The Democracy of the Intellect

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Editor’s note: The following article is the keynote address delivered by Katherine Paterson at the 2008 National Reading Recovery & K–6 Classroom Literacy Conference. It is printed here, with permission by the author, so that all RRCNA members have the opportunity to be moved by her powerful images and eloquent descriptions.

Among the great joys of my life are the frequent trips I have made to New Zealand, where I met Marie Clay on several occasions, as well as Joy Cowley and Margaret Mahy who have become dear friends. These were people who had a vision that has spread around the world, even to my town in Vermont, where just recently a young friend told me with shining eyes, that Miss Phyllis, Barre Town School’s Reading Recovery teacher, was helping her with her reading.

So it is a real privilege to be with all of you today. I don’t need to tell you how important it is for every child, every person to know how to read and how to understand and analyze what he or she has read, how important it is for all of us to learn from and even delight in the written word.

A wonderful librarian and scholar of the last century, Frances Clarke Sayers, spoke of “the shattering and gracious encounter that all art affords.” This is the gift that you are daily giving to children, this shattering and gracious encounter, and for that I, and all of us who care about our children and our country, owe you a great debt.

When I think of that shattering and gracious encounter, I have a picture of myself on the bed in the back bedroom in Takoma Park, Maryland with our four children — a boy and a girl on either side so the boys won’t poke at each other. Again, I could be reading any number of things, but in this picture I am reading Charlotte’s Web for the umpteenth time and we are approaching page 171 and John, who is about six, begins to call out: “Don’t cry, Mom, don’t cry. You ruin it when you cry!” And I determine for the umpteenth time that I will get through without crying. After all, how many times have I read this now? I know it nearly by heart. But by the time we get to page 171, I am weeping uncontrollably, so I hand the book to John and he reads: “…The infield was littered with bottles and trash. Nobody, of the hundreds of people that had visited the Fair, knew that a grey spider had played the most important part of all. No one was with her when she died.” Now there’s a shattering and gracious encounter for you. The only reason I can get through that passage this morning is that I have no child beside me to hand the book to.

All my life books have been for me a shattering and gracious encounter. It was my love of stories which led me to writing them. I didn’t know when I started if I had any talent or ability. I only knew that I loved stories and wanted not only to read them but to take part in their creation.

As you know, there is a far-greater push these days to get a computer in every classroom than there is to make sure that the library is overflowing with a great variety of books of knowledge and imagination that have the power to summon children from the myriad distractions of their lives to the wide and nurturing world of the printed word.

In preparation for this speech I went back to reread Jacob Bronowski’s The Ascent of Man. The final chapter of this marvelous book is entitled “The Long Childhood.”

What is it, Bronowski asks, that makes human beings unique? Is it the apposite thumb? The ability to make tools? No, it is the ability to create language—not just give cries of greeting or alarm—but to name things. To construct words and rearrange them, so that the same words can take on varieties of meaning. This unique human ability has given rise in every human society to both science, by which we mean knowledge, and art, by which we mean works of the creative imagination.

We all know that there is a difference between the skull of early humanoids and our own skulls. Our egg-shaped foreheads have replaced their sloping ones. And in that enlarged space are the frontal lobes which allow us to do something else animals cannot do or can only do in a rudimentary way. They enable us to plan actions — not just to be able to make tools or to use the apposite thumb? The ability to make tools? No, it is the ability to create language—not just give cries of greeting or alarm—but to name things.

What is it, Bronowski asks, that makes human beings unique? Is it the ability to create? Is it the ability to work together? Is it the ability to create the democratic world, which I am a witness to all around me, which we are about to hear about here?

Long Childhood

As the final chapter of Ascent of Man, this marvelous book is entitled “The Long Childhood.” This is a miracle. It is the way the brain is an instrument of decision, of greeting or alarm—but to name things. This unique human ability has given rise in every human society to both science, by which we mean knowledge, and art, by which we mean works of the creative imagination.

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We have to delay decision making, because we need first to acquire the knowledge and wisdom our future decisions will demand.

What happens during this period is crucial to what the person will become. We know now that our children are born with their brains wired for acquiring language, but science has also taught us that in order actually to acquire language, any language, a child has to learn some language quite early on. A baby is born with a brain receptive to language, but if she or he is not spoken to, played with, read to, those areas of the brain simply do not develop as they are meant to. Recent studies prove that the children of deaf parents begin to babble in sign language at the same time children of hearing parents begin to babble orally. It doesn’t matter, it would seem, what language a child is early exposed to — just that he or she is given a rich experience of human language in those early months and years of life.

In her disturbing book, *Endangered Minds*, Jane Healy, working from the observations of many teachers that “children today just aren’t the way they used to be,” has come to the conclusion that, by and large this is true. When many of our children should have been read to, talked to, played with, they were watching TV which is passive and doesn’t aid in this crucial development. Their brains, lacking the proper intellectual nourishment, are physiologically stunted. They have trouble putting together coherent sentences. They are incapable of reasoned argument. In short, they can’t think very well. They are not prepared for the basic task of adulthood — that of making life enhancing decisions for themselves and for the world into which they have been born.

I am called back to another Frances Clarke Sayers’ statement about the child audience that “lives on what it feeds upon.” What are we feeding our children? Is there anything on the World Wide Web that can nourish a child intellectually and spiritually in the sense that the best of our books can?

Bronowski speaks of the long childhood of western civilization, but in truth childhood is too short to waste. We’re not going to snatch TV remotes or Game Boys from our children’s hands; indeed, that would make them all the more desirable. But somehow we must make sure early on that they have books that will truly nourish them, that will enlarge their minds, that will prepare them to make wise and compassionate decisions when they are grown.

The child who has the finest literature as a touchstone can read trash or play vapid video games and not be especially damaged, but many children have no means of comparison. I may have devoured comic books, but when I was 11 my mother used her scarce dollars to buy me a copy of *The Yearling*, one of the formative books of my young life.

Years ago our youngest was deep in the spring agony of waiting for college acceptance. I found her one Saturday morning curled up in the big armchair engrossed in a book. I turned my head upside down to see the title. To my astonishment, she was reading *Charlotte’s Web*. I couldn’t resist. “Oh,” I said, “I see you’re reading a good book.” She looked up and said fiercely, “This is a great book.”

There is something so comforting about the beloved books of childhood. When the uncertainties of life assail us, they stand as healing verities, and we can return to them again and again. But only, of course, if someone helped us to find those books when we were very young.
with loss, rehearsal for grieving, just as we need preparation for decision making.

Jacob Bronowski speaks of the “plasticity of human behavior” (p. 412) which allows enormous variation of action within our species. The same basic mental apparatus that allows for a Mozart will also produce an Einstein. Yet, for thousands of years, only a tiny remnant of humanity were allowed to fully develop those wonderfully varied capacities with which nature, or God if you please, had endowed them. There was an aristocracy of learning and it was extremely limited. The rest of us — and since I seem to have been descended more from the poor and dispossessed than from the royal line — the rest of us were expected to know our place in society, regard it as divinely ordained, and act accordingly.

But something wonderful happened, at least, in western civilization. The printing press was finally invented, and with it a new attitude toward learning began to emerge in the west. Bronowski calls this phenomenon, the “democracy of the intellect.” Now there had been printing in China by 200 AD and moveable type was invented in the 10th Century. But because of the nature of the language, which requires up to 40,000 separate characters, moveable type did not seem like a practical invention to the Chinese and they soon abandoned it. But western languages are blessed with an alphabet. In English the arrangement of the same 26 little characters will write Frog and Toad or War and Peace.

When in the middle of the 15th Century moveable type got reinvented by Europeans, everything was ripe for its immediate utilization. Between 1450 and 1500, more than 6,000 separate works were printed. By 1500, there were 417 printers in the city of Venice alone. And those Italians weren’t just printing Latin Bibles; they were printing the classics of Greece and Rome. Trouble was on the way. For wherever people can read freely and widely, they begin to think and to question, and there is nothing the established order dreads more than a thinking, questioning populace.

Erasmus was orphaned at an early age. In his day the only path out of poverty was through taking holy orders. Yet he secretly read those forbidden classics. “A heathen wrote this to a heathen,” he marveled as he read The Dialogues, “yet it has justice, sanctity, and truth. I can hardly refrain from saying, ‘St. Socrates, pray for me’” (Bronowski, p. 472). And so the enlightenment was born.

The encounter with art, with literature, can enlarge our spirits and change our lives. In my book, The Great Gilly Hopkins, Gilly, who has made it a matter of honor not to make human friends, knows that books are friends, and the ice which has long encased her heart begins to melt on her first encounter with the warm liquid beauty of Wordsworth’s poetry.

Our son, David, with the composer, Steve Liebman, has adapted this book for the stage. One of my favorite scenes in the play as well as in the book is the one where Gilly first meets Wordsworth.

Trotter has asked Gilly to read aloud to her neighbor who is old, blind, and African American. Gilly’s first reaction to Mr. Randolph has been offensively negative. But she can’t resist showing off how well she reads.

“You want the Wordsworth one, Mr. Randolph?” Trotter asks, “or do you have that by heart?”

Both, he answers.

And then there begins a spoken duet with lines alternating between the belligerent child and the beautiful old man:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem Apparell’d in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.

It is not now as it hath been of yore: —

Turn wheresoe’er I may,
By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting;
The Soul that rises with us, our life’s Star,
 hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:

Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God who is our home.

In the play the spoken duet turns at this point into a haunting melody as Gilly and Mr. Randolph sing together the final stanza:

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Thanks to the human heart by which we live,

Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,

To me the meanest flower that blows can give

Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

When you tell Steve Liebman you liked the play, he invariably replies: “You’re supposed to say, ‘I laughed, I cried, it changed my life.’”

Steve is only half teasing. That is what literature, that is what art is supposed to do—provide us with a shattering and gracious encounter—make us experience the spectrum of human emotion and somehow make us richer, more compassionate, wiser human beings in the process.

Some years ago I was invited to speak with a book group that was discussing *Great Gilly Hopkins*. The meeting was being held not at a school or the local library or in someone’s home, but in one of our state prisons. The inmates had read *The Great Gilly Hopkins* as part of their literacy program and they wanted an opportunity to talk with the author about it. It was my first trip to prison. I registered at the window and then divested myself of purse and briefcase (which were closely examined), took off my coat and sent it through the x-ray, but when I walked through the metal detector the alarm rang. I couldn’t understand it. “You have buckles on your shoes,” the guard said. Meekly, I took off my shoes and tiptoed through. Then I went through a series of heavy doors, the first shutting behind me before the next opened. Finally, I was in the large room where the inmates were waiting. A large table, consisting of a series of smaller tables, had been set up in the center of the room. Twenty men and four women were seated around the table with the instructor who had invited me.

After an initial awkwardness, we began to talk in earnest about the book and what it had meant to read it. One of the men said that when he was a young teenager he had been briefly in a foster home with a foster mother who was really kind to him. She had wanted him to read the book at that time, but, he sort of shrugged, “I was a kid that didn’t want anybody telling me what to do. I guess that’s why I’m here now. Now that I’ve read the book, I know what she was trying to say to me.”

“Just out of curiosity,” the instructor asked, “how many of you were ever in foster care?”

Every single inmate raised a hand. As part of the literacy program, each participant was given a paperback copy of every book they discussed, so at the end of the session, the inmates lined up to have their books autographed.

“What’s your name?” I asked the young man handing me his book.

“It’s not for me,” he said. “It’s for my daughter. Her name is Angel.”

It had been an emotional afternoon, but that one sentence was the one that haunted me for nearly 13 years. But as I often tell students who ask me about ideas, one idea doth not a novel make.

At least a dozen years after that day in the prison, I was in California and a friend gave me a copy of a small magazine which her husband was editing. On the back of the magazine was a dramatic photo of Supernova remnant Cassiopeia A and under the picture this quotation:

When the Chandra telescope took its first image in August of this year, it caught not just another star in the heavens, but a foundry distributing its wares to the rest of the galaxy.

Silicon, sulfur, argon, calcium, and iron were among the elements identified from Chandra’s x-ray image. ‘These are the materials we are made of,’ said the project scientist.

The thrill that every writer recognizes went through my body. I knew I had an idea for a book in that quotation. At length I recognized it as the missing strand I had needed to write Angel’s story. What would it mean to a child that the world has discarded as waste material to learn that she is made of the same stuff as the stars?

From time to time people speak to me with surprise about the fact that my characters read. But I am the one who is more surprised to have it regarded as something unusual. Of course my characters read! Reading is a vital part of my life. My characters would seem less than human if books didn’t enter their lives.

But I have also used the theme of learning how to read to say something about the process of becoming fully human, perhaps, most pointedly in *Rebels of the Heavenly Kingdom*. *Rebels*, I think it is safe to say, is my least read book. It is currently out of print, though I am happy to say, it will be available again soon. *Rebels* is the book that jumped to mind when I read Dr. Bronowski’s phrase, “the democracy of the intellect.” It is his contention that it is the printed word — it is books that make this democracy possible.
From time to time people speak to me with surprise about the fact that my characters read. But I am the one who is more surprised to have it regarded as something unusual. Of course my characters read! Reading is a vital part of my life. My characters would seem less than human if books didn’t enter their lives.

In a peculiar way we could say that Confucius in 500 BC sought to establish such a democracy. He himself was born poor, but he was bright and ambitious, and by the time he was 15 years old he had given himself to learning. His life’s goal, which was never fulfilled except in romantic myth, was to become an ideal ruler of his people — a benevolent leader whose wisdom would be employed to enrich his people and educate them. No actual monarch or governor was ever daring enough to give Confucius a meaningful public office. How could a ruler who followed such a teacher’s dictums hope to maintain his power over the populace? But Confucius’ popularity as a teacher saved his life, because neither did any ruler dare to silence him.

Confucius’ teaching about society, about the responsibility that each man owed to those below him, beside him, and above him in the social scale, this teaching, though never fully implemented, was the glue that held Chinese society together for nearly 2,000 years.

I can’t claim that the teacher was a feminist, but, at least for the male population, he believed in the democracy of the intellect. And his ideal, though often honored more in the breach than in the observance, was that any boy with the intellect and moral strength to do so, could rise from the lowest place in society to become a ruler of his people.

When I first began to read about the Taiping movement which arose in China during the 19th Century, I was struck with how their early proclamations sounded like a mixture of the best of Confucian teaching and the ideals of Christianity. For the Taiping not only valued all human life and declared the equality of all people under heaven, but they determined that every boy and every girl should be educated, and that any child of either sex might rise to positions of leadership if he or she had the wit, the integrity, and the will. There was to be no foot-binding, no prostitution, no slavery, no stealing, no killing, no use of mind altering drinks or drugs. Confucius’ altruism and Jesus’ commandments to love truly met in the Taiping’s early teaching. “You should not kill one innocent person or do one unrighteous act, even though it be to acquire an empire,” the heavenly king of the Taiping declared.

The Taiping’s righteous ideals led to self-righteousness, corruption, and eventually to genocidal warfare. In the end they self-destructed, as do any people who fail to remember that righteous ends can only be secured by righteous means. But for a brief shining moment, they understood, even more fully than Confucius, the meaning of the democracy of the intellect.

Wang Lee, the peasant boy in my story who has joined the Taiping and learned to read and write, is kidnapped. The bandits who capture him disguise him as a girl and sell him to work in the kitchen of a wealthy household where he is befriended by One Ear, the cook, and Precious Jade, the 5-year-old daughter of the household.

Though early in the story Wang Lee despises the big feet of the Taiping women, when Little Jade’s feet are bound, he is horrified. The child can no longer run and play. She weeps constantly from the pain in her broken toes and arches.

One day when One Ear (the cook) was at the market, Wang Lee found her alone crying. And he carried her into the kitchen and put her on a stool at the table where he was working. “I’m going to teach you a new game,” he said.

She looked up at him. The circles under her eyes were dark as bruises, and her face had grown as pinched as an old woman’s.

“I’m going to teach you how to read and write,” he whispered.

Her eyes flashed almost like before. “You can’t teach me,” she said. “You’re nothing but a big-footed slave girl.”

“Hush,” he said. “It’s a secret.”

Then one day One Ear the cook comes in, thwacks Wang Lee on the rear with what proves to be the first reader in the traditional Confucian schoolboy’s education. “It’s not for free,” the cook says. “You have to teach me, too.”
“And so Wang Lee taught them both, beginning with the first three-character sentence: At birth men are by nature good.’

If I’d been more alert when I wrote that last sentence, I would have translated Confucius more accurately. The character I have translated as “men” is, in Chinese and Japanese as well, the word for humanity, including both men and women.

In our own country we have tried with varying degrees of success to promote the democracy of the intellect. The public libraries of our great cities certainly have. As thousands of immigrants poured out of the steerage of the ships that brought them here to find squalid shelter in our slums, the libraries threw open their majestic doors and welcomed the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free. The lady holding her lamp in the harbor may have been the symbol, but the librarian raising her date due stamp was the true provider of liberty. I don’t think it’s merely a coincidence that the same politicians who despise immigrants think libraries are, by and large, superfluous. The democracy of the intellect has always threatened the narrow-visioned politician whose power depends on ignorance and prejudice and mistrust of anyone who is different from oneself.

Why should there be libraries that are open long hours and welcome all manner and ages of people? Why do we need them? We don’t need them unless we believe passionately in the democracy of the intellect — unless we cherish the long childhood of the human race as a time of preparation for wise decision making for the maturity of individuals as well as for the healing and illumination of the citizenry as a whole.

When we speak of the preparation of the young, we of course think of their schooling. The minute the word “education” is uttered, the cries of dismay go up. The horror stories about American education abound and I don’t have the time nor the inclination to repeat them. But I must say, as a person who lived for 4 years in Japan, the holding up of the Japanese model as the ideal has always puzzled me. I felt vindicated when I heard on public radio a report from Japan. It seems that Japanese business leaders had gathered to decry the state of education in Japan. Japanese education, they declared, is not producing graduates with the creative imagination that the 21st Century will demand. And this from business leaders.

Jacob Bronowski has something to say on this subject as well. In one vital respect, he says the ancient civilizations of Egypt, China, India, and Europe in the Middle Ages all failed. And this is how they failed: They limited “the freedom of the imagination of the young.” Any civilization that does this becomes static and then falls into decline.

The Japanese businessmen who spoke up are wise enough to recognize what happens when education is reduced to the memorization of answers for entrance exams. We have been a bit slower catching on. In our great drive to keep taxes in check, the first thing we do is cut funds for children and youth. And when we cut the school budget the first to go is the art teacher, then the music teacher, and then the librarian. The imagination is a suspect commodity these days. The cry is, “Back to the basics!” I’ve never been quite sure what that phrase meant, but I think that it means that the creative imagination which the Japanese businessmen are saying is vital for the next century is for many of our citizens not merely a frill but a danger. And although No Child Left Behind was supposed to support art and music, the demand to teach to the tests has all but eliminated anything that can’t be measured by multiple choice and graded by a machine.

Yet despite the attempts through the ages of both the tyrannical and the timid, the riches of the imagination of the human race are still available to us. They are gathered and preserved in the printed word. We are still summoned by books to that wisdom, that strength, and that delight.

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We cannot surrender to those who fear the power of books because they know that a true democracy of the intellect threatens demagoguery, breaks open the narrowness of the spirit, and challenges the selfish interests of the privileged few.

As recently as last month I saw Jefferson’s words echoed on the front page of my local newspaper. The story concerned Daniel Heller who is principal of the K–8 Halifax School in southeastern Vermont. Heller has recently written a book entitled Curriculum on the Edge of Survival: How Schools Fail to Prepare Students for Membership in a Democracy. Heller says:

Those in government need to stop avoiding direct answers to questions, relying on sound bites and playing on emotions. A well-educated electorate, prepared to be part of a democracy, would not allow leaders to communicate this way. Holding schools responsible for holding students responsible, in this sense, is vital…The overarching goal of the public school is the preparation of our students to take their rightful places in a democratic society.

In his own 60-student school the curriculum is built on four cornerstones: “Thinking that is more than simple test taking. Problem solving that is more than simple math. Communications that are more than simple English. And, perhaps most radically, the teaching of simple kindness.” By this Heller means that we must help children learn to care for and respect one another — to be able to differ with others without despising them.

I want to tell you a story that seems to me to summarize all I have said this morning. It’s a true story about a friend of mine. I’m going to call him Walter, though that is not his real name. Walter began life in a family of modest means in a city on the east coast — father, mother, then two younger brothers. Walter, a lively child, was less than enchanted with school, but somehow he scraped through the boring days, investing a minimum of effort. Life may not have been wonderful for Walter, but it was okay, it was normal. Then suddenly, one day Walter’s life turned upside down. His father walked out, leaving his mother with no marketable skills and three small boys to care for.

It was a time when the job market was flooded with veterans returning from World War II. Women who had worked to support the war effort left their jobs and went home to be the perfect housewives and mothers of the fifties. But Walter’s mother had to go to work. There was, of course, no child care system in place in our country — proper stay-at-home mothers didn’t require it. Nor was there any government effort in place to track down deadbeat fathers and force them to pay child support.

It isn’t hard to imagine what Walter’s mother went through — working at whatever jobs she could find, worrying day by day about what her three little boys were doing, worrying all night about how she was going to feed them and clothe them and keep a roof over their heads.

As summer approached her worry increased. Even though the city streets might have been less dangerous in the fifties than they have become, she was a good and caring mother who didn’t want her children running loose all day long. So when she heard about a farm out from town where the farmer and his wife took children in for the summer to give them 3 months of fresh air and good food at no cost—oh, the children would be expected to help out with the chores, but they’d want to, wouldn’t they?—when she heard about this opportunity, she jumped at the chance. As soon as school was out, Walter and his two little brothers went to spend an idyllic summer in the country.

You are already anticipating trouble. The farmer was a stern taskmaster. He expected the children to work and work hard. Quite soon Walter’s lively, not to say rebellious nature, landed him in trouble. Punishment was called for. And punishment the farmer decreed was to be locked up alone in the gloomy attic of the old farmhouse. Now we imagine an angry, homesick, apprehensive child climbing the dark staircase, hearing the door at the bottom slam shut and the key turn in the lock.
It is summer, so there is still a little light coming from the small window. I don’t know if Walter is crying. If he is, it is probably tears of anger, but eventually, like any prisoner, he begins to look about his prison. And he sees that he is not alone. The farmer has also exiled to the attic Charles Dickens and Jane Austin, Mark Twain and Robert Louis Stevenson, Harriet Beecher Stowe and John Milton. Walter takes down a dusty volume, carries it to the window, and begins to read.

During the rest of that otherwise dreadful summer, Walter contrived to get himself punished on a regular basis. But by the next time he was exiled to the attic he had managed to secure a flashlight for himself so that his reading would not have to stop when the sun set.

He went back to the city and back to school. School continued to bore him, and he was never more than an indifferent student. Yet at the same time his teachers were writing him off, Walter was hungrily reading everything he could get his hands on. During those nights in that attic, the world had opened up for him. He had learned that books could stretch his mind and heart as nothing else and no one else had ever done before. He could not get enough.

Those in authority were surprised when Walter, who had exhibited no academic ambition in high school, opted to take the scholastic aptitude tests that are usually required for university admittance. When the scores came out, Walter was called into the office. He must have cheated. There was no other explanation for his phenomenal score. He would have to take the test again, but this time he would be doing so under carefully monitored conditions. Walter repeated the tests with a teacher standing over his shoulder and again pulled down an astounding score.

Walter received his undergraduate degree and went on to earn a masters degree from Harvard University. He became an innovative and successful businessman and, more importantly, a devoted husband, father and grandfather — a man, not only of intelligence, but of wisdom, compassion, and delightful good humor. Despite a full and busy life, Walter still reads widely and voraciously. “Books saved him,” his wife says simply.

Imagine for me a different scenario. Nine-year-old Walter has climbed those attic stairs, but instead of books, he finds piled by the window a set of workbooks and standardized tests and a finely sharpened pencil. Even if, out of boredom, he had filled in the blanks on every page of the workbooks; even if he had completed every test, can we believe for a minute that doing so would have enlarged and changed his life?

Or fast forward to our own times. Suppose a current day Walter had climbed those attic stairs and found a computer, already connected to the worldwide web. Yes, he might have come upon information to expand his knowledge of the world, or he might have stumbled into dark Internet sites, manned by sick and angry souls, who would seek to persuade him that violence was the only way to combat the pain in his young and impressionable spirit.

I am very grateful that the treasure hidden in the attic was books—great books—wonderful stories.

I have always been taught that the evils of the world are the result of sin, but perhaps we should consider that poverty, disease, crime, and war also result from a failure of the human imagination. Those of us who are among the world’s blessed cannot fully imagine ourselves as victims of gross injustice, nor can we fully imagine how wrongs of injustice might be righted. A novel can illumine the imagination because it lets us experience another person’s life at a very deep level — it allows us to eavesdrop on another person’s soul.

The essayist Barry Lopez speaks eloquently about the power of the story both to illumine and to heal. To heal means to make whole. This is more than putting a bandage on a wound. It is more than simple catharsis, the purging of the emotions. Healing here is concerned with growing, with becoming. And that is why children’s books are so important. We don’t come into this world fully human. We become human, we become whole, and the stories we hear and read as children are vital nourishment in this process of becoming fully human.

Some years ago I was asked to speak to a group of public school teachers who would be taking their classes to see a production of the play, Bridge...
to Terabithia. I spent more than an hour telling about how the book came to be written and rewritten, and then how Stephanie Tolan and I adapted it into the play their classes would see. There was the usual time of questions, at the end of which a young male teacher thanked me for my time and what I had told them that morning. “But I want to take

something special back to my class. Can you give me some word to take back to them?”

I was momentarily silenced. After all, I had been talking continuously for over an hour; surely he could pick out from that outpouring a word or two to take home to his students. Fortunately, I kept my mouth shut long enough to realize what I ought to say — it is what I want to say to all of you today. “I’m very Biblically oriented,” I said, “and so for me the most important thing is for the word to become flesh. I can write stories for children and young people, and in that sense I can offer them words, but you are the word become flesh in your classroom. Society has taught our children that they are nobodies unless their faces appear on television. But by your caring, by your showing them how important each one of them is, you become the word that I would like to share with each of them. You are that word become flesh.”

That day long ago in the Chittenden prison one of the inmates asked me, “Do you think Gilly would have made it if there had been no Mamie Trotter?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I just don’t know.”

What I want to say to all the Gillys who might read my books is this: You are seen, you are not alone, you are not despised, you are unique and of infinite value in the human family. A writer can try to say this through the words of a story, but it is you who meet those children every day. It is you who will embody that hope. You are their Mamie Trotter. You are their word of hope become flesh.

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About the Author

Katherine Paterson, award-winning author of Bridge to Terabithia, has written more than 30 books, including 15 novels for young people. She has twice won both the Newbery Medal and the National Book Award. Her books have been published in more than 25 languages. She is the 1998 recipient of the Hans Christian Andersen Medal given by the International Board of Books for Young People. She was named one of America’s Living Legends by the Library of Congress. In 2007 Disney adapted Bridge to Terabithia into a highly successful movie.

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