

FOREWORD

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My childhood public library was comprised of several shelves in a small community building augmented by the monthly appearance of the bookmobile under my cousin's big oak tree in our little southern town. As much as we relied on those meager resources, my sister and I wanted to own what we heard read and were delighted when a gift arrived that by shape and size just had to be a book. From our early volumes, many of which were poetry, we learned to appreciate the cadence of language and the sheer beauty of words. We experienced the uncanny twist of shared emotion when we heard A.A. Milne's "Rice Pudding" with its delightful refrain "What *is* the matter with Mary Jane?" or "Halfway Down" which expresses a child's need to have a thinking place or "Lines and Squares" which gave voice to my own anxious nature. We loved Eugene Field, too, sad as he was, and of course, Robert Louis Stevenson who understood the dreamworld of childhood as well as any psychologist might.

From our early fiction, we discovered the delights of the animal world (*Old Mother West Wind*, *The Wind in the Willow*), fairy tales that were companions to the darkness we felt in our own experiences, and family stories like *Little Women* and *The Five Little Peppers and How They Grew* that offered us siblings who shared sadness and misunderstandings but mostly affection. When we reached our early teens in the fifties, we found a gap in what was personally meaningful to us -- we skipped from *My Friend Flicka* to *Jane Eyre* -- but by high school, our reading was mostly from our grandmother's shelf (what a joy to discover *Gone with the Wind* there!), from the library in a neighboring city and from paperback books which were just becoming popular and on which we spent our meager funds. We loved stories in whatever form they came -- plays, films, popular music, ballet, opera, but our greatest pleasure was reading. Books taught and inspired us but most of all, they comforted us, both in the sense of solace and of strength. We were, without knowing it, being nourished and strengthened by what we read.

From my earliest years, I knew that important insights could be drawn from stories. My maternal grandmother was a great storyteller. From her we learned much of our family history but also life lessons which she couched in stories. I see now that she frequently told parables. After Grandmother's death, our mother took on the role of storyteller. In response to a simple question, she would say, "Now there a story to tell about that," and off she would go, enriching the smallest incident with lovely details and succinct character studies.

As a reader and a writer, my youthful connection to stories and books gives me a special feeling for *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning; Tapping the Powerful Resources of Story*. Looking at Dr. Warner's research into what young people find meaningful in literature is somewhat disheartening and yet the untapped fiction available and recommended in this book is quite astounding. Dr. Warner provides

guidance that can connect parents, teachers and librarians to books that may help teenagers find meaning in life. There is no stronger incentive for beginning a book than a personal recommendation. “You might like this,” are powerful words because they are the words of gift-giving. Not “you must read this” or “this book will change you, clarify, explain, expose your depths to you” but “you might *like* it.”

Adolescents in the Search for Meaning explores the unsettling world of the young adult. We all want to say to them “hold on!” A wise friend of mine says in times of difficulty, “It came to pass, not to stay,” but teenagers live in the pain of the moment and it’s hard for them to see beyond it. They don’t always ask for help or see the available resources which accounts for the high suicide rate in their age group. They need hope and, since earliest speech, stories have provided insight and given hope.

As Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham write in their book *The Spirituality of Imperfection*:

What can we do, in order to be? Yet again, an ancient answer echoes across the centuries: *Listen! Listen to stories!* For what stories do, above all else, is hold up a mirror so that we can see ourselves. Stories are mirrors of human be-ing, reflecting back our very essence. In a story, we come to know precisely the both/and, mixed-up-ed-ness of our very being. In the mirror of another’s story, we can discover *our* tragedy and *our* comedy -- and therefore our very *human*-ness, the ambiguity and incongruity that lie at the core of the human condition.

(Kurtz and Ketcham 63)

As a writer of young adult literature, I am grateful for the information this book provides. Calling attention to the importance of helping young people find meaning through books is a worthwhile endeavor in and of itself. In the hands of parents, teachers, and librarians willing to say “you might like this one,” it provides a valuable step toward connecting young people with books. Story is a powerful resource, one of the most enduring tools we have for exploration and understanding. It is a gift for a lifetime. Readers of this book will gain inspiration and information to help make that gift a reality in the lives of many young people.

Works Cited

Kurtz, Ernest and Katherine Ketcham. *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search for Meaning*². New York: Bantam Books, 1992.