

Freedom, Not Force, Creates Lifelong Learners

I remember the book I read that would set me on my life's initial career path. I was 14 and it was lying in a book bin in the small den on the first floor of my childhood home. For 8th grade English class we had a brief and unusual hiatus from whatever curriculum directives dominated the syllabus and we were allowed to read whatever book we wanted. It was called "free choice."

The pages of Dale Carnegie's classic bestseller, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, captivated me. A blend of historical anecdotes and real-life applications for understanding human relations, Carnegie's book triggered a fledgling personal interest in both business and self-improvement. Years later, as I founded my own corporate training company and taught hundreds of professionals across the country in business workshops ranging from public speaking to client service to leadership skills, the key idea of individual self-mastery first planted by Carnegie's book remained with me and was echoed throughout the classes I taught.

I don't remember much else about 8th grade English. The lessons that stayed with me, and that would ultimately define my early professional life, had nothing to do with what I learned in school. Perhaps that is why I am such a vocal advocate for freedom and choice in learning: the seminal lesson from my time in school was the brief moment I was given "free choice" to do something completely outside the ordained curriculum, following my own interests.

This is one reason why I don't tell my children what books to read. They are free to choose whatever books interest them, whatever styles and genres and subjects fascinate them at any given time. My job is to connect them to available resources, to make frequent visits with them to the local library, to fill our home with a variety and abundance of books and other reading material, to read to them often and to model my own love of reading for them. But all of their books are "free choice."

At seven, my daughter Abby is our family's newest reader. She told me the other day: "Mama, I only read books that I like." It was such a simple, yet culturally radical, statement—for a child anyway. I replied that I, too, only read books that I like. Most of us adults are, I hope, free to choose what books we read and don't read. Yet, for children we often assume that there are certain things they must read. Not only that, we often force them to learn to read in a long, arduous, mundane process, completely disconnected from their interests and on an arbitrary timeline that increasingly pushes young children to read before they are developmentally ready. As assistant professor of education, Daphna Bassok, and her colleagues at the University of Virginia discovered: In 1998, 31% of teachers believed that children should learn to read while in kindergarten. In 2010, that

number was 80%.

If we were to design a system of reading instruction certain to fuel a general dislike of reading, and by extension learning, then we would create a system that forces children to read things they don't like and that have no meaning for them, at ever earlier ages, with rampant labeling, tracking, testing, and interventions to ensure that they meet an artificial curriculum standard. Are we surprised that one-quarter of American adults haven't read a book, in whole or in part, in the last year?

"But there are certain topics children should know about," one might say. *"American history, for example."* I agree that it is desirable for educated citizens living in a free and democratic society to have a certain collective knowledge about important topics. But I disagree that the best way to impart this knowledge in a free and democratic society is through force. This may also explain why, according to a 2017 University of Pennsylvania poll, 37 percent of Americans could not identify one right protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution! Curriculum by force, and knowledge imparted through compulsory schooling, may not be working so well.

"But surely you have read things in your life that you didn't like but that you had to read," a critic may add. Yes, I am sure that I was not thrilled to read certain journal articles or essays in college or graduate school, for instance, but I chose to go to college and I chose to take that course in pursuit of an individual goal. The choice, and attendant responsibility, were on me. I could also have chosen not to go to college and not to take that course or pursue that goal. Most children are not granted that same free choice in their learning.

As author Ray Bradbury famously said: "You don't have to burn books to destroy a culture. Just get people to stop reading them." If we want an educated and engaged citizenry, with a passion for reading and knowledge and ongoing self-improvement, then perhaps "free choice" should be the norm rather than the exception.

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