

(December 2009)

I don't know how many administrators could say the same, but I am truly enjoying my first year as a principal. No day is every the same as the last, no problem is ever redundant, no challenge is ever predictable. That said, one of my most absolute pleasures remains being a teacher. There is no better moment in my life at school than when, after finishing a book or story, one of my students says, "I loooooove this story!" Now, if you have any exposure to middle school, you are well aware that a female student gushed those words. My male students run more along the lines of, "(sigh) It was okay (successive sigh)."

Though I am many years removed from middle school myself, I have remembered and carried with me many of the lines of poetry or stories that struck me over the years. During my junior year in college, I had a literature professor who placed *My Brilliant Career* by Miles Franklin on the syllabus. One of the most salient passages came from this reading and echoes in my head nearly two decades after I first read it. Here, the main character, Sybylla, reflects on her own passion for particular authors . . .

*The pleasure, so exquisite as to be almost pain, which I derived from the books, and especially the Australian poets, is beyond description. In the narrow peasant life of Possum Gully I had been deprived of companionship with people of refinement and education who would talk of the things I loved; but, at last here was congeniality, here was companionship.*

*The weird witchery of mighty bush, the breath of wide sunlit plains, the sound of camp-bells and jingle of hobble chains, floating on the soft twilight breezes, had come to these men and had written a tale on their hearts as had been written on mine. The glory of the starlit heavens, the mighty wonder of the sea, and the majesty of thunder had come home to them, and the breathless fullness of the sunset hour had whispered of something more than the humour of tomorrow's weather. The wind and rain had a voice which spoke to Kendall, and he too had endured the misery of lack of companionship. Gordon, with his sad, sad humanism and bitter disappointment, held out his hand and took me with him. The regret of it all was I could never meet them -- Byron, Thackeray, Dickens, Longfellow, Gordon, Kendall, the men I loved, all were dead. . .*

Did you hear the crack of wind in the window? Of the men I love who are dead, John Updike reigns- more so, for me, because of his short stories than his novels. His exquisitely painful "Separating" concludes with a quiet yet excruciating moment in the life of a family breaking apart. Updike writes, "It was a whistle of wind in a crack, a

knife thrust, a window thrown open on emptiness.” I don’t believe I have ever heard or read a more perfect description of what the right words put together in the right way sound like, and I always fall back to Updike’s “wind in a crack” when I read something piercing. Franklin manages this kind of perfection when she writes that the men she loved were dead.

Granted, I’m not Australian and I’m not Miles Franklin or Sybylla, but I can feel the pang described above, and I know that any of you who are affected by the literature you read have a connection to this sentiment as well. Who are those authors for you? Which have touched you so tenderly that you remember the words and the feeling years later? In addition to Updike, there is for me Greene and Stegner (who I will write of in another time, to be sure) and a fine, fine writer by the name of Elwyn Brooks White.

Perhaps you know him more simply as E.B. White, author of *One Man’s Meat*, subsequent co-author of *The Elements of Style* or, more likely, from *Charlotte’s Web* or *Stuart Little*. You may not know however, that White penned one of the most splendid reflections on Christmas ever written. White, as a writer for the *New Yorker*, reflected upon an encounter with his Aunt Carolyn in a 1954 piece for the esteemed periodical. Imagine the home of White’s memory, the season, and the 92 year old Aunt Carolyn who, as White describes, is in “good health and spirits” and who speaks with a “precision and refinement rare in this undisciplined century”. White explains in his holiday piece that the surrounding family offers an apology for not having taken their Aunt out for a drive through the woods to see the changing seasons. Without hesitating and without bitterness, Aunt Carolyn replies, “. . . remembrance is sufficient of the beauty we have seen.”

Remembrance is sufficient of the beauty we have seen. Did you hear the wind in the crack in Aunt Carolyn’s words? A remarkable and rare appreciation of life and its beauty, wouldn’t you agree? Aunt Carolyn’s words bring us face to face with a potent reminder that there is indeed much for which we should be grateful and that one’s happiness is inextricably tied to one’s outlook.

I hope you will take the time to seek out and read E.B. White’s 1954 holiday message entitled “Remembrance is Sufficient”, and that you too will be moved by White, his essay, and the resolute, heartening outlook of Aunt Carolyn’s. Whether Christmas or any other holiday, the message remains true and powerful. Dead men still speak, so long as we listen, and the appeal to keep close family and friends, love, joy and memory rings true at any holiday, at any time of year in any decade.

May this holiday season be filled with delight and time to appreciate the memories we are today creating.

Wishing you joyful holidays,