

Reading Service at BFUU
January 26, 2014
Sermon

“Reading Is Our Heritage”

For me, reading and writing are the supreme miracle of human existence. Reading is what lets us live beyond the times in which we exist and the places we are able to visit. Reading lets us hear the words of people long dead or far away. Since Gutenberg’s printing press in the fifteenth century, reading has been more and more the great equalizer, allowing anyone to learn at least the basics of a subject without having to be able to afford to travel long distances or hire expensive experts to teach them.

Writing is just as miraculous. It allows us to record our thoughts for others to read, giving us the closest thing to immortality we’ve got so far. It frees us from the necessity of replicating effort, because we can pick up where a previous explorer left off instead of having to start from the beginning each time. It allows us to truly know about the world around us because it allows for facts and ideas to be collected and compared without the distortion of human memory and retelling. With written information we can distinguish data from anecdote.

Whatever purpose one has in one’s life, reading and writing are important tools for pursuing it. The sculptor can read about techniques and tools, and about the inspiring journeys of other sculptors. A doctor can keep up to date on all of the latest studies and breakthroughs in order to best heal her patients. A historian can comb through the notes of all of his colleagues stretching back hundreds of years, as well as the letters, diaries, and articles written in the periods he’s studying. The religious pilgrim can sit at the feet of masters from any tradition, from any point on the globe and any period in history simply by visiting a library.

No matter what fire burns in your heart, the written word can give you fuel for that fire. At their most basic, reading and writing are tools for learning and teaching. The ability to read and write is our single greatest advantage as a species driven by its insatiable curiosity. I am hardly the first person to talk about the great gift of writing. In fact, today we've already heard four stories about the importance of writing. We heard about Louise Braille, who was so intent on bringing the gift of reading to himself and other blind people that he invented a new alphabet which could be read by touch and revolutionized the way blind people are taught and treated even today.

This is just one story about of the importance of writing. And to drive my point even further home, we have this story because it was written down. The continued existence of this story is evidence supporting the truth that the written word is powerful and important.

But not everyone has equal access to this common human heritage of knowledge. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 14.5% of US Adults lack 'Basic Prose Literacy Skills.'¹ In our public schools, 34% of students can't read proficiently by fourth grade. Students who fall behind reading level remain behind and fall further behind faster the longer they go without specialized intervention. In fact, students below reading level in third grade are four times as likely to drop out of high school as students at or below reading level in third grade.² These students represent a civic crisis, as their lifelong earnings and economic productivity have been compromised, but they also represent a crisis of ethics and faith. As citizens and residents of the United States, public education is a promise that we have given our children that we will help prepare them to be productive workers, responsible citizens, and

¹ <http://nces.ed.gov/naal/estimates/overview.aspx#top>

² <http://readingpartners.org/who-we-are/about-us/>

well-rounded human beings. Each child who cannot read is a child for whom we have broken this promise. As Unitarian Universalists, we believe that each person has the right to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Every child who cannot read is a person whose search has been obstructed. Whether we examine the problem from the perspective of enlightened self-interest, responsible citizenship, or our Unitarian Universalist faith we must conclude that the problem exists and is severe.

But while the situation is serious, the solution is also relatively easy. For the past year I have had the pleasure of working for Reading Partners' central headquarters in Oakland. Reading Partners is a fantastic organization which helps students who have fallen behind in reading catch up to and surpass minimum literacy standards. One of my favorite things about Reading Partners is that they collect data about themselves, we are constantly evaluating our methods and results, and we have found that they work. Last school year, nearly 88% of the students we worked with narrowed or closed the gap between where their reading levels were and where they should have been. The strategy is simple: when a student falls below reading level in one of the schools where we have a Reading Center, that student is paired with one or two volunteer tutors who work with them individually, addressing each student's specific needs. We also make books available for students so that they are able to read outside of schools. One of the most important aspect is that each session includes time when the student simply listens to their tutor read to them. I love Reading Partners and would encourage everyone here who can to volunteer as a tutor in one of our reading centers, or to donate to help support our program, but even if you don't choose to support Reading Partners the lessons they've taught me apply elsewhere.

To ensure that everyone has access to our human heritage of literacy, as is their right, we do not need to invent a new alphabet like Louise Braille. We just need to spend time with our children and neighbors, give them books, and read to them.