

Literature as Invitation

A few years ago, while visiting a small school on the outskirts of San Jose, Costa Rica, I wandered into a class that happened to be discussing *The Diary of Anne Frank*. The talk was taking a course of its own, undirected by the teacher and undeterred by my intrusion. Both of us were occasionally allowed to join in, however, as long as we didn't disturb the natural flow of the discourse.

Although I was with the group for only a short time, much was happening and I found myself wishing for a tape recorder, or at least the notepad I'd thoughtlessly left in the car. The conversation was energetic but sprawling, almost chaotic, as the students spilled out what they felt compelled to say. There was at first a lot of talking; very little listening. It was as if the reading had filled them with a passion and energy they could discharge only through speech. Gradually, however, the monologues became dialogues and kids began to hear what others were saying and to pause long enough to actually listen and reflect. The talk seemed to grow somewhat quiet as the students would find a focus and pursue it. They raised and discussed some of the predictable questions: How was it possible for people to treat others so inhumanely? Could something like this happen again? Could it happen here, or nearby?

And then at some point one student mentioned the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina and talk turned to the conflict in that region. There were differences, of course, between Anne Frank's story and the tales coming out of the Balkans, but

the students focused on the similarities, and as they talked we could hear compassion for the suffering of the people in Kosovo. Because they had read the *Diary of Anne Frank*, people who might otherwise have been mere stick figures marching across an alien landscape on CNN were transformed into folks like us, the 20 students and 2 teachers gathered in that little room. A text written 60 years ago bound together for the moment the Jews suffering under the Nazis in Northern Europe, young students in Central America, and the disenfranchised citizens of Kosovo—a bond spanning many decades and thousands of miles.

It was a brief but marvelous moment, the sort of classroom experience I wish I could reliably plan and somehow execute, and it has come to represent for me what literature is or might be in the classroom if we respect its power and accept what it offers. The books, and stories, and poems we lay before our students are not, after all, simply instruction manuals or repositories of information. They are instead invitations to a passionate engagement with human experience. They are invitations to do what those young students in San Jose were doing for those brief moments.

Literature as the Invitation to Speak

Literature is, first of all, an invitation simply to speak, to pour out thoughts and feelings, as those readers of *Anne Frank* demonstrated, and as very young children show us when we first begin to read aloud to them. They may listen quietly for a while, but often, if the story grips them, they want to tell us what they think and feel and hope and remember and wonder about. These youngsters tell us what the character did and should have

done, what they hope will happen as a result, what *they* would have done in similar circumstances, what their friends did that very afternoon, what their mothers tell them they ought to do if confronted with such problems as those the character faced. They ask questions, pass judgments, speculate, condemn, praise, and give orders.

Adolescents aren't very different in that respect from the child sitting on your knee. Even older readers, adults, though they may seldom find the opportunity to discuss what they've read, betray the same impulses. If it moved them, they walk out of a movie talking about what they liked, what confused them, what was exciting and what was boring, who performed well or poorly, which effects were believable and which were not, whether the director is getting better or worse, whether the actor is over the hill or not. And they do it all without waiting for their teachers to interrogate them. Seldom do we overhear someone exit a movie expressing the desire for a good old 10-question quiz, just like the ones he used to have back in our school days, to reassure him that he had paid adequate attention to Bruce Willis during the last 90 minutes.

The first impulse of both child and adult, so far as I can tell, is *not* to demand, eagerly, that you pose a question or review the basic facts of the story. Rather, it's to talk, to tell you something about themselves, something about their experience with the text or about the prior experiences of which the text reminded them. If we don't allow time for that, students may learn to suppress the impulse to talk and to wait for the teacher's questions. In many classrooms, after all, talking has just been an opportunity to make a mistake—if you keep quiet at least you can't be wrong—so silence is safer. But if students don't learn to speak up after they've read, finding their own way into the story, then they'll need you there to help them with the movie long after they've left school.

There are times when it seems that the best setting a teacher can provide at the end of a reading is a receptive vacuum, a space that the students might begin to fill with responses. It can be chaotic if students are moved by the reading, and

it's helpful to have the recorder or the notepad that I'd left in the car to help catch ideas that might later be revisited. Sometimes, suppressing the impulse to talk may be the way to enrich it. A few minutes to write without speaking may help those students who would otherwise hang back, who are reluctant to lay their thoughts before the group, or who are simply too slow to jump in, to capture their ideas so that they aren't lost in the confusion. The free-writing done immediately after reading can help to set the agenda when we try to move from random talk to more orderly and rational dialogue where ideas are not simply tossed out on the table, but are instead examined.

I've tried, for instance, asking students to write freely about a text for roughly five minutes. Then, in small groups, they're asked to share what they've written, but—and this is the critical point—to do so *without* comment or question until everyone has had the opportunity to either read what they've written or to tell the group about it. Then, when all have had the chance to express their responses, tell their stories, or otherwise share their thoughts, they are urged to discuss whatever matters seem most interesting. The silent moments seem to allow everyone the chance to speak before the group attempts to move into conversation where it's so easy for the timid to be lost.

There are other ways to help students see the invitation to speak, but slowing them down so that they have the chance to find their thoughts, and insisting that they capture them, seems to be a key. Typically, the free-writing or journal keeping is done at the end of some reading, but it might also take place *during* the reading. Giving students a few sheets of sticky notes and asking them to interrupt their reading long enough to jot down their thoughts, questions, or reactions at three or four

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points along the way, sticking the notes right on the page, will give them a brief record of their experiences with the text and provide them with something to say when the group gets around to talking.

Literature as the Invitation to a Dialogue

If their first impulse is to speak, it doesn't necessarily follow that their second is to listen. Dia-

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logue—talking *and* listening—is essential, however, if students are to grow beyond the confines of their own idiosyncratic responses. Speaking—articulating our responses, thoughts, and questions—is, of course, the first step in a dialogue. There is an immense difference, however, between the alternating monologues that sometimes pass for discussion, with all participants speaking and few if any listening, and real dialogue in which ideas are explored rather than simply proclaimed. When transitions consist of little more than “Yes, but . . .” as a speaker dismisses the thoughts of the one before, little is likely to be accomplished.

Nor will students learn to converse through recitation and interrogation, which in some classes have passed for dialogue. The task of responding to questions has little in common with the much more rigorous and complex task of articulating your own questions, formulating your responses, connecting the text with your own experiences, drawing your own inferences and mustering the evidence for them, passing your own judgments, and then sharing all of these matters with others who have done the same. Most of us have had no training and little experience with dialogue in the schools. And dialogue is not especially easy, as anyone who has suffered through a faculty meeting will know.

Dialogue may, in fact, be the most difficult of all the arts, but it seems that if literature is any-

thing, it is an invitation into dialogue, into the great ongoing conversation about the big issues that come in little words: love, hate, justice, revenge, hope, despair, good, evil, finding, losing, mourning, rejoicing If literature matters, it matters because it is about these issues, issues that are at once universal and personal, that are both the private concerns of our most intimate and lonely moments and the public property of all people everywhere. It is in this dialogue that students have the chance to refine their understandings and to sharpen their perceptions.

One strategy that seems to work well from late elementary school through graduate school to help introduce students to dialogue has been dubbed by one teacher “Passing Notes,” in honor of the middle school child’s irresistible impulse to jot a quick missive to the kid sitting next to her. It consists of silent, written conversation. Students are given a poem or an extract from a longer work, asked to read it, and then invited to talk about it, silently, by passing notes. One student writes a sentence or two while the other waits. Then the note is passed and the second student reads it, writes a reply below, and returns it. The sheets are exchanged several times, sustaining the dialogue as long as the group will tolerate, and then the pairs are invited to talk, aloud, about any issues that have come up. After the pairs have had adequate time to converse, the whole class can be brought together to discuss issues that have arisen.

The activity slows down the talk, giving students time to reflect. When they are writing, they have some uninterrupted time to formulate their thoughts. They aren’t trying both to think their own thoughts and to listen to those of their partner simultaneously. And while their partners are writing, there is little for them to do but think; they can’t talk with anyone else and there isn’t time enough to pull out their math homework. So all they can do is reflect, or perhaps re-read the text, or maybe think about the note they’ve just read or written. Then, when they read their partner’s *next* note, they have time and silence in which to reflect upon it. They don’t have to speak up immediately, and they don’t have to remember exactly

what was said—it stays there on the page before them to be re-read if necessary. The written dialogue enables them to slow down the talk, to focus on its various aspects, to learn to do what they will have to do at break-neck speed in oral exchanges.

Obviously, this is not an activity for every day. It takes patience and energy. Nor is it suitable for longer works unless students have had some practice and will come to class with a brief statement ready about the last chapter or two of the book they're reading. But used sparingly it helps students find and express thoughts they might otherwise lose, it shows them something about the nature of talk, it generates ideas that the entire class can investigate, and it may gradually begin to improve the oral dialogues that we hope will constitute much of our class time.

Less demanding and tiring, perhaps, is an activity that asks students to imitate, in their discussion of a text, the sort of talk they'd expect to find in other social settings. When they've finished reading something together, for instance, you might ask the class to pretend that they've just left a movie (which is, in this case, the text we've read), they're sitting around a table waiting to be picked up, and their ride isn't going to get there for five or ten minutes. Just talk, I'd suggest, sip your imaginary cokes and talk. Then, when the conversations begin to lag, call the whole class back together and ask them what came up in each group. That undirected conversation often has a vitality that more tightly directed discussions sometimes lack, and, if we're lucky, it reveals interesting reactions and opens up unpredicted lines of inquiry for the group. "How," we may ask, "did the text get you to discussing *that* issue?" Or "Why did the members of your group react so differently to the text?" Teachers have to be alert to catch the clues that the group-talk may provide, but when such discussions catch fire, they have the vitality of the conversation in that classroom in San Jose, students passionately talking about Anne Frank, Kosovo, and their own hopes for themselves.

Another strategy I've experimented with recently involves placing a poem or a suitable paragraph from a longer work in the middle of a large

sheet of flip-chart paper and asking students to gather around it in groups of three or four, at a table or on the floor. The students are given felt-tip pens of different colors. Then they are asked to read the piece and, in silence, to begin writing on the sheet. They are told to write anything, whatever comes to mind—questions, comments, criticisms, memories, or anything else. If they are dutiful students, they'll begin in silence, as asked, but talk gradually emerges, beginning in whispers as they comment on and ask about what the others have written, and soon, if it's working, they may find themselves in conversation about the text, their readings, and their own lives. It might be interesting to have a tape recorder handy to capture the talk that does emerge during the activity. Such talk is often powerful, because it addresses issues that matter to the students, issues they have found themselves in the reading.

Literature as the Invitation to Intellectual Inquiry

The invitation to a dialogue is, of course, ultimately an invitation to intellectual inquiry. As we lay ideas on the table, we assume the obligation to examine and assess them. That is, at least in part, why we come together in schools, and why schools that are free from the constraints of corporate or religious dogma are so vitally important. We have to defend freedom of thought and diversity of opinion, but that doesn't obligate us to respect, indiscriminately, all thought and all opinion. There are, as a cursory glance over the last century makes painfully clear, as those students discussing *Anne Frank* knew, ideas that are despicable, inhumane, and corrupt. We need to have students reflect upon and examine the visions of human possibilities they are offered, with the assistance of other students and teachers, so that they may learn to assess the

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Approaches to literature instruction that have suggested respect for the responses of readers have occasionally been accused of indulging the lazy reader's inclination to avoid such rigorous thought and analysis. Rosenblatt and almost all the others who have written thoughtfully about response to literature have, however, made it quite clear that

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intelligent reading is much more than simply emoting or expressing one's feelings and then moving on to something else. Rather, response leads to reflection, analysis, and interpretation. Students may need help articulating the ques-

tions, but most will be able to see that their responses to *Anne Frank* necessarily imply questions about human values, about abuses of power, about our responsibilities to others, and about other issues. Our responses may lead us elsewhere, of course, including into our own stories, but the intellectual inquiry that literature invites, almost demands, is essential for students to learn.

Such inquiry is almost inevitable if the teacher capitalizes on the natural flow of discourse. The talk may begin with the personal and idiosyncratic—"I feel this . . ." one student will say, or "I think that . . ." Others will confirm or disagree, but always the question arises, even if the teacher must first suggest it, "*Why* do you feel or think as you do?" And the answers take the form, "Because the author says this," or "Because the character did that." When that sort of analysis grows out of the responses of the students themselves, they are more likely to feel some ownership of the questions, and a stronger motivation to answer them.

Consider, for example, a discussion of Paulsen's *Dogsong*, which speaks in part of the relationship between an individual and his sled dogs. Several students, predictably, talked of their own dogs, though in Georgia few had ever thought of racing them through the snow pulling heavy sleds.

Ultimately, one student casually and dismissively expressed the opinion that you'd have to be crazy to go roaming around in the wilds, surrounded by wolves and polar bears, with only a pack of half-mad Huskies for company. That observation was slightly unsettling for those students who felt differently, who thought that it was not sheer madness that would take someone out into frozen country on a dogsled, but who couldn't quite articulate the motivations for, or the value of, such dangerous behavior.

The disharmony within the class allowed the teacher to help them phrase a question that might enable them to deal with the issue. She suggested that figuring out what drove Paulsen and his characters out into the snow, and what they seemed to derive from the experience, might help them figure out why they, the readers, were reacting to the story so differently. Thus she moved them, logically and smoothly, from a free-wheeling discussion of their feelings, their responses, and their own stories, into analysis of the values and beliefs of the characters and the author.

Rather than wait for the question to arise during the talk, she might have begun there, perhaps asking something like "Why does Paulsen write about people who take such extraordinary risks?" and the discussion might have gone well, leading the students through analysis and inference. But it would not have shown them how the murky and disparate responses of readers can give rise to questions worth investigating further. It wouldn't have given them the experience of shaping disagreements into questions that might be answered, at least partially, by gathering evidence and organizing it into a reasoned inference. The students will, of course, still very likely differ in their judgments of any text they share, but the intellectual inquiry it invites them to undertake may show them how reasoned discourse is conducted among people who are committed to understanding events and willing to explore various ways of looking at them. Literature, by provoking and sustaining a range of responses, invites—even demands—the questioning and analysis that the schools have always hoped to teach.

Literature as the Invitation to Tell Your Own Story

Occasionally, the free-writing, the journals, and the other activities designed to evoke talk, to lead students into dialogue, and to lure them into reflection on significant ideas, may instead turn them inside themselves, leading them far away from the text into their own memories, their own lives. A story we read may invite us to tell a story of our own.

The literature that resonates most powerfully with us is the literature that echoes or extends our own experience in some ways. Consider those students who are touched by a poem or a story that evokes a powerful memory of a character's loss, of another's fear, of still another's most embarrassing moments, and find themselves nodding in recognition and moving toward sharing their own experiences. The most powerful moments in a literature class may be those moments when literature evokes literature. When story leads to story, we see most clearly what Rosenblatt meant when she said that :

Surely, of all the arts, literature is most immediately implicated with life itself. The very medium through which the author shapes the text—language—is grounded in the shared lives of human beings. Language is the bloodstream of a common culture, a common history. What might otherwise be mere vibrations in the air or black marks on a page can point to all that has been thought or imagined—in Henry James' phrases, to "all life, all feeling, all observation, all vision (Rosenblatt, 1985, p. 65).

The literature that matters most to us *is* deeply implicated with our lives, reminding us of our own fears and hopes, and of those moments—moments that have the potential, at least, of becoming stories in which we feared and hoped. Telling those stories enables us to take some control of our lives, to understand in ways that would otherwise elude us. Although it comes from psychiatry rather than teaching, Coles's account of his first experiences working in a clinic emphasizes the importance of story. Struggling to understand a patient by reducing her talk to "clinical history" and by categorizing her difficulties in the diagnostic terms of psychiatry, Coles finds himself finally, in a mo-

ment of either frustration or great intuition, asking her, "Why don't you just tell me a story or two?" It seems to be a pivotal point, both in his work with that patient and in his own understanding of his task. He realizes

that we all had accumulated stories in our lives, that each of us had a history of such stories, that no one's stories are quite like anyone else's, and that we could, after a fashion, become our own appreciative and comprehending critics by learning to pull together the various incidents in our lives in such a way that they do, in fact, become an old-fashioned story (Coles, 1990, p. 11).

Telling their own stories, after all, is what the writers themselves are doing, and if the activity is valid for them, why is it not equally valid for our students? Writers make sense of their lives by telling their stories and writing their poems; so too might students. When we were experimenting with a variation of the poster activity discussed earlier, Judy

Goldberg brought into her class (at The Lincoln School in San Jose, Costa Rica) about six or seven thematically related poems mounted in the middle of large sheets of flip-chart paper, taped some on the walls, and scattered the others around on the floor. She asked students to wander around the room in silence, visiting the poems and writing their responses and thoughts on the sheets. Whether it was strategic on her part, or just good luck, I don't know, but she didn't repeat her request for silence and gradually we were finding ourselves in pairs, chatting quietly about the poems, what others had written on them, and what we were writing ourselves. When we gathered as a full class to revisit the poems, most of the talk took the form of stories about our own lives. One student told about the fear she'd felt on moving from Chicago to San Jose, and the sorrow she now felt at having to leave friends and return to the States. Others, responding both to the poems and the stories of classmates, talked of their own ex-

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periences. From there, we moved on to interpretations and judgments of the texts.

In such talk, students begin to do what writers do to comprehend their own lives. Katherine Paterson, in a speech at the National Council of Teachers of English in Louisville, November 1993,

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said, “I wrote *Bridge to Terabithia* to make sense of a time in my life that made no sense at all.” Bob Anderson says something similar in his talks about the writing of plays: “I write to find out what I didn’t know I knew, to feel what I didn’t know I felt.” Students, in

telling the stories evoked by the stories they read, are engaging in the same process of discovery, transforming the otherwise chaotic events in their lives into comprehensible experience.

Literature as the Invitation to Participate in a Society and the Culture

Perhaps most important of all—and sadly most neglected—literature, by inviting us into the exchange of our stories, the conversations about our lives, and the investigation of the big issues, enables us to build our families, communities, and societies.

Literary experience is often solitary and isolated once we have left the classroom. We read our books in the privacy of our rooms, we hide behind them to preserve our solitude on buses and planes, and we seldom discuss them with anyone else. You may recommend a book to me, but by the time I’ve read it you’ve moved on to something else, and the friend I pass it along to won’t get around to it until I’ve nearly forgotten it. Even our potentially most social form of literature, television, has become a solitary experience for many of us. Although we could gather around the TV in small groups, turn the volume up or down, talk about the stories even as they unfold, instead, with roughly 2.7 televisions in households that average

2.1 members, it’s likely that each person will retreat to his own shows, and watch them essentially alone.

But at one time, literature *had* to be social; when there were no books, people had to gather around the storyteller or tell stories themselves. In those days, it seems likely that the trading of stories helped forge the collection of individuals into a group. Consider how stories work in your own family. We probably all have those little family stories, of interest to almost no one outside the family, that have somehow endured much longer than their innate literary merit would justify. Parents tell stories about the child knocking over the Christmas tree; children tell stories about the father backing the car through the unopened garage door. Why? There’s no adventure, romance, mystery, sex, intrigue, suspense, or anything else in these stories. Why, then, do they live for decades? It seems probable that they live because they bind us together as families, because without them we’d be little more than strangers occupying the same room.

Consider, too, the people closest to you—your children, perhaps, or your parents. Think of them, and then think of them with all your stories about them erased, eradicated, suppressed. Little remains but height and weight. But we know that our children are more than facts and figures. Your son is the stories you have about him learning to ride his bicycle, getting his driver’s license, leaving home and moving on. It is the stories that make us family.

Stories bind us together, allow us to sympathize and understand. But they have to be shared to do their work. They cannot be reduced to multiple-choice tests. The questions raised by writers who interest and provoke our students, from Shakespeare to Silverstein, are matters about which we have to talk. We have to trade our perceptions, tell our stories, reveal and consider our values and beliefs, argue and assess our reasoning, and ultimately come to our own reconciliation with the world and the people in it. Literature is not the answer to those questions, not the end of the discussion, but rather the invitation to all

people to join the conversation, to tell the stories that shape their own lives.

Thus literature becomes an invitation to participate in a society—that’s what the conversation, the storytelling, the intellectual inquiry add up to. At first, it is the society of the classroom, examining and reconsidering the visions of human possibilities the literature presents. Later, it will be the larger society, of which they are already a significant part, even as children, but in which they will have a shaping role when they become adults.

Ultimately, that society is of all humankind. Beyond the family and the immediate society, literature is an invitation into the cultural life of the world. We find ourselves reflected in the contemporary poetry of Pat Mora and Gary Soto and in *Gilgamesh* and *Beowulf*. In these stories we see links with men and women of ancient Greece, of Africa, of China, of Australia—wherever the texts may come from. I suppose, if we could read them well enough, we would find our own fears and aspirations reflected in prehistoric cave drawings. Literature invites us to become human, to share knowledgeably in the continuing effort to make sense out of our experience, the essential elements of which—fear, hope, love, despair, elation, and all the others—have probably characterized human life since we first emerged from the caves.

Literature as the Invitation to Self-Definition

By inviting us to participate in the cultural life of humankind, literature invites us to be—to create—ourselves. Stories capture for us the multitude of ways we’ve found to get through our lives, and thus give us some choice about who and what we will become. They invite us to escape the narrow confines of our instincts or upbringing, to see the various ways of feeling and thinking about life, and thus to define ourselves. Ultimately, literature is an invitation, as Scholes says, to read and write our own lives.

Learning to read books—or pictures, or films—is not just a matter of acquiring information from texts, it is a matter of learning to read and write the texts of our lives. Reading, seen this way, is not merely an academic experience but a way of accepting the fact that our lives are of limited duration and that whatever satisfaction we may achieve in life must come through the strength of our engagement with what is around us. We do well to read our lives with the same intensity we develop from learning to read our texts (Scholes, 1989, p. 19).

Perhaps, had Scholes been a middle school teacher, he would have rephrased that last line to read, “We do well to read our texts with the same intensity we develop from learning to read our lives,” because our students are, as we can observe every day, reading their lives with intense interest. They read the expressions on the faces of their friends, the bearing of the big kid in class, the mood of the teacher. If they would read their texts with half that intensity, they would be immensely literate young people. But it is in the literature classroom, where events can be slowed, held in the hand, examined and discussed, that they can best learn to comprehend human experience, to respond to it passionately and analyze it dispassionately, to define themselves emotionally and intellectually as they do so, and, by sharing their responses and thoughts with those around them, to shape the families and the society in which we will all live. It is the teachers of language and literature who preside over the child’s best opportunity to thoughtfully and reflectively decide who she will be, what he will become, and what sort of world we will all have in the future.

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Robert Probst is professor of English Education at Georgia State University in Atlanta. He can be reached at probstre@gsu.edu.