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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, and 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 confounded comprehension packets! I am so pokey at reading, by the time I end the chapter, I haven't hardly retained enough information to recall for answering the questions.

I guess 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 unmendable and broken. I wasn't focused or determined or didn't care enough—at least that's how my teachers made the situation seem like. Every so often, I was being pulled out of English by my teacher giving me the third-degree about how I'm a good student, I just need to start doing the reading. That was when they gave me positive reinforcement. Then you have 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. She chewed me out about how I need to be doing these *and* that I needed to be on top of things *and* if I need help I should ask her or my classmates *and* I shouldn't be having this hard of a time, these questions are easy, *and* how I need to be doing my homework (basically insinuating I'm lazy and there's no excuse for not getting something like a comprehension packet

filled out). She topped off the rambling lecture with a pink slip and an hour of detention for not getting my work done. Not only that, but now I had to walk back into the classroom filled with a big bunch eavesdroppers that hid their snickering as I slumped back into my desk with a red face and even more hatred towards our assigned reading. Actually, make that reading in general because at this point, I didn't enjoy any of it.

I eventually got myself out of the scolding though as 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 really crafted my art as I skirted my way through high school. To this day, I have trouble remembering what we read Freshman and Sophomore year. SparkNotes, skimming, and simply knowing where to look got me by when it came to tests and papers. I usually filled out the worksheets and packets haphazardly the morning of, knowing we'd go over them anyway in class, so I would fix my answers then. 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 beside bring me frustration and anguish? Why put energy into my relationship with reading, when reading never seemed to give anything back in return. Those teachers just tortured us by giving us something to do. I couldn't keep up, I had a hard time remembering and recollecting facts after reading, and I just didn't like reading enough to stay focused. 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 for this particular year had a strange path. I took the first semester of Senior English in the summer prior to the school year and the second semester in the spring with everybody else. 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 and opened 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'm that absent from the world of reading that I don't know what an audiobook is, but this 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 they 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 being 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, *woah!* Wait...

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 I could never like reading!

Mrs. Danowitz asked us to pull out a sheet of paper. In big letters, 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 to 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.

Shortly after, 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. I don't think the problem was me either.

The rest of the semester continued this way: Me, being skeptical about reading. Mrs. Danowitz, proving me wrong about everything I had assumed about reading. Reading, showing me that it was okay; I was growing.

Being our class was a summer course, we had more flexibility to learn and absorb the reading in different ways. Mrs. Danowitz used videos, adaptations, and narrations to enhance the text in ways past teachers hadn't. She involved us. She would pause, ask us questions (and not those lame comprehension questions either), or make us a part of the reading itself. The connections to myself and what I was doing with the literature was finally starting to kindle.

Another way Mrs. Danowitz surprised me was when she showed 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 said, “can be found in references throughout media you consume on a daily basis.” Using the show, she played a clip and explained to us how the characters seen on the show, in this instance, were references to the three witches that provide foreshadowing to the audience.

Mrs. Danowitz ended out the semester having us write parodies of something we have read in school. Well, my options were limited, but 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. I skimmed over the play again to remind myself where the events were, but overall, I truly remembered a large amount of the play.

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 and used 80s slang. I used every cliché 1980s reference and quip I could pull together. I got up and performed my parody myself. By request, I used voices for each character. The class was in tears, my teacher was hunched over, and I couldn’t help myself but get a little too into character.

Though, it was this project that 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!

The summer semester ended, and there was a large gap of time where reading and I remained distant. Though I kept the idea of reading and I being closer in the front of my mind. I mean, 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.

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 and the endless neglectfulness I had towards reading. We had some catching up to do. Thanks to Mrs. Danowitz, I could learn to be a better reader and use my resources and know how to find them to make my love for reading even stronger.