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RIGHT TO READ

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with
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Do No Harm

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“Read because it illuminates and frees us.”
(G. Paulsen, personal communication, April 14, 2015)

A loosely translated phrase from the Hippocratic Oath, often glamorized in movies and on television, admonishes physicians in treating their patients to “First, do no harm.” For our third and final column, we are entreating teachers and librarians to take that same ancient oath, to do no harm. We are taking a stand, not only for the right of young people to have access to and to read the books that some factions of society find objectionable, but more important, we are taking a stand for the responsibility of teachers and librarians to advocate for and even champion the reading and teaching of these very books. Failure to do so perpetrates a form of harm on young people and the world.

We recruited Gary Paulsen to provide some insight from the perspective of an author who suffered more than his share of abuse and adversity as a child and one who believes that we do neither kids nor society any favors when we promote only literature that avoids life’s important, sometimes ugly, issues. We start with an examination of who gets hurt when we fail to provide our young people with meaningful reading, and we end with Gary’s admonition to do what is best for young people by choosing books that

will prepare them for life—not storybook life, but real life.

Who Is Harmed by Book Banning?

Most of us, at one time or another, have probably heard a colleague say, “Why choose books with potentially controversial content when there are so many good books out there that don’t have any material that might offend people? Why take the chance of riling up parents, or going against the agenda of local political groups, or placing teachers’ jobs in jeopardy with conservative school board members if you don’t have to?” These are honest questions, and they deserve honest answers.

Is there a good reason to promote the reading and study of books that are likely to make some people uncomfortable or to offend some people? Yes. Yes, there absolutely is. The reason is that someone gets hurt when we do not. When we choose to abandon books that deal with issues of race, sex, abuse, gender identity, discrimination, disenfranchisement, or similar topics, we hurt the people who live with these issues every day by implying that their life experiences are not worth talking about, or are an embarrassment, or are simply wrong. When these stories are absent from the curriculum or libraries, when these experiences are not reflected in the books and stories that are available, accessible, and taught, then we risk telling the young people who face these issues that their lives must not matter.

As Atticus Finch once said about our nation’s courtrooms, our schools and public libraries should be places where all people are equal, places where all

lives matter, equally (Lee, 1960). These are places to learn a great variety of things, such as why one life is just as valuable as any other and how to make the world a better place for all people, not just some. We are morally obligated to read and study literature that exposes our students to the realities of lives lived with difficulty, realities known only too well by the person in the next seat or the next classroom or the next county. We are obligated to provide our students with literature that may show how some of us, teachers as well as students, consciously or unconsciously, are the perpetrators of injustice against our fellow human beings, hurting people by the hundreds, thousands, maybe even millions. Books provide a powerful means for exposing truths, highlighting social contradictions, and mobilizing people to work for change.

What Books Are Banned and Why?

When access to the power of books is denied, people get hurt, especially young people who are often the same people who are already victimized in life. It's not too hard to figure out who these young people are; it's almost a matter of record. The American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom keeps an annual list of the "most frequently challenged books" and the accompanying reasons given by those who attempt to keep these books away from young readers. As expected, the 2014 list reads like both an all-star honor roll and a lineup of the usual suspects. The four most frequently challenged books include *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), an illustrated novel by Sherman Alexie; *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (2003), a graphic memoir by Marjane Satrapi; *And Tango Makes Three* (2005), a children's picturebook by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell; and *The Bluest Eye* (1970), a novel by Toni Morrison. It seems both obvious and alarming that the most challenged books are also multicultural stories representing experiences related to race and sexuality. Let's look at three of them and examine who is most likely to get hurt when these books are withheld.

Censoring Bullying, Race, and Disability

In first place is Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007). Although this novel won the National Book Award and was highly acclaimed for its depiction of the hardships faced by

a Native American young man navigating two different worlds—Native American and White—challengers were offended by, among other things, its "depictions of bullying" (Office for Intellectual Freedom). Born with multiple disabilities, Alexie's protagonist, Junior, is bullied relentlessly for his differences. Nevertheless, he finds ways to cope with both his disabilities and the horrible treatment by his peers. In the end, he is a victor in sports, academics, and high school society.

According to the National Education Association (2011), 32 million kids are bullied at school; each day, 160,000 of those kids stay home from school to avoid being bullied. And the results of bullying can be drastic: "Five studies reported that bullying victims were two to nine times more likely to report suicidal thoughts than other children," according to a meta study done at Yale University (Peart, 2008). Even more concerning are the statistics on suicide for Native American and Native Alaskan youth. According to the National Congress of American Indians, there are 2.9 million self-identifying Native American/Native Alaskans in the United States, and 32% of those, about 928,000, are under the age of 18. According to the National Education Association (2011), Native American and Native Alaskan youth are three times as likely to commit suicide as their non-Native peers, often because of bullying:

NEA thinks it's important that educators know about the link between bullying and suicide. The vast majority of American Indian and Alaska Native students attend our K-12 public schools. And as educators committed to the proposition that every student has the right to learn, grow, and develop his or her full potential, we think it is critical that we address the bullying issue.

Taken together, these statistics support our assertion that educators have a moral obligation to address social issues that youth face, especially when considering the intersections of bullying and Native

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American/Native Alaskan youth suicide. A book like *Absolutely True Diary* has the potential to validate the experiences of youth located at these intersections and to expose all young people to these issues. Inversely, censoring this story and others like it contributes to a harmful silence about these experiences.

Censoring Sexuality

And Tango Makes Three (2005), by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell, comes in at number three among

challenged or censored books, primarily because it “promotes the homosexual agenda” (Office for Intellectual Freedom). This book, based on a true story about two male penguins in the New York Central Park Zoo who raised a chick from an egg, is most often the target of religious conservatives who believe that same-sex marriage is wrong and harmful to children brought up in same-sex families. According to Justin Richardson, “We wrote the book to help parents teach children about same-sex

parent families. It’s no more an argument in favor of human gay relationships than it is a call for children to swallow their fish whole or sleep on rocks” (Miller, 2005).

Should children learn about homosexuality and same-sex parent families? The facts are overwhelmingly in favor of this. Four major population surveys conducted between 2006 and 2014 reveal that between 2.2% and 4% of US adults age 18 or older self-reported as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) (Gates, 2014, p. 1). Note the “self-reported” qualifier. No one really knows how many people fit into these categories, how many categories there really are, or whether such categories even work for human sexuality. Nevertheless, there are significant numbers of people in the US and the world who identify as LGBT. Surely they deserve more than one little picturebook about penguins!

Censoring Sexual Assault

Number four on the list is *The Bluest Eye* (1970), by Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison, challenged most often for being sexually explicit and because it “contains controversial issues” (Office for Intellectual Freedom). These issues are almost certainly incest, pedophilia, and rape. The title of the novel and its premise—that White standards for feminine beauty trump all others—focus on deeply ingrained racism, but the most commonly criticized scene depicts the novel’s main character, 11-year-old Pecola Breedlove, being raped by her father. Detractors often call this scene pornographic, incorrectly interpreting a literary depiction of an act as approval of that act.

Nevertheless, many people believe they are doing young people a favor by keeping this book out of their hands. As a complainant said in Wake County, North Carolina, after challenging the use of *The Bluest Eye* in one teacher’s Advanced Placement classes at East Wake County High School, “We’re giving these images to our kids, and I think that’s wrong when these kids are at an influential phase in their life” (Hankerson, 2014). The sexually abused protagonist is 11. The students reading the book, with guidance from a professional educator, are between 16 and 18.

What is the reality of our students’ world during this “influential phase”? Does knowing the facts of this “controversial issue” help prevent it from happening? According to the US Department of Justice:

Providing facts about sexual abuse is one of the ways to raise awareness about sexual abuse. Awareness of the facts is one of several preventive measures that can be taken to assist you in making better decisions to keep you and someone you know safe.

So what *are* the facts according to the Department of Justice website?

- Approximately 30% of sexual assault cases are reported to authorities.
- 62,939 cases of child sexual abuse were reported in 2012.
- According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics’ National Criminal Victimization Survey, in 2012, there were 346,830 reported rapes or sexual assaults of persons 12 years or older.
- About 30% of perpetrators of child sexual abuse are family members.

- Approximately 1.8 million adolescents in the United States have been the victims of sexual assault.
- Research conducted by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimates that approximately 1 in 6 boys and 1 in 4 girls are sexually abused before the age of 18.
- 69% of the teen sexual assaults reported to law enforcement occurred in the residence of the victim, the offender, or another individual.
- Approximately 1 in 5 female high school students reports being physically and/or sexually abused by a dating partner.
- Not all sexually abused children exhibit symptoms—some estimate that up to 40% of sexually abused children are asymptomatic; however, others experience serious and long-standing consequences.
- Disclosure of sexual abuse is often delayed; children often avoid telling because they are either afraid of a negative reaction from their parents or of being harmed by the abuser. As such, they often delay disclosure until adulthood. (US Department of Justice)

Who gets hurt when we fail to use books like *The Bluest Eye*, when we sweep so-called “controversial issues” under the rug and pretend they don’t happen? The victims. Maybe even some of the perpetrators. And both might have sought help if they realized they were not alone.

Rather than steering clear of books like *The Bluest Eye* or any book that tackles sexual abuse head on, we need to steer right at them by facilitating their reading, researching the issues they represent, and discussing them in our classrooms and libraries. We need look no further than the impact of Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak* (1999), a frequently challenged book that depicts the experience of a ninth-grade girl who is raped by a senior boy at a high school beer party, to find evidence of what can happen when we do. For example, researcher Malo-Juvera (2014) conducted a survey of students who read *Speak* in their eighth-grade English classes. The study revealed that reading and discussing the novel effectively decreased students’ acceptance of rape myths, including blaming the victim, compared to students who had not read the book.

Macmillan, the publisher of *Speak*, also takes the impact of the book seriously. On the 15-year anniversary of *Speak*’s release, Macmillan agreed to match up to \$15,000 in private donations to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization whose mission is to provide help to victims of sexual assault of all kinds. As the largest anti-sexual assault organization in the United States, RAINN “operates the National Sexual Assault Hotline . . . in partnership with more than 1,100 local sexual assault service providers across the country and operates the DoD Safe Helpline for the Department of Defense,” including services in Spanish.

By its 14th anniversary in 2014, *Speak* had sold over 3 million copies. Who knows how many friends passed on a dog-eared copy to the next friend in line to read it? The book inspired a movie with Kristen Stewart as Melinda and Steve Zahn as the art teacher. Suffice it to say that most teenage young women in the US know this book, but let’s hear it right from the source, a teenage young woman’s blog:

Chances are, if you went to middle school, are in middle school, or know someone in middle school, you’ve read *Speak*. And, chances are, it meant everything to you. Anderson’s most famous novel was (and still is) a staple in the classrooms and bookshelves of teenage girls everywhere, and I’ve yet to meet a woman my age whose formative years weren’t at least partly shaped by Melinda Sordino and her horrible freshman year. (Simon, 2015)

Books affect, change, even save, lives. We are called to share the best of them, not the most sanitized, not the least disturbing, not the most disinfected of society’s ills, but the best of them. We may think we do no one ill when we shy away from the most challenged titles, but we actually do great harm. We fail to provide the means to heal and understand life to our world’s most marginalized.

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Reading to Arm Oneself: An Author's Perspective

Gary Paulsen has never shirked away from telling the unvarnished truth, especially when kids are involved and lying to them about the world is such a disservice. We end with wisdom he was kind enough to share with us for the purpose of this final column. Many thanks to his agent, Jennifer Flannery, for her help.

I always say my writing comes from personal inspection at zero altitude. That's true, but I've left some serious skin in the game along the way: abusive parents, lousy grades and no friends in school, alcoholism, dead-end career paths, the illnesses and deaths of friends and loved ones, being cheated and stolen from, bad choices that led to aches and pains from broken bones and other injuries in the wilderness and on the sea.

If there's anything to be gained from all those nightmares, I hope it's that I've shared my experiences, and the fact that I've survived them all, with young readers. So that the kids who read my books don't have to feel alone, so they can pick up, maybe, a few pointers about dealing with, as my hero Shakespeare puts it, "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune."

Life is not always pretty, and it's very seldom fair. Turn on the news—murder, rape, drugs, terrorism, theft, violence—they're some of the notes that make up the dance of life. And I've always thought that giving kids a safe place to explore these horrific concepts—in the pages of a book, with teachers and librarians and parents to help lend perspective—is one of the best ways to arm our young people with the information they need, not only to survive, but to thrive; not only to cope with the horrors, but to become the force that helps stop them.

From prehistoric time, when cavemen danced around the fire telling what the hunt was like, it's been human nature to share our stories. We write about what happened to us so that others might learn, might grow, might not suffer so much in the future.

Read.

Read everything you can get your hands on.

Read because it illuminates and frees us.

Read like a wolf eats. (G. Paulsen, personal communication, April 14, 2015)

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