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Comp/Lit 11 Period 3

14 September 2012

Breaking Stereotypes

Disaffected groups are people who are not happy with authority. They will give in to the expectation of being dumb, just so they don't have to follow through with the government. The disaffected groups of Indians that Sherman Alexie spoke to "were expected to be stupid." Most of these children live up to the expectations in the classroom, but once they weren't around authority, they defy these expectations. Although the Indians could challenge their assumed potential, most continued on their chosen path. "Those who failed were ceremonially accepted by other Indians and appropriately pitted by non-Indians." (Pg. 17) Sherman Alexie gave these disaffected kids advice. This advice was the thing he cherished most on this earth. It was what leads him on the path taken by very few Indians. He told them, "Books". That was the best piece of advice he could give to any disaffected person. Books. The stories and information in books would help these children break away from their undeserved stereotypes.

Sherman Alexie believes that books are the best way to educate children and set them on their unique path. As I research reading more and more, I agree with the advice Alexie gave those children. Reading helps with many aspects of life. The more you read, the more you learn. The different kinds of books give a variety of knowledge. Reading leads to better vocabulary, spelling, and improved writing skills. Books open new worlds to children. These worlds are filled with new people, places, and an improved understanding and concern for humanity. Reading helps with all an over general knowledge, intelligence, and higher GPA's. When a kid

gets involved with a book, it keeps them on the path of success and away from harmful entertainment.

Not only do books give knowledge, but they help educate disaffected children who are less than willing to learn from government teachers. They help the majority of Indian children break away from the stereotype already given to them. I have felt the same way towards stereotypes in the past. Although these Indian kids gave into their stereotypes, I was not willing to get passed up. Being the captain of the local Spirit Squad, I was already expected to be dumb. Just like these Indian children, it was okay if I wasn't aware of the answers, or if I didn't pass the class on the first try. But from childhood, I have been in love with math. Math is a subject most people do not enjoy. I was already the odd one out for always having a 95% or higher in my math classes, but adding a cheerleading uniform on top of that was something else. Last year, I was awarded the Top Trigonometry Student of the Year. As I walked down the aisle of the auditorium to receive my award, I heard somebody in the crowd say, "Isn't she a cheerleader?" He said it with a tone that implied that the likes of me should not be included in such a ceremony. I had gone against the crowd to defy my stereotype and not everyone was happy about it. I enjoy reading math text books and learning new things in the math world. And because I perform at football games with nineteen other girls in uniforms and pompons, I have to work that much harder to be accepted as a math geek. That stereotype is what drives me to memorize mathematical equations and stay up late into the night making sure I understand my math homework completely. Alexie is trying to get through to these Indian children, but they let their stereotypes define them. They would rather give in to authority, than fight for something they could learn to love. Alexie and I believe that books are the best way to break the Indians

stereotype. Smart Indians are dangerous, “widely feared and ridiculed by Indians and non-Indians alike.” (Pg. 17)

I believe stereotypes are meant to be broken. Alexie believed that as well. I work hard to break my stereotype with a 3.985 GPA. Alexie worked hard to break his stereotype by becoming an extremely successful writer. During his childhood all he wanted was to succeed, to live his life freely and respected. He didn't want to be used like his fellow Indians. “I loved those books, but I also knew that love had only one purpose. I was trying to save my life.” (Pg. 18) The Indians he was brought up with we considered not good enough to even think about being a writer. “Writing was something beyond Indians. I cannot recall a single time that a guest teacher visited the reservation.” (Pg. 18) But Alexie was not about to let someone else decided what he was or wasn't good enough for. He broke his stereotype with books and now that he is in control of his future and his life, he decided to help the next generation of Indians also save their life.

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14 September 2012

Out of Caves into Books

In Plato's Allegory, he says, "our argument shows that the power and capacity of learning exists in the soul already" (Plato). In "The Joys of Reading and Writing: Superman and Me", Sherman Alexie offers the advice of, "'Books', I say to them. 'Books', I say" (18) to disaffected Indian students. Recently my sister asked me for help on an assignment about Plato's "The Allegory of the Cave". As I read, I began to see a connection between that story and Alexie's "Superman and Me". Both are essays about the importance of the search for knowledge. Alexie focuses on books and reading as an instrument in that search. In "The Joys of Reading and Writing: Superman and Me", Sherman Alexie argues that books enrich, empower and also challenge us by stimulating our desire to learn and to seek knowledge.

As it says in the "Allegory of the Cave", everyone is born with the ability to learn, but we separate ourselves by how much we choose to use this ability. In the 'Allegory of the Cave', chained-up prisoners sit looking at a wall seeing the shadows of men walking by carrying different objects. Not being able to see things directly, they rely on their imaginations and the voiced thoughts of others to create a real picture in their mind of what is being shown in the shadows. Their learning is indirect and limited. This, in a way, parallels the Indian students sitting in the back of the classroom choosing to be inactive. They sit, as the prisoners do, with their backs to the action. They choose not to challenge themselves or to speak out, just as the prisoners choose not to turn around.

When one of the prisoners is freed and is allowed to stand up, he sees for the first time where the shadows are coming from and, at first, is confused by reality. The prisoner is afraid of the truth, but, at the same time, curious of what else there is to see. Alexie is an Indian student who chose to open a book and not sit idle in the back of the classroom. He reads and starts to realize the knowledge and information he gains as he reads and how much he enjoys it. Still, like Plato's prisoner he is afraid of his new 'power'. Yet, Alexie begins to read more and more, just as the prisoner starts to move out of the cave to see where the light is coming from and continues to look around and to explore his surroundings. Learning and the search for knowledge has overtaken them both.

Wanting to share the knowledge that the prisoner in the "Allegory of the Cave" now has, he goes back to the cave. The other prisoners, having never been released, are ignorant and do not believe him. The other prisoners are afraid and do not have the knowledge to understand what the released prisoner is saying. Alexie, knowing the great benefits that come from reading, is telling the Indian students to go out and read and to educate themselves. As Alexie writes, "I loved those books, but I also knew that love had only one purpose. I was trying to save my life" (Alexie 18). He wants them to make something of themselves. Through reading books, Alexie gained the knowledge and confidence to stand up and make a change. He put his learning into action by becoming a writer. By visiting students at the reservation school he is trying to share his love of learning and book with others. Plato's prisoner realizes that he is better off and does not want to stay back with the other prisoners in the cave, he rather wants them to join him, but, because of their fear and ignorance, do not. Alexie shares his excitement with the Indian students, and while some open up to it right away and take his advice, others sit in the back of the classroom with fear and resistance.

Looking back and comparing when I first read the “Allegory of the Cave” to when I read it the second time while helping my sister with her homework, I realize the knowledge that I have gained during that time. I better understood the story and was able to make a connection between it and “Superman and Me”. Where the “Allegory of the Cave” talks about learning and the search for knowledge, Alexie focuses on one instrument, books, that can be used in that search. In the end, if we just ‘turn our heads’ or ‘open a book’, our lives will be enriched as those of Alexie and the prisoner were.

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Comp/Lit 11 7th

13 September 2012

Just Another Page

This story doesn't quite hit me as the author hoped it would. However, it does have quite a powerful message behind it. Personally, it does not affect me in astonishing ways. That does not mean this piece has no personal guidance or meaning for others. In Sherman Alexie's, "The Joy of Writing: Superman and Me", reading allows one to not only allow their mind to wander, it also allows an individual to escape from their personal hardships, however, it's only effective for those who utilize their passion for reading.

Reading did more for Alexie than just become an art he fell in love with. He was a young man who had aspirations to become someone. He was not going to settle for a poor quality of life on the reservation. Alexie encourages many of the youth attending school on the reservations to go and pick up a book. By doing so, he has high hopes they will find themselves to enjoy reading and do something more than settle for life on the reservation. Though his efforts and dreams for these children are tremendous, when Alexie says, "books", I say, "books," (18), I do not believe that a heavy emphasis on one simple word can do much to transform an individual's approach towards reading. Only those who are open to the idea of picking up a book, and diving into it with open arms, can benefit and reap rewards. Until then, it is still only an unknown art; a book.

To approach reading from a personal aspect, I do not harbor a sweltering hate for reading. However, I often encounter these emotions when approaching school assigned literature. To be quite honest, I find it to be highly rewarding. As I mentioned earlier, this specific piece of

literature hardly touches me. Although, I will give it props for allowing me to view reading from a different perspective. Being able to pick up a book and know that the pages can take me where I choose, or venture into the path the author intended, is exciting.

Everyday tasks, in some way, shape, or form, require the ability to read, and it is a necessity. If one does not have the ability to read, then life can become a challenge. For example, let's take a quick look at Frederick Douglass. When Douglass was born, he was born enslaved. However, with the willing aid of his Mistress and the young, neighborhood boys, he learned to read. Later on down the road, he taught himself to write. After his escape many years later, he became a lecturer for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society (Douglass), an "internationally recognized uncompromising abolitionist" (Douglass), a "trusted advisor to Lincoln" (Douglass), and many other outstanding lifetime accomplishments. The point is reading transformed somebody who had but slavery to his name, to an internationally recognized figure and hero. To tie this all back to Sherman Alexie's point, reading can do more than provide knowledge. It can provide knowledge, and knowledge is power.

Though this essay was quite dry, it did hold some meaning to it. I believe reading can do what an individual desires it to do, be it becoming a nationally recognized public figure, or being an individual who is quite disinterested in reading. Whatever the case may be, it holds quite an amazing power, which can drastically evolve ones' life.

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Comp/Lit 11 Period 8

14 September 2012

The "Savior" of Life

In life, many short-term goals exist—calculators, study guides, and ACT prep books are just a few. Reading and writing are everlasting skills that immensely aid everyday life. If one were trapped in the crevices of a rock cave with death knocking at the door, a survival guide would instruct the necessary steps to escape the situation. Without reading and writing, no communication occurs through the written word, and one will struggle to communicate with spoken words. In "The Joy of Reading and Writing: Superman and Me," Sherman Alexie elucidates that books help people succeed at life by understanding the people and the world around them, reading between the lines, and demolishing barriers.

If one can read, he or she has the crucial advantage of understanding their surroundings. Alexie states, "A smart Indian is a dangerous person" (17). He says this because Indians and white people alike expect Indians to be stupid. Whites fear if Indians gain knowledge, they will comprehend that the Whites in authority are limiting their potential, causing retaliation. Only through books am I able to understand many aspects of my environment, as well. For example, I would not know how to reach a destination without reading a map. I would never be able to visit places for leisure or learn how to arrive at mandatory destinations.

Also, I would not be able to drive any place new if I could not read the street names. Reading a variety of books helps me recognize signs like these quickly. Additionally, I could never hold a job if the written manuals resembled gibberish in my eyes. Therefore, if I were illiterate, I would struggle to buy food, water, and shelter for survival.

I realize people may think that one can find places through trial and error; however, illiteracy can make trial and error more difficult. Reading provides one with common sense and symbols that may lead to the right direction. For instance, if a person wants to locate an office building, common sense says to travel in the building's direction—not the open field's. An illiterate person could not make this educated guess due to lack of acquired common sense. A literate person would have the background knowledge to make the correct judgment of traveling toward the buildings.

Books tremendously help one to pinpoint the subtleties of life. The varieties of books I have read help me detect when someone is being sarcastic or when one's body language is different than what they speak literally. For example, when I see a teacher aimlessly flipping through pages of a textbook, it means he or she wants me to stop yelling nonsense and listen. Books are a crucial source for learning such body language and underlying meanings.

Furthermore, I would not understand my brother Gabe's sarcasm when he tells me that I look presentable when I first wake up. By reading other people's responses to sarcasm, I make the connection that Gabe means quite the opposite of the literal meaning. Books also help me understand my mother's mood; even though she says she is not angry, her pursed lips hint otherwise. Reading about facial gestures leads me to this conclusion.

Reading, as abstract as it seems, helps one abolish obstacles that block the path of life. When Alexie was a child and read *Superman* comic books, "Superman [broke] down the door" (17). The book did not convey this with words, but Alexie understood the message by interpreting the picture. Superman did not simply open the door. He eliminated his obstacle instead of merely *overcoming* it. Alexie implies that through reading, one can eliminate difficulties in everyday life. In my own existence, I strive to read motivational books that teach me how to eliminate obstacles, especially the Bible. I could never rein victorious over

strongholds if I could not comprehend God's unfailing truth. After my father died, I pried myself out of bed only through God's saving grace.

Without books, my life would reach a state of chaos. I would never be able to complete simple tasks such as going to the store or visiting a friend's house easily. Also, I would be unable to join the millions of people in the workforce due to illiteracy. No income would create a death sentence for my future family and me. My spiritual struggles would blind me from God's plans, disconnecting me from His mercy. When Alexie says he is "trying to save [their] lives," he did not want this for special effect; it is the sickening truth (18). Without literacy, one is trapped. One is defeated. The instinct of survival becomes a daily burden.

Works Cited

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