

Recent Resource Library Additions  
from the Project on Civic Reflection  
December 2008

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## What Happened During the Ice Storm

Jim Heynen

### Overview

Jim Heynen is a teacher, short story writer, and regular contributor to NPR's *All Things Considered*. His "What Happened During the Ice Storm" tells of an ice storm in a rural place. Most of the animals have found shelter, but the pheasants have been left so helpless that men are going out with clubs to hunt them. A group of boys goes looking for pheasants too and comes across a group of them—their wings weighted down with ice, their eyes glazed shut. After a brief bout of uncertainty, one boy acts, and the others follow suit in a sympathy-rich, outside-the-box response to the pheasants' plight. We often try to define good moral leadership, but is there also a way of following that best encourages thoughtful ethical choices? Should groups strategize to achieve such moments of consensus as the boys experience here, or can these moments only realistically be viewed as gifts?

### Questions

- *How or when does leadership begin?*
- *What is compassion? Where does it come from and what does it enable us to do?*
- *What is our responsibility to the natural world?*

### Reflective Exercise

Think about a time, recent or long ago, when you exercised moral leadership and others followed your lead. Now think of a time when you exercised moral leadership but no one followed. What made the difference?

## The Secret Sharer

Joseph Conrad

### Overview

Joseph Conrad was born in Poland in 1857, went to sea at the age of sixteen, and led a life of adventure and travel until his late thirties, when illness and literary ambition caused him to settle in England as a writer. His short story “The Secret Sharer” presents an unnamed protagonist, the rookie captain of a merchant ship in Southeast Asia. Early on in the voyage, without the knowledge of the crew, he takes on a fugitive swimmer wanted for murder on a nearby ship. Determined to see the man escape, he risks the ship, the lives of his men, and his own promising career in his attempt to help. Conrad compels us to ask what motivates the captain’s actions. Is he showing himself to be the best kind of leader or the worst?

### Questions

- *Are leaders different or separate from the people they lead?*
- *Should leaders always tell the truth to the people they lead?*
- *What is justice? How do we recognize it?*

### Reflective Exercise

Think back to a situation when your sense of responsibility to an individual conflicted in some way with your sense of responsibility to a larger group. How did you resolve the conflict? In retrospect, do you think you made the right choice?

## The Parable of the Three Rings

Giovanni Boccaccio

### Overview

Giovanni Boccaccio's medieval masterpiece *The Decameron* is a collection of one hundred stories purportedly told by a group of Florentine refugees who have fled the plague. The third story of the collection tells how the Sultan of Babylon, finding himself in need of money to maintain his lavish lifestyle, tries to trap the Jewish moneylender Melchisadech into saying something dangerous in public, thinking that by doing so he will put Melchisadech at his mercy and force a loan. "Which law of God," the Sultan demands, "the Christian, the Saracen, or the Jewish one, do you consider the true one?" Melchisadech tells a story in response. "Once," he says, "there was a great and wealthy man who had a most beautiful and precious ring..." The text touches on issues of religious tolerance, humility in leadership, and the power of story to reinforce stereotypes as well as to soften or undo them.

### Questions

- *What is good leadership?*
- *Do we need to share certain values if we want to experience unity?*
- *Does faith make it easier or harder to respond to ethical problems?*

### Reflective Exercise

When have you been in a "no-win" situation, in which no matter what decision you made, some people would be unhappy? How did you manage the situation? How did you come to a decision?

## What Men Live By

Leo Tolstoy

### Overview

Nineteenth-century Russian author Leo Tolstoy is best known as a writer of sweeping novels on love and historical themes. Toward the end of his life however, after experiencing a religious crisis, he wrote a number of small tales that focus on questions of faith and meaningful living. “What Men Live By” is one of these. The story begins with a poor shoemaker who on a cold winter’s day comes upon a young man lying naked and shivering near a roadside shrine. He takes the stranger home and events gradually reveal the young man’s identity, even as the young man himself learns the answers to three questions: What is given to us in life? What is not given to us to know? What do human beings live by?

### Questions

- *What is compassion? Where does it come from and what does it enable us to do?*
- *What makes it hard for us to help each other?*
- *Who are we responsible for?*

### Reflective Exercise

Consider a time when you gave something reluctantly or grudgingly. Why were you reluctant to give, and why did you go ahead and give anyway? How did this particular giving transaction wind up?

## The Same Inside

Anna Swir

### Overview

Anna Swir was born in Warsaw in 1909 and lived there until the Warsaw uprising of 1944, during which time she served as a nurse and experienced the city's near-total destruction. Her poetry, which she began to publish in the 1930's, takes up such themes as war, sexual love, and motherhood. In "The Same Inside" the speaker of the poem tells about encountering an old beggar woman on the street while en route to a romantic tryst. Falling into conversation with the needy stranger, the speaker experiences an intense moment of recognition and communion and loses interest in the planned rendezvous. The poem, addressed to the lover with whom the original tryst was to take place, delves into the forces that attract us to others and then maintain our connections with them. How trustworthy is the sense of identifying with another human being? Do we connect with others because of what we feel we can give to them? Take from them? How do we decide which relationship takes precedence when?

### Questions

- *How does interacting with others help us understand ourselves?*
- *What makes it possible for us to connect with others? What gets in the way?*
- *When we give or serve, what do we get in return?*

### Reflective Exercise

In your experiences of serving and giving, when have you felt an especially strong connection to someone you were serving or giving to? What provoked this sense of connection? In what ways did the sense of connection impact the service or the giving?

## Bilingual/Bilingüe

Rhina P. Espaillat

### Overview

Rhina Espaillat was born in the Dominican Republic in 1932, but her family was exiled in 1939 by the dictatorship there and immigrated to the United States. Now retired, Espaillat spent many years teaching English in New York City public schools. “Bilingual/Bilingüe” describes her experience growing up speaking both Spanish and English. Her father, she says, wanted her to speak English outside the house and Spanish inside, but she, wanting badly to comprehend the world in both tongues, stubbornly opposed that separation. The poem centers on themes of identity and association. How does language itself define our world view? To what extent does being bilingual really makes us bi-cultural?

### Questions

- *What makes someone a citizen?*
- *What makes it possible for us to connect with others? What gets in the way?*
- *What do people give up or gain when they join together in groups?*

### Reflective Exercise

When have you had to leave something behind—like your home, your culture, your community or your family—in order to be part of something new? What did you leave behind and why?

## Facing It

Yusef Komunyakaa

### Overview

Born in Bogalusa, Louisiana in 1947, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Yusef Komunyakaa served in the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War and as correspondent and editor of the military newspaper *The Southern Cross*. More than a decade later, he used poetry to try to make sense of his experience as a soldier. In “Facing It,” from Komunyakaa’s 1988 collection *Dien Cai Dau*, a Vietnam veteran describes his visit to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. The reflective surface of the black granite wall, engraved with the names of the dead, becomes a mirror in which the speaker sees himself and other visitors to the monument. But like his memories of the war, the images he sees in the wall are fragmentary and sometimes misleading. In an interview Komunyakaa said of this poem, “Tonally, I believe, it informed the other poems [in the collection]. I wanted to deal with images instead of outright statements.” What story is told by the images in this poem? How does the wall, like his wartime experiences, both connect Komunyakaa to and divide him from the strangers around him?

### Questions

- *How do we respond to strangers?*
- *How do we honor the past?*
- *What makes it possible for us to connect with others? What gets in the way?*

### Reflective Exercise

Looking back, what is the most memorable experience you've had in visiting a public monument or memorial? What motivated you to go? How did you feel about the people around you?

## What I Learned From My Mother

Julia Kasdorf

### Overview

Julia Kasdorf is an award-winning poet who grew up in Western Pennsylvania. Her earthy, colorful poems draw deeply on lived experience and often reveal an ache for connection and community. “What I Learned from My Mother” is a list of simple, specific things the poet’s mother did for those around her in need—from taking garden flowers to the sick to attending funeral viewings. It raises the possibility that the suffering of others might become a source of meaning in our own lives by creating conditions that ask us to make ourselves useful. It also touches on questions of upbringing and whether a person can really be taught to be generous.

### Questions

- *How does a person learn compassion?*
- *How does a person learn to serve?*
- *What does it mean to belong to others?*

### Reflective Exercise

Can you describe one ritual of giving that you learned from a member of your family? Is this a ritual you still practice?

## Close Encounters of the Human Kind

Abraham Verghese

### Overview

Raised in Ethiopia in an Indian family, Abraham Verghese emigrated to the U.S. as a young man. He established himself as a noted physician and author, launching the program in the Theory and Practice of Medicine at Stanford University in 2007. Verghese's bestselling first book, *My Own Country: A Doctor's Story*, centers on the challenges of assimilating to life in America while treating AIDS patients in rural Tennessee. In this 2005 *New York Times* article, Verghese reflects on his encounters with traumatized refugees of Hurricane Katrina. Feeling helpless in the face of their stories of suffering, he finds that all he can say is, "I'm so sorry." This experience leads him to ponder the barriers that exist between the physically and psychically wounded and those who would help. Is "the willingness to be wounded" sometimes all that we have to offer one another?

### Questions

- *Does staying detached from the people we serve help us to serve them?*
- *How do we really know what others need?*
- *In relating to others, how do we deal with race?*

### Reflective Exercise

Think of a conversation you've had with someone who was the recipient of services or donations from you. What was this conversation like? How did it affect your experience of giving or serving?

## Where I Lived and What I Lived For (from *Walden*)

Henry David Thoreau

### Overview

Born in Concord, Massachusetts in 1817, Henry David Thoreau was one of a group of New England writers, known as the Transcendentalists, who prized a personal and intuitive approach to spiritual experience. “Where I Lived and What I Lived For” comprises the second chapter of Thoreau’s extended autobiographical work *Walden*. Here Thoreau tells why he chose to stay for two years in a small cabin near Walden Pond, alone. He criticizes the lifestyle of his day, characterizing it in ways that we might think unique to our time: news-hungry, addicted to speed, and self-deluding. In place of society’s values, he champions a more meditative and simple life rooted in the abiding rhythms of nature. The text raises questions about the tension between idealism and practicality. When our own values are at odds with the values of the culture around us, should we compromise or stand firm? At what price?

### Questions

- *Which are more important, material or spiritual needs?*
- *What does it mean to be alone?*
- *How are we connected to others?*

### Reflective Exercise

Think of someone you have met who strikes (or struck) you as being alive in some deep or full sense. What was it about this person that seemed so alive? Have you experienced this sense of being fully alive that you detected in the other person? If so, when?