



January 18, 2021

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Speech by

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Ode to literature; how far our relationship has come. How much I have grown, and learned; thanks to the many venues through which I have gotten to know you. Now it is through you that I can express what you, literature, mean to me. It is because of my path I can appreciate from which I come. I did not always love literature. My fears and shortcomings with the subject of literature have come a long way. In elementary school I was shy. Although I wasn't really shy, I was just reserved and wanted to come across as intelligent, prepared, well put together, articulate, and proficient in every subject. I felt the need to prove that I was more than just the diversity bused in from the south side of town. But I was only suppressing my insecurities of literacy. The tension between me and a blank page caused great anxiety as I tried so desperately to think what to write. To ease the writing process, I would come to school with pre-ordained million-dollar words to use in my third grade journal entry like “ebullient” or “pensive.” When the teacher called upon students in class to read aloud, I'd watch her shifting eyes and peep her pattern of “popcorn” in order to predict the most

convenient time to go to the restroom, or quickly recite the designated text forward and backward in my head before standing and speaking to my classmates. Every day, I put on a show hoping it would be enough to send the message to my teacher that I had mastered literature for my grade-level.

My wit worked only for so long. Later my tactics would be no match for standardized testing. This is where my weaknesses would be discovered. I felt disgraced by my testing scores in reading and writing. The numbers wouldn't lie and my clever habits couldn't save me. I was embarrassed to disappear from class to strengthen my reading and writing skills, only to return and have my intelligence questioned by my friends. Though the individualized tutoring helped, I couldn't tell you how long my fear of reading aloud lingered and followed me through my education career. However, I believe the most pivotal moment in my relationship with literature was when I stopped running from the exercises and activities that would challenge my reading abilities, and sharpen my writing. As I reminisce about my childhood struggle with literacy, and the effort I put in to overcome them, I realize that it is similar to the actions taken by my predecessors.

When I found out that my grandmother and great uncle were both unable to read and write, I questioned how they survived in a time when literacy was a privilege and not a prerequisite to a person's quality of life. I thought my relationship with words was traumatic ....but imagine being contracted into

debt from not being able to read a document; or signing your name with an X-mark; or being prevented from applying to receive a birth certificate or license.... I had the audacity to patronize them because I saw them as I saw myself. My brain was conditioned by my own insecurities; illiteracy was weak, fair skin was beautiful, and white was right. But this was far from the case.

My grandmother was a nurse amongst many other things before owning her own salon and being self-employed for over fifty years. She learned through experience, not in a school, to provide for her family and be her own boss. Though she found success, she still desired to read on her own. When I was twelve, she enrolled herself in school to learn how to read. Seeing her smile ear to ear made it clear to me that reading had a lifetime of relevance. It involved entering another dimension, experiencing someone else's story, or learning something new. My grandmother wanted to experience this through the pages of her bible, and so she did.

My great uncle was America's first certified African-American pastry chef. People had no clue that he could not read or write. He simply invented and pressed for alternative ways of being taught. After using every opportunity to assist in the kitchen, he was later mentored under a German chef to develop into a self-made chef who mastered navigating the kitchen, acquiring chef skills, and leading teams to produce some of his renowned recipes. After his career he networked with others who *were* literate to get his story written. My

great uncle not only made history, but held himself responsible to record it so it would not be forgotten. This showed me the importance of writing and its longevity. Now after being inducted into museums, he has encouraged large donors to support literacy efforts for others.

You see...Generations of institutional, systematic, and social discriminations against African Americans were the impediment to quality education, employment, and income that arrested the development of generations to come. As I explored my family history further I realized they were ingenious. They did more with less. Society may have failed them to receive a quality education, but they still found means to make something of themselves despite facing adversity. I think of it as an analogy to someone who is blind, while you are disabled in one area you are enabled in another. As I discovered their stories it's clear that their deprivation was the mother of invention.

Though my grandmother and my great uncle overcame the obstacle of being illiterate, I can only imagine the betterment of their lives if they, and others with similar stories, were granted their inalienable rights to quality education and exercised the foundational skills to read and write during their time. Giving an African American a book was dangerous to the oppressors who wanted to remain in power. They knew literacy could enable those oppressed to read to become knowledgeable, write to record history, and articulate to

communicate our injustices; as did Dr. Martin Luther King in his non-violent fight for the liberation of African Americans.

Dr. Martin Luther King was exposed to literacy during a time when education was privilege. His upbringing made him a phenomenal anomaly, coming from a father who received education from the church and a mother who earned a bachelors a degree. Dr. King's environment and the nurture of the avid readers and writers that raised him exposed him to literature, music and leadership principles that greatly contributed to his later achievements.

After graduating from Morehouse College in 1948 with a bachelors in Sociology while simultaneously becoming an established reverend, Dr. King then explored the genre of philosophy. Through philosophical books Dr. King was introduced to perspectives, cultures, and realities different from what he'd lived. Dr. King's dream wasn't just a figment of the imagination, it was pragmatic and attainable. Reading essays, speeches and biographies of leaders who made change with the absence of violence were his blueprint as he went forward to inspire the nation to fathom the existence of equality. Dr. King had the power to move the world with his words. Literacy gave him the capacity to imagine a better existence for the African Americans and encourage a different approach to combating discrimination, and a belief in the redemptive power of love between individuals.

Three years ago, I would have not understood how literacy propelled Dr. Martin Luther King to make great strides toward something he believed in. My freshman year in college I was excited to embark upon subjects of choice; I declared a double major in International Economics and Finance and East Asian Studies concentrated in Mandarin because it involved using my strengths in mathematics, economics, and foreign language. I thought I could leave literature behind, assuring safety from the terror of essays and hefty reading assignments. Despite my chosen academic studies, later I realized that in order to understand and analyze the things I was passionate about, I needed to incorporate literature.

My fight against literature felt personal and lonely. For too long my fears controlled me but knowing I have dreams worth sharing, goals to communicate, generational obstacles to break, and lives I aspire to change just like Dr. Martin Luther King I was determined to free myself of this burden. Like those before me, I worked with what I had, utilized resources around me and was disciplined in exercising the skills of literacy. Over the course of four years here my correspondence with books matured and the books that I explored have become a reflection of my passions. It was literature that led me to explore books in support of my independent studies; it was literature that pushed me step outside of my shy self and express who I am on paper which afforded me opportunity to travel abroad; and it was literature that gave me words to speak before you today.

Through my journey, I realized I wasn't alone. I realized students around me had similar relationships with literature. People avoided, disengaged and took for granted their privilege to strengthen a skill that attributes to the development of ourselves. I found myself frequently sharing my story and encouraging others around me to do the same. Discovering this was a common problem, I was urged to contribute a solution in my community. Thus starting the book club here at Austin College and unapologetically geeking out to my fellow peers about the power of literature.

I wanted to challenge students at AC to prescribe their own books and take advantage of the privilege that we have to be literate. I wanted to host a community where people would feel encouraged to continue their exploration in books or simply begin their journey. You see...We are living in such an advanced decade that has made information more convenient in our daily lives. Apps, podcast, and digital feeds; these abbreviated and consolidated contexts affect our frequency to sharpen the tool of literacy. Reading and writing are now stigmatized as taxing and only performed if necessary. As a result, we are losing appreciation for literature.

My mother used to always say "Readers are Leaders," and I have come to appreciate her determined weekly visits to the library: a place where I grew to have exploration and self-motivation to read books that piqued my personal

interest. And my father, who enforced the practice of reading books out of my comfort zone like “The Art of War,” Shakespeare, and “The Inner Game of Tennis” that expanded my palette of genres. I’m thankful to be afforded a safe place to learn and receive mentorship from my amazing professors. I’m thankful to Dr. King for being an example to me of what I can do with my education and how to capitalize on what I stand for. And I’m thankful to Austin College for giving me the opportunity to found an organization that empowers students to read together. With all the history, tools and community that supported me, the only thing left was for me to get out of the way of myself. I have changed my perspective on literature, and realized it is needed, and not something to be avoided. For those of you who may face the same battle, or even a different one, I challenge you to do the same. Whatever emotion you have toward speaking, writing, reading, etc., acknowledge it, understand it and begin to challenge it.

In the spirit of Dr. Martin Luther King; read literature that perplexes yourself; welcome diverse, global, and underrepresented groups; insert the practice of literacy into your life and I assure you....you will begin to advance your discussion, provoke critical and creative thinking that will support your personal fulfillment and become like Dr. Martin Luther King - a reader who is a leader.