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Teaching Children about Death—Discussing the Taboo

Rationale:

Benjamin Franklin sums it up quite accurately when he states, “In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.” While taxes are covered in Civics class, death is seldom discussed in the classroom. For an experience that is universal and unavoidable little is done to prepare for the inevitable—either as the griever or the one dying. Dr. Bickmore, in his YA Wednesday Blog reflects:

Facing death and the feelings that surround the event is not easy for adolescents. It is always shocking, difficult, isolating, and perhaps lonely. For adolescents who experience death for the first time it can be traumatic and confusing. By the same token, I am not sure that, as adults, we are more prepared. (Bickmore).

While some students in the class may already have experienced loss, and some may still be grieving, the majority of students have not encountered it yet. Literature is a safe place to explore all of the emotions surrounding death. Different stories tackle the various aspects and types of dying and coping. YA literature especially is poised to make the greatest impact because students will relate to it much more than, in their eyes, the distant canonical works.

It is important to prepare students for the life ahead in addition to teaching them about literature; often both can be accomplished at once. By focusing on a relatable topic, that students cannot say is outdated or not reflective of their own experience, I can give them tools to prepare for the inevitable. At the same time, the literature we will focus on will engage the students. Too often there is not enough done in the classroom to bring relevancy to the texts. Although it may offhandedly be correlated to current events, my classroom experience has shown me that there is not enough done to solidify the connections and relevancy between the old to the new or canonical and modern works. By doing so with this unit, I hope to engage with the students and keep them motivated and interested in continuing to explore literature.

Death is a taboo subject, and it can be difficult to know how to approach this topic. Creating a safe space within the classroom and within the texts can allow students to work through their own beliefs is very important. It also connects to Dr. Bickmore’s words that even adults are often ill prepared for their own mortality or the death of someone close. That being said, adults do not have all the answers. However, with an open dialogue this unit will impress upon students literature is a safe place to find many answers that adults can sometimes not answer or that students do not want to ask; especially by using YA novels.

By covering this unit I hope to incorporate the answers to many of the taboo and hard to ask questions by using a memoir. I have chosen *Tuesdays with Morrie* as the central text because it is a memoir, and novels of this style are often overlooked in English classes. However, memoirs can offer students a lot as Lisa Scherff, a guest presenter to Dr. Bickmore’s YA Wednesday, notes works such as these “often catch adolescents’ natural interest about the lives of others…I want students to understand that everyone's story is important, and that their own stories are worth telling. I think memoir can be as much a gateway to effective writing instruction, as it can be to reading/literature instruction” (Scherff). For teens reading something real it will be much more interesting to them and hopefully grab their attention so they have a solid foundation for the rest of the unit and an interest in literature.

Launching the Unit:

1. Five Stages of Grieving
   1. Students will work in groups to come up with their own order and stages of grief; without being told there are specifically five or any other information. Encourage students to get creative and maybe add illustrations or color to reflect the emotions of each stage. Afterwards, we will come together as a class and share each group’s stages of grief and discuss what we feel the correct answer. Finally, I will show them the real five stages of grief. This will introduce students to the subject as well as give them useful information for the remaining pieces of the unit.
2. Respect and Maturity Talk
   1. Before going further, we will have a serious conversation about respecting each other’s beliefs, opinions, and to be considerate as we talk about sensitive topics. As well as the necessity for maturity in this unit. I will not force the students to share anything they feel is too personal with the class, but make it clear I will be reading their writing assignments. There should also be a note on the board of counseling services offered at the school since some students may become more emotionally distraught than others.
3. Sustained Silent Writing (SSW)
   1. I will then give the students a prompt to do a Sustained Silent Writing (SSW) on the topic to start a discussion on personal experiences, thoughts and beliefs. Questions will include: Have you ever experienced the loss of someone close to you? Did you go through these five stages, if not, what did you experience? Do you believe these are five universal stages, why or why not? What do you know about death—religious beliefs, personal beliefs, funerals, etc.? This will be the first SSW for the unit; students should be saving this and all other SSWs that will follow.

The Unit:

1. *Tuesday’s with Morrie* 
   1. In class I will preview the major work students will all be reading—Mitch Albom’s, *Tuesdays with Morrie*. Lessons for working with this novel are taken and adapted from Mary L. Warner’s, *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning: Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story*. Because this novel is a shorter work, it will be read entirely in class in small chunks to allow time for reflection and discussion. Possible points to focus on will be the questions Morrie Schwartz prepares for Albom that students will answer for themselves in an SSW before we read the corresponding section in class. After we have read the section I will give students time to reflect on how their answers compare with Morrie Schwartz’s before we start our class discussion in part two of the SSW. For sections that do not have direct questions we will analyze significant quotes on Morrie Schwartz’s and Albom’s emotional experience in a one part SSW.
2. YA Novels
   1. Since the canonical work will be read entirely in class, students will chose their YA project book before we start *Tuesdays with Morrie* and it will be their reading homework. Ideas from “The Choice for a Lifetime: Encouraging Aesthetic Reading by Pairing Free-Choice Books and Classics in high School Classrooms” by Angie Beumer Johnson and Stacey Ciancio will be incorporated in this section of the unit. Several copies of each YA novel choice will be brought in to perform a modified book pass. For example, a class of thirty-three would be divided into three groups of eleven. Each member of each group would see each YA novel choice. Meaning, three copies of each YA novel need to be provided. Students need to see each text to make their decision for the title they would like to work on for their final project. There should be no more than five students per group; some students may end up working on their second or third choice. Reading schedules will be made by each group to conclude their YA novel at the same time *Tuesdays with Morrie* is finished.
3. Group Project
   1. Each group will give a book talk style presentation on their novel to the class; class time will be used to work on projects over two days and then any remaining work will be completed at home. This will include: a summary of the plot, elements of the stages of grieving in their novel (with quotes as their evidence), a memorial piece for the dead, and a letter from one of their characters to Morrie Schwartz and his response to them. Taking what they have learned from *Tuesdays with Morrie* they will analyze the different ways to die and to be a survivor of someone who has passed away. In their books, they will identify the five stages of grieving and discuss whether the characters have difficulty in moving through this process or whether they made it through all five stages. By choosing YA novels students will hopefully find more in common with the characters but have a chance to put the wise words of Morrie Schwartz into practice.

Recommended Titles:

*Deadline,* Chris Crutcher

Ben Wolf is a high school senior looking forward to start what he thinks will be the best year of his life. He has big plans for his last year of school, but things take a turn when he is diagnosed with Leukemia. Ben accepts his fate, and chooses not to opt for treatment. He decides to keep the news a secret from everyone, and aims to make the most of the time he has left. He quits cross country in order to join his star quarterback of a brother on the football team, and finally musters up the courage to introduce himself to his dream girl. These days he is constantly pushing himself, whether it be academically, socially, or physically. As the year goes by though, keeping his secret becomes harder and harder as he faces the reality of his own mortality (Santa Clara).

*Things We Know by Heart*, Jessi Kirby

*Things We Know by Heart* is an intimate portrayal of young love forming from the broken pieces of grief, loss, and illness. At only eighteen years old, Quinn Sullivan has already experienced the crushing death of her longtime boyfriend, Trent. Quinn tries to find closure and comfort by reaching out the recipients of Trent’s donated organs. Although many agree to meet with her, the recipient of Trent’s heart remains painfully silent. Quinn then takes matters into her own hands and tracks down the recipient. What, or rather who, Quinn discovers changes her world. As soon as Quinn Sullivan and Colton Thomas meet, an instant bond is formed. However, the truths that they hide from each other could break that bond, and even worse, their hearts.  *Things We Know by Heart* addresses the themes of death, grief, life, and love with a gentle directness, and a poetic humor. (Callahan)

*The Fault in our Stars*, John Green

This book is about family, friends, love, life and, death. The two main characters in this book are Hazel, 16 and Augustus, 17. The two meet at a children’s cancer support group meeting. Both have cancer. Hazel and Augustus are instantly attracted to one another both physically and intellectually. They are very different in some ways, Hazel wants to minimize the “damage” she will cause by dying so she mostly keeps to herself. Gus, on the other hand, wants so badly to make an impact on the lives of the people he leaves behind. He is loud and grand while Hazel is more quiet and reserved. This is a great love story with a surprise, tragic twist. (Davies)

*A Monster Calls*, Patrick Ness

At seven minutes past midnight, thirteen-year-old Conor wakes to find a monster outside his bedroom window. But it isn't the monster Conor's been expecting-- he's been expecting the one from his nightmare, the nightmare he's had nearly every night since his mother started her treatments. The monster in his backyard is different. It's ancient. And wild. And it wants something from Conor. Something terrible and dangerous. It wants the truth. From the final idea of award-winning author Siobhan Dowd-- whose premature death from cancer prevented her from writing it herself-- Patrick Ness has spun a haunting and darkly funny novel of mischief, loss, and monsters both real and imagined. (Amazon.com)

*Me, Earl, and the Dying Girl*, Jesse Andrews

The protagonist, Greg Gaines, hates high school. As his senior year approaches, he discovers a plan to deal with all that is wrong about high school. His plan is to be friendly with every clique in school, but never to befriend any group and remain in the background at all times. Greg isn’t completely alone though. He has a “coworker” named Earl. Together they create films by taking titles of a movie, making it stupider, and then making a new movie reflecting the new title (i.e., *Sockwork orange*, *Rosemary’s Carrots*, etc.) Greg’s plan drastically changes when his mom forces him to be friends with Rachel, a classmate with Leukemia. *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* is rich in its complexity, and while death is a prominent theme expressed, humor and wit still find ways to shine through as Greg and Rachel become close friends. (Pace)

*The Truth about Forever*, Sarah Dessen

*The Truth About Forever* is about a sixteen year-old girl named Macy Queen. She plans on spending her summer before senior year working at the library, studying for the SATs, and helping her obsessive mother with her real estate business. Since the death of her father, Macy has taken on the role of being the perfect daughter, trying to please everyone around her, and remaining in control for the sake of others. Then, one night she meets the Wish Catering Crew and her life is changed forever. (Tran)

*Walk Two Moons*, Creech Sharon

Sal (Salamanca Tree Hiddle) is 13 and has lived most of her life in Bybanks, Kentucky. The book tells two stories simultaneously. The first story is that of Sal and her father, of her mother who died, of the bay who was born prematurely and died, and of Sal’s grandparents, the Hiddles—paternal grandparents (Gramps and Gram) who are taking her on a trip to Idahp, actually tracing the path of Sal’s mom’s last jourey. Sal’s family is Native American; both Sal and her mom wanted to be called Indian or American Indian. The second story is of Phoebe Winterbottom, a young girl Sal’s age. Phoebe’s and Sal become pals when Sal and her dad move to Euclid, Ohio. They have been there a year when Margaret Cadaver (a very significant woman in the story) finds a job there for Mr. Hiddle.

Phoebe’s mom is frightened when a young man appears in the area of the Winterbottom home; eventually readers learn that Phoebe’s mom has a son out of wedlock. Her husband, Prudence (one of Phoebe’s sisters), and Phoebe area all shocked—and Phoebe has been further upset because her mom disappeared several weeks before all of this came out. The family has also had several messages left on their porch, saying things like “do not judge a person until you’ve walked two moons in his moccasins.” (Warner, 168*)*

*Mick Harte was Here*, Barbara Park

Phoebe, the almost-14-year-old sister of Mick, tells the story. Mick is just 10 months younger than Phoebe and is a classic clown and annoying younger brother. The day he is fatally injured in a bike accident changes the lives of Phoebe and her parents. One of the amazing things Phoebe learns is that Mick in death is not “lost,” but is actually present everywhere. She is also able to talk to her peers in an assembly at school about the importance of wearing a helmet while riding a bike—had Mick worn a helmet, his life would have been saved. (Warner, 181).

*Fallen Angels,* Walter Myers

The book is dedicated to Walter dean Myer’s brother, Thomas, “whose dream of adding beauty to this world through his humanity and his art” ended in Vietnam on May 7, 1968. The book opens with a group of soldiers en route to Vietnam, on a flight from Massachusetts to Anchorage, Alaska. The narrator, Richie Perry, is not even supposed to go—he has a bad know, but his paperwork has been messed up; he says the war will be over soon anyway. Perry has graduated from high school and plant to go to college and be a writer like James Baldwin; he goes into the army hoping to earn and send money home to his mother and younger brother Kenny.

Peewee, Jenkins, and Perry are sent out to Chu Lai, their first trip into combat—they are in Alpha Company. Johnson, a large African-American, is also in their group. Jenkins is afraid he is going to die in Nam. Peewee and Perry are in a foxhole; they had to kill a Vietcong to be there. When leaving the hole and trying to get to a pickup area, Perry realizes Peewee is injured. Monaco is also in danger; all three get on a chopper, but Perry is again injured. Perry does recover, Peewee also recovers—for a time, and Monaco has to go back to the “Boonies.”

Monaco, Peewee, and Perry have all “tasted what it feels like to be dead.” They are “not all right.” “We would have to learn what it was like to be alive again” (Fallen Angels, 304). Peewee and Perry fly “back to the world” together. (Warner, 179).

*I Was Here*, Gayle Forman

Cody is shocked when her best friend, Meg, commits suicide in a motel room soon after leaving for college. While collecting Meg’s things, Cody finds an encrypted file on her computer that leads her to a suicide chatroom Meg posted on before taking her own life. I Was Herepresses upon readers the idea that there isn’t a certain “type” of person who contemplates or commits suicide. Instead, it’s an issue that can torment those we least expect, showing that those who put up the bravest front sometimes hide a very dark secret. (Fitzpatrick)

[*Playlist for the Dead*](http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/playlist-for-the-dead-michelle-falkoff/1119440274?ean=9780062310507)**, Michelle Falkoff**

After Sam and his best friend, Hayden, have a fight at a party, Sam goes to make amends the next day…only to find Hayden dead in his bed. His suicide note is a playlist Sam must listen to, in an effort to piece together why his best friend would take his own life. Playlist for the Deadis for anyone who has had to cope with moving on from a friend’s death, and the difficulty of learning to grow even if it means leaving the memory of that friend behind. (Fitzpatrick)

Conclusion of Unit:

1. Reflection
   1. After all of the presentations have concluded students will write a two to three page reflection essay. They should look back at their SWWs to remind themselves of their initial responses to the various topics. Students will reflect upon how their attitudes have changed and what they have learned about dying and grieving. Additionally, they should draw connections between their YA novel and *Tuesdays with Morrie* to show they understand their relationship and significance. Finally, students should include their own thoughts and responses to the novels. Did they connect with the characters and their stories, did they feel the loss of the characters death, how does this relate to other losses they have experienced?

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