

Childhood's Magic Milestone by Betty Peck

□Betty Peck at 92 is full of a radiant loveliness that brings to mind fairy godmothers and enchanted gardens. Visiting her is a little like falling down Alice’s rabbit hole. A train track with a real train runs around her Saratoga home. There are ivy-covered walls, crazy winding paths, tree houses, even a Rapunzel tower, and an amphitheater under the trees complete with a Romeo and Juliet balcony. Hundreds of children have played in the sun-dappled creek here, thrilled to the feel of soil under bare feet and rejoiced in a world brimming with creativity, beauty and wonder. This is the world that Betty Peck gifted to multiple generations of children.

□And now this amazing teacher has a new project that she is deeply excited about. A project that she describes in her own words below, and that begins with a simple yet profound question...

□I want to know how you learned to read.

□Learning to read is the most important thing that happens to us, and it happens (for most) in childhood. My husband, Willys Peck learned to read by “The Pooh Method”. Here are his words about this amazing event:

□The Pooh Method of Learned Reading

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□When I was a child my parents would read books to me and my brother. My favorites were the books Winnie the Pooh, and The House at Pooh Corner by A.A.. Milne. Though I didn’t make a conscious effort to memorize the stories, I found through hearing them multiple times that I could recite the opening paragraphs from memory. One day while looking at the book and reciting it from memory, I found myself picking up words beyond those actually memorized. It was at that moment that I realized I was reading! That is why I call it learning to read by the Pooh Method.

□My learning to read was the most important thing that happened to me in first grade; it is what helped me to become who I am. I have written this up in my book: Kindergarten Education –Freeing Children’s Creative Potential (Hawthorne Press).

□My grandmother told me all the fairy tales and nursery rhymes. Lucky is the child who contains all these words of ancient wisdom. I, in turn, would become the storyteller for my brothers and sisters.

□I remember the day I learned to read. I too, believe along with John Steinbeck, “It is

perhaps the greatest single effort that the human undertakes, and he must do it as a child.” I remember the day I carried my paperback book home to read my mother when I was in first grade. I had learned to read! The excitement of this anticipation of being able to read to my mother is still with me.

□In my memory, we sat down together not far from the front door. I read the entire book to her with great delight and joy. When I was finished, she said, to me, “Now read it backwards.” She didn’t believe I had learned to read! With more joy than before, I read the entire book backwards. It was at that moment that I had the feeling of coming into my own. I had become more than I had thought myself to be. Now, I would use the word ‘transcended’ for this occasion, for now I knew what my mother could not know. I, and I alone, knew this wonderful secret: I had learned to read. I didn’t need a celebration; learning to read was celebration enough.

□When my grandchild Sarah learned to read, I asked if a picture of her reading to her sister, Merina, could be placed in the children’s room at our village library in celebration of her learning to read. The picture was hung celebrating one of the most important steps of life that just happens to fall in childhood.

□It was the library in Los Angeles near our house that nourished my love of literature. My mother would read to me. We would read to the last minute that the book was due and then I would rush off to the library on my skates, always alone. But it was Mrs. Laverne Perrin, my seventh-grade teacher at Bel Pasi School, who introduced me to the great literature of the world. We had to learn a poem each week. She would read Sir Walter Scott’s work, and in a different vein, ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin; was one where we hung onto every word. She read us, I am sure, all the things she loved, for I remember her great passion for these books. Each story, was more than its words: it was the whole realm of history, culture, nature, philosophy, religion and psychology. Because of this heritage, I now read, and re-read from several books a day, all of which I own in my library.

□Reading is one of the most important events in the life of a human being, and it happens in childhood. Have you ever thought of all the skills that must come together to be able read? This exciting event is a gift from the gods.

□What we do with this gift helps determine who we are, and as a teacher I feel privileged to help parents of kindergartners build the foundation for productive citizens who grow up loving to read. I hope that celebrations and ritual can be built up around the event when a child of today learns to read. It has taken this long to realize that this is a magical moment that needs recognition.

□How did you learn to read? I would love to hear your story.