Jim the Therapist, when a ten-year-old Datsun station wagon pulled into the parking lot and a middle-aged woman stepped out. Brenda broke off in mid-sentence and shot across the grass toward Mrs. Richardson, the long train whipping behind her. She looked like a kite. She didn't knock Mrs. Richardson over when she jumped into her arms, but it was close.

They stood laughing and crying, hugging, stepping back, hugging again. They hadn't seen each other since Brenda's third grade. When I thanked Mrs. Richardson for all the fine work she'd done for me over

the years, I'm pretty sure she thought either I had her mixed up with someone else or was in need of mental health services of my own.

That should have contributed all the pieces I needed for my happy ending. The human's life who had provided the *voice* for Sarah Byrnes had turned out better than my fictional character. But we were out of fiction and back into the real world. I maintained contact with Brenda because, as most of you know, wedded bliss as a cure-all can be overstated. When Brenda gave birth to her first daughter, we began making regular contact because she was well aware of the possibility of the horrors of her childhood leaking through, and of course there were the anger issues she had always dealt with, as well as the need to attend to some interpersonal skills required to keep a marriage afloat.

The one thing we always had to fall back on, when depression snuck up on her or rage exploded from some corner where she let vigilance slip, was physical activity. She could punch out the heavy bag, take a long hard bike ride, go for a run, or take it out on some unsuspecting member of a rival soccer team. The extreme athletic world was her milieu.

Her athletic trail led her to mountain biking. Mountain biking had all the elements a girl with a near-death wish could want—steep hills, rocky trails, the opportunity to knock some overly aggressive rival off the road and down the hill.

But then, on a Monday morning in the fall, my phone rang.

Brenda: Ya gotta come see me, man.

Me: Where are you?

Brenda: Deaconess. The rehab center.

I figured some other Brenda-like mountain biker had gotten a leg up on her.

I walked into Brenda's room at Deaconess to see her lying flat, immobilized.

She had gone over to the coast to a two-day mountain bike event. At the end of a relatively unsuccessful Saturday, she returned to her hotel, feeling something wrong in her legs. She just didn't feel the coordination she always counted on. By Sunday night, she was technically a quadriplegic. No control of her legs and only large motor control in her arms and hands.

Progressive MS. Not going to get better. Get used to it. That's how her colossally insensitive doctor said it.

I don't curse the universe much, but walking back to the car that day, I gave thanks that her paralysis was so complete she couldn't kill herself and silently told everyone who ever told me God doesn't give us more than we can endure to kiss my ass. Our one refuge was wiped out. No matter how bad things got, no matter how bleak the future, Brenda could always bring herself back through physical challenge. And it was a place I could join her. And it was gone.

But my real-life Sarah Byrnes was twice as tough as my fictional Sarah Byrnes and ten times as tough as me. Her insurance company reduced the number of physical therapy sessions they were willing to pay for because her condition was expected to get progressively worse. But she was such an inspiration to the other members of her therapy group that the physical therapist offered to treat her free. The hospital wouldn't allow it because of liability. In true Sarah Byrnes form, she said fuck 'em. Anything I can do at the rehab center, I can do at home. And fuck 'em for telling me I won't get better.

Brenda took on her rehab like it was Olympic, and against all conventional wisdom, the harder she worked, the better she got. Small motor coordination *did* return in her arms and hands, and she learned to manage. In fact, she started playing wheelchair basketball. The craziness of the insurance/SSI/greedy health system wouldn't allow her to own apparatuses she needed to improve. The monetary value of those apparatuses automatically reduced her aid money.

So, in true Sarah Byrnes form, *I* said fuck 'em. I am now the proud owner of a whole bunch of rehab structures I hope I don't live long enough to have to use.

Brenda called one day to tell me she wanted to go to the Y. She wanted to swim. I said, "Brenda, you couldn't swim worth a damn before the MS." She said, "Are you a lifeguard or not?"

I swear, we got in the water with a system of floaties she could have used to swim from Cuba, and she swam 500 yards. That's twenty lengths of the pool. On the way out, she saw a teenager working with some grade-school kids on the climbing wall. He

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heard her ask me, “Why can’t I do that?” He said, “No reason” and helped her into the harness. Brenda made it *one handhold* away from the top on arm strength alone. When he brought her down, she slugged him in the shoulder, her version of a hug, and said, “Next time.”

I had breakfast with Brenda about a week ago. She walked into the diner, her crutches under her arms (just in case), sat down, and showed me pictures of her daughters: one on a graduate Fulbright fellowship in Brazil teaching English and environmental science at a remote university in the rainforest, the other an eight-year-old playing soccer two age groups up. “She scares me, Chris. You think *I* was bad.”

I did think she was bad. And I think she is good.

And without that teacher coming along at just the right time, with just the right combination of toughness and compassion, This. Shit. Doesn’t. Happen.

Good teachers save lives.

Thank you for your time and attention, and thank you for all you do.

Chris Crutcher’s years as a teacher in, then director of, a K–12 alternative school in Oakland, California, through the 1970s and his subsequent years as a therapist specializing in child abuse and neglect inform his 10 novels and 2 collections of short stories. He has also written what he calls an ill-advised autobiography titled *King of the Mild Frontier*, which was designated by Publishers Weekly as “the YA book most adults would have read if they knew it existed.” Chris has received a number of coveted awards, from his high school designation as “Most Likely to Plagiarize” to the American Library Association’s Margaret A. Edwards Lifetime Achievement Award. His favorites are his two Intellectual Freedom awards—one from the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the other from the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC).

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