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Ms. Cannon

Socratic 12

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Last Lecture: The Better Story

As the rain began to pour, the enemy materialized. It was a dark, thick, gooey presence. As the foremost knights in the kingdom, it was the Bailey boys' calling and duty to defeat this monster. After donning our armor and strapping into our boots, Clark slid back the castle gate and we charged forth to slay the beast. Our initial efforts seemed to be forcing it into retreat. But the harder we fought, the deeper we sank into the behemoth's black-brown soup. The deeper we plunged the more we strained to hoist our boot-shod feet back to the surface until finally we were caught in the fiend's hideous spell. We were cemented in place. The Bailey brothers were defeated and bitterly hung our heads in shame. Then we wailed for the fearless, undefeatable Queen of the Realm. Only she could save us in our darkest hour.

Upon hearing our desperate call, Mom walked out into the backyard, smiled as she saw our snow-boot dressed feet drowned in muck, took a few pictures, and pulled us out of the muddy garden in the far corner of the yard. After getting hosed off to rid ourselves of the final remnants of the earthy leviathan, Clark and I went inside through the sliding glass door and shrugged off our armor, eh-hm, excuse me, rain jackets. This grand tale of daring courage stands tall in Bailey family lore and forms a cornerstone of my childhood memories.

This year in Senior Socratic we studied *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel. Without spoiling too much of the story: Following the sinking of his ship, Pi, the main character, tells of his voyage

across the Pacific Ocean in a lifeboat with a tiger on board. At the end of the book, Pi tells another story that parallels the first, but lacks its beauty and meaning. When I read this second ending I was, initially, deeply offended. Pi just spent 300 pages detailing his conversion to religion followed by how that conversion had aided him in his demanding journey across the sea. This second story seemed to say that was all just a hoax Pi had invented to hide from his painful reality. But in a Socratic discussion on Zoom, my classmates helped me realize the truth of what Martel was saying: The first story with the tiger is not a deceitful mechanism to hide the truth. It was Pi's way of learning from and demonstrating principles he found in his tragic adventure. I remain unsure which version is true, but I discovered the power of telling the better story even if that story isn't rooted so much in fact as the emotional power of the moment.

My backyard adventure with Clark was full of both fantasy and interpretation. We never were Knights captured by a fierce mud demon. On our other adventures Clark and I never actually faced off in a rugged western town as sheriff and outlaw, nor did we fly to the moon in our homemade rocket. However, these fanciful tales of heroic action contain the joy of my childhood. It is not in the rote details of slogging through a soggy garden that would have been forgotten days or weeks later, but in the better story of my runaway imagination, that I created that joy. The key was to spin the nonessential technicalities into a fantasy that more realistically represented the feelings of the experience.

High school is no different. We have junctures with fate: winning a soccer game, losing a basketball game, stumbling through the Socratic discussion on a reading I should have done the night before (missed opportunities for growth that I'm ashamed of), screaming "There's nothing like a dame!" in Broadway Rocks, discussing how to navigate woes of high school drama with

Mr. Simmons and The Boys after practice. As individual events these memories make up “the good old days,” that I will remember for years to come, but it is the romance, background, potent emotions, and interpretation that make stories worth listening to, but more importantly worth learning from. I am not telling you to fabricate stories to teach artificial lessons, but there is immense value in recognizing the powerful lessons that can be learned in the deep emotions of seemingly insignificant moments. The moments of high school are essential and wonderful, but it is how we turn those moments, on the muddy potter's wheel of fantasy and principle, into better stories that shape and define us that really matters.