



Identity Development through Literature

Working with High School Students

Defne Caldwell

“It would have been impossible for me to have told anyone what I derived from these novels, for it was nothing less than a sense of life itself.”

Richard Wright, *Black Boy*

I have spent 27 years exploring stories with young people. While most of this experience unfolded at Green Meadow Waldorf School, in Chestnut Ridge, NY, I have also spent seven years in public education and four years teaching at the college level. The variety of this experience still confirms for me that Waldorf education has a unique strength by working on the relationship of learning and being. I can see this in my classmates (I, myself, was a lifelong Waldorf student), in my own children and their friends, and in my students – that Waldorf students have a being that has unique qualities. Waldorf students can recognize these in each other. The other day, my daughter said, “Well, I met some Waldorf students at college last night. I was at a party and I just knew.” Our students are recognized for something I could only call presence, ease, poise, self-reliance, curiosity, enjoyment of multiple aspects of life, as well as by the level of their discourse and by a kind of independent spirit.

The role that working with stories or with literature in general plays in the students’ lives is one of building a sense of self and a connection to the world. You may call this connection *empathy*. In preparing for writing this piece, I asked one of my students what she thought literature does for people; she replied, “It helps you in the process of empathy, and it helps you find ways to explain what you are feeling and what role you want to play in this world.” This is not so different than what I would say. My own wording would state: When you read literature, when you work it out and really listen, you are experiencing something that is larger than yourself but also just about you. In this act, you become larger, richer than you were. Your identity is built from something that reaches far and wide, and into the past and future, filtered through and fostering the development of your own unique self.

The fact that Waldorf education is so mindfully dedicated to the development of each individual is also what sets our schooling apart when it comes to working with literature. The personal growth of each of my students is my goal. For high schoolers, finding meaning in stories is the means to that goal, and students work towards it eagerly, because they are naturally driven to make connections and to find meaning wherever they can.

People are meaning makers, really. I’m thinking of the unborn child listening to voices, the infant making sense of light and shape, the baby connecting sound and sense. We are just desperate to make connections between everything. We are just as desperate to make connections with each other. It is common to think that we are individuals, each their own person with their own feelings and thoughts. That is true. But each of us is at the center of a larger being, which we might call humanity. Stories are what allow us to live inside the experience of people who lead us into the world, people who face situations we do not face, people who are different in terms of age, gender, race, sexuality, religion, culture, and history; any difference can be bridged with a story.

The art of the story is also the way that we recognize form and meaning in what would otherwise be life ongoing, an endless string of moments. With the art of the story, events become plot, recurrences build up as themes, people can be understood like characters, anything, anything can be a metaphor or symbol. Art in general, but writing and reading literature, specifically, is one way we take hold of life. I can imagine the earliest human beings retelling or previewing the hunt on the walls of a cave or singing the stories of great heroes like Beowulf and Odysseus to each other. From the moment the mind begins to navigate a story, it is looking for a parallel life. The relationship of my life to the parallel lives I live through literature is where the meanings grow. In working on that relationship of self with an other self, and life with an other life, I change. Incredibly, the story changes too! Stories that used to move us, *The Giving Tree*, for example, change as we change. So many of us grew up with that story, a metaphor for good parenting. Now, how awful that the tree is destroyed by giving. That is no longer a healthy

metaphor. Characters in novels and stories change too. Just think about the once exemplary character of Uncle Tom, today seen as servile and self-loathing, and the once near and dear Huck Finn, today seen as inadvertently racist, but racist all the same. It is important to hold the picture that readers create the reality or meaning of the stories they read as much, if not more, than writers. In *The American Scholar*, Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “There is then creative reading as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion. Every sentence is doubly significant, and the sense of our author is as broad as the world.” The reader builds the meaning of the story.

I would like to give you a taste of the way in which at Green Meadow we work to support the development of each student through literature. Because we are mindful of child development, the way we work with literature changes in the four years of high school. In the samples I bring, you will see, for example, that it is not healthy for ninth graders to be told that they are alone in the world. Seniors, on the other hand, do need to explore being alone.

Ninth grade students, who are 13 or 14-years old, are boldly brazen and still unsure at the same time. They vacillate from conviction to doubt and from loving things to hating them at the drop of a hat. A deep feeling lives within them and also a new tendency to judge, though without what we would call true judgement. As much as a two-year-old’s tantrums signal the birth of her will, these signs in the 14 year-old signal the birth of an intellect. Now, if we tried to engage them at the level of the mature, free-thinking individual that they will one day become, we would be faced with their uncertainty or with convictions that come out of gut feelings, which, unschooled, can actually become an obstacle to powerful thinking and a strong sense of self. So we draw ninth graders out into the fantastic truths and mysteries of the world and into pondering opposites, so that they can practice their natural swinging thoughts and feelings in positive ways.

Melville’s novel, *Moby-Dick*, is perhaps the most formative text I use with ninth graders. They are immersed in a world without borders, where nothing is certain, and yet one that mirrors their new consciousness of how huge the universe is, how beyond understanding truth is. This is the world of the sea, where every place you

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look, there is only the ring of a horizon. In contrast to that immensity is the world of the ship, also a familiar experience to ninth graders. This is the world of family, or school, maybe in some cases of a town or city. On the ship, named the Pequod, they are presented with sailors from many different places on earth, from Nantucket to the Pacific Islands, from the vast continent of Africa to the Isle of Mann. It isn’t a stretch to see how a ship, or a family, or New York resembles a collection of humanity, like the whalers on board the Pequod. Ishmael, the narrator, tells us that the voyage of the Pequod is fated.

Well, ninth graders do not choose their lives or families. Even if they don’t believe in fate, they can relate to the feeling that there are life situations they can’t control. However, along that fated voyage, all of the opportunities for Ishmael to make free-will choices about his behavior are there, just as it is for our students. And we spend a good deal of time talking about what free will is.

Individuals on the Pequod are richly varied archetypes, and while each character is unlike the others, students can understand them in terms of polarities – the opposite qualities that they have: the immovable, obsessed, proud and tyrannical Captain Ahab in contrast to the innocent, frightened, ready to please cabin boy, Pip; the crass and explosive third mate, Flask, in contrast to the noble, perfectly able to act harpooner, Daggoo. As I said before, thinking about opposites is natural to ninth graders. In fact, one often has to remind them that the world isn’t made up from or to be mapped out as good and bad, and that they don’t have to either love or hate a thing. But pondering opposites yields a good deal of meaning, too, when used in the right way. The willfulness of Ahab, who is consumed with self, is intensified when compared to the temerity and selflessness of Pip. A rich series of contrasts between characters helps students to see the specific qualities of each. Working with contrasts also keeps their minds and hearts moving well in an intellectual space they naturally inhabit, the space of opposites. Their first introduction to thinking in terms of polarities is made in the sweetest and most relatable way by Ishmael, when he tries to explain why it is so wonderful to be under warm covers in his cold room. He says, “To truly enjoy bodily warmth, some small part of you must be cold, for there is no quality in this world that is not what it is merely by contrast. Nothing exists in itself.” Every student knows what this means. And then, the act of comparison ends up yielding so much insight.

At the same time, the novel provides students with a series of dualities – Pairs rather than opposites. Queequeg, the Pacific Islander tattooed from head to toe who eats steak with his harpoon may seem to be Ishmael's opposite. Queequeg is not a Christian and Ishmael is, Queequeg is a prince from Kokovoko in the Pacific and Ishmael is down and out North American from New England. But they are both drawn toward one another, both spiritual in their own way, both possessed of a balanced sense of self and other, both generous. And so they become a pair, and an example to students that what may seem like an opposing force in life can also be a companion force when one finds common ground. In this case, no one is ever ultimately alone. This speaks to ninth graders who are newly conscious of being unique unto themselves and just as newly in need of true friendship. You could say that this is a lesson in feeling. Initially, Ishmael was afraid of Queequeg and disgusted that he smoked in the bed they had to share in the inn. Once they become best friends, suddenly Ishmael loves nothing more than to lie in bed with Queequeg and pass the pipe back and forth. Ishmael remarks, "See how elastic our stiff prejudices grow when love once comes to bend them."

The novel is also rich in metaphor and symbol, often pondered by our narrator and guide, Ishmael. The Pequod itself, decked out in the bones and teeth of whales, is a symbol of self-destruction. Ishmael calls it a "cannibal of a craft," the light of the fire beneath the try pots, which makes the sailor's look like devils in hell, to Ishmael, is a symbol of unfounded fears at night; the Catskill Eagle that flies through dark mountain gorges, yet is always higher than the other birds of the woods and plains, is, in his mind, a symbol of deep thinking. Our love of the sea, Ishmael says, is related to Narcissus, who, "because he could not grasp the tormenting mild image he saw of himself plunged in and was drowned. But that same image we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life." In class, we spend many minutes discussing what that is, the ungraspable phantom of life. Students say it is the meaning of life, or it is who you are, or it is what your life should be. This is the work of building meaning and self at the same time.

There is really so much more to say about this novel and its capacity as a builder of self. Still, I can't move on without honoring the role of a hero in literature. Ishmael is one of the best. He, our narrator and guide,

is perhaps the most constant influence on the ninth graders. It is no mistake that we know nothing of what he looks like or of his past. He can fit anyone. His warm introduction, *Call me Ishmael*, is the world-famous first line of the novel. Within the first two chapters, students have climbed up inside of him and are on a journey that proceeds from within his thinking.

Because of the intensity of his role of an intimate thoughtful narrator, Ishmael is the armor that the students wear as they navigate the dangers of the story. Through him, they practice presence, honesty, flexibility, and deep thinking.

Ishmael provides students with presence through his powers of observation. We focus a great deal on this power with ninth graders as it gives them the power of sight and of objective discernment that is the foundation of clear thought. Ishmael reports and reports and reports, and in this way, he builds the world that becomes, for a time, their reality.

The second superpower he employs, which comes as great service to ninth graders, is honesty. He shares his feelings truthfully, especially when he, early on, shares his doubts and fears. In this way, he is not only an example of a way to be, but an example of a good guide, one who does not pretend to be what he is not.

Within the confines of the fated voyage, and caught in a web of intense relationships, Ishmael is able to change in order to bond with others. Understanding how to

find common ground, how to seek company, and how to be intimate is as important for a young individual as learning the art of solitude will be later in the 11th and 12th grades.

Finally, Ishmael's greatest gift is his deep thinking. Because he is thoughtful and through the narration of his thoughts, the ship, its special attributes, the people on it,

their relationships, events, storms and swells at sea, all become symbols and full of meaning.

The beauty of language, its power to create worlds, inspire thought, and move feelings, takes root in students. Every year, in a closing circle in which we review the main lesson, a few of the ninth grade students comment on the beauty of Melville's writing.

Towards the end of the novel, Melville describes a beautiful day; it is beautiful enough to move Ahab to a rare moment of self-realization and tears. Even in this description, the power of polarities and dualities

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is evident. Mostly, it offers an example of the power of language to move us:

It was a clear steel-blue day. The firmaments of air and sea were hardly separable in that all-pervading azure; only, the pensive air was transparently pure and soft, with a woman's look, and the robust and man-like sea heaved with long, strong, lingering swells, as Samson's chest in his sleep...

That glad, happy air, that winsome sky, did at last stroke and caress Ahab; the step-mother world, so long cruel—forbidding—now threw affectionate arms round his stubborn neck, and did seem to joyously sob over him, as if over one, that however willful and erring, she could yet find it in her heart to save and to bless. From beneath his slouched hat Ahab dropped a tear into the sea; nor did all the Pacific contain such wealth as that one wee drop.

In the tenth grade, students step outside of their guides and heroes. They can watch *over the shoulder* of Odysseus or Richard Wright, for example, but they are also *watching* Odysseus and Richard Wright. This is an important step in the students' construction of their own perspectives. In the tenth grade, stories are mined not for archetypes, polarities and dualities, and timeless truths, but more for process. How can a person *learn from experiences*? *The Odyssey* is a perfect example of a series of situations made up of cause and effect. Because he is easily tempted and cannot control his crew, Odysseus spends many years lost in the world. Then, finally, he is saved by the slow process not of controlling his men actually, but of learning to control himself. The obstacles Richard Wright faces and described in *Black Boy* are the harshness of his childhood and the iron fist of racism. Like Odysseus, he can't change the world. His challenge is to be true to himself and survive. In both pieces, a hero is at first beset by the world, tested physically, psychologically, and morally, again and again. In both cases, the hero fails, yet he learns from mistakes and develops clear thinking and inner fortitude, which allows each hero to find a home in the world and within himself. Inwardly, these heroes build a positive, moral self who, in the end, does feel a connection to the world despite the painful road traveled to reach this point. In his autobiography, Wright describes his childhood and adolescence: "My days and nights were one long, quiet, continuously contained dream of terror, tension, and anxiety. I wondered how long I could bear it." But then, through a long process of study and inner development, he is able to speak out of a sense of wholeness

in himself and unity with others. He writes, "If you possess enough courage to speak out what you are, you will find you are not alone."

In the eleventh grade, students need experiences of a deeper kind of navigation. These are experiences that do not provide clear tests or lessons, and situations that cannot be controlled by clear thinking and inner fortitude. This is the year in which students practice developing an inner resolve around personal perspectives that may or may not jive with one's surroundings. They work with texts that involve characters who find themselves in situations that can only be met by inward growth. Here, interactions, planning, behavior are secondary to what can only be called a higher perspective.

In *Inferno*, Dante finds himself in hell. In his autobiography, Malcolm X finds himself in a world that bars him from true progress because of the color of his skin and then due to his incarceration. Hamlet loses father, mother and, worst of all, his trust in everyone around him, as anyone may or may not be conspiring against him. Working with these texts, students experience a wide range of initial emotions, Dante's extreme terror and pity for sinners suffering in hell, Malcolm X's blind efforts to get by, no matter what, even if this involves crimes against himself and others, and Hamlet's disorientation, depression and madness. You could say that none of these characters can find a healthy footing in the world. Through these characters, eleventh graders begin to understand that there are some things about the world that they cannot change or control, and that they need to develop a sense of personal responsibility and their own point of view to have a world that

lives *inside* them. That they will soon be going out alone into the big world of college and beyond both dances and looms in front of them. In their experience, the practice of careful observation, deep thinking, the tracking of patterns of behavior have begun to take root in an experience of a dawning deeply personal self that

is unlike any other and, ultimately, a lonely experience.

It is healing to travel through hell with Dante, and to see how he is strengthened, not weakened, by terror and pain and also by having to witness horrors he can't fully understand. Ultimately, he faces the creator and understands that he is both separate and unified with the entire universe and that the divine power of love is what creates this relationship of self to all of creation. Malcolm X discovers that understanding the true history of his African ancestors and the true painful story of their history on American soil results in self-respect.

Formative texts involve what we would call voice – one's own language, one's own truth and one's own causes or dreams.

In giving himself in service to others through his dedication to Islam, he finds humility and purpose. In both cases, a struggling self is saved by working on one's self and by love. Hamlet's lesson is that he will not compromise his truth no matter what, ultimately to his death. Though his story is tragic, every word he utters along the way confirms the hard road that sticking with your truth can involve and gives language to the experience of a dawning consciousness of self. There are too many examples to share them all. But in a conversation with his friend about how Hamlet finds Demark to be a prison though his friend does not, Hamlet says, "Why then, 'tis none to you, for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

In the senior year, the role that literature plays is deeply personal and different for every student. Formative texts involve what we would call voice – one's own language, one's own truth and one's own causes or dreams. We study the writers and speakers who gave North America a voice in the mid nineteenth century, distinct from what they had inherited from Europe. Ralph Waldo Emerson tells students, "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great person is one who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude" (Self-Reliance). Emily Dickinson's work is an example of deeply personal, distilled, and sometimes evasive personal truths. She writes, "Much madness is divinest sense - / To a discerning eye - / Much sense - the starkest Madness." And for the artists, she says, "Nature is a haunted house – but Art a house that tries to be haunted." In *Walden*, Thoreau's love of solitude and communion with nature opens doors to true independence. Students see how powerful that independence is in "Civil Disobedience," Thoreau's treatise on standing for—instead of fighting for—what you believe, a stance that inspired Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Thoreau reminds students, "Action from principle, the perception and performance of right, changes things and relations." Frederic Douglass is a bold voice, fearlessly taking on not just the institution of slavery, but American racism as it is woven into people's minds, accepted behaviors, laws, institutions, even the Constitution. Students are moved by his thoughts, his words, and the beauty of his language. In speaking about the supposed freedom of African Americans in 1888, he boldly pointed out "He [a person previously enslaved] is worse off, in many respects, than when he was a slave, I am compelled to admit, but I contend that the fault is not his, but that of

his heartless accusers. He is the victim of a cunningly devised swindle, one which paralyzes his energies, suppresses his ambition, and blasts all his hopes... I here and now denounce his so-called emancipation as a stupendous fraud!" And he warns, "No man can put a chain about the ankle of his fellow man without at last finding the other end fastened about his own neck" (Speech at Civil Rights Mass Meeting, Washington, DC, 1883).

Amid these voices, students settle further into themselves and find their own voices. In their conversations and writing, it becomes clear that they have so much to say without having been previously aware of it. They examine the context that their lives have provided them with in order to recognize their personal gifts and struggles; no two are the same. This step also involves a process of self-observation, self-acceptance and self-love. Ultimately, the process results in the beginning of realizations about self and declarations of self in the students' own distilled original thoughts.

Last year, a student wrote, "Emotions are the eternally changing seas: tempestuous, passionate, tranquil and fathomless." Another wrote, "Nature's expansiveness holds the soul better than any four walls." Students

also exercise their voices in expansive poetic songs of self, inspired by Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself." In a section of one such song of self, a student wrote, "The eagle rides the current of the wind, like a kite without a string." "The windy trails are most pleasing to me, / They slowly let me down." Later on in this same song, she wrote, "the relationships I have are built upon snowdrifts, / I am in avalanche danger." Another wrote about what she loves, describing

...the deer sleeping in the flowerbeds,
And the lucidity of a child's imagination,
And the pedals of a piano,
And the taste of plantains,
And the sound of cascading laughter in the heart
of the forest,
And the knowledge that nothing is imperfect, with
the firm belief that it is true...

Another student finds himself in a universal context drawn to earth. He wrote,

Timeless, I hung in space,

"Emotions are the
eternally changing seas:
tempestuous, passionate,
tranquil and fathomless"

— A Student Statement

A chrysalis wrapped in a cocoon of starlit constellations and the cosmos.

Guiding me down into her protecting light, an earthly soul called my name...

Peaceful as the sunrise is the scent of blooming mountain laurels,

Birds and cicadas sing their songs, and the rays of prosaic suns filter through the leaves.

Bleeding hearts cry, dogwoods blossom.

You can see how these voices speak out of deeply personal thoughts and feelings, observations, and intuitions.

We, Waldorf teachers, work with the conviction that each person is an individuality looking for their fullest, freest life. In the high school, we are working with the first foundational steps of a thinking, feeling individual whom we know will not fully arrive until around the age of 21, and who will spend a lifetime working to make what they have inherited their own and what they bring to the world as rich a life as possible. The way in which we use literature to support, inspire and grow the individual is a mindful process that takes place over four years under our care, which we hope inspires a lifetime of growth. The worlds, characters, and stories we live through, yes, *live through*, provide worlds, guides, and experiences, which, I think, we cannot do without. Without these worlds, guides, and experiences, and our capacity to live in our imaginations and build meaning, we would be left brushing teeth, getting where we need to go, interacting with the events and people, as if for the first time, and reacting without the wisdom of humanity accumulated through the ages.

I'd like to close with a quote from Joseph Campbell's *The Hero's Journey*, which expresses so perfectly what I have tried to show here. Maybe some of you are familiar with this work.

We have not even to risk the adventure alone, for the heroes of all time have gone before us. The labyrinth is thoroughly known; we have only to follow the thread of the hero path. And where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god. And where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves. And where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come into the center of our own existence. And where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world.

Defne Caldwell graduated from Green Meadow Waldorf School in 1987. Before joining the Green Meadow faculty full-time, in 2006, she taught English and humanities for six years at Ramapo Indian Hills High School, in Franklin Lakes, NJ. She also taught literature, college writing, and creative writing courses at Ramapo College in Mahwah, NJ, for four years. Defne completed independent Foundation Studies under Signe Schaefer and trained as a Waldorf teacher with John Wulsin. At Green Meadow, she teaches high school English and drama. Defne is also the parent of two alumna daughters who attended Green Meadow.