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## The Influence of Words

by Emilie Hewgley

Words hold a unique and unmatched power in the lives of every individual. They have the ability to harm or to hearten. Literature can inform us of what is happening in our world, or it can take us to new worlds. I have always enjoyed using words to map out my thoughts; they are like little puzzle pieces in one grand picture that only my brain could generate. That is why I want to work in the creative writing field one day.

I discovered my passion for writing years ago. I was around the age of ten, and I had always loved plotting my own little stories and creating worlds to escape to in my head. It had never occurred to me that there was a more logical way than just playing pretend to get the ideas in my head out. My best friend, Victoria, told me that I could document my ideas in the form of a narrative. That way I would always have them to look back on, and I could share them with other people. It was in that moment that my hopeful career began.

One of my favorite things to do was to write stories with Victoria. We were older when this started, about twelve, and we would craft our tales over text. She would send a paragraph, then I would respond, molding the characters we created together and developing the plot she had started. Sometimes I would start the story, and other days she would have the better idea. We told people about the work we did, and they would listen attentively. Every now and again our differing visions would cause slight problems. I would argue why my idea was better, and she would disagree and say it did not serve to develop the characters. More often than not, my

insecurity would get the better of me, and we would go with her idea. After all, she had introduced me to writing, so I assumed she must be better at it than I was.

“I wish I were as talented as she is,” I would think to myself. Surprisingly, criticism from my peers was not the biggest struggle I faced with writing; it was endless doubt in my mind. It still is. I started telling many stories as a child that I never had the courage to keep growing. My brain would grow weary of the same old adventures and generate something fresh and new. I would abandon my old works with little hesitation. My once pristine contrivances would be left to rot within the pages of my worn-out notebooks. From time to time, I would peek within the covers to revisit the towns I had constructed, but guilt would drive me to shut them out once again.

By the time I started high school, my self-doubt had prevented me from taking on any real writing projects, or any that might require a long-term commitment. “I’m too busy to write,” I said. “I’m not in a good creative mindset; even if I did have the time, who knows if I could even come up with anything.” There were so many lies, or maybe half-truths, I told myself to keep the guilt away. I was, in fact, very busy my freshman year. I resorted to reading to feed my creative cravings. After all, I had often been told that reading builds a writer’s abilities. It is less work, too, in my opinion. There is no need to make sure the character’s personalities do not clash—it has already been done. Plus, if I was not sure how the book should end, I could just keep reading.

Sophomore year was a very influential time in my writing journey. I decided to join the Reading Bowl team with a friend of mine, Rebekah. We were in the same Honors Literature class, and in that class, we had to read a lot of books and write essays on them. We wrote essays for tests, classwork grades, and more. Any excuse our teacher had for making us write, she took.

Looking back on that year, I am glad she did. There was one essay in particular I remember vividly.

It was about halfway through the year. We were reading *Jane Eyre* in our literature class. The Reading Bowl list also had a *Jane Eyre*-inspired retelling we had to read before our next competition. Despite my love of reading, I was the slowest on the team, which meant I was behind. I did not have the time to read both versions of *Jane Eyre* and risk getting them confused. I did what anyone else would have done: I read the more interesting retelling of the novel. As I read the book, I prepared for the team's upcoming competition and completed my classwork. Finally, the day of our test came. It was an essay in which we had to use key quotations and themes from the book to tell how it could impact our lives today. I could not be sure my book had the correct quotes, and I knew the page numbers were different because the retelling was much thicker than the original we received in class. Fortunately, SparkNotes had my back. I filled in all the gaps the retelling had missed or altered, I wrote down proper quotations, and I made note of the themes (mainly the ones that had stayed the same across both versions of the tale). I walked into class the day of the test knowing full well I was not properly prepared. I was not sure my unique writing style would be enough to save my grade. Rebekah rolled her eyes before whispering, "Good luck." At our teacher's signal, we flipped over our papers and began to write.

Unlike my reading speed, I write rather quickly. Even after proofreading my essay, I was one of the first to turn it in. I then sat quietly and prayed that my attempt at connecting with my teacher through the theme I had chosen would be enough. A week or so passed, and my classmates and I were gathered outside the classroom. Our teacher was running a few minutes late, and everyone was buzzing about the scores they had received on their essays. The grading

system our school used showed both the highest and lowest scores in the class if you knew where to look. At the time, I was unaware of this feature. I was very proud of my score, as well as shocked as to how I had earned it. Rebekah had read both versions of the book and still managed to receive a slightly lower score than me. She was frustrated, and rightfully so, but she congratulated me anyway.

As we all stood in a mob outside the door, one of our peers, Lacy, approached us. She asked us how we felt about our essays.

“I feel pretty good about mine,” I said. “I was honestly surprised when I saw my score.” Rebekah laughed and agreed that my score had shocked her too. Lacy’s friend mentioned that she wanted to know who had gotten the highest score in our class.

“Well, what did you guys get?” Rebekah asked. She told them she scored a ninety-four.

“I got a ninety-two on mine,” Lacy answered. Her friend said she got a score in the high eighties.

“What did you get, Emilie?” she asked. I flashed a grin at Rebekah and then said, “I got a ninety-eight.”

Lacy and her friend paused for a moment. Then Lacy exclaimed, “I *told* you it was her!” Little did I know, I had made the highest score in our class, and people were talking about it. They were talking about *me*.

I remember that moment so vividly because it encouraged my love of writing. It silenced the doubts in my head. It made me realize that as long as I wrote for myself about the things I enjoyed, my words would find the right audience. It taught me that there is always going to be someone out there who wants to hear what I have to say. However, they cannot hear it if I never write it.

Later that same year, my teacher picked me and Rebekah to participate in a writing workshop program at our school. We had been selected, along with a handful of others, as skilled enough writers to offer advice and inspiration to struggling students. We were instructed to send in two essays to the sponsor of the program to compete for certain mentorship positions within each lunch period. There were only two spots available but four people chosen in our period. To make matters worse, one was the valedictorian. All four of us sat at the same table and ate lunch together. The weeks were tense. The sponsor told us that he needed more time to decide. He met with each of us. We were so close to finding out who he would choose. Then, the Covid-19 virus hit.

We never did find out who got the spots. In the end, it did not matter. The school year was nearly at its close. What mattered to me was that I had been chosen as an option for the position. I had been put into a group with the smartest people I knew while getting to help other people discover their own passion for writing. Despite my class rank being so below theirs, they considered me a threat for nearly three weeks, knowing I had a very good chance at taking this opportunity away from them. The respect I had earned through my hard work that year showed not only my teachers and peers, but myself, that I was a more than capable writer.

My journey has been littered with ups and downs, full of accomplices who pushed me, helped me, and developed me as a writer. There were times when I almost gave up writing altogether unless it was required for a grade. I would ask myself, “What good is writing beyond that?” Now I know that writing is not meant to be measured against anyone else’s standards. It often is, as so many things in today’s culture are, but writing can be so much more than a type of classwork assignment. It can be therapeutic. It can be damaging. It can be full of love, hate, or

confusion. There are so many ways that words help shape the ideas and people we are, and that is why they will forever be a part of *my* story.