

OHIO LIBRARY EDUCATIONAL MEDIA ASSOCIATION
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THE BEGINNING OF SADNESS

It has not been easy to prepare a speech for you today. The world has changed so; and the things I have said so often, and so comfortably, in the past - the affectionate reminiscences, the funny little anecdotes – all seem limp and meaningless and obsolete now.

I could tell you of my three-year-old grandson, who visited recently, and during his visit insisted on wearing his underpants on his head – face looking out through a leghole – all weekend. "It makes me into a Power Ranger," he explained.

But if I tell you about that, and you smile, as I do, too, all of us knowing three-year-olds - I also have to tell you that the same child, having apparently glimpsed the news on TV, cried when his father put him to bed, and said, "Keep me safe, Daddy."

This is a time in our lives, in the lives of our children and grandchildren, and our students, and all the children of the world, when none of us feel safe and all of us feel powerless.

What do we do about that?

First, I think, we acknowledge it, and we find a context in which to put it.

I want to read a poem to you. It's a poem by Billy Collins, who has just been appointed Poet Laureate of the United States...and that is the best thing, in my opinion, that has happened in the literate world in recent times.

I start each day, alone in my office, by reading a poem to myself. Sometimes it is one by Mary Oliver....whom I recommend to all of you. But more often, lately, it is one – chosen at random – by Billy Collins.

This one is called

ON TURNING TEN

*The whole idea of it makes me feel
Like I'm coming down with something,
Something worse than any stomach ache
Or the headaches I get from reading in bad light—
A kind of measles of the spirit,
A mumps of the psyche,
A disfiguring chicken pox of the soul.*

*You tell me it is too early to be looking back,
But that is because you have forgotten
The perfect simplicity of being one
And the beautiful complexity introduced by two.
But I can lie on my bed and remember every digit.
At four I was an Arabian wizard.
I could make myself invisible*

*By drinking a glass of milk in a certain way.
At seven I was a soldier, at nine a prince.*

*But now I am mostly at the window
Watching the late afternoon light.
Back then it never fell so solemnly
Against the side of my tree house,
And my bicycle never leaned against the garage
As it does today,
All the dark blue speed drained out of it.*

*This is the beginning of sadness, I say to myself,
As I walk through the universe in my sneakers.
It is time to say goodbye to my imaginary friends,
Time to turn the first big number.*

*It seems only yesterday I used to believe
There was nothing under my skin but light.
If you cut me I would shine.
But now when I fall upon the sidewalks of life,
I skin my knees. I bleed.*

And indeed, these times are times of realization, for our children; these times are the beginning of sadness.

I wrote, years ago, in the book that most of you know, the book called *THE GIVER*, about a boy who—like the boy not-yet-ten, in the Collins poem—had been exempted from pain and knowledge of

pain. That awareness is thrust upon him quite suddenly when he is twelve years old; it changes his life, and ultimately the whole world in which he lives.

If I were to stand here and read to you the letters I have received about that book, *THE GIVER*, one after another, we would all be here until next January. They began to come shortly after the book was published. They came in greater volume after the Newbery Medal was awarded. Surprisingly, they still come. It has been eight years, and they still come. They come from children, teachers, librarians, businessmen, religious leaders, therapists, parents, psychiatric patients, and they have come in at least 14 languages....some so obscure than even in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where I live, I can't find a translator.

Some letters, it will not surprise you to know, are simply of this variety: "We have to write a letter to an author. Please tell me a list of everything you ever wrote. And how do you get your ideas. Answer by next Tuesday and I will get an A."

Some are like the one from this woman in Scranton, Pennsylvania, who wrote: "I thank God that my daughter did not read your book. I find it even more disappointing that *THE GIVER* won the Newbery Medal. I am quite certain that although you may receive awards in this world for your work, God is not pleased with you. "

But a far vaster number are intimate, passionate, thoughtful—and thought-provoking. This one came from a woman in Bethesda, Maryland, less than a year ago. It concludes:

"...in your story, as in Genesis, each human must confront the needs for creative disobedience, sexulaity, and self-reliance, as well as the knowledge of mortality.

"This is a theme which I don't recall often encountering in fiction: namely, the conflict and suffering felt by a parent having to introduce a child to the concept of pain and death. By implication, this extends even to the decision to have a child in the first place, since the parent knows that she must take responsibility for bringing the child into the world and that, once the child is born, the child's suffering and death – and the knowledge thereof – are inevitable. I can only recall two literary sources touching on this universal experience. One is the legend concerning the childhood of Prince Gautama, who became the Buddha. The other is the screenplay for Ingmar Bergman's "Wild Strawberries." Adolescents, like anyone who has not seriously entertained the choice of whether or not to engender children, can hardly be expected to appreciate the thoughts and feelings involved. In short, they can identify with your youthful hero, but not with The Giver himself...."

(You can see that much of my mail can't be answered with the form letter that lists everything I ever wrote and tells how I get my ideas.)

Here is an excerpt from my reply to that woman:

.....I could go on and on about the surprising responses (including the fact that three people suffering from multiple-personality-disorder have written to say that the book speaks to them in some meaningful way) but perhaps it is enough simply to acknowledge that a story I wrote has taken on a life far above and beyond what I dreamed it had.

No one until you, though, has really addressed the complex issue that you found troubling. We who give children life also give them suffering, it is true.

Five years ago, one of my own children was killed in a hideous accident. Among the many, many letters I received in the aftermath of that tragedy was one from the writer Lois Duncan, whose own daughter had been murdered not long before. She said: "From the moment a woman decides to bear a child, her heart goes walking around outside her body."

How does one deal with that awareness? One thing I think THE GIVER tried to say is that pain, too, is a gift of great value. It is what makes us human.

It is one thing for me to have said — and to have believed, as I did then and still do — that pain is a gift of great value, just a year ago when the world still seemed safe and nurturing to children. It was a world then, such a short time ago, when a child like my little grandson could say to his father: "Keep me safe, Daddy"...and the father could promise to do so without feeling himself a liar. It was a world filled with reliable protectors.

But now even the protectors feel fragile.

What do we do?

Many years ago I wrote a book called AUTUMN STREET which portrayed fictionally a set of events that had actually happened in the small Pennsylvania town where I grew up. I changed things. If you go back and try to find these events in old newspapers, you'll be stymied.

In the book there is a little girl named Elizabeth Lorimer, and she is me. And there is a little boy, her friend, who is named Charles. The real Charles was a girl, and her name was Gloria Jordan.

Gloria Jordan was my friend at a time and in a place when it was unusual for children of different races to develop and maintain friendships. Gloria was black. She was the granddaughter of my grandparents' cook. And Gloria was murdered.

The little girl of the book – the Elizabeth – the "me" – is very young. She has her seventh birthday in the final pages. And already she has suffered an irredeemable loss...as many children did on a recent September day.

The book AUTUMN STREET concludes with this paragraph:

It was such a long time ago. Probably my father and I both knew, even then, that it was not true, what we told each other, that bad things would never happen again. But we needed that lie, that pretending, the spring that I was seven. We had both lost so much. He had told me his secret: that sometimes, in the night, he felt a deep, unassuageable pain in the place where his leg had been; and I had whispered to him of mine, of the hollow place inside me where I ached with memory and with fear. We told each other, promised each other, that the pain and the fear would go away. It was not ever to be true. But there are times—times of anguish— when an impossible promise to someone you love is as sweet as a cinnamon-smudged fingertip, as nourishing and necessary as the sunlight that comes, still, to consecrate Autumn Street in summer.

Impossible promises are what we must make to today's children. We also owe them honesty; and I would like to think that the two things are not mutually exclusive..

Just about four weeks ago I was asked—as were many other authors—to write a letter to teachers. It was hard. It seemed oddly similar to writing to my son when he was a fighter pilot in the Gulf War. What can you say to someone who has a difficult and heart-breaking job to do? To my son, I simply said that I was sorry there was such work to be done; but I was glad that he was one of the ones doing it because I knew he was a person of integrity and compassion, as well as the necessary courage.

I ended up saying much the same thing to teachers...and by extension, to librarians, and all of those who work with children. This is what I wrote:

In the aftermath of tragedy, I have read about movie productions halted and books-in-progress abandoned because their plots, once deemed simple "thriller" and "action," suddenly were ominously too true, too close to home.

I am uneasily aware that a book of mine published last year, Gathering Blue, is set in a world that has turned savage and primitive after the collapse of organized civilization. In this world—where there are no longer books—the people hear their entire history chanted in a ritual called "the Ruin Song" once each year.

One tiny section of the lengthy song invokes the talismanic repetition of what seem meaningless words:

Bogo tabal
Timore toron
Totoo now gone

"...it tells the name of lost places," a character explains. Young readers, those who enjoy puzzling out such things, find hidden in the strange words the names of contemporary cities. Bogota. Baltimore. Toronto. *Lost places. Now gone.*

It seemed, when I wrote it, a fantasy. On September 11th, watching the towers crumble and collapse, fantasy receded and became real. My own words seemed eerily prophetic and I winced at the thought of young people realizing that the streets and buildings and schools and playgrounds of their childhood can disappear in an instant of horror.

I wanted to shield them. *Don't read this book. Don't look at the TV. Cover your eyes.*

Odd, to have those thoughts during Banned Books Week.

But then I remembered teachers. I remembered Miss Louise Heckman's measured voice and her firm arm across my shoulders in 1944. She was my fourth grade teacher when my father was on an island in the Pacific and the huge headlines in our small-town newspaper scared me. She didn't tell me to cover my eyes. She told me to read. And she told me what to read, and how to talk about it, and where to find comfort in words.

I remember other teachers, too, over the years: their names, their voices, their compassion, their presence. Most of them are gone, now. But I see their counterparts in the schools of today and I can hear in my mind, now, the voices in classrooms across the country: clear, resolute, reassuring.

As our country tries now to shape a future free of fear, the courage and wisdom to guide, reassure, and educate children will be front-line attributes. Those who do this work will, as always, be as underpaid as footsoldiers and firefighters but perhaps the world will wake up now and begin to value them more.

At the conclusion of Gathering Blue, it is a child—a young girl—who holds in her hands the power and determination to change a world brutalized by evil.

I think today's children will have that same power. I think it will have been given to them, largely, by you.

WRITING and READING bring such emotional satisfaction in these uncertain times. On Tuesday the main headline in my hometown newspaper – the Boston Globe – was **US SOUNDS ANOTHER TERROR ALERT**. With that headline still staring at me from my kitchen table, I had to go to my desk and print out a speech to take with me to Logan Airport, in order to come to Columbus.

I picked up my Billy Collins again and turned to this poem.

PASSENGERS

At the gate, I sit in a row of blue seats
With the possible company of my death,
This sprawling miscellany of people—
Carry-on bags and paperbacks—

That could be gathered in a flash
Into a band of pilgrims on the last open road.
Not that I think
If our plane crumpled into a mountain

We would all ascend together,
Holding hands like a ring of sky divers,
Into a sudden gasp of brightness,
Or that there would be some common spot

For us all to reunite to jubilize the moment,
Some spaceless, pillarless Greece
Where we could, at the count of three,
Toss our ashes into the sunny air.

It's just that the way that man has his briefcase
So carefully arranged,
The way that girl is cooling her tea,
And the flow of the comb that woman

Passes through her daughter's hair...
And when you consider the altitude,
The secret parts of the engines,
And all the hard water and the deep canyons below...

Well, I just think it would be good if one of us
Maybe stood up and said a few words,
Or, so as not to involve the police,
At least quietly wrote something down.

In closing, let me suggest that all of us, in these times that
are the beginning of sadness....let us quietly write things down. Let us
find words that others have written down, over generations and
centuries. Let us read these things to one another, and to our children.