

Woodson/On Being Grateful

On Being Grateful... And Honest
Hans Christian Andersen Speech
August 20, 2021

The first time my teacher read The Little Match Girl to me, I knew. I was around eight or nine years old and it was the first time in my life I had experienced a book that didn't have a happy ending. And although the ending devastated me, I knew this was what I always wanted – honesty and truth and empathy in stories. It was a Friday and this was the routine in my third grade classroom when we had been 'good'. We were gifted with the reading of a picture book by our teacher, Ms. Moskowitz. I don't remember a Friday when we weren't 'good' enough for this end of the week ritual and decades later, what I am supposing is that the reading was just as enjoyable for our teacher as it was for us.

Our desks were in rows, nailed to the floor and our chairs were attached to them. The only movement this allowed was the flipping up and down of our seats as we slid out of them. The wood was a deep brown, the legs of the desks and chairs, an ornate dark metal. I loved everything about that classroom and that school – an ancient building rumored to have once been a castle. The floors in the classroom were wide-planked and the stairs leading up to our third floor classroom were marble. Years later, the building that spanned two city blocks would be painted pink and this too was beautiful to me. In the decades to follow, New York City would come to have the highest rate of segregated schools in the country but as a child, my classrooms were still very integrated. Inside that school and inside that classroom, I didn't know that our neighborhood was considered 'underprivileged'. I didn't know our school was considered a 'failing one'. And so as I lay my head down on my desk to listen to Ms.

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Moskowitz's voice move over the classroom (I didn't care about the pictures – just the words), I sank into the saga of the Little Match Girl from my safe place inside a classroom filled with light, inside a school that felt like it had always been there waiting to harbor a student like me and inside the words of a story being read to us on Friday afternoon.

I know I don't have to tell anyone listening that at the end of the book, the little match girl dies. She dies because of poverty. She dies because of neglect. She dies because then and now, we live in a world where too often the needs of our young people go unheard. By the time Ms. Moskowitz finished reading the book, I was inconsolable. And though she tried to comfort me as she lead us in two lines out of the building, she couldn't. By the time I walked out of that building into the bright afternoon, what I knew more than anything was that I wanted to write and I wanted a different world.

After school everyday, my siblings and I, like so many kids in our neighborhood, walked the five blocks to the neighborhood public library – The Washington Irving Branch. There, we obediently did our homework and then found books to read until our parents, who worked full time, came to collect us at six o'clock in the evening. But that afternoon, instead of leaning over my homework, I went straight to the shelves and found The Little Match Girl. I thought maybe this time, there would be a happy ending. Maybe this book was different from the one our teacher had read to us. Of course the ending was the same. And yet – somehow, Mr. Andersen wrote with such a deep honesty and hope, that I read the book again and again. I wanted the world to be better and until I understood the ways in which it was broken, I would remain powerless to

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changing it. After all, I was just a kid from Brooklyn. Most days, I thought I didn't know anything. But as I read books like Andersen's The Little Match Girl, Oscar Wilde's The Selfish Giant, Jon Steptoe's Stevie, and Eloise Greenfield's She Come Bringing That Little Baby Girl,

Years later, I'd realize that there was no such thing as 'just a kid from Brooklyn. That we were/are all so much more than the place we come from, the people we love, the forces we worship, the languages we speak. That those elements of our spirit make us human and amazing. And yet, I would come to realize that even as we grow older, we are always still beginning.

And from this new beginning – after a pandemic has turned our lives upside down, after the birth of babies and the loss of loved ones and everything that happens in between birth and death, I am standing here so grateful to the committee that chose me as this year's (but is it really this year's – cuz, truly, what year *is* it?! 😊) winner of the Hans Christian Andersen Award.

It is truly a dream come true that in my hands soon, I will hold the medal from the person who launched this journey by writing honestly so that I could one day not be afraid to write honestly.

From my first novel in 1990 until today, I've tried to write truthfully about the world and with that truth speak to the hope, that above all else, must remain with us.

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Every evening at dinner, our family goes around the table and says what we're grateful for. Sometimes it's the simple things – the dogs, the garden, the sunny day. And sometimes it's the deeper stuff. This year, one of my closest friends died suddenly at 58 on the first day of his retirement. A fluke accident and the shock and loss that follow the middle of the night call. The days and months of waking up and remembering the hole in the planet where he once was. We all know these holes in the planet. They are the new wrinkles around our eyes, the gray hairs at our temples, the sadness that edges our smiles now.

But too we know the beauty. The joy when those of us who have been able to be vaccinated, sat in that chair and received that first shot. The hope of the future that might follow. The idea of being able to travel again. To hug the friends that we haven't seen in forever. To see the faces of the young people who know our work. Even when the pandemic is at its most dismal moments, there is the hope of a better day, always.

And I've tried to write always into this hope. My writing has taken me from Brooklyn to Berlin. From Pennsylvania to Palestine. And although as a young person, I stood in the bathroom mirror holding a hairbrush as a microphone and recited my Pulitzer Prize speech, I had no idea that one day the words that started in my brain would be out in the world... and beloved. That awards would follow. That one day I'd be writing this talk and accepting one of the world's greatest honors. A kid from Brooklyn – in front of you now. Grateful.

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I think of the people I've met on the journey – the friends I've made, the *ride or die* folks who I can call in the night just to hear a voice, just to hear someone say *You got, Jackie. You can do this*. I think of the way I've grown up and older with my writing buddies – how we nurtured each other's children and Zoomed and Facetimed our way through this pandemic – words and worlds that didn't exist as verbs this way when I was a kid. Or even when I was a grownup for that matter! I think of my beloved and the kids we've brought into the world – how I was pregnant with my oldest when the Towers came down on 9/11. How my son has had to bare witness to so many people who looked like him getting killed by people who were hired to protect them. How they've seen their schools closed, their proms cancelled, their smiles covered with masks. I think of how they've moved through it – Learning again how to smile with their eyes, dance outside, play board games and wear their masks like badges – or gloves on a chilly day. How what seemed so dire and heartbreaking to us as adults, are simply stones our young people have learned to hurdle, landing gently on the other side of.

How quickly they've grown up inside a community of writers and teachers and thinkers and doers, knowing the importance of community health, social justice – and gratitude.

And always, inside this world of changing ways and changing times, I carry with me the ancestors – the writers that have moved on to the next place but who – like Andersen with *The Little Match Girl* – continue to show me the way. And always – I remain grateful for the gift of words and the many of you who have supported me on this journey. The many of you who again and again have said “We see you. We understand you. Keep writing.”

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And so I will...

Thank you.

Jacqueline Woodson

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