

The Adventure of Reading

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Abstract:

Reading takes one on an adventure. The ends are pleasure and knowledge. As on any journey, the people we meet along the road shape our thoughts, hopes and desires.

Can we inspire those who find it difficult to get started that the adventure is worth the effort?

The Adventure of Reading

I would like to introduce this session with a cautionary tale. It is taken from the opening to St Exupery's wonderful novella 'Le petit Prince' or 'The Little Prince':

"The Little Prince"

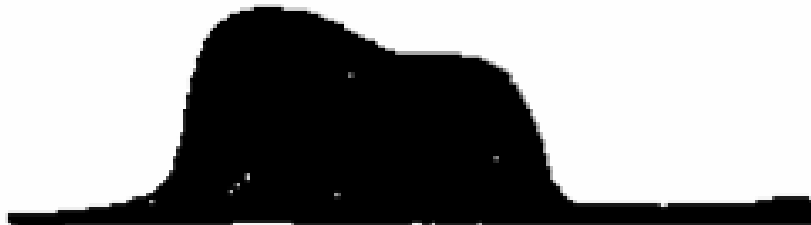
by Antoine de Sainte Exupery.

Once when I was six years old I saw a magnificent picture in a book, called True Stories from Nature, about the primeval forest. It was a picture of a boa constrictor in the act of swallowing an animal. Here is a copy of the drawing:



In the book it said: "Boa constrictors swallow their prey whole, without chewing it. After that they are not able to move, and they sleep through the six months that they need for digestion."

I pondered deeply, then, over the adventures of the jungle. And after some work with a colored pencil I succeeded in making my first drawing. My Drawing Number One. It looked like this:



I showed my masterpiece to the grown-ups, and asked them whether the drawing frightened them.

But they answered: "Frighten? Why should any one be frightened by a hat?"

My drawing was not a picture of a hat. It was a picture of a boa constrictor digesting an elephant. But since the grown-ups were not able to understand it, I made another drawing: I drew the inside of the boa constrictor, so that the grown-ups could see it clearly. **They always need to have things explained.** My Drawing Number Two looked like this:



The grown-ups' response, this time, was to advise me to lay aside my drawings of boa constrictors, whether from the inside or the outside, and devote myself instead to geography, history, arithmetic and grammar. That is why, at the age of six, I gave up what might have been a magnificent career as a painter. I had been disheartened by the failure of my Drawing Number One and my Drawing Number Two. Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them.

So then I chose another profession, and learned to pilot airplanes. I have flown a little over all parts of the world; and it is true that geography has been very useful to me. At a glance I can distinguish China from Arizona. If one gets lost in the night, such knowledge is valuable.

In the course of this life I have had a great many encounters with a great many people who have been concerned with matters of consequence. I have lived a great deal among grown-ups. I have seen them intimately, close at hand. And that hasn't much improved my opinion of them.

Whenever I met one of them who seemed to me at all clear-sighted, I tried the experiment of showing him my Drawing Number One, which I have always kept. I would try to find out, so, if this was a person of true understanding. But, whoever it was, he, or she, would always say:

"That is a hat."

Then I would never talk to that person about boa constrictors, or primeval forests, or stars. I would bring myself down to his level. I would talk to him about bridge, and golf, and politics, and neckties. And the grown-up would be greatly pleased to have met such a sensible man.'

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I asked my colleagues what elements they would expect an adventure to contain. They gave me the following answers, in no particular order:

1. Anticipation
2. Danger
3. Novelty
4. Excitement
5. Achievement
6. Fun
7. Knowledge
8. Reflection
9. Insight

I hope during your little adventure with me today you will experience some, if not all of these elements. Secondly, I hope the content of what I have to say will highlight some of the elements in the adventure of reading. Most of the time I will take off my hat as 'scientific' psychologist and speak more from my background in the arts. The arts are not so much bounded by time and space and measurement as are the pursuits of science. The arts deal with realities such as beauty, the imagination; with questions such as *what if?*

I want to bring you on a journey of discovery, at first down memory lane: and then into a world of virtual reality.

What book comes to mind, what pleasure and excitement is evoked by remembering your favourite book? What magical world is conjured up? (Ask the devotees of Harry Potter and they will soon tell you.) If I'm not mistaken, those of us, for whom reading is now as natural an activity as eating a meal, can recall a book or books that opened up a new world for us at impressionable or critical moments of our lives. I became a teacher, perhaps, because a book called 'Judith Teaches' inflamed my imagination when I was sixteen years old. I could nearly say I became a psychologist

because the books I read with Jungian interpretation of literature seemed to bring together two passions at the time: my own personal journey and my love of literature. I can still remember the feeling of exhilaration I got walking home from Trinity College having discovered Rene Hague's Notes on the *Anthemata* of David Jones, how the one opened up the universe in the other when I thought the door to it was locked; or how Tolstoy's *War and Peace* or E.M Foster's *Passage to India* or Doris Lessing's *Martha Quest* reverberated with some aspect of my living at the time. There are other books that I remember for the sheer pleasure they gave, a 'jolly good read'!

You will each have a book, or books, that has remained in your heart, whether because of the time you read it, the story it told, the amount of blood, sweat and tears it took to understand and write about it for an examination. One way or another, reading is a **sophisticated, civilised and civilising activity**. And value. We still live in a print-rich environment. Access to the world of print is easier and more general than heretofore, albeit harder to get into if you have dyslexia. But more possible than ever.

So where do we begin?

The starting point of a journey is having a goal. In a poem by the Greek poet Constantine P. Cavafy called *Ithaca*, the poet recalls the epic and archetypal journey of Ulysses back to his homeland. He admonishes the traveller

'Always keep Ithaca on your mind.

To arrive there is the ultimate goal'

What might Ithaca be?

Ithaca is every Promised Land, it is the 'ultimate goal'. For us, in the context of today's conference and of this talk, Ithaca is the wisdom and wholeness we achieve through other people's words, particularly their written words.

Arriving there implies the struggle to be able to enjoy reading: to take up a book and read it with pleasure, take in what it says, not have to re-read, be able to discuss it with a friend and use it as a tool to higher goals. 'Always keep Ithaca on your mind'. Cavafy further describes the journey:

Ithaca

When you set out on your journey to Ithaca,
pray that the road is long,
full of adventure, full of knowledge.

.....

Pray that the road is long.
That the summer mornings are many, when,
with such pleasure, with such joy
you will enter ports seen for the first time;
stop at Phoenician markets,
and purchase fine merchandise,
mother-of-pearl and coral, amber, and ebony,
and sensual perfumes of all kinds,
as many sensual perfumes as you can;
visit many Egyptian cities,
to learn and learn from scholars.

... do not hurry the voyage at all.
It is better to let it last for many years;
and to anchor at the island when you are old,
rich with all you have gained on the way,

Always keep Ithaca in your mind:

Learning to read words, sentences, paragraphs, pages is a **means** to an end
not an end in itself. Sometimes a child tells me that reading a newspaper in
place of watching TV is better for you because it helps you to read better, and
I think 'she hasn't understood'. She doesn't know why she is trying to learn to
read. **Always keep Ithaca in your mind.** If she understands that this is a
trophy worth playing for it may help her to keep going. Knowledge,
understanding of life, wholeness, pleasure is the goal, not reading in itself.
Always keep that in mind when you are downhearted about the
journey/struggle, (when the phonics, decoding, sight vocabulary, end of year
tests keep shouting in your ear 'she'll never do it!').

The poet notes that the goal is not where the treasure is. The riches are to be gathered on the way.

The road to Ithaca is not direct. It is reached only after detours, false starts, failures. Most parents who have children with dyslexia, perhaps many of you yourselves, are/have been down this way. Perchance somebody or something – a learning support teacher, a friend, your inner creative streak, the chance picking up of a book - will come along and point you in a new direction and you speed off until the next road-block. Remember discouragement is the great enemy of achievement. Encouragement gives renewed heart. (I feel I'm on the yellow brick road!) If you persevere and if your attitude is right the obstacles can become adventures and you may expect to find there treasures of knowledge, pleasure, wisdom, what you will.

To repeat the analogy with sport, the exercises have to be done to enhance your skills, but in the end the skills thus learned come together in the real activity of the match. The match enhances skills because other motivations kick into play together with the learned skills. So it is with reading. Reading a book, listening to a book being read is a whole different experience from learning to read, sound by sound.

How do we release the magic?

Is the problem in getting started? Or being motivated? To take up the previous point made, a book is more than a series of words. It is a whole world of thought, ideas and imagination. The challenge is to find ways to invite the reader to sample the potential pleasure hidden between the covers. First rule is exposure. Talking about the books I have here will not give anything like the pleasure of turning the pages and gleaning their contents.

What place does the library and the bookshop play in the life of the family?

There are some places that should be just wandered into every time you pass and these are two such, (as well as the dress shop and the gadgets and video games shops). No big deal, and certainly not a 'duty', just a check to see if there is anything new that takes your fancy or your child's fancy. Children

should be able to handle beautiful books, look at its pictures, fall into the trance of imagination.

If you are like me you may be in danger of being overwhelmed by the volume of publications, so it does help if you know something that you want to read. If not, ask. There are specialists in most good bookshops and libraries who are more than willing to advise you. Some, such as the DunLaoghaire/Rathdown Library Service, have compiled lists of really good reading suitable for all ages. There are wonderful books available and books on tape. The bookshops have similar lists. In fact Dubray Books have their own guide with reviews and interviews with authors.

The books I recalled at the outset make a motley list. What joins them together is how unexpected their pleasure was. You never know what will spark a flame, or start the journey. Frequently, I hear stories of reluctant teenager readers who suddenly discover the new world of reading from a particular book they have taken up and, then like Shackleton or the great explorers go back again and again to unlock more secrets. The golden rule is let the child follow his interest. Which is not to say that you cannot also develop interest in a wide panoply of kinds of reading. It doesn't matter whether you are drawn by the **subject matter**, the **colour illustrations**, the **author's ability to tell a good story**; whether the **characters** make you laugh or cry, whether the writer **discusses issues** about which you are passionate or whether you just **like the feel** of this book, the pure **beauty** of the printed object, there are multiple ways into this world. Then, indeed, we will find ourselves, like Wordsworth and CS Lewis, 'surprised by joy'.

The next question is how do you read? I could give you technical explanation of the process as far as we know it from scientific research. But I'll refrain for as long as I can: that belongs to my psychologist's hat. Instead I want you to think about colour and sound and imagination, features that may change, develop, augment the way you and your child read.

Let's think about books that have illustrations as well as text. Many children with dyslexia have better than usual visuospatial abilities, that is they process more with their eyes than with their ears. We buy **picture books** for them at the start. Good. When are they expected to get beyond the picture stage? Never...They/you **progress**. It is never a good thing to be too exclusive, even snobbish about books. 'Serious books don't have pictures'. Don't they? What about the Book of Kells? Should I throw out my complete works of Shakespeare because it is full of quirky illustrations and character sketches, literally, sketches! What about Lord Pakenham's wonderful book about wonderful trees. It often surprises me when children don't **read** the pictures. Many do. Like every other skill reading visual information is a skill that can be developed.

How do you **read** picture books? You verbalise, the child verbalises? Do we run too quickly to meaning and story? Or, do you **look** and **savour**? The best picture books have high quality illustrations that challenge thought not just about what happens but about the emotions and character of the creatures. Books such as those illustrated by PJ Lynch use pictures to **complement** the verbal telling. The don't just illustrate the story, they add to the story. **Look** at the range of characters portrayed, **look** at the menace, the bizarre, the affection that is present in the shades of colour, movement, size.

Each detail is designed to encourage the reader to **fill out** the atmosphere of the world that is also described in words. We see light and shade, we see characters leap into three dimensions. We can grasp a world. Not everybody is sensitive to nuances of words, that's a skill that will also need to be developed over the years and to which I shall return, but for the moment I want to stay with picture. Approaching story through the medium of picture is a powerful way of teaching the emergent child that there is more to life than meets the eye. We convey something of our personal inner world by how we move, the expressions on our face, even the colours we wear may relate to mood.

Good illustrations are part of the text: they extend it, tell you more. Look at the layout on the page:

Text and picture are interwoven not by accident. Your eye follows the lines as your ear hears the words. They also condense the amount of reading words needed to convey their story and message. No need to long descriptive passages... yet.

And now **listen** to words. Words are what can defeat a child with dyslexia, if you let them. They have difficulty getting them out, fitting the word to the situation, getting to know the look of them.

The poet, TS Eliot, a great artist with words, describes what happens to the writer. He might well be talking to all of us as we try to put words on our experience:

Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.

TSEliot: *Four Quartets, Burnt Norton*

Shakespeare's *King Lear* complained bitterly that words can be hijacked.

Words without feeling are empty ciphers:

‘words, words, words, no matter from the heart’.

For the writer words always contain ‘matter from the heart’.

It takes years to build up a satisfactory vocabulary, satisfactory, that is, for what you want to say. Oral language is the precursor of written language. If you know a word to use it in speech you are more likely to be able to recognise it or at least make a good guess at it in text. On the other hand people with short working memory capacity or diminished phonological awareness may have difficulty at first hearing the words accurately and have

difficulty both with memory and recall and so their limited store of words is a further barrier when they go on to read. It is a circle: You read better because you know more words, you know words because you have met them in your reading. Vocabulary acquired through reading is powerful instrument in acquiring one's own unique vocabulary.

Reading and writing words that have a particular personal significance e.g. your name, your address, words in the environment is the first stage of literacy. It is well researched that children's first awareness of a written system of language is from the words that have meaning in their everyday lives. They will recognise whole words and only later have to learn the details of an alphabetic system. It is at this analytic, conscious stage that the difficulties develop.

Have you noticed how a child first 'reads' her favourite book?. The young child who eagerly wants to read will often make up/read his own word to create the story. Many will use what we call top-down strategies to read i.e. deduce the word because it is the most likely word to make sense of this group of words. When they do so you know the activity of reading has lit their imagination. Let us not stifle that with rules of grammar and spelling and decoding. Not yet. Often they will insert synonyms or cognate words when they cannot recognise or decode the word that is written. Does it matter at this early stage when we want to read for pleasure? We don't always need to read every word on the page to understand. Fluent readers are able to skim across and absorb meaning from the key words and grammatical structure of the sentence. 'There will be time...' say Eliot or the writer of the Book of Ecclesiasticus

'To everything there is a season, and
a time to every purpose under heaven: ...'

There will be a time for concentrating on accuracy, ...but not now.

Words work at different levels. Words are beautiful objects, like Russian dolls: peel away the outside and you have a series of other objects,

associations, personal stories within. They usually carry more than single meaning, or description of objective reality. Even if you cannot now read every word the writer's choice of words does matter. The writer who described the wolf's action 'he blew, and blew and blew' knew what he was doing. The sound, the rhythm, the repetition, even the way you purse your lips when you say the word conveys not only an action that can be mimed, but also his determination and effort, perhaps malevolence. It is more than a childish way of conveying that he destroyed the house! When Milton wrote:

'Him the Almighty hurled headlong flaming from the ethereal sky'

or Coleridge described the Ancient Mariner

'alone, alone, all, all alone

On a wide wide sea'

their words are intended to convey a pictorial and sound effect that extend the emotional reality as forcefully as the earlier illustrations did in their context. At the early stage encourage the child to **listen** to words

Let me explain in another way about listening, or rather let Thomas Lux explain it:

The Voice You Hear When You Read Silently – by Thomas Lux

is not silent, it is a speaking-
out-loud voice in your head: is it *spoken*,
a voice is *saying* it
as you read. It's the writer's words,
of course, in a literary sense
his or her *voice*, but the sound
of that voice is the sound of your voice.
Not the sound your friends know
or the sound of a tape played back
but your voice
caught in the dark cathedral
of your skull, your voice heard
by an internal ear informed by internal abstracts
and what you know by feeling,
having felt. It is your voice

saying, for example, the word *barn*
that the writer wrote
but the barn you say
is a barn you know or knew. The voice
in your head, speaking as you read,
never says anything neutrally — some people
hated the barn they knew,
some people love the barn they know
so you hear the word loaded
and a sensory constellation
is lit: horse-gnawed stalls,
hayloft, black heat tape wrapping
a water pipe, a slippery
spilled chirr of oats from a split sack,
the bony, filthy haunches of cows. . . .
And barn is only a noun — no verb
or subject has entered into the sentence yet!
The voice you hear when you read to yourself
is the clearest voice: you speak it
speaking to you.

Invite the reader to listen to ‘the voice you hear when you read to yourself’
and let it take precedence over word by word reading. Listen to the story, let
the characters come alive, and have live dialogues in the world of the reader’s
imagination. Afterwards you may play a game with yourself and/or with your
child: see if the impact is different if you change a word for one you might
choose. Make up a Scrabble game of your own allowing only words that you
have met in the tale.... But beware, this is for later. **There will be time...**

By playing with words in this way what you are doing is laying the foundation
for your child’s **comprehension of text** beyond the literal, because we often
imply meaning rather than state it and we often want to convey experience
rather than fact. Words release the imagination and allow the reader to enter
into a world of virtual reality. In this world our reality is extended and
modified. On the one hand some one else’s experience brings us into a new
world. We become absorbed in the landscape of the writer’s imagination. If

we can visualise and forget ourselves as we imagine this virtual world we begin to share the struggles and adventures and fates of the characters.

One of the features of an adventure is the opportunity it gives to reflect, particularly reflect on what is really important. Reading is not a passive occupation. Somehow our own value system and prejudices can be challenged if we stop to think. Why else are novels such as *David Copperfield*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Good-night Mr. Tom* prescribed for examination? All great stories are about the hard realities of existence. The writer EM Foster, in a classic analysis of the difference between story and plot, made this distinction between the story, which tells you 'this happened' and then this happened '. Plot, on the other hand, draws out connections, causal relationships. This happened **because** this happened, **because** this happened. When interviewed about her Booker prize winning novel, on Wednesday morning last, Anne Enright summarised her tale as being an account of a woman who has just suffered a family tragedy trying to find the events in past generations that may have sown the seeds of destruction which have ended in this event. Good plots explore and try to make sense of what are sometimes senseless events. Many of the current best teenage novels address really hard subjects. They deserve and reward discussion together. To do so is well worth the experience. You can be as involved with your child's reading as you are with their sport, for example. Initially you are the story teller to quote another great Irish children's writer, Sam Mc Bratney: 'reading to children , reading with them at the quiet end of the day just feels to me like one of the most natural and worthwhile things you can do. The benefits may last for all of a lifetime'.

Reluctant readers, especially, need somebody to accompany them even after the initial stages. Once the activity of reading is taken out of the school situation and not seen as a duty, magic things may happen. Society at the moment is buzzing with readers' clubs and groups at the moment. Why not children's reading clubs? Or a group of friends together? I often hear a children's programme *Go for It*, on BBC 4 on a Sunday nights. I am fascinated by the precocious young people who have no difficulty expressing

quite sophisticated views and giving their opinions on books they may have read. I have heard them on RTE also. The idea of giving a child a book for review and allowing them a forum in which to discuss it must surely increase their self confidence, thinking skills and appreciation of the world of books.

To draw to a conclusion: Reading is a stage in developing imagination, it is a way of being able to enter into reflection about ourselves and to understanding and empathise with others. It allows us to ask the question 'what if?'. I have not dealt with subject knowledge. But I hope I have shown some of the pleasures of reading, the action of sitting down with a book, getting lost/absorbed in its world, a deeply human and humanising activity.

I have peopled my text with other writers' words because they can say much better than I can what I want to say. There is a book for everyone, that magic book that will start the child or the reluctant teenager, or the turned-off adult.