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Bruce Kutney

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Why I Continue to Read



ESSAY BY **BRUCE KUTNEY**

Those students who still read often think of it as training for college and, thus, their careers. It becomes a kind of abstract, long-term apprenticeship: *Pride and Prejudice* as the rudimentaries of engineering. I try hard to shake them from this notion even though, in a very shallow sense, they are right. Reading is preparation for college, but it can become something infinitely more important than that: reading can make them better people. And I'm not talking about enhanced buying power here — that curious, left-handed route which they're convinced takes them from an "A" on a physics test to a solid transcript to a major university, then on to a degree and a job as a packaging engineer. I'm talking about using reading as a moral/ethical prod to gain a better sense of who they are and who they might become. Nowhere in life can this be accomplished in quite the same way as through reading.

The reading that has mattered to me has been the reading helping me crystallize my own experience. The day after my mother died, after a long and cruel battle with lung cancer, my father asked me to write her eulogy. Even though ministers are trained to do this sort of thing, he didn't want a stranger—someone who had never spoken one word to his wife — to deliver her last words. It made sense. I couldn't refuse. I was terrified. What training had I been given for this? I had never before experienced the death of someone I loved. I had never read the Bible, never spent much time brooding about the themes of life and

death and eternity which the Bible so eloquently explores.

I had to try and focus the meaning of my mother's life — and the meaning of her death — in two or three pages of simple prose and, I remind you, *this* after recently seeing her body curled and contorted by the tubes of life support systems.

I had nothing to say because I had *everything* to say. I had nothing to feel because I felt everything, all at once. My mother's death dropped me down onto a whole different plane of experience, more muddled but much more intense, than anywhere I had ever been before. I was lost but, worse than that, I had no time to be lost; I had to compose coherent language about the meaning of my mother's life and death, and then deliver that language up at a very public forum: a memorial service at a funeral home.

The Russian writer Leo Tolstoy saved me. His story, "Master and Man," about a wealthy innkeeper named Vasili who spends too much time scheming how to beat someone out of a piece of land, saved me. It really did. I kept thinking about the blinding ice of that thick Russian winter, and about how Vasili, the smug, comfortable landowner, smug in all his material wealth but spiritually impoverished, ends up sacrificing his own life to save someone else's. I kept recalling one line as I thought about that story: The meaning of life is to live for others. I kept hearing it and hearing it: The meaning of life is to live for others. No matter how hard I tried to write about my mother, I kept hearing that

line, and I kept seeing Vasili, draped over the chilled body of his servant, using his own warmth as a blanket to keep his servant from freezing to death.

I finally realized that Vasili and Tolstoy were not really on my mind at all. It *was* my mother. So the eulogy became a tribute to *her* sacrifice, to *her* selflessness, as she managed a household, raised her children, and helped build a happy marriage that lasted for almost half a century.

When I think back to that time, I can see that my reading of Tolstoy created a consciousness and a perspective which helped me shape and clarify one of life's most profound and inscrutable experiences: the death of someone I loved.

Tolstoy has also helped me clarify my own life. I read his lengthy story, "The Death of Ivan Ilych," two or three times while in my twenties, but the story never really hit home until I reread it as a thirty-five year old adult.

Ivan Ilych was a man who did all the right things. He diligently prepared and then attended all the right schools. He succeeded at law school and became an outstanding attorney and, after that, a celebrated judge. He also became a perfect gentleman, wearing all the right clothes, marrying the right woman, and having the right kind of family. Tolstoy painstakingly draws this portrait of Ivan Ilych, the consummate winner.

The story turns when Ilych becomes stricken with a fatal form of cancer. It forces him to assess his life, perhaps for the very first time. He comes to realize that even though he did everything he

was supposed to do, he has met every possible expectation for success, he feels hollow—empty inside. I remember feeling terror for Ilych as he first realized his psychic condition: that he had done all the right things and still wasted his life.

So, as a middle-aged man who has already made several crucial decisions about career and family, decisions which will influence the rest of my life, I am reminded through Ivan's experience to assess and reassess who I am. Ivan Ilych taught me that the horror of not knowing how to die is a symptom of never having truly lived in the first place.

When I reread this essay, I realize that I have written exclusively about Tolstoy and about how reading him has helped me define myself. But there have been others. Many, many others. I know that reading them has helped me become a better person. A better husband, a better father, a better man. So I'm going to keep at this reading thing. When the information superhighway reaches my home, with all its dazzling distractions, I will continue to keep at this reading thing. And who knows? If I keep at it long enough and hard enough, keep at it often enough, I might even be prepared for college.

Bruce Kutney teaches English at Holt High School. He is the editor of Alternative Assessment: Emerging Theories and Practices at Holt High School, which is published by his district.