

The Most Valuable

People tend to give more time and effort to an activity that they are skilled at than one that is a struggle. When a person finds that they are gifted at a task, they enjoy it even more and continue to improve. On the other hand, when someone struggles at an activity, their dislike for it typically deepens and they become less likely to pursue improvement. This downward spiral is common when a person feels as though they are out of their depth. Yet, if motivation and the tools to chase progress can be found, despite obstacles along the way, a person can recover from this path. I know all of this is true because I have experienced it in the context of my academic career. As I was growing up, science and math were my strengths, reading and writing my weaknesses. There were several seemingly minor events, which later proved significant, that saved me from the downward spiral described above. They shaped my view of, and ability at, reading and writing. Gradually, making improvements at these skills became both attainable and desirable.

The first event that shaped me as a reader and writer happened when I was rather young. I struggled greatly as I was learning to read, the words just did not make sense. Yet, math came easily and I had a passion for science. Before I began first grade, I could mentally calculate eight squared and five cubed, which was apparently rather precocious and I was quite proud of this. In contrast, when seven I could hardly read a storybook intended for three-year-olds or write my full name with all the letters in the proper order and facing the correct way. This, of course, I was not proud of; I felt embarrassed and dumb. But my mom knew I was a smart kid because she homeschooled my siblings and me. She thought there must have been a reason for the seeming inconsistency between my reading and intelligence, so she devoted much of her time to

working with me. I would read aloud to her as well as I could. She quickly noticed that at times I would say things differently than how they were written. So, either I could read extremely well and would change the order intentionally as some sort of game (I was rather impish so this was not out of the question), or I truly saw it the way I read it. One day, when I misread a sentence, my mom asked, "Can you read that page again?" I did, and this time I read it the way it was written. "Why did you read it differently the second time?" she asked me.

"Well, Momma," I responded, slightly exasperated by her silly questions, "words move around on the pages sometimes." As soon as I said this, my mom realized that I was dyslexic. I do not remember that moment, but I know that it gave me a chance at developing into a capable reader and writer. My mom immediately began researching methods to help me overcome my disability. I cannot recall all the systems we tried, but I do remember the ones that helped the most. For instance, I will not lose my place in a paragraph if I put an index card on the page and move it down, line by line, as I read. Another method we used helped improve my spelling. We made index cards with visual aids that represent basic spelling rules and practiced applying them daily. I did not enjoy learning them, but these tricks did make it possible for me to read and write. However, I did not want to. It felt unfair that I had to work twice as hard as my siblings to be half as capable as they were. So, I declared that I did not like reading or writing, and stuck to what I did like as much as I could.

It is quite a bit harder to separate reading and writing from other subjects than I thought it would be. As mentioned before, math is fun and I love science, biology specifically. Well, how does one increase their knowledge of science? By researching via books and articles. So, if I read voluntarily, it was likely about plants or animals, and about how and why they do what they

do. Discovering a unique creature has never failed to excite me. I was endlessly fascinated by organisms that possess surprising traits or appear to be oxymorons. I was drawn to them because seeing an oddity in nature made me feel more normal.

Carrion flowers are an example of this and are one of my favorite deviations from the expected. When I think of flowers, I usually imagine them giving off a sweet scent to attract butterflies to pollinate them. Carrion flowers, however, use a stench similar to that of rotting flesh to entice flesh flies and flesh-eating beetles to pollinate them. The largest, and most impressive, of these flowers is *Amorphophallus titanum* (titan arum). The discovery of a flower that does not do what flowers are known for, yet thrives, was comforting to me, a bright kid who was an inferior reader. When I learned of titan arum, I realized that since God made a flower that stinks, then He did not make a mistake when He made me. Once I knew this, I believed I could accomplish necessary tasks using my odd tactics, just as a carrion flower draws in pollinators by reeking.

The first writing assignment that I remember enjoying was a research paper on titan arum. I spent weeks going to the library, checking out backpacks worth of books, locating online sources, and making index cards. Every new fact I learned made me love the incredible titan arum even more. Once I had a solid base of information I began prioritizing facts, forming categories, and arranging information with the most logical, thought out organization I could. I was so taken by this strange organism and I wanted to share it well. By the time I had completed the assignment, you could ask me any question about titan arum and I would proudly give you the answer.

That research paper bridged the gap between my strengths and weaknesses. My love of science and natural curiosities gave me a greater desire and stronger drive to read than I had ever had. I wanted to learn as much as I possibly could, so I read as much as I possibly could. During the course of that assignment, reading gained value in my sight as a means to earn knowledge and understanding. The actual writing of the paper allowed me to share with my family all the discoveries I had found as I researched. Presenting a subject that I find fascinating to my family showed me how writing empowers authors to bring their audience into their world. My family members would have never known about titan arum had I not picked it as my subject, but when they read my paper they too thought it intriguing and enjoyed learning about it. Although my family did not know that I personally identify with titan arum, I was content with introducing them into my realm of natural inquiry. Writing formed a new connection between my family and myself in that instance.

After my research paper on titan arum, I recognized reading as useful, necessary, and worthwhile, but I still did not enjoy reading in and of itself. If I could gain the knowledge without the reading, I would. Reading was merely a means to an end. That changed when I read Pat Frank's 1959 novel, *Alas, Babylon*. Normally, I would not have chosen to read *Alas, Babylon* because it was a book that I considered too long. I was notorious at that stage of life for judging books by their cover, page number, and font size. In my opinion, *Alas, Babylon* had far too many pages, as a non-science book, to consider it worth reading. Luckily, I was mistakenly under the impression that it was a schoolbook, and that I would receive credit for reading it. By the time I had learned that this was not the case, I wanted to read the book and I didn't care about earning extra credit anymore.

A specific paragraph was what changed my motivation for reading *Alas, Babylon* and changed my reading life. This is that paragraph: “He found the old, nickel-plated revolver, purchased by his father many years before, in the top drawer of his bureau. Edgar had never fired it. The bullets were green with mold and the hammer rusted. He put it to his temple, wondering if it would work. It did” (Frank 113). When I read that paragraph, I was shocked. We had met Edgar chapters ago. How could he be dead? No, I must have read that wrong. My first thoughts when I reread that section and realized he truly was dead were, “What about his wife! What is she going to do?” In that terrible moment I had been drawn into a world falling apart, the world of *Alas, Babylon*.

I had to stay, to be with the characters left alone, the ones who had no one to care for them anymore. I had to know how the rest of their lives played out, and so I read chapter after chapter. I read before I went to bed, as soon as I got up in the mornings, and after school. Any spare moment I could find, I was reading, anxiously anticipating what surprise the next page would bring. Reading *Alas, Babylon* transported me into the world Pat Frank had created. When I recall reading that book, I do not remember words on pages. I remember characters’ faces and the distress in their voice during crucial moments. I remember suffering with them. Thanks to *Alas, Babylon*, I finally valued reading for the sake of reading. I had finally experienced escape from reality through literature. Since reading *Alas, Babylon*, I have entered many places, times, and situations that I do not have access to through the physical world. Only through literature are such adventures possible.

I almost missed out on the journeys reading has taken me on and the ability to express myself effectively in writing because I disregarded reading and writing as valuable skills. I was

rescued from this fate by several significant events. The first was thanks to the support and aid my mother provided for me. Together we discovered what tools are beneficial to me and learned how to employ them. Next, I realized that I was like the unique titan arum, and became able to accept that me being different and using special methods to do simple tasks is okay. In addition to making me comfortable with my reality, titan arum also allowed me to find a tie between what is comfortable and what is challenging. *Alas, Babylon* caused me to realize that difficult things can be enjoyable and that the written word is an extremely powerful thing. Not only did it provide clarity in my reality, but it can also allowed me to escape my reality entirely. Because of this, I finally understood that what you work the hardest for is often the most valuable.

Works Cited

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