

Keeping Stories

In his short story, “The Things They Carried,” Tim O’Brien tells of the experiences of a few U.S. soldiers in Viet Nam, detailing for the reader the things they carried, both tangible and intangible. It is this story that came to mind when I read the prompt for the Wauwatosa All-City Read essay contest.

As stories do, “The Things They Carried” triggered a response in me. What have I kept as I have portaged through life? What, like soldiers in Viet Nam, have I considered essential to survival, not physical survival in my case, but to the well-being of my spirit? I know that stories read and remembered at crucial times have sustained me, enriched me, and enlarged my life, for it is through stories that I have gained insight into the human condition and therefore my own. Stories have shown me myself and helped me to be more understanding of others. When I read stories, I settle in, my guard down. I can step into the lives of others and, in doing so, see myself without becoming defensive. Truth-telling stories, well written, not only delight me, but change me. Stories are what I carry with me.

In high school the story of Thoreau at Walden resonated deeply with me. Awakened to the world of ideas and stunned by the philosophy of transcendentalism, I finally had words for what I knew deep down but hadn’t been able to articulate. Like Thoreau, I wanted to “live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.” Many years later, I still want to live deliberately, to think carefully about all things in life, to examine who I am and to know my place in the world. I want to keep Thoreau’s encouragement to live thoughtfully and with integrity.

I still want to be like Atticus Finch who was never false and whose integrity never wavered. I have read *To Kill a Mockingbird* many times, and Atticus' example never fails to inspire me. Standing alone against prejudice, not concerning himself with the opinion of others, but simply doing the right thing, Atticus is my favorite hero. "Before I can live with other folks I've got to live with myself. The one thing that doesn't abide by majority rule is a person's conscience." Atticus Finch did not curry favor, did not rationalize, and did not take the easy way out. That kind of courage is costly, and he almost lost his children. But what a legacy he gave them. His example shaped them and enabled them, though young, to see "what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you know when you're licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and see it through no matter what." I want to keep Atticus' example of doing the right thing even when unpopular and whether or not it will result in success.

Neither living with integrity nor according to the dictates of her conscience, Lady Macbeth pursues power until her guilt consumes her. She lets nothing get in her way of ensuring that her husband becomes king. She incites her husband to murder, and one crime leads to many more. She does get what she wants, but the cost is more than even she can handle:

Noughts had, all's spent,
Where our desire is got without content;
Tis safer to be that which we destroy
Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.

Ravaged by guilt and discontent, Lady Macbeth, though achieving her goal, loses her life and worse, her soul. The single-minded, no-holds-barred pursuit of power and fame destroys the pursuer. I want to keep this cautionary story as a reminder of the corrupting nature of power.

In *One True Thing* by Anna Quindlen, Kate Gulden understands what Lady Macbeth didn't—the secret of being content. Wiser by far, Kate lives largely while dying of cancer at the age of 48. The subtitle of *One True Thing*, *Love What You Have*, gets to the heart of the matter—what you have may not be all you want, but accepting what is and making the best of it, good and bad, brings peace. Kate, despite an unfaithful husband, despite being misunderstood by her daughter, has the wisdom to be thankful for the good in her life while accepting the difficulties in it. I want to keep Kate Gulden's example of being content.

In *Orphan Train* Molly and Vivian are both searching for family while enduring unspeakable hardships. Though much different in age, their shared stories create a bond of love and acceptance, and, perhaps, even a realization that their friendship was meant to be:

What up until this moment has felt like a random, disconnected series of unhappy events she now views as necessary steps in a journey toward...*enlightenment* is perhaps too strong a word, but there are others, less lofty, like *self-acceptance* and *perspective*. She has never believed in fate; it would've been dispiriting to accept that her life so far unfolded as it did according to some preordained pattern. But now she wonders. If she hadn't been bounced from one foster home to the next, she wouldn't have ended up on this island—and met Jack, and through him, Vivian. She would never have heard Vivian's story, with all its resonance to her own.

The stories of the people in my life bring me closer to them, helping me to understand what they've gone through, creating a bond of love. Molly and Vivian help me to listen to the stories of others.

In the Bible, the story of the prophet Nathan going to King David to tell him a story about himself is a vivid example of the power of stories to enlighten us and even to turn us around.

Nathan tells David about a rich man with many sheep and a poor man who had nothing except one little lamb whom he loved as a daughter. It slept in his arms and was like a member of the family. The rich man had a visitor and he wanted to prepare a feast for him, but instead of taking one of his own sheep, he took the one and only dearly-loved lamb of the poor man. This story so infuriated David that he said that the rich man who did this deserved to die because he did such a thing and had no pity. Then Nathan said to David, “You are the man!” And David was the man—and he knew it because he had taken another man’s wife for himself, though he had many, and saw to it that her husband was killed.

David’s guard was down because a story in and of itself is non-threatening. He was guilty of much, yet he did not acknowledge it until he heard a story. It took a story to bring him to his knees. It was a story that woke him to the reality of his actions and their consequences. And it was the proclamation “You are the man!” that turned his life around. And, me too, I am the man. And I am Lady Macbeth and Kate Gulden, Thoreau and Atticus, Molly and Vivian. Their stories are mine, and like all good stories, they nourish and delight me on my journey. They enlighten and change me. I keep them and am kept by them, and for that I am grateful.