Lighting the Literacy Fire

Twice in my life, I have experienced a period of fiery hunger to find words that expressed the voice within me, what I think of as my inner soul. Ten years separated those two periods of time, and during that ten-year gap, I felt somewhat detached from the words I typed on the page. The burning urge to read, to write, to think, had been methodically doused, ironically, by my well-meaning teachers, trying to teach to the New York State tests. Strangely enough, I felt the warmth of my first true ember in my writers’ soul when I was only six years old, and a student in Ms. Cloonan’s multi-age kindergarten-first grade classroom. Then came the ten-year chill that was thankfully defrosted in my senior year by a shaggy-haired, guitar-wielding, soon-to-be-retired English teacher, Mr. Hinkhouse. Fittingly enough, the song he played on our first day of English class was Jim Morrison’s song, “Light My Fire.”

The flame of literacy was lit extraordinarily early for me, I am certain of that. My family can bear witness to the fact that I was reading fluently before the age of three. My parents would drive down Erie Boulevard in Syracuse, New York with their two-and-a-half-year-old son reading every storefront sign from Mitsubishi to Outback Steakhouse as well as the street signs that spelled out “Do Not Enter” or “Parking in Rear”. My mother tells of the time, when I was not quite three, my Uncle David raced through the yard, with me in his arms, yelling, “Oh my God! Oh my God!” And when she asked my uncle, “What’s wrong?” he screamed, “He just spelled xylophone, with magnetic letters, on the
retriever, all by himself!” So from the beginning, clearly my literacy experience was far from cookie-cutter.

When the pediatrician would ask my mother how she taught me to read at such an early age, my mother told me she would stand there shrugging her shoulders, and say, “He just knew…” I have vivid recollections of being surrounded by books, but not just any books…books that my mother brought to me because they fanned the embers of the things I showed interest in such as dinosaurs, historical figures, and animals. These books were like bellows to the flame that was already glowing brightly.

When it came time to begin public education, my parents knew I would have to be placed with a teacher who would be willing to meet me where I was as a reader, writer, and thinker. I was placed with Ms. Cloonan and two important things happened to me when I was in her class. The first thing was that she found a small group of students like me, who also needed “something different.” The second thing she did was to study US, to find out what “lit OUR fires.” During the two-year period with Ms. Cloonan, our group read, wrote, and thought about big concepts like segregation, discrimination, and tolerance. We dove deep into the lives of people like Martin Luther King, Jackie Robinson, John F. Kennedy, Abraham Lincoln, and even local people in our community to bring a voice, a face, and a name to those big concepts. It was a fiery renaissance for me. Sadly, it would not be rekindled for another decade.

The frost approached the flames in second grade, when writing now was far more focused on following a formulaic design that would satisfy the powers that be in Albany. We were suddenly hearing teachers say things such as, “Restate the question” or “Write three things directly from this passage that support your answer” on a nearly constant
basis. Suddenly, there was this request to not write what WE thought, but to simply rephrase what the author of the passage thought. “Whole” books disappeared from my educational setting, and photocopied, short excerpts became our limited literary playground. I hid my flame when I was at school, but it burned brightly at home, where I was free to write what was on my mind, to read books that fueled my fire, and to think big thoughts.

By the time high school came, well-intentioned English teachers put the meaty literature back in my hand, but continued to use formulaic-like instruction related to writing, reading and thinking. By this time, the teacher dialogue contained things such as “State your thesis” and “Cite examples the author gives to support the thesis.” Missing were things like, “How does this character remind YOU of a struggle YOU are currently experiencing?” and “If YOU could talk to this character, what advice would YOU give them?” I felt a lingering spark, but by no means did I feel the fiery passion I felt in Ms. Cloonan’s room so many years ago.

But in my senior year of high school, something great happened that reignited the fire within me. When I walked into my senior English class, I knew two things about the instructor, Mr. Hinkhouse. First of all, I knew that the kids who had him in the previous semester said he was slightly disorganized, and secondly, I knew that this semester would be his last year of teaching, concluding a 25-year career. What I didn’t know was that this absent-minded retiree was about to pour fuel onto my literary spark, producing a flame, like the one I knew so well a decade earlier.

My first clue should have been when he opened our first day of class by playing Jim Morrison’s song, “Light My Fire”, which reminded us that there is an urge to take what
we saw in front of us and not wait to live…the time was now. In class discussions he wanted to know what we FELT when we listened to/read the lyrics. The comments in red on my papers no longer were things like, “You need another supporting detail.” Instead, this kind, mop-headed man would draw an arrow to a section of my writing and would comment, “This shows your deep thinking and ability to find compassion for the character’s struggle.” My fire was once more ablaze. I knew because I wanted to read more, to think more, to write more. In doing these things, I suddenly knew more.

Experiencing these two teachers, ten years apart, taught me something about what is important to me as a reader, a writer, and a thinker. What I learned is that I cannot be left out of the process. When I am left out, my writing becomes soulless, and I become somewhat detached from the words I type on the page. I can write technically, I can restate a question, and I can find sentences that support my response. I can do all these things, but they carry little attachment or meaning for me. I need to have some kind of soulful attachment to my reading, writing and thinking in order to feel like it means something to me…in order to feel the fire within me.