

“Freedom to Read: Making a Brighter Destiny”
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Since I proposed giving a sermon on Banned Books, our country has witnessed blatant, politically motivated acts of censorship. The government and the corporations in thrall to this government have turned their back on the first amendment, motivated by anger or perhaps shame at truths that don't match their version of reality. These acts of censorship matter because of the first amendment right to free speech, and they also matter because they shut down the expression of opposing views. It is through disagreement and discussion that we make knowledge and find ways of being in an ever changing world.

This is not a sermon about politics or the erosion of first amendment rights. Although those topics preoccupy me much these days, I am not the best person to speak about the law. My sermon today is about censorship's first cousin – book banning – and about that topic, I may actually be the best person to speak.

I am a children's author and a professor of children's literature. In these roles, I speak often with readers and students about why books matter for young people. I am also on the Banned Books Week Committee at Bucknell this year, and Banned Books Week begins today. Started in 1982, Banned Books Week aims to draw attention to the harms of censorship and highlights books that are both banned and challenged.

Since we're sitting in a church, I'll mention William Tyndale whose radical English Bible – radical simply for being in English – was banned in England in the fifteenth century. Parliament passed an act banning Tyndale's Bible, and those caught with the book were charged with crimes and sometimes burned at the stake, as was Tyndale himself. In the US in the 21st century, books are not banned by the national government, not yet anyway, and book bans are much less deadly, though still extremely damaging.

The victims of book bans in America today are overwhelmingly children and teenagers. Books in America are banned by local governments – primarily school boards – who remove books that have caused offense from classrooms, school libraries, and public libraries. A book is *challenged* when an individual or

an entity formally raises concerns about the book, and, usually, the book is removed while the school board or library board makes a decision about whether to proceed with a ban. Thus, a challenge to a book has the same impact as a ban because readers lose access to it, at least temporarily. And if you're thinking, OK, but readers can just get books elsewhere – from the library if the book is taken out of schools, or from a bookstore – you must remember that few children have money to spend on books or transportation to the public library or a bookstore.

A piece that appeared in *The Guardian* in February of this year reports:

PEN America has tracked **more than 10,000** public school book bans in the 2023-2024 school year alone... The bans show a clear pattern of targeting authors of color, women and members of the LGBTQ+ community. Books that educate about racism, gender and history are most often the recipient of relentless censorship attempts.

The Banned Books Week website explains: “The most common justifications for censorship provided by

complainants were false claims of illegal obscenity for minors; inclusion of LGBTQIA+ characters or themes; and covering topics of race, racism, equity, and social justice.” Let me emphasize those last two justifications for taking books away from young people: the books have queer characters, or they address race. The assertion is that reading about queer people or people of color, or social justice more broadly, is harmful to children.

During Covid, when millions of children started attending school virtually from home, parents had opportunities to observe their children’s classrooms in a completely new way. This unfortunate circumstance acted as an accelerant for a parenting style that makes helicopter parenting seem like a quaint, slightly problematic approach of the early twenty-first century: snowplow parenting describes the effort to remove all obstacles from children’s paths. Those obstacles certainly include some dangers many of us would agree should be plowed away, but they also include false threats based on bad information, like the supposed threat of vaccines or confused and damaging beliefs about gender identity.

Another of the threats these snowplow parents try to remove from their children's lives is the threat of discomfort. They seek to protect their children from discomfort of any kind but especially discomfort in the face of growing literacy about institutional racism in our country. A fifth grader should probably read different texts about race in America than an adult would read, but that 10 year old can learn about slavery and Jim Crow and red lining. Will developing an understanding of this history make that child uncomfortable? I hope so. And it is from that discomfort that understanding and empathy will grow.

It is often said of the Holocaust that we must never forget: remembering is the assurance against repeating. And this principle can be generalized. We must never forget the mistakes of our past, lest we repeat them. For this reason, books about dark moments in our history serve a vital purpose. Among books on black history that have been banned from schools are the picture book *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* by Christopher Paul Curtis about the Civil Rights movement, *Who Was Maya Angelou?* And *Who Was Martin Luther King Jr.* from the popular Who Was series for young readers, and Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta*

Lacks about racism in medical research. It is hard to read about these topics. It makes us uncomfortable. But in reading, we remember, we learn, and in remembering and learning, we grow away from the mistakes of the past, toward a future that is more just. We learn to be better human beings by reading – about mistakes and atrocities and kindness and bravery and confusion and difference and changing one’s mind and love. What do we do to ourselves and to our future when we deny young people the freedom to read?

I could say more about the implications of banning books for democracy, the stifling of opposition that enables authoritarian regimes to take hold, the prohibition on questioning, a prohibition that forecloses innovation, unity, and the possibility of a civil society. These are urgent topics for our time. When being uncomfortable and being curious are pathologized, the nation and the very fabric of society are ripped to shreds that may never be stitched back into a recognizable whole.

When being uncomfortable and being curious are pathologized *for children*, the very nature of what it means to be human is endangered. My focus today is not on the silencing of university professors or the hobbling of medical

research or the bullying of media outlets, law firms, and, well, the 340 million people who live in the United States. My focus is on the special cruelty of banning books for children.

I care about this for a lot of reasons, too many to talk about this morning, but one of them is because I believe in the long game. What I mean is I believe that while we must work for justice and love in the present, we must also work for justice and love in the future by giving young people what they need to be curious, thoughtful, empathetic, and loving.

The scary thing is the other side cares about the long game, too. And current political realities reveal that they've been working on the long game for a long time in ways many were too naive or too incredulous to address. So now we have a generation of parents who believe with every fiber of their being that it is their job to protect their children from everything from medical treatments they question to the simple experience of discomfort, and we have municipal, state, and federal governments that facilitate the actions of these parents as they curate not only the experiences of their own children – which is of course their prerogative – but also the experiences of everyone else's children.

On September 15 of this year, Heather Cox Richardson wrote this about democracy: “I am staunchly committed to the principle of human self-determination for people of all races, genders, abilities, and ethnicities: the idea that we all have the right to work to become whatever we wish.” But self-determination is crippled when people don’t have the freedom to explore a wide range of ideas. Self-determination is crippled when people consume news in an ideological echo chamber, and self-determination is simply off the table for children who are denied access to hard truths about our national history, who are denied the opportunity to meet people different from themselves in the books they read, who are denied the sometimes life-saving chance to see themselves in what they read.

Without books that showcase difference and address difficult subjects, the young self is pre-determined according to a model set by the book banners. That self grows up to be a person who only values people like themselves and who has never spent time considering the mistakes of the past and how to avoid repeating them. That individual never had a chance to make any determinations about their world or their self. They

are never given space to wish for anything other than an anodyne reality curated by adults who may mean well, if we want to extend them some grace, but who themselves live in a curated reality without difference or hard truths. And so the problem perpetuates. The children of book banners grow up to be book banners themselves. How could they be otherwise? And this is how democracy dies.

As we heard earlier, Adichie describes in “The Danger of a Single Story,” how she came to realize there was more than one story. Those who ban books want there to be only one story. A safe story. A nice story. One that won’t upset anyone or lead to hard questions. Late in her speech, Adichie says, “Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.”

Banning books about the loss and reclamation of dignity, about those with and without power, about the myriad ways of being a human being – denies young people a fair chance in this world.

As I said already, the most banned books are those that are most important to the most marginalized young people: queer youth and people of color.

Published in 2017, *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds is a powerful and beautifully written verse novel about Will, a 15 year old black boy whose older brother was murdered the day before: as he rides the elevator down from his apartment to the street with his brother's gun hidden under his shirt, Will struggles with whether or not to seek revenge. He is confronted by the ghosts of a series of friends and family members also lost to gun violence, and the book ends ambiguously: the reader isn't sure whether Will plans to use the gun or not.

Long Way Down offers a great example of why the freedom to read is so essential. Readers who identify with Will see themselves in the book. These young people rarely see themselves in the books they read, and when they find themselves on the page, they first and foremost feel seen in a world that marginalizes them. They also find a space to explore their identity and to ask hard questions. Wouldn't we rather the young man who identifies with Will explore grief,

anger, and the attraction of revenge in the safe space of a book, rather than in the high stakes space of the real world?

And for the readers who don't identify with Will, *Long Way Down* offers insight into a different life, a different world, a different set of problems. It allows the reader who has never held a gun or who comes from more privilege than Will to develop an understanding of the lives of the Wills of the world. The book prompts these readers to develop empathy.

Identification and empathy are the twin reasons why books that tell *other* stories matter. This is true for all readers, but it is especially true for young people for whom the primary business of life is becoming a person. How do you become a thoughtful, kind, loving person if you have never read about people who are different from you? How do you develop a sense of self worth if you have never seen yourself in the pages of a book?

And somewhere in between identification and empathy is another reason why books for children matter. Books allow children to practice being people. Maybe a reader of *Long Way Down* has never lost a loved one. Experiencing Will's

grief helps prepare that reader for the day when grief comes, and it will come. Maybe a reader of this book has never had to face a truly difficult decision, and riding alongside Will as he weighs his options prepares that reader for the moral quandaries that will come. Every child will face challenges in their young life, however much parents may wish this were not the case, and every child will grow up to be an adult who will suffer loss, have to make hard choices, and will live in a world filled with people different from themselves. Books offer a precious chance to prepare for this life.

And of course many children already have hard lives. When a kid like Will reads *Long Way Down*, his life may get just a bit easier. When a queer kid, who may be bullied at school, or at home, reads *All Boys Aren't Blue* by George M Johnson or *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe, the two most frequently banned books of 2023-24, that kid realizes, perhaps for the first time, that they are not alone.

The most banned picture book of 2023-24 is *And Tango Makes Three*, which Sara read to us a few minutes ago: this true story about penguins at the Central Park Zoo celebrates families with same-sex parents, and for this reason has been

challenged and banned. The young reader of *And Tango Makes Three* who is from a family with same-sex parents may never have seen a family like theirs in a picture book before. That child will feel affirmed and celebrated when they read the book. The reader who may never have met a child with two parents of the same gender, sees how those two dads love their child and has the chance to practice accepting a differently shaped family. Even for those people who find families like the one in *And Tango Makes Three* frightening, the solution is not to ban the book, but to learn more, to try harder to understand.

In an essay called “On Three Ways of Writing for Children,” author C. S. Lewis responds to critics who want children’s books to offer a nice, simple, harmless picture of reality. In particular, one critic had asserted that children’s books should protect children from fear and the ugly things in life. Lewis offers an impassioned plea for the importance of hard content in books for young readers. He writes, “Since it is so likely that they will meet cruel enemies, let them at least have heard of brave knights and heroic courage. Otherwise you are making their destiny not brighter but darker.”

When people ban children's books and deny young people the freedom to read, they make those children's destinies darker. They make the destiny of our society and our democracy darker.

This Banned Books Week, and honestly, every week, please join me in choosing a brighter destiny for young people, for ourselves, and for our country. Advocate for freedom to read legislation, like the state bill passed last month in Oregon that makes it illegal for school districts to ban books because they are by or about members of a protected class. Don't let the banners determine what children get to read. Embrace dissent. And give a kid a book.