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Couple's Counseling: My Recovering Relationship with Reading

*Great. Another novel.* Another novel that I won't read, won't remember, and will have to weasel my way through for the next month. It always goes like this: The teacher gives us a novel. I read the first chapter or so. Then I give up because before I know it, I'm behind everyone else. I'm too slow of a reader to even bother trying to keep up. Don't even get me started on those damn comprehension packets! I am so pokey at reading, by the time I finish a chapter, I've barely retained enough information to recall when answering the questions.

I knew I had problems with reading, but I didn't realize they were problems that could be fixed. I just assumed my relationship with reading was always broken and unmendable. I wasn't focused enough, determined enough, and didn't care enough—at least that's how my teachers made it seem. Every so often, I was pulled out of English by my teacher to receive the third-degree about how I'm a "good student," but I just need to start doing the reading. That was the kinder scolding. Mind you, they didn't provide me with any reinforcement to help me actually do the reading—just to do it.

Then there was the one time when my seventh-grade English teacher, Ms. Cheney, took me outside the classroom but forgot to shut the door. She had noticed next to none of my yellow *Phantom of the Tollbooth* comprehension packet had been filled out. (I'm lucky I put my name on such a disgusting packet.) She dismantled my existence by discharging a lecture loud enough for the students inside the room to hear, "*You need* to be doing these and *you need* to be on top of

things and if *you need* help *you* should ask me or your classmates and *you should not* be having this hard of a time, these questions are easy, and *you need* to be doing my homework.”

Basically, all I heard was, “You are lazy and there was no excuse for not getting something like a comprehension packet filled out.” She topped off the persecution with a pink slip and an hour of detention for not getting my work done.

I was embarrassed as all hell. How am I supposed to “do the reading” if I have no idea why I can’t? I mean, I can read, but I’m not sure why it is so difficult for me. I can’t stop getting distracted, *and* I can’t keep up with others, *and* I can’t keep up with my peers, *and* I can’t recite or recall a lot of what I read because I’m more focused on reading the words and getting through it than digesting *and* I can’t get into the material *and* I can’t ask for help when I don’t know what the problem is. I can’t. I can’t. I can’t.

I had come to the conclusion that I had a problem, but no one ever addressed reading as the problem or their teaching as the problem. The only answer left was that the problem was me and not doing my work, and from what they were telling me, there were no resources for that.

After the beratement, I shuffled miserably back into a classroom full of a big bunch of eavesdroppers that failed to hide their snickering. I slumped back into my desk with a red face, a free pass to afterschool detention, and with even more hatred towards our assigned reading. Actually, make that reading in general because at this point, I wanted nothing to do with it.

In time, I eventually got myself out of the scolding. I realized I wasn’t able to break all ties with reading completely. Like it or not, reading was here to stay. I progressed through my English classes by the adolescent hairs starting to poke out of my changing face by using an ingenious technique that I like to call *bullshitting*. Man, did I have those teachers fooled. I honed this sneaky skill as I skirted my way through high school. By bullshitting, I could participate

enough to remain inconspicuous, pass assignments and tests to get a B or a C, and not have to read all that much. SparkNotes, skimming, and simply knowing where to look got me by. I read bits and pieces, just enough to swindle my way through another assigned novel. I mean, what was the point? What did reading those novels do for me besides bring me frustration and anguish? It's not like reading was giving me anything back in return. Those teachers just tortured us by giving us something to do. There just didn't seem to be much hope for me and reading. Reading and I had definitely gone our separate ways a long time ago—or so it seemed.

Senior English had something else in store for me and reading. English this particular year had a strange path. I took the first semester of Senior English in the summer prior to the school year. I'm not entirely sure what compelled me to take part of Senior English in the summer, but the English gods were aligning stars or something because I was right where I needed to be.

Mrs. Danowitz, my summer school teacher, packed the semester with a syllabus of short stories, *Beowulf*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. A concoction of intense and tiresome English entities that I figured I would have to trudge through with my bullshitting skills—in the gorgeous summertime, too! First came *Beowulf*. Thanks, Mrs. Danowitz, for starting us off with a dense fantasy from the beginning of the second millennia. I rolled my eyes while opening up the twelfth-grade anthology that was so large they had to split it into two volumes. I flipped to page 6,043—or something like that—and got ready to stare vacantly at the page. Until Mrs. Danowitz started the audio. *The audio?*

Don't think I am that absent from the world of reading that I don't know what an audiobook is, but the audio she was using struck my ears differently. The recording wasn't some failing actor sitting in a sound room with a monotonous voice reading with just as much effort as

I would have myself. No. This recording not only featured a strong-voiced heroic narrator, but the audio filled the passages with sounds, music, and suspense. The man courageously boomed the boastful introduction of the story like he was Beowulf himself. He thrust Beowulf's entrance out of the speakers; a flawless character description and superhuman qualities entrance. I could imagine this god-like being forming before my eyes. The passage engulfed me as this knight of high regards was brought to life. *Pause.*

Hey! I can't believe she just stopped it right there. Just as the reading was getting good!

Woah, woah, *woah!* Did I just say that? The *reading* was getting *good*?! I was immersed in the *assigned reading*?! Must have been some sort of fluke because there was no way.

Mrs. Danowitz asked us to pull out a sheet of paper. She had us put our name on the top of the page. For the next ten minutes, she had us write a boastful epic introduction of ourselves. I used terrible bubble letters to scribble my name above, and before I knew it, I had taken the intensity of the introduction to Beowulf and the recording to write a two-page bragging about who I am. I felt like a modern-day Beowulf. I was ecstatic. I understood and consumed what was being read. I could recall information, and I was not distracted. My focus was on the words, and for once, I felt that I was able to be part of the literature in an English course. My feelings towards reading were starting to shift; I just needed some more convincing.

Shortly after writing, we read our pieces to the class. I, still buzzing after the high of actually getting into the reading, stood up and announced myself to the class with just a tad less fervor than the narrator of the recording (but, you know, the spirit was there). My classmates may have looked at me like the odd kid that gets a bit too invested in the work, but at this point, I didn't care. I was starting to get the problem, and the problem wasn't reading. For once, I also didn't think the problem was me either.

The rest of the semester continued this way: I was skeptical about reading. Mrs. Danowitz proved me wrong about everything I had assumed about reading. Reading showed me that it was okay—no hard feelings. Everything between Reading and I were changing.

Being our class was a summer course, we had more flexibility to learn and absorb the reading in various ways. Mrs. Danowitz used videos, adaptations, and narrations to enhance the text in ways past teachers hadn't. She involved us. The reading involved us. She would pause and ask us questions (and not those lame comprehension questions either). Questions like, "How do you feel about the Lady of Bath as a character? Which character from Chaucer's *Prologue* would you eat dinner with?" The connections to myself and what I was doing with the literature were finally starting to kindle.

Another way Mrs. Danowitz surprised me was by showing us an episode of *Lost* in relation to *Macbeth*. By playing the clip, she showed us how literature influences the world around us, especially television and movies. "Shakespeare's plays," she explained, "can be found in references throughout media you consume on a daily basis." Using an episode of the show, she revealed how the characters depicted in this instance were references to the three witches that provide foreshadowing to the audience in the play. This opened a new world of understanding and the importance of reading. Going home and watching TV, I began to notice so many more literary references in common, mindless television, which built more appreciation for literature.

Mrs. Danowitz ended the semester by having us write parodies of something we had read in high school. *Uh oh*. Well, my options were limited, but ultimately, I chose *Romeo and Juliet* because I remembered the story and watching the two film adaptations—the 1968 version and the Leonardo DiCaprio version from the 90s. Having a surprisingly decent recollection of the play, I skimmed over the play again to remind myself where the events were

I decided the best way to interpret the play was as an 80s after-school special. I had a load of fun changing how the younger characters talked by using 80s slang. I used every cliché 1980s reference and quip I could pull together. I got up and performed my totally tubular parody myself. By request of my teacher and classmates, I used different voices for each character to enhance the performance—boy, did I ever. The class was in tears. Mrs. Danowitz was hunched over with laughter.

Through this project, Mrs. Danowitz opened my eyes. On my parody, she commented: “William, your understanding of *Romeo and Juliet* and ability to transform it into a new performance and adaptation was wonderful to watch.” I couldn’t believe it. A teacher noticed my *understanding* of the reading! I couldn’t believe that I was finally getting the concept of reading.

The summer semester ended, and there was a large gap of time where reading and I remained distant, although I kept the idea of reading and I closer in the front of my mind. I couldn’t believe how easy Mrs. Danowitz had made reading. I couldn’t understand how my teachers didn’t tell me sooner that audiobooks and video adaptations could help me comprehend what I was reading while staying at-pace with my fellow students. I felt cheated and lied to. Like really! I could’ve used anything to make reading easier, and it took until my last year of high school for someone to show me what those tools were? Maybe it was karma for all the bullshitting I had done over the years or perhaps the endless neglectfulness I had towards reading. Reading and I had some catching up to do. Thanks to Mrs. Danowitz, I learned how to be a better reader and how to find and use my resources to make my love and appreciation for reading even stronger.