What Can I Do but Say More Words?

I do not remember the process I undertook to learn how to read. And I hardly remember learning to write. Yet, I remember desperately wanting to be able to read and especially write. I watched my parents make grocery lists, write letters, notes to each other, and sign their names. My daddy's handwriting was all lines and sharp points, and my mama's was curves and preciseness. After watching them create these beautiful marks, I would go up to my room with a pen and a piece of paper and draw squiggly lines across the page, mimicking the flow of their writing by picking up my pen every few seconds, creating the illusion of separate words. I kept these pages because I had seen in a movie how a young author kept her writing in a folder, only to, in one scene, have the pages scattered in the wind. I kept my pages of wavy lines that I imagined were stories in a yellow folder, upon which I got my sister, with uneven handwriting, to press the word "Important."

Only I did not know just how important reading and writing would be to me. Then somehow, someway, I was taught to read and write. Now, the process of forming and decoding words is as easy and effortless to me as breathing or blinking. I see words and turn them into images I understand almost as easily as I see images themselves with my eyes and understand them. Only a few short years after I gained this ability, I began to absorb any words I could get my hands on, and my "Important" folder was suddenly filled with pages of actual words and stories, and journals began to line my shelves. In the fourth grade, I read my first novel. It was a young adult fiction book about a girl growing up during the Revolutionary War. Something changed for me after that.

It was young adult fiction that did it. In these books were these characters, and in some cases these narrators, who were my age, who understood the things I understood and questioned what I questioned. Despite the fact that I have grown up and the narrators and characters of young adult fiction books, to me, keep getting younger and younger, they still seem to ask the questions that I ask, and learn things that I am still learning. To me, this is the power of young adult fiction. For some reason, there is this perception of adulthood in our culture and maybe even just in the world in general. As Dorothe said in her feedback to my first paper, there is a "type of disillusionment that is so inherent about our ideas of growing up." I thought about it, and she is right. Adulthood is separated from childhood and adolescence by this decisive separation between learning and knowing. For some reason, to be in a state of learning is associated with childhood, and to be in a state of "knowing a little bit more" is associated with adulthood.

My continued love of young adult fiction allows me to break down this barrier between learning and knowing. I think about what we have read in this class, *Keesha's House*, *Ender's Game*, *The Amber Spyglass*, and despite the fact that these characters are younger than me, I learn right along with them. From *Keesha's House* I learn the importance of being safe within yourself and without, the difficulties and freedoms associated with being alone, and ways to deal with loss. From *Ender's Game* I get knowledge about the way the world and people will use you if you let them and the human capacity for destruction but also for redemption and healing. In our discussion one day, someone said, "The books we read in this class are always vehicles for something more." The characters themselves may be small and young, but the wisdom they gain and offer to me is great and is, I think, as old as humankind itself. Being in college and being forced to read all kinds of things, some
good and some bad, had made me forget this a little bit. This class and these books made me re-realize that I always have something to learn from the words I read.

One of the most amazing things I have grasped from all of the hundreds and hundreds of books I have read is that every word and sentence I read allows me to learn thing about the world, other people, and especially myself. Then, the books make me realize that I have always known these things, but I have just never been able to articulate them. I used to speak of reading as an escape. When I read I am consumed by the story completely, to the point that often I block out the reality going on around me. I used to see my life and the lives of the characters I read about as completely separate; I had to block out one to experience the other. Yet, now that I have been in this class, I do not think that reading is a way of replacing my own reality with someone else’s. Rather, “sometimes these fantasies are the only ways to make reality bearable.” I learn about my own reality by momentarily retreating into the fantasies. Instead of staying separate, my reality and the reality of the book I am reading merge, and they pass between each other “from one form to the next. When I read a book, I translate symbols on a page into an entire landscape and lifetime in my head” that sits next to and communicates with my own reality, teaching me about my own existence.

The passages I chose for my Learning Portfolio show, I hope, how I have woven this class and young adult fiction into my own learning and reality to shape my ongoing spiritual journey. I wanted to show the progression of my spiritual journey with the placement of the passages and their organization within the portfolio. I began with my words, because I started out in this class with only my thoughts and ideas about spiritual journeys. Soon, I began to read and hear the thoughts of my classmates, and suddenly their ideas merged themselves with mine, shaping what was already there. The same thing happened with the books we read; I took these stories and ideas into my brain and they became my own. I included some of mine and some of the class’ words at the end, making sure to interweave them, to show the mixture of our ideas into a cohesive whole, while showing how they still remain distinct and personal.

Our discussions on enlightenment and silence really highlight this. The process of enlightenment, we said, begins with the individual, with me. I have to shift my focus from the outside to my inner self. Only when this process has been completed will I be able, with the peace I have found, to reach out and take action to foster the same peace in others. As Danny says in The Chosen, “He taught me to look into myself, to find my own strength, to walk around inside myself in company with my soul.... One learns the pain of others by suffering one’s own pain, he would say, by turning inside oneself, by finding one’s own soul” (Potok, 278). This class invited that behavior. I was encouraged to look within in order to be able to project to the class what I found, hopefully to the betterment of the discussion.

So much of the impression I have fostered about my spiritual journey has been wrapped up in ideas about growing up. This is true for several reasons. First, young adult fiction is packed with notions about what it is to grow up, especially under what seems unbeatable odds. Lyra’s decisions as she grows up throughout The Amber Spyglass have the ability to change the world completely, and possibly irrevocably. Ender is forced to fight an entire war before he has even become a teenager. Michael, in The Reader, falls in love with an older woman who teaches him about what it means to be grown up. Second, I find
myself ten days from my college graduation. If there is ever a "growing up" moment, it will be that.

In my reflective essay, I tried to think of moments like that, “growing up” moments. I wondered if these moments acted as springboards into adulthood, and if, after experiencing these moments, I left a little bit of my childhood behind. In the essay, I showed how I recognized that, as a child, I expected a distinct difference between my childhood and adulthood. Yet, I’ve learned that this is not the case. “I cannot say that my childhood has been completely cut away during my growth into an adult human being. I still hear ‘kid Rachel,’ and many of her emotions and desires still govern how I make decisions, and often, what decisions I make.”

One of the first things I noticed about this class was its emphasis on thought and decision-making. From the very first day, John and Dorothe were inviting me to engage in certain exercises that harnessed self-awareness and self-control over my thoughts. I had never done anything like these exercises before. My mind, because of my active imagination, is a blessing and a curse. I can imagine stories and images in my brain easily, but sometimes it is getting distracting and damaging thoughts out of my brain that is the hard part. On the first day, I got to practice clearing my mind. It had been so long since I had tried to do that. And I never was very good at it on my own. But suddenly, in this classroom of what was then strangers, I was able to do it. Over the course of the semester, I sat in silence, meditated, and trained my mind to think, or not think, in structured ways. I’ve needed this. I have needed to hone my thoughts for my mental well-being. Now, because of this class, I have these tools to be able to quiet my thoughts when they need to be quieted, and other exercises to open my mind in deeper and more revealing ways. I will have the ability to keep my thoughts under my control, so that “nothing [will be] hanging out in space alone; everything [will be] grounded.”

Related but still distinct from this, I often have issues with my own past, and some insight I have heard in this class has helped me to realize something about my past and my own connection to it. On one of the first days of class, I wrote, “Will I always be defined by the things I’ve done? There are things I so desperately want to forget.... Do these things define me? Or is it the change I underwent, the change I sought for in myself that defines me?” I hoped that what I had been hearing in this class was true. I heard that the past is important, but it does not explain me. I can use my past to my advantage, “mining” it for meaning and strength for my present and future. I am not quite there yet, but I have faith that, one day, I will be able to live with no regret, just like Nicole said in her “This I Believe” statement: “Never regret anything because you can always learn from it...everything happens for a reason...[and] at one point it was exactly what you wanted.” This was so wise and so thought provoking for me. I will never forget this, and hopefully it will help me in the future to see past my mistakes.

There is one thing I will regret. Ever since I was two or three years old making pretend words on a piece of paper, I have been writing. To me, this is my gift, and it is the joy of my existence. I have this outlet for all my thoughts, and this is something this class has reminded me. I used to journal. I filled blank book after blank book full of my thoughts. But for four years, I have been writing countless essays that, frankly, I did not care much about, even though my teachers did. Even in the fiction writing classes I have taken (even though I absolutely loved every second of them), there was an emphasis on the product versus writing for writing’s sake. With the morning pages and the creative writing project, I
have suddenly re-realized something: I love to write. So, as Natalie said, "Dive in." That is what I am going to do. I have decided that my immediate summer plans are not just going to include working at this beautiful café. I am going to start writing again on my own. Maybe I will start a novel or a play. John and this class has inspired me. I want my writing to be revelatory of me to others but also to myself. I have learned from what I have written in this class, and I never want to stop learning from myself this way. I will take my notebook and my pen, my laptop, or paper napkins and a pencil and I will write so that I can feel my "heart sigh" like Cathy's does when she draws. Finally, first the first time in a long time, I am seeking peace.

This isn't part of my essay, but I just want to say how lucky I think I am to have this as my final assignment due in college. This was the perfect way to wrap up what I have been trying to figure out for the past four years.
Words, Words, Words
A Portfolio

• Some of My Words:

--I'm just going to write because I cannot help it. Charlotte Bronte--

  o In the art project we did with the crayons: "I want nothing hanging out in space alone; everything has to be grounded."

  o From an Ender’s Game blog post: "He is brilliant, but he cannot conceive of growing up. The feelings associated with it are foreign to him...To be honest, he doesn't see how being an adult is all that helpful to him or to adults in general."

  o March 19 Synthesis: "But here's the difference in my mind. No one forced me to sit there. Nobody said to me, "Be quiet. We won't speak." I could've screamed if I wanted to."

  o March 12 Synthesis: "It's almost like the passing of reality from one form to the next. When we read a book, we translate symbols on a page into an entire landscape and lifetime in our heads. Complete with colors, movement, faces, friends and enemies. The list goes on. Our abilities to do this is pretty much the best thing ever. We take the words and create the picture."

  o From "The Turning Point:" "The reality [of adulthood] has turned out a little differently than what I originally pictured. Jonathon Taylor Thomas and I are no longer together, but I have been in a committed relationship for five and a half years. I imagined my adult self in a glamorous, worry-free life; I had no way of conceiving of debt, twenty-page college papers (gah), of friends with alcohol poisoning."

      • "I cannot say that my childhood has been completely cut away during my growth into an adult human being. I still hear 'kid Rachel,' and many of her emotions and desires still govern how I make decisions and often, what decisions I make."

  o From "The Look of It:" "I had never seen anything die before. But I saw in Snow White how those little men had put flowers around Snow White’s coffin when she died, even though she woke up later when the prince kissed her on the mouth. But, I was not about to kiss that dog."

• And Some of Everyone Else’s:
--The process of relaying [something with] “I did this...or felt this” allows the [writer] to explore the memory for herself. (Creative Writing Reflection)--

- From feedback for “The Turning Point:” “Does this decision make [her grow up] or is it that her unrealistic image of what it’s like to be an adult is bound to set her up for the type of disillusionment that’s so inherent in our ideas of growing up?”

- Nicole, April 27, “This I Believe:“ “I believe in never regretting. Never regret anything because you can always learn from it. Never regret anything because everything happens for a reason. Never regret anything because at one point it was exactly what you wanted.”

- Natalie, March 13: “So this is what I’m thinking: Dive in shallow, swim over to the deep end, but make sure that those little swimmy wings that kept you afloat in the beginning are still visible from the deep end, making it clear how far you’ve gone.”

- August, February 14: “It seems that part of growing up is shuttering the windows in your mind, closing off alternatives and cementing your ideas in place. But it doesn’t have to be that way does it? I certainly don’t want to be like that, so sure of myself as an adult. I don’t think anyone can truly be that sure of themselves. If they are I think their certainty is misplaced...”

- Jourdan, Creative Writing Reflection: “I have been told that our writing can reveal a lot about the author. So at the end of this writing process, I have only one question left: What do these stories reveal about me? ...I had been hoping that my stories would not only intrigue, but also allow access to my personality and personal story that is hard to do directly.”

- Cathy, March 27, “This I Believe:” “Simple things make me happy. Others talk about worldly power and success, while still others focus on inner meditation and control. Me–I need good weather, and friends. Happiness is obtainable. It comes unexpectedly, in varying shades. And it makes life worthwhile.”

- Cathy, Creative Writing Project: “A white paper and a marker in hand are all I need/for the blood to start pumping/fingers tingling/all the potential energy in the felt tip SCREAMS./I draw a wide curve and my heart sighs.”

- Words so smart They typed them out and bound them in books:

--For when they say exactly what I wanted to say better than I ever could.--

- “I stay alive/by lookin’ hard at one tree branch.... Sometimes I stay alive/by thinkin’ of those stories. Rapunzel, Sleeping Beauty” (Keesha’s House, 52, 53).
- "Truth is easy. You don't get so much to remember.... Truth is, I'm part guilty, part innocent" (Keesha's House, 68).

- "You can never have too much sky. You can fall asleep and wake up drunk on sky, and sky can keep you safe when you are sad" (The House on Mango Street, 33).

- "I like to tell stories. I tell them inside my head. I tell them after the mailman says, Here's your mail. Here's your mail he said. I make a story for my life, for each step my brown shoes take" (The House on Mango Street, 109).

- "Samuel Beckett once said: 'Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness.' ...On the other hand, he SAID it" (Maus II, 45).

- "You are no longer a child, Reuven, my father went on. Is it almost possible to see the way your mind is growing. And your heart, too.... You do not see it. But I see it. And it is a beautiful thing to see" (The Chosen, 216).

- "He taught me to look into myself, to find my own strength, to walk around inside myself with my soul.... One learns the pain of others by suffering one's own pain, he would say, by turning inside oneself, by finding one's own soul. And it is important to know of pain, he said" (The Chosen, 278).

- "Human beings are free except when humanity needs them. Maybe humanity needs you. To do something. Maybe humanity needs me—to find out what you're good for. We might both do despicable things, Ender, but if humankind survives, then we were good tools" (Ender's Game).

- "I always had the feeling that no one understood me anyway, that no one knew who I was and what made me do this or that. And you know, when no one understands you, then no one can call you to account. But the dead can. They understand" (The Reader).

- "More I don’t need to tell you. We were both very happy, and lived happy, happy ever after. ...I’m TIRED from talking...and it’s enough stories for now" (Maus II, 136).

- Words from My Notebook:
  
  --CHOOSE TO BE FREE--

  - Notes on fairytales: “Sometimes these fantasies are the only ways to make reality bearable."
Writing Response on The Amber Spyglass: “How do I make decisions? It’s interesting that you ask because I should probably figure that out. I guess now is as good a time as any.”

From someone wise: “It’s an important distinction between what you want to define you and what actually does.”

From someone else who is wise: “There is power in speech that has been thought about before it was spoken.”

Our thoughts on Enlightenment:
- Find peace but then take action to foster that peace in others.
- Change the outward pursuit into an inward pursuit.

The Role of Silence: To find the soul. To search through introspection rather than questions. To develop compassion. Through silence, we can expand the definition of communication.

So much wisdom in one classroom: Imagine a wall. This wall is your problem. Your reaction to the problem is the most important thing. Hit the wall with your fist out of frustration, anger, or fear and the wall doesn’t budge. Your reaction only brings you pain. Treat the wall appropriately. Climb it, go around it, unmake it brick by brick. Problem solved with less pain.

Questions with no answers: “Will I always be defined by the things I’ve done? There are things I so desperately want to forget, that I want no one to know. Do these things define me? Or is it the change I underwent, the change I fought for in myself that defines me?”

An understanding of this class: “The books we read in this class and throughout our lives are always vehicles for something more.”

The Young and the Wise: “It’s so easy for us to skim our lives like we skim books.”

And finally: “I mine the past for meaning.”