



Washtenaw Literacy

Blair Kraft

Illiteracy is the great silencer. I am sometimes asked just how important literacy is to me. I was 37 years old before I ever told anyone about what happened on that fateful day in the third grade. It wasn't until I put it on paper that I ever told a soul.



QUITTING THE THIRD GRADE BY BLAIR KRAFT

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I was sitting quietly doing my best to be neat. I had been warned by the Commandant, Mrs. D. The hair on the back of my neck snapped to attention as I hear her goose stepping up the aisle from behind. As the pungent odor she called perfume got closer I quivered, pondering what might be my fate. "Class," she screeched in the voice of a wounded vulture, "We have a little baby here who hasn't learned how to write. You know what we do to babies?" she said as she ripped up the paper I had worked so hard for her to like. I felt like I was drowning as she walked to the cupboard. The giggles of the class stung like lashes from a whip as she reappeared with that stained, yellow baby bonnet. The old claws scratched my neck as she tied the shroud of humility atop my head. The roar of the class seemed deafening as they laughed at the clown with the tears running down his face. It was at that moment in the third grade I quit school, or at least quit trying.

Feeling inferior as a teen-ager I developed masks to hide my problem and, went on a quest to become popular at any cost. I learned fast how to walk the thin line of being bad enough to be cool but, good enough to make most teachers feel sorry for me. I liked to think of this as a James Dean, Eddie Haskal blend. By running with a wild bunch and always having a good sense of humor, making friends came easy to me. When confronted by teachers who really did care, and there were more than a few, I'd tell them, "I don't care. All I want is a job in a factory and you don't need school for that."

As I entered adulthood I got that good paying job in the factory, but there was a void in my life. I had in tenth grade been forced, kicking and screaming, into a special reading class by an English teacher with the audacity to care, but I still hadn't learned how to write. When my boss would ask me to leave notes I would make excuses or say it wasn't my job. I refused to write out checks insisting cash made the world go around. The truth of the matter was, every time I put pen to paper I could hear the goose stepping and feel the sting of the whip. For every time I tried to write the clown would appear.

After the announcement of the closing of the plant I found an organization called "Washtenaw Literacy." During my assessment Pamela, the Program Director told me she thought my only problem was that I was dyslexic and with help from a tutor I was college material. I only half believed the college part, after all I'd spent most of my life thinking I was the village idiot. The more I work with my tutor, Kelly, and the more I write for class, the farther the clown goes away. I only now forgive Mrs. D.; for I've turned her humiliation into compassion that I will share with others the rest of my life.

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