

Teacher to Teacher

039-0300-0039



Have You Met My Friend Robert? The Power of the Right Book at the Right Time

Autumn Tooms
Kent State University

When I was a junior in high school, I was a nerd. I had glasses and braces, and I loved biology. For the most part I was a happy nerd, until the day it became clear to me that being different was not something to be proud of. I didn't understand why one had to be wearing Izod shirts to be validated. I did not want to look like everyone else and did not want to act like everyone else either. But my hormonally driven need for acceptance was always in conflict with a perverse delight in being so unusual. Silly me, I had thought that being the only girl on the ROTC rifle team would actually help me get a date to the junior prom. When the prom came and went without me, I decided that being different was not good.

I was feeling particularly pathetic and self absorbed one morning during the prom season of my senior year when my reading teacher, Karen Hess, asked if I would like to be part of the committee to design the invitations for our school's graduation. I was not sure how this committee rated on the cool meter. Because I half heartedly expressed my skepticism, I was directed to go the library and find a poem for the invitation.

Oh great. Now I had to go to the library... I knew *that* was not a cool thing. Only nerds did that. When I winced at her request, Mrs. Hess retaliated by telling me to not only go to the library but to look up her friend Robert... Robert Frost. So I went and asked the front desk if I could see Mr. Frost. It took two seconds for me to get the joke: Ha ha- he's dead and I get to choose from a stack of his books. I pouted and flopped open a poetry book. I looked down to see this:

“...Somewhere ages and ages hence;
Two roads diverged in the wood, and I-
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.”

Who was this Robert Frost? How did he know about being unusual? This guy even said being different made his life better. Suddenly, I knew a little more about myself and my world because of Mr. Frost's insight. I decided that I could be comfortable in my uncool and unpopular skin.

I read the poem over and over, savoring every word, incredulous that this person I had not met knew me so well. I ran back to Mrs. Hess and gleefully showed her “The Road Not Taken.” I announced this was the creed our senior class needed. More specifically, I shared that this was *my creed*. I

had found my own song of myself. When I calmed down enough to listen, Mrs. Hess said, “So you have learned what an epiphany feels like. Good for you! Do you see the power of a book? The written word is a legacy that spans time, space, and culture. Going to the library is really like going on a treasure hunt for the next secret about how the world works. Let me know when you think you can handle treasure hunting again.”

At that moment I discovered the most profound pleasure of reading: bumping into the right book at the right time. Great teachers understand this. They know that reading can be a magnificent experience, but only when the reader is ready for the insight of a particular book. Do you think that these teachers are only in academic settings? Think again. Phil Jackson, the world famous professional basketball coach, is well known for assigning a unique reading list for each player and assistant coach on his team. His hope is that the reading will foster personal growth and fulfillment. Jackson started the practice when he was coaching the Chicago Bulls. In a regular locker room ritual, Jackson would hand out books he purchased specifically for his team. He has said that sometimes he could almost hear the “thanks” as certain players swiftly dropped their gifts into the nearest garbage can. Other times, he has said that he could almost hear the whirring of minds as players digested the volumes (Lazenby, 2000). Do not assume that Jackson's choices are the obvious ones, either. His reading lists for his colleagues do not contain a single book about sports. For example, in 2001 after two back-to-back national championship victories, he gave Los Angeles Laker Shaquille O'Neal a copy of *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse. Jackson claims he chose this book because,

I wanted Shaq to realize that many things must be tried, found, and then put aside before the true goal in life or sport can be approached. Shaq needs to sense the discipline, the asceticism, the denial of food, sleep and other deprivations of Siddhartha along the path to salvation and to see how Siddhartha found deliverance finally through good works. I wanted Shaq to take the steps to inner peace, to become quiet, to get into the attitude of non-attention to desire. Not to eliminate it, but not to fall prey to it. For Shaq, it has to be his own path. Until you get on that path, there won't be an answer... He really seemed to like it. He knew what I

was trying to get across and I believe he appreciated it. (Tealander, 2001)

Not all of Jackson's choices are coffee-table-bending volumes. He suggested African-born Dikembe Mutombo (a forward for the Philadelphia 76ers) read Aesop's "The Tortoise and the Hare." Why? "Dikembe does not have the overall muscle, skill, and drive that Shaq has. But he is a real humanitarian and a great guy. That is why I think he can benefit from reading a fantasy where a slow and less skilled character actually wins" (Tealander, 2001).

Being a teacher is one thing. Being a literacy apostle for the people you serve is quite another. The ability to touch another's life by way of the gift of a book is not such a difficult goal to aspire to. However, it does require you to reflect on your own Rolodex of literary works that you have enjoyed. Being aware of this Rolodex is a small discipline that is akin to recommending a movie to a friend. After you see a particular movie, you might think about where it was filmed and then realize your friend would like the scenery, drama, or the great performance of the hunky star.

If you can't remember the last book or poem you have read, take heart. There are places all over the Internet to help whet your appetite for a book or to remind you of good ones you have delved into before. Do you want to check out a few of the 100 greatest poems ever written? Go to <http://www.poetry.com/greatestpoems/list.asp>. Perhaps you would like to see what the Modern Library lists as the 100 best novels. Then surf to <http://www.randomhouse.com/modernlibrary/100bestnovels.html>. If you enjoy nonfiction, check another Random House website: <http://www.randomhouse.com/modernlibrary/100bestnonfiction.html>.

Do you remember the first time you read Shirley Jackson's creepy short story called "The Lottery?" If you would like to explore other short stories from the masters of this genre go to <http://ee.iasphost.com/shortstoryclassics/index.html>. And Billy Collins, former Poet Laureate for the United States, has compiled a list of 180 poems (one a day for the entire school year) he believes are interesting for students. They are at this website: <http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180>.

If you are looking for ways to help those around you beef up their own Rolodex of great literary works, consider a putting up a bulletin board in a central place where you post the lists offered on these websites. Schools are not the only places where reading becomes part of the culture. One Ohio-based public relations firm has a bookcase in the employees' restrooms filled with books that coworkers share. A whiteboard on the wall lists the books and who brought them in so that borrowers can ask donors about them. Another whiteboard contains a current book title and people are free to make reviewers' comments as they come and go throughout the day. You could do the same thing at your place of work. Make your own 'lounge library' or put up a poem on a whiteboard and invite passers-by to graffiti their impressions of the work. Running conversations about literature do not always have to take place in person. It can be a real morale boost to see conversations evolve on a community whiteboard.

Another idea to beef up your literary Rolodex is to sponsor a book club or series of book talks. You don't have to do this with your colleagues. You can have a book club with

two of your best friends. Have an initial meeting and ask your buddies what sort of book they would like to read. Give them themes to choose from; classics, Oprah's book lists, or even something from the websites previously mentioned. Maybe there is a book you have always wanted to read but never got around to it. Perhaps you enjoyed a movie and would like to see how closely it followed the book. Find group consensus on a book choice, and agree on a time to meet again and discuss the first three chapters, or the first half of the book, or even the entire book. Then when you meet again (preferably over coffee or adult beverages, or bowling...) talk about what you liked and what you didn't. Books are more delicious when you can share them with someone. Another idea is to revisit a childhood book and share the adventure with friends or colleagues through your adult lenses. Dr. Seuss is famous for weaving very adult topics in whimsical children's stories. Grab *Green Eggs and Ham* and have a night out with your friends to talk about it.

Books are wonderful, intimate, and very symbolic gifts. Abraham Lincoln once said, "My best friend is the one who gives me a book I have not read." If you have a friend or colleague who needs a little happy pick me up consider giving these titles:

The Tao of Pooh by Benjamin Hoff

The Te of Piglet by Benjamin Hoff

Gift from the Sea by Ann Morrow Lindbergh

The Giving Tree by Shel Silverstein

Ten Poems to Change your Life by Roger Housdsen

Zen Fables by Richard McLean

A Patriots Handbook by Caroline Kennedy is a collection of songs, stories, and speeches that celebrate America. The selections range from George Washington's farewell address to lyrics by Bob Dylan and the Grateful Dead. Anna Quindlen wrote a wonderful little book called *How Reading Changed My Life* that is a most appropriate gift for any occasion and for anyone you know.

Books say a lot about who we are. When they sit on the shelves of our offices, they tell the observer what we appreciate, what we admire, and what we enjoy. Have you seen a great movie lately with a friend or a loved one? Was a book referenced in the movie? Terrific, you have an automatic gift idea: go get that book and read it, better yet give it to your movie companion. This author discovered a poet named A.E. Houseman because in the movie "Out of Africa," Meryl Streep (playing adventuress Karin Von Blixen) read the poem "To an Athlete Dying Young" in a heart-wrenching funeral scene. Finding this poem was not difficult at all, thanks to the Internet. Some movies are only based on one of a series of books. If you saw *Divine Secrets of the Ya Ya Sisterhood* and liked it, go get Rebecca Wells' prequel novel, *Little Altars Everywhere*.

What if you feel like you never have time to read? There are plenty of books on tape. Nothing is more decadent than to have a book read to you. If you have a willing reading partner, road trips are made all the more entertaining by sharing a book with whoever rides shotgun. Any book by short story humorist David Sedaris is a great choice for road trip reading. Another colleague of mine loves to go to estate sales with his wife every Saturday. In between sales, his wife reads aloud in the car the science fiction and fantasy books of Diane Gabaldon.

If you are looking for other ways to find a book that interests you, figure out where National Public Radio is located on your local radio dial. This station sponsors several wonderful programs on the weekend dedicated to talking about books or reference books, music, and other efforts in the area of liberal arts and culture. Known authors, such as David Sedaris, often contribute stories. In partnership with National Public Radio, Borders bookstore has a section that displays the books and music referenced each week on National Public Radio.

The last thing to recognize when thinking about the power of the right book at the right time is to realize that you need to have some sense of the person that you will be giving a book to. Receiving a book as a gift does not (and often should not) have to feel like homework. Some people who are not readers may enjoy a book that is not text-rich, but will have information valuable to them. Or you may be able to provide them with books that serve as conduits for reading other books.

A fine example of this paradox lies in the never-ending search for a birthday present for my best friend, the nonreader. This friend of mine would rather coach basketball and buy Nike shoes than read. She loves her Nike tennis shoes so much that she has stock in the Nike Corporation. So when *Nike, Yesterday and Today: A Fulcrum of Nike History* by Ibani Ibani was on the shelves at the local bookstore, the birthday present dilemma was instantly solved. This Nike fashionista happily devoured her book because it was a complete history of every shoe Nike ever made. Furthermore, this book inspired her to read *Nike Culture* by Stephen Papson and Robert Founder. Now, she gives both books to all of the members of her varsity basketball team. Is this the same as giving teenagers Walt Whitman? No. But there are now teenagers reading a genre of books that they did not know existed. The more one reads, the more literate he or she tends to become. And the greater one's literacy skills, the more likely he or she will continue to read. Ultimately, that reader will spread the word about the latest treasure they discovered or heard about. This circle of influence from one literacy apostle to another- to a whole community and generation of readers- is the magic that the right book at the right time can manifest.

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