

Preface

ROBERT WAXLER ON *FINDING A VOICE*

CAN READING GOOD LITERATURE help us to find a voice? We believe it can—and this book offers a glimpse into that belief.

Start with the simple assumption, as we did back in 1991, that criminal offenders have been pushed to the margins and declared failures. They have an important story to tell, but no one will listen. Teachers have dismissed them as incompetent. Judges have sentenced them to confinement. They are disenchanting, struggling in an enormous present, without a past or a future, as if the human heart itself was surrounded by a frozen sea.

“A book must be an axe for the frozen sea within us. This is what I believe,” Kafka wrote his friend Oskar Pollak. Perhaps he was thinking, as we are, that books can shock and surprise, return us to the voice lost, to the imagination forsaken.

Yes, books keep us off-balance, stir us to ask deep questions, and allow us to return to the enchantment of the heart. That is our belief.

A number of recent reports argue for the need to discover alternatives to the current approach to criminal justice. For us, such an argument invites a substantive conversation about the kind of society we want to live in, the values we respect and embrace, the way we judge ourselves as well as others in the community.

Back in 1991, we conducted a small experiment for criminal offenders at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, based on just such thinking. The program was rooted in the simple idea that reading and discussing good literature could change lives. An engagement with language could help us find our voices in a world increasingly distracted by cold facts, ratios, and abstractions. Reading good stories, we believed, could re-awaken the interior life and bring us all closer to the beat of the human heart.

We believed then, as we do today, that the success of a democracy is best judged not by how many people are in jail, but by how many are able to speak out as productive citizens. And we knew that talking about books around a table on a college campus could give voice to those with little power—could in fact enhance the lives of everyone, including judges, probation officers, and professors.

In a good book, readers always discover the voice they seek, for in its language a book holds the future and the past, our hope and our memory. Such language makes us uneasy, calls us to question, and invites us to listen for something deeper in ourselves and in the world.

Since 1991, the Changing Lives Through Literature (CLTL) program has spread throughout Massachusetts and into several other states, including Texas where politically conservative judges, not unaccustomed to sentencing inmates to death, have embraced the program because they are convinced that great books can open the human heart and redeem us.

That is the power of CLTL. It has nothing to do with partisan politics and everything to do with democracy and education. It costs less than \$500 per person to send an offender through CLTL, pocket cash compared to the \$30,000 necessary to lock that same offender behind bars for a year.

Historically, often the first signs that a community has established itself appear when that community builds a jail and fashions grave-stones for a cemetery. The jail serves as a temporary stay for citizens

who have lost their way but who almost always return to the community. The cemetery offers no such hope. In its silence, it serves only as a final marker of our limitations, reminding us of the importance of the human voice and the need for justice and compassion.

But how we as a community make room for that human voice—how we provide that sense of justice and compassion—seems the crucial question. In my view, literature remains the best answer we have to keep ourselves, as individuals and as a society, human. Literature offers all of us the opportunity to find a voice deep within, the voice that names us and calls us home.

JEAN TROUNSTINE ON *FINDING A VOICE*

When I facilitated my first CLTL seminar, I was struck by how many of the women yearned, like me, to hear their dreams evoked what they read. As Zora Neale Hurston said, for women, “The dream is the truth.” The women involved with CLTL came to the table with broken lives; they wanted to heal. In the characters who touched them most deeply, they often found a sense of connection, wisdom, safety, and hope. The conversations we had week after week were reflections of the texts we read. We took a book and held it up to our lives, bringing ideas, arguments, and many thought-provoking moments to the table. Many other CLTL practitioners have found the same truth: Our voices are enriched and deepened, not only from the readings but through all of the expression around the table. Our collective exploration into texts enlivens our voices.

It was 1973, on an early spring afternoon in Massachusetts that I first realized the transformational power of hearing my own voice inside a character. I was walking to the graduate student dorm at Brandeis University. The trees were just beginning to bloom, bushes breaking into yellow forsythia, grass becoming green. The pond was bursting with color. I was trying to sort out mixed feelings about playing Joan of Arc in my next scene class.

Acting was not something I had lucked into. I had been driven to the stage by the need to inhabit the soul of another, by the need to delve deep into behaviors that make each of us unique, and by an intuitive sense that the lives of others can teach us who we are and who we want to be. I read book after book, imagining myself inside the pages. In many ways, reading led me to corners that were hidden, through doors that were locked. As I listened to the voices of others, I found that I heard my own.

As a girl, I had not known exactly why I loved the world of the imagination. And as an adult, I knew my dream to be an actress was a long shot. Being cast at Brandeis had not been easy. I was short and chunky, more character than leading lady. I had a round face and long wild hair that kept me from getting dramatic leads like the stunningly beautiful Hedda Gabler and the sleek and sharp Sadie in *All the King's Men*. "You'll get more roles when you're older," one teacher had said. But that didn't console me. I wanted roles now, those that spoke to me: the intense and forthright Antigone in Anouilh's *Antigone*; the tall Rosalind who disguises herself as a man in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*; and the passionate believer, Joan, in George Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan*. In their words, I found something of myself. I heard my voice.

So I rounded the pond thinking about the character I had chosen to play in a class monologue, Joan of Arc. I had just been on stage that day, trying out her words. During the scene where Joan tells her adversaries that it doesn't matter if they reject her, that she can take France to victory because she has God's help, my teacher had yelled "Crap!" From the back row, his voice resounded throughout the hall. Then, while the class sat in silence and shock, he told me that I was sentimentalizing Joan: "That kind of aloneness is unknown to you, to most of us. And it's not easy to play." I slunk away, feeling deep shame inside. I was, in his eyes, too weak to play such a dynamic character.

Later, I found myself thinking that if I was going to play Joan, I mustn't be beaten down. I had to believe in myself, no matter what he'd said. I gathered something like confidence or revenge or a com-

bination of both, huffing and puffing, trying out thoughts, putting on a mantle of yes-I-can as I plodded through mud around that pond. Struggling against the wind, I could hear my boots clomping on the path beneath me. This next time, I would nail my part and surprise the lot of them.

My process that day was not unlike what our students undergo when they walk into a CLTL program, fraught with fear. My revelation was perhaps similar to their own when they encounter a character who sticks inside and, in spite of differences, touches a chord. I thought how Joan was a peasant girl who lived in the Middle Ages and became a soldier because the “voices” in her head told her to serve God. She was a military leader, a heretic, a national savior, a fighter, and according to George Bernard Shaw, an inspiration. I was a newly married woman, wanting a career that didn’t want me; I was yearning to find my path in the world. In spite of the differences in our lives, Joan’s words resonated with me; the very core of her character made me feel powerful and strong.

On that day in 1973, I realized Joan’s epiphany. My voice became connected to what I read on the page, and I felt I could use her words to express my inner heart. With Joan, I could be anyone, play any part, no matter what the nay-sayers said. I practiced her words aloud as I walked around and around, and by the time it was dark, I felt somehow transformed. I understood that, like Joan, I must “dare and dare and dare” until I die.

When I performed Joan at the next class, I was solidly behind her words; I got a standing ovation. But more important, I began to see how a character could affect us.

When I first became a teacher, I told that story over and over again to my students because I wanted them to understand that there was much in stepping into the world of another, and that success is never easy. “Whose voice resonates with you?” I asked them, hoping to uncover what and who might be their touchstone. Through the years, I have asked that question many times, encouraging others to see that

words have power, and that books can amuse, comfort, reveal, and teach. I tell students that we meet characters at different times in our lives and we need them at different times, but when we love a book, often what it means is that we have found our voice inside it. And I continue telling them until they start telling me.

CLTL allows all of us to be the teachers. It allows us to all share our epiphanies. It is a program of many voices, and in this book you will hear from students, probation officers, teachers, judges, and the text itself.

This book is about the how and why of Changing Lives Through Literature: It is through finding and sharing our voices and listening to the voices of others that we learn to hear more clearly, to see more deeply.