

Maine Policy Review

Volume 24
Issue 1 *Humanities and Policy*

2015

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David Richards
Margaret Chase Smith Library, davidr@mcslibrary.org

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Recommended Citation

Richards, David. "Humanities beyond the Classroom: Blessed Be the Human Ties That Bind." *Maine Policy Review* 24.1 (2015) : 68 -71, <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mpr/vol24/iss1/21>.

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Humanities beyond the Classroom:

Blessed Be the Human Ties That Bind

by David Richards

Imagine not being able to read—a job application, a newspaper, or this essay. Or imagine working with adults who struggle not only with literacy, but also with making it through the day, some without enough work or food or love. Imagine a moment at the end of a book discussion when a reticent middle-aged man, proudly reports that he has read an entire story on his own for the first time in his life. Imagine that the accomplishment is completion of the children’s book *Little Bear*. Welcome to my experience of the humanities beyond the classroom.

The most appealing definition I have heard of the humanities comes from Julia Walkling, coordinator of the New Books, New Readers program of the Maine Humanities Council (MHC), the organization that supplied the copy of *Little Bear* to Robert. She has often pointed out to me that the word is made up of three elements: human, ties, with I smack dab in the middle. Quite simply, my fundamental objective as a humanities scholar facilitating book discussions and teaching writing is to foster human ties between me and the group, among participants, and within communities.

I fell unexpectedly into my work with the Maine Humanities Council. While studying history in graduate school at the University of New Hampshire, I led a few discussions as part of the council’s Modern Times in Maine & America project, which related to my dissertation research at the time on the rise of the Poland Spring resort during the late nineteenth century. After graduate school, I landed a job at the Margaret Chase Smith Library in Skowhegan, Maine, which occasionally served as a host site for MHC programs led by Jeff Aronson. After about a year of running book discussions at the library, Jeff turned to me one night and said: “You could do this.” A new avocation was born that evening.

Since 1998 I have facilitated nearly 100 book series and led over 400 discussions. Most of these events have been offered through two programs of the Maine Humanities Council’s Harriet P. Henry Center for the Book: New Books, New Readers and Let’s Talk About It. Over the past 16 years, I have come to view myself as an

itinerant circuit rider, bringing my humanities training and facilitation skills to communities throughout central and western Maine, including Waterville, Stetson, Canaan, Palmyra, Pittsfield, Dexter, Guilford, Greenville, Rangeley, and Jay, in addition to my home base of Skowhegan. Everywhere my goal has been the same—to build ties more than to explain books.

The mission of New Books, New Readers is to improve the reading skills of adult, low-level readers. The clientele encompasses a variety of groups: people with learning or developmental disabilities, high school dropouts and GED seekers, and a surprising number of English language learners (ELL), even in the smallest, most out-of-the-way locations in nearly homogenous Maine. I have worked with three dozen ELL students from 19 different countries spanning five continents. Those who have stuck with it, like Simi from Greenville and Maria from Madison, both via Mexico, the nation, not the Maine town, really have been able to learn English quite well and just as important, to serve as models of assimilation for their children.

The program uses children’s books on the premise that good literature is ageless. Each of the 22 series focuses on a theme. *Little Bear* is part of the series on home. A good example of the adult discussion that can emerge from a simple story is *Frederick*, which is part of the series on courage. For kids, this picture book is the tale of a frivolous mouse completely oblivious to securing the necessities of life as winter approaches. Digging more deeply into this children’s book invites mature readers to consider what those necessities really are. Are they limited to the nuts and straw of the practical mice, or do they also include the sun rays, color, and words in which Frederick, ruled by the courage of his convictions, is more interested? In effect, the story is an allegory for our own contemporary policy debate about the relevance of the liberal arts in a modern world increasingly dominated by science and technology. Mankind cannot thrive on bytes alone. STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) may make us rich, but the arts and humanities are what give our lives richness.

These are the mechanics of New Books, New Readers. Groups meet four times, usually with about a month of reading time between each session, first for a general discussion of the topic, followed by three more meetings examining sets of three books at a time. The reading material for each session is geared to different literacy levels. Typically, one assignment is predominantly a picture book; another, a combination of illustrations and text; and the third a longer chapter book. Participants get to keep all nine books supplied by the MHC at no cost to them. The intention is that they will then be shared and promote literacy within families.

New Books, New Readers has sometimes been expanded to encompass the ideal of family literacy, particularly in small communities, where a limited pool of adult candidates would not make offering a typical adult literacy program feasible. This has been the model I have used with the LIFE program in Greenville 15 times since 2003. That is long enough that the brothers who started out as youngsters are now studying business at the University of Maine and economics at Colby College. Seeing kids grow up with an appreciation for reading is rewarding. Watching up to four generations discuss a story is illuminating. Inspiring young readers is gratifying. I still cherish the illustrated story “Mouse in the House” that Andrew, who happens to be Maria’s son, wrote for me several years ago as part of a family literacy New Books, New Readers in Skowhegan.

Another adaptation of the program has been bringing it into correctional facilities. It is not that most inmates cannot read; it is more that too many do not read. For many years, Julia Walking had been a siren trying to lure me into leading a series at the Somerset County Jail. For most of that time, I was able to rebuff her overtures with the excuse that the facility was too rundown and overcrowded to suit my instructional preferences. I lost that argument when the county went ahead and built a brand new jail in 2008.

A remarkable thing happened during the second New Books, New Readers program I offered at the county jail during the winter of 2011. Toward the end of the community series, one of the more hardened members of the group wrote a poem on the theme. The effort opened with the verse: “The community we live in/It’s sometimes hard to fit in/Hard to find trust/But try we must.” This was my awakening that even rough and tumble inmates hunger for human ties. Derek did not realize it, but his initiative raised a question, and planted a seed too. Were there other writers at the jail?

The next chapter in my humanities moonlighting began during the summer of 2010. Under the auspices of SAD 54 Adult and Community Education, I started teaching a writing class for the inmates. My initial task was to prepare them for GED testing by helping with essay writing. I received a few practice samples. What quickly became apparent, though, was that most of the students came to class not because they needed to learn how to write, but rather because they wanted an outlet to share their writing. Prolific Logan was as deep as the Beats. Wrestler Tim penned rugged tales of adventures on the waters and in the woods of western Maine. Academic Alex was amazingly well read, with a book-a-day goal. One Michael was an earnest essayist; another was a razor-sharp rapper. Frank was a persistent polemicist; while John was a motor head. Matthew was a voluminous philosopher, and Jonah a whale of a storyteller. From C Pod, where orange is the new black, Karen crafted cathartic confessionals, and Terry volunteered tortured testimonies; while Kizzy wrote religious tracts, and Sydney, Jonah’s prison bride, gave birth to brilliant poems. Illustrated with a tombstone, “Woman,” for instance, opened with the gut-punch line: “We are all dead by fifteen.” Sydney’s verse spoke volumes about the root trauma that eventually led many females to the downward spiral of depression, self-medication, and incarceration. All together the writing class participants at the jail have produced more than 1,400 pages of material, some of which has appeared in monthly newsletters initiated and edited by the inmates and all of which I preserve in four overflowing binders.

Watching up to four generations discuss a story is illuminating.

Over the past four and half years, I have worked with nearly 400 men and women at the Somerset County Jail. They have been from all over Maine and across the country thanks to the sprawling tentacles of drug networks. Yes, many have committed heinous crimes. There have been child molesters and pedophiles, “skinnners” in prison parlance, robbers and rapists, wife beaters and murderers among the groups. No, I have never felt afraid as the heavy metal doors clanged shut

behind me because, incredibly, there is humanity, too. I attempt to break down the walls of distrust and breach the barriers of brokenness to get at the good awaiting release from within. My constant mantra in class is “Write it out!” So far my best shot at making a connection is my initial writing assignment to the uninitiated. I invite a response to the prompt: The truth about me is.... The resulting essays are always revealing.

It took me a while to overcome my own guardedness and recognize the latent humanity even amidst the hearts of darkness. I should have learned this early on through Derek and his poem. It was not driven home, however, until a couple of years later when Jonathan joined the writing class. He was gruff and fidgety, but with cause as he was afflicted with Tourette syndrome. Consequently, my expectations were low. Then one night while waiting for inmates from other pods to arrive, he began talking to me about his cultural hero. I was dumbfounded to hear it was Sylvia Plath, whose personal demons and struggles he identified with completely. His was no superficial familiarity. He knew both Plath’s biography and bibliography. He had read her works and understood their meaning. That was my moment of enlightenment not to judge inmates by their scarlet letters. It was time instead to concentrate on the ties that bind.

The diversity of insights and opinions different people can draw out of the same book still astounds me.

I was reminded of the oft-surprising talents of inmates just the other night at the jail. Stephanie was new to writing class. She is from Boston, the Bromley-Heath housing project of JP, Jamaica Plain, to be exact, and has an obsession about always wanting to be right. Her puzzle this night was of all things the Emancipation Proclamation. She wanted confirmation that President Lincoln’s executive order had not freed all the slaves, only the ones held in the states still in rebellion. I was impressed as much by the depth and nuance of her historical knowledge as by the many colorful tattoos covering her arms.

The third component of my nocturnal humanities adventures is Let’s Talk About It. Like New Books, New

Readers, this is another MHC book discussion program. It is a staple for many public libraries, providing over 40 thematic series of books, ranging from *Across Cultures & Continents: Literature of the South Asian Experience* to *Yankees & Strangers: The New England Town*, as well as a scholar to lead sessions. I have facilitated 18 of the series and also created one. Mine is about cultural changes in the late-nineteenth-century United States and uses the following five texts: *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner, *The Age of Innocence* by Edith Wharton, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* by William Dean Howells, *The Devil and the White City* by Erik Larson, and my own book, *Poland Spring: A Tale of the Gilded Age*. The series asks readers to consider whether the rampant materialism, conspicuous consumption, and moral veneer of the earlier era pertains to our own times, too.

More satisfying than constructing my own series has been building relationships with Let’s Talk About It participants. The diversity of insights and opinions different people can draw out of the same book still astounds me. The phenomenon makes it fascinating to lead the same series in multiple venues. In places I get to return to more than once, the connections, both literary and personal, become even deeper. Truth be told, I have developed a favorite site. Entering 2014, I had led Let’s Talk About It for the Shaw Public Library in Greenville for 13 summers, dating back to 1998. It is a community I have grown to love ever since the first time I crested Indian Hill and saw the vista of Moosehead Lake, ringed by majestic mountain ranges, sprawl before my view.

I commenced my fourteenth Greenville summer in late June 2014. The series was *Invisible New England: The Real New England?* an examination of the region’s non-WASP ethnic heritage. Nineteen people, many of whom were repeat participants, some with attendance records dating back well over a decade, showed up to discuss the opening book, *The Living Is Easy*, by Dorothy West. Not many participants liked this account of African-American life in early-twentieth-century Boston. They could not identify with the story and disliked one of the main characters. Nevertheless, I tried valiantly to defend the novel’s merits. The disagreement made for a lively discussion. I was looking forward to returning to my home away from home for four more spirited book discussions with people who in many cases have become dear and valued friends.

My plans changed in an instant and with a sudden thud late on the evening of July 3, 2014. That is when I

collided with an unseen, 900-pound moose while on my way to Greenville to see fireworks. On its way to crashing through my windshield and landing in the passenger seat of my compact car, the stealthy intruder broke my left hand, fractured my right arm, and cracked a vertebra in my neck. I seek no pity. The point is that what sustained me during the three-month recovery in the hospital and then at home was the care and concern of family and friends. Many of the latter were from Greenville and were alumni/ae of the numerous book discussions I have led there. They mailed get-well wishes, called, visited, presented gifts, and cooked for me. An oversize 14-inch by 22-inch, handmade greeting card circulated at the popular ice cream stand downtown still graces my living room and serves as a visible reminder of the many acts of kindness sent my way as I recovered from my injuries this past summer. That is what all the trips on behalf of the MHC to Moosehead Lake since 1998 had really meant. I was part of the community, a player in the Greenville version of *Our Town*. I had been blessed by the human ties that bind.

When I was younger, I thought Thomas Jefferson was the genius philosopher of America. The trinity of classical liberalism—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—has surely been essential to the development of this country. They have been necessary ideals. The Gospel of Individualism, however, is not sufficient for national greatness. In my later years, I have come to appreciate more the wisdom of America's founding philosopher John Winthrop. The leader of the Massachusetts Bay Colony delivered a seminal sermon in 1630 during passage across the Atlantic as part of the Puritan errand into the wilderness. "A Model of Christian Charity" laid out a vision of the New World as a "city upon a hill" for all the world to behold. The image has inspired belief in American exceptionalism for four centuries. It was a vision predicated on a social ideal in which everyone—male and female, young and old, rich and poor, mighty and meek—must be knit together as one. It is a social model whereby threads of individualism become woven into the fabric of community. Blessed be the tie that binds.

I believe Winthrop thoroughly grasped the enduring essence of community nearly 400 years ago. Reading the journal he kept as governor reveals that he also understood its inherent messiness. In tribute to Winthrop's model of civic engagement, I will be back to Greenville. Not as an omniscient and sage Stage Manager, not even as an erudite humanities scholar. Instead, I will return as

a knitter and a friend. There are still many more books to explore and discussions to lead, with kids and old acquaintances alike. There are still many more human ties to foster. Blessed be the humanities. 🐼



David Richards started working at the Margaret Chase Smith Library in 1996 and has served as director since 2012. During that time, he has facilitated a wide variety of programs for the Maine Humanities Council. He became a gubernatorial appointee to the MHC board of directors in 2010. In addition, he has taught writing classes for SAD 54 Adult & Community Education at the Somerset County Jail since 2010.