

An excerpt from

Open a World of Possible

*Real Stories About the Joy
and Power of Reading*

by Jeffrey D. Wilhelm

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To Read, to Love, and to Stand Up

The major impulses of my life have been to love and to be loved, to know and to be known, and to take a stance when necessary, which means knowing where to stand. These three impulses are informed by my reading life and have led to my primary professional goal: to read and to help others read—not only books, but the world.



My life is continuously shaped and changed by reading. Reading is part of my perpetual act of becoming more fully myself and placing myself in the world. Reading is a thrilling and “dangerous” game, a way of surfing on the crest of the future’s breaking wave, of questioning the status quo, of becoming something new.

I trace my earliest memory of reading back to our evenings together as a family in our small Ohio house. After dinner, my father, a science teacher, sat in an upholstered green recliner and my brother Jon and I would sit on opposite armrests as he read the evening newspaper or a magazine. He would read an article or excerpt he thought we might find interesting, as well as some of our favorite comics, which he would patiently explain to us until we got the jokes. Then we would leave our father in peace and migrate to our mother, in a brown upholstered swivel chair, and sit on her lap as she read us picture book versions of *The Odyssey*, the Greek myths, the King Arthur stories (how I loved and still love Parsifal!), *The Arabian Nights*, stories from the Bible, the Frances books (*Best Friends for Frances* still holds a place in my heart), and so much more.

How glad I am that Mom and Dad both treated us like real readers from the start: they read all manner of texts, and they read not *to* us, but *with* us. I’m grateful they also let us choose our own books and forge our own reading lives.

My parents related to me, in part, through reading. I learned that reading was essential to learning how to love and relate to others. My parents taught me that reading is a conversation, a way of listening to others and the world—of listening new ideas into existence. Harold Brodkey asserts: “Reading is an intimate act, perhaps more intimate than any other human act. I say this because it provides the most prolonged and intense exposure of one mind

to another.” Through reading, I related to my parents, to characters, and to authors, many of whom were distant from me in time, space, and experience, and whose ideas differed greatly from mine. I learned to listen, to consider others’ ideas, and decide whether I wished to affirm, adapt, or resist.

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Reading was always essential to my dating and love life: I only dated girls who were readers, and I used reading to pursue my romantic relationships: “Read one of mine; I’ll read one of yours. Then let’s talk. Let’s explore each other’s inner geography. Let us see what we have in common as well as what we can learn from each other.” Sharing reading is a way of knowing and a way to be known. It has enriched my marriage, my parenthood, and my friendships.

Resistance—knowing when to take a stand—has likewise always been essential to my life. It is through resistance, as well as alignment, that we stake our identities and explore the boundaries of the self. Whenever we align with an idea or with a group, we are resisting something else. Conscious resistance, as well as alignment, is energizing. Roger Soder offers a nifty explanation:

“Compliance is never edifying, it never rings with human dignity, and it never pulses with excitement and curiosity and wonder. You’d never come running home from school telling your parents how much you complied that day and how much you liked it!”

Reading has taught me the terms of many a debate and the excitement and joy of participating in those debates.

I love Stephen Spender’s wonderful poem of heroism:

*“I think continually of those who were truly great.
Who, from the womb, remembered the soul’s history . . .
Whose lovely ambition/Was that their lips, still touched with fire,
Should tell of the Spirit clothed from head to foot in song . . .”*

For me, the heroes are authors. They sing, lips touched with fire, of the Spirit and of the soul's history. I am grateful to them. They have given me great gifts . . . gifts of transition to new ways of thinking, understanding, and being.

How do I return these great favors? As my daughters (the incomparable Fiona and Jasmine) were growing up, I'd carry them to bed, one in each arm (which I did until they were 9 and 11), and then I'd read to them. We read the newspaper, the Old and New Testaments, *The Odyssey*, the Greek myths, *The Arabian Nights*, and, every night, numerous picture books—I must have read *Madeline* 4,000 times, and when I finally hid the book, my girls found it and insisted on another reading. They are adults now, but they still know I will always reimburse them for the price of a book. A book: what an investment in the future, what a legacy to pass on!

Like my father and mother, I became a teacher. I have dedicated my life to promoting reading and to helping teachers create nurturing environments and interventions that assist student reading. I have argued that students need to be helped to do what expert readers do—not only to learn their stances and strategies, but to make choices, to read what they need, to contend with issues in the world, and to forge their own reading lives in ways that help them become their best possible selves.

I teach reading. The gift is one of possibility and transformation; the capacity to imagine what has not yet come to be—for oneself, for others, for the world. And with imagination—with reading—all things are possible.



Jeffrey D. Wilhelm, Ph.D., has been a teacher for 32 years. He is the author of 32 books about literacy and teaching. His latest book, co-authored with Michael W. Smith, is *Reading Unbound: Why Kids Need to Read What They Want—and Why We Should Let Them*. He is the editor of three series of issues-oriented books for adolescents: The Ten, XBooks, and Issues 21.