

The Turtle and the Hare

I am a speedy reader. I don't mean a speed-reader, who skims a passage, picking out key words and gathering enough information to comprehend the general meaning. I mean a speedy reader who zooms through a book faster than a rabbit on rocket fuel, absorbing and understanding the text as well as if I had spent hours poring over each paragraph. I first noticed this particular talent in my fourth grade advanced reading group. When my competitive peers would ask how far each of us had read during the period of silent sustained reading, I noticed that I was always at least five pages ahead of everyone else. By the time I reached sixth grade, I realized that being a fast reader came in handy, especially when I needed to finish *Little Women* in time to play a game of kick ball before dark. I also appreciated my reading speed in high school when I could polish off *The Catcher in the Rye* in a few hours, sparing me the choice of whether to do my English reading or watch a re-run of *Cheers* before bed. Later, with the ponderous amount of reading in college, I truly benefited. While my roommates were absorbed in their books, I was taking relationship quizzes in *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, having finished the quarter's reading assignments days ahead of due dates.

Over the years, I have felt truly blessed with my talent. My fellow CATE members will certainly understand how speedy reading is useful when I am faced with 60 senior research papers on top of 90 sophomore book critiques. However, as the years roll along, I realize that the accelerated pace of my reading reflects the accelerated pace of my life. I am a teacher, and teaching is a high energy, fast paced world of multi-tasking. In fact, I find that my reading rate mirrors how quickly an hour in period one transitions into

period two, how rapidly a day at school concludes with the dismissal bell, and how swiftly a year ends in another graduation ceremony.

When my husband returns home from work and asks about my day, I usually tell him, “I was running.” And the running doesn’t stop on the commute home. Like every other working mom, once my day job ends, my night job begins. From four o’clock on, I’m shuffling my daughter off to her numerous after-school activities, cooking dinner, and completing miscellaneous household chores. I also have an elderly mother in poor health who needs assistance with appointments, shopping, and cleaning. Once the family duties are finished and the child is tucked into bed, I then have the time to quickly read those essays on symbolism in *Jane Eyre*. The reading I do in that moment is one more chore on a long list. I relish the idea of escaping into a psychological thriller or a tawdry romance novel, but the thought of diving into a book or even a short story becomes lost in a soporific haze when my head hits the pillow.

Toward the end of third quarter, after reading hundreds of student papers and re-reading *A Lesson Before Dying* for the umpteenth time, I feel resentful that I have no time to read for pleasure. Around April, though, the reading I must do for class suddenly becomes pleasure reading, I find myself voraciously reading any and all poems that I can find in eager anticipation of the poetry unit that I am about to teach. This joyful expectancy hasn’t always been the case. In the past, I have dreaded the poetry unit because the hasty reader in me is also an impatient reader. I used to feel that the pay-out of reading poetry never equaled the time investment. Furthermore, if I can’t slow myself down long enough to thoroughly understand the paradox in Shakespeare’s “When My Love Swears” or the irony in “The Barbie Doll,” how will I motivate my students to do

the same? Fortunately, I have poetry enthusiasts every year in my classroom who carry me through the five weeks we spend on verse. It is one such student named Shelby who, two years ago in my English 2 class, showed me how to slow down.

You see, Shelby is a resource student who struggles with every subject except English. She has a brilliant, creative mind and can write eloquent essays, profound stories, and, you guessed it, masterful poetry. But Shelby doesn't write these pieces quickly. Often, she takes weeks in her labors, and I wonder if I will ever see the end product. When I do, though, I am in awe at her mature thought and skillful execution. Not only am I impressed with her writing, I am impressed by how content Shelby seems undertaking the task. Her world of nagging teachers and distraught parents seems to disappear when she writes. During in-class essays, I have watched her, sitting in the front of the classroom, her usual slumped posture leaning into the desk's edge as if she were the tortoise at the starting line of the race. I have studied her face, her brows furrowing, then arching again as a thought fleets through her mind and down to her scribbling fingers. I have witnessed the knowing smile creep across her mouth as she shyly approaches me to ask if she can have more time to finish since she is only half-way through with her essay when the dismissal bell rings. I always grant her request; I would be denying myself the pleasure of Shelby's genius if I didn't.

Once I receive Shelby's creations, I find that I can't rush through them like I do the other papers heaped in my to-do pile. Her complexly woven compositions require careful consideration. I must admit that the first time I was faced with a Shelby masterpiece, I raced through it with my usual impatience, having the vague sense that it was good and scrawling an A on it before slapping it onto the finished stack. I don't

remember what made me take a second look. Perhaps I had to justify the grade in the rubric and needed a second look for inspiration. Whatever the reason, I found myself reading her essay on the Sacred Feminine as portrayed in *The Secret Life of Bees* again and again, amazed at the diction, the insight, the fluidity. Herein lay the epiphany. If slowing down to read a student's poetic paper more carefully reaps such grand rewards, why not give published poets another try?

I, the hurried and harried hare, have learned a lesson from Shelby, a lesson I wish I had learned twenty years ago at the start of my teaching career. When the whirlwind of my life is fed by the draft of my own running, I know it is time to slow down. Reading poetry reinforces that lesson for me and brings me a sense of calm in the midst of the tempest. Furthermore, I can reap the benefits of these harmony-inducing elixirs even in the very place where originates most of the mayhem—the classroom. When the pace of the curriculum becomes too rushed, I'll pull out a John Donne poem that my students and I will puzzle over for hours and come back to weeks later when we are knee-deep in *Othello*. Reading poetry allows us to catch our breath, to pause and remember that the school calendar does not delineate a race to the finish line.

Reading poetry after work helps me realize that my home life is not a race, either. One poem that stops me in my tracks is "Turtle," by Kay Ryan. After just one read-through, I am suddenly transported to my grandfather's Indiana farm where I once sat for two hours watching a turtle struggle up a culvert. Even as a child, I think I found some affinity with the creature who was "stuck up to her axle." Could I have known then that the plight of a turtle would be likened to my own plight now? During the course of the school year, I often feel "below luck level" when trying to balance job duties, family

obligations, and me-time. Like Ryan's turtle, I can find myself "barely mobile," which is ironic in my fast-paced life. I am running, as I tell my husband, but am I making progress if I fail to take a breather and enjoy the moment? Reading this poem about a turtle whose "only levity is patience" is the perfect test to see that I have learned my lesson from Shelby. When I find that I am becoming impatient with the turtle's sluggish pace, I remind myself that there is beauty and a certain satisfaction in her toil. "Turtle," like all poetry, prompts me to reaffirm my commitment to pace myself and enjoy the here and now. And what better way to enjoy the here and now than with a poem?

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