

# Be the Match: The Importance of Teachers, Stories, and Heroes

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## Introduction

Thank you. It's always a delight to be at NCTE, with so many dear friends. And it's especially so tonight, with this opportunity to address you all here in Orlando.

At times like this, I always recall some good advice from my mother. When I was 11 or 12 years old, and was just about to give a little speech, she told me: "Don't try to sound wise, charming, or articulate. Just ... be yourself."

Tonight I want to talk about the great importance of teachers and librarians—especially in these extremely challenging times. I will also speak about the essential role of heroes, and the lasting value of stories. But first ... I'd like to give you a few highlights of my personal journey as a writer. (It's been quite a ride!)

As a youngster growing up on a ranch in Colorado, I discovered my urge to share stories—around the campfire, at the dinner table, or in my own ridiculous little magazine called *The Idiot's Odyssey*. I'd sit under a tree and just scribble away for hours.

In the years to come, I often hiked and camped, rambling through Rocky Mountain meadows so full of color that they seemed like fields of crushed rainbows. And I discovered that *nature* was more than just my favorite playground. It was also my greatest inspiration—as well as my friend, my healer, and my mentor.

My very first manuscript, which I began after college during a year of travels with my backpack around Asia and Africa, was my ticket, I hoped, to a life as a writer. It got a *great reception*: I sent it off to one publisher after another, until I'd sent it to 32 different publishers. And received—you guessed it—32 rejections. Now, rejection letters are not meant to be warm and fuzzy. Or very personal. They simply *hurt*. And I had a big, thick pile of them.

But, to be completely fair, there was one letter in that pile that was truly personal. It treated me with such kindness and dignity that, to this day, I can still quote exactly what it said. It began: "Dear Sir/Madam." They even took the trouble to circle the word 'Sir'. So personal! Then the letter continued: "Your work of fiction/nonfiction"—with a circle around 'fiction'—"does not meet our publishing standards for our Spring/Fall list." (In that case, they circled *both* Spring and Fall—just to make absolutely *sure* that I didn't miss the point.)

Well, it took me seven years to work up the courage to try again. Despite everything, I still dreamed about being a writer—especially a writer of stories for young people. During those years, I'd often wake up before dawn to write before going to work; I'd scribble in the back of taxis or during long business meetings. (Actually, I was doing character sketches of the secret lives of all those lawyers and bankers in the meeting! So if you've ever wondered where I got the inspiration for the trolls, ogres, and goblins in my books ... now you know.)

This time, however, I had two advantages going for me: first, the unqualified belief of my loving wife, Currie; and second, the encouragement of a truly marvelous writer whom I'd met in a bizarre case of serendipity, and who had, by then, become a dear friend—Madeleine L'Engle. So one fine day I surprised my business partners and quit my job in New York, then moved back to Colorado to see if I could write something that somebody might actually want to read. Well, that was twenty years ago—and twenty-four books ago. In that time, many more good things have happened than I would ever have believed possible.

Just to give you the full humor of that career change, let me tell you about the day I walked into my office and quit my job. I was president of the company, and it was the very *last* thing my partners and investors expected. One of the founding partners came up to me, looking very upset. Digging into his pocket, he pulled out a beat-up business card and handed it to me. “This is my therapist,” he said earnestly. “Call him—*right now*. Before you jump out a window or something.”

That night I had dinner with Madeleine L'Engle at her apartment on the West Side. In the midst of our conversation, she leaned across the table and declared: “You know, Tom, there are exactly *three essential rules* to writing a brilliant novel.” I almost dropped my fork, eager to hear what she'd say next. Then she went on: “Unfortunately, *no one* knows what they are.”

That piece of wisdom sums up everything about the writing experience.

One last comment about that career change: People sometimes ask me, “Wasn't it scary to leave a job, move somewhere else, and try to start a new career?” The answer is yes, of course, it's always a little scary to make any change in one's life. But those changes were not *nearly* as scary as something else—the idea of growing old, of coming to the end of my life, and wondering, “Why on Earth didn't I follow my dream?” To know my deepest passion, and then to *waste* my one precious opportunity to make that passion real—*that* was a truly terrifying prospect. Much more terrifying than any nightmare! For that's what life is all about—to *pursue* our deepest dreams, and to *grow* in whatever ways we can. If you look at life that way, it's much less scary to try and fail ... than *never* to have tried at all.

If you walk in the direction of your dreams, good things will happen. They might not be what you expected ... but you will have opened the door to serendipity. Maybe the best example I can give you of this is how I met Madeleine L'Engle.

It happened not long after I received the last of those 32 rejection letters. The words “Dear Sir/Madam” were still ringing in my ears. So I was, as you can imagine, a bit depressed—and very doubtful about the likelihood of *ever* becoming a writer. By chance, I happened to talk with a friend in Colorado, who had seen an unpublished story by one of

my favorite authors, Madeleine L'Engle. "I'll send it to you," she offered. "Maybe it will cheer you up." "Sure," I answered, not at all convinced.

A week later, in the mail, I received the story. Written on the stationery of Madeleine's publisher, FSG, it was indeed delightful. It made me smile for at least 2 or 3 seconds. As I sorted through the rest of that day's mail, however, I found an envelope addressed to me—from someone at FSG.

Just to give you a sense of my mood ... I realized, before opening it, that FSG was one of the very few publishers to whom I hadn't sent the manuscript ... so my first thought was, "Bummer! They're rejecting me *in advance*. They've heard about my manuscript and now they want to reject it before they ever see it!"

But I was wrong. To my astonishment, it was actually a letter to me—from Madeleine L'Engle. Written on the stationery of FSG, it read: "Dear Tom Barron, I have heard from our mutual friend that you would like to write books, but haven't found any success with publishers. I thought you'd like to know that my book, *A Wrinkle in Time*, was rejected by 42 publishers before it was finally accepted." (My immediate thought was—hey, that's ten more tries! Who knows what might happen?) She went on to say, in a soaring conclusion, "Keep writing, keep trying. And if you persevere, I promise that you, too, will find your voice."

I was ecstatic. The first thing I did was call my friend in Colorado to tell her the good news, but she wasn't at home. So I called ... everyone else I knew. I called my parents, my college roommate, my friends near and far. I even read the letter aloud to the doorman in my apartment building. Finally, I caught up with my friend in Colorado and told her the wonderful news. I jabbered on and on ... but strangely, she was totally silent. So I stopped and asked, "Is anything wrong?" She sighed, then answered, "I just didn't think you were that gullible."

That's right: *forgery*. Major forgery! She had copied the letterhead of the FSG stationery and written the letter—as a joke. I was stunned. For several weeks, I walked around with a dark cloud over my head. Then, one night ... I realized there was, in fact, a silver lining: Because of this terrible hoax, I now knew the address of one of my favorite writers. So I sat down and wrote her a letter:

"Dear Madeleine L'Engle, This is a thank-you letter—first, for all the wonderful books you have written; and second, for the warm and encouraging letter you wrote me, which is attached. Now, you may not remember writing it, because in fact, you didn't. But it sure sounded like you. And it gave me exactly the hopeful message I needed. You see, I have always wanted to write books ... but instead, I'm stuck in New York, wearing a business suit. And so if you are ever in New York, I would be deeply honored to take you to lunch."

Then I added: "P. S. If you *do* answer this letter ... *please* have your signature notarized. I just can't handle going through all this again!"

Never in a million years did I expect an answer. But it did feel good to write the letter. Three weeks went by. Then, to my surprise, I received a postcard. It read: “Dear Tom Barron, I *live* in New York. Call this number, and let’s have lunch.” Signed: Madeleine L’Engle—*signature notarized*.

We did have lunch—which lasted 7 whole hours. And that began a wonderful friendship for which I’m deeply grateful. Long live serendipity ... and notarized signatures!

### **Be the Match**

Now ... a few words about teaching—arguably the greatest profession, the highest calling, anyone could have. And first, to set the stage, I’d like to tell you a story:

Two years ago, I travelled to Africa with my daughter—to Rwanda, home of the world’s last surviving mountain gorillas. One night, we happened to meet a wonderful man named Nsengi Barakabuyé who leads the country’s largest national park, devoted to protecting the gorillas and all the other species who live in the rain forest. As we sat together around a campfire, which crackled and sent sparks spiraling up into the African night, I asked Nsengi, “What made you decide to devote your life to conservation? To try to save all these creatures?”

His answer was simple: “A teacher.”

“When I was young,” he explained, “I was afraid of the forest. Like everyone else in my village, I didn’t want to go there. It was a dark place. A scary place.”

“Then,” he said, “a teacher came to my village. I don’t remember her name or where she came from. But I do remember *everything* she said about the forest and its strange and beautiful creatures. She showed us pictures. She helped us draw maps. And then she took us for our first walk in the place we had so long feared.”

Firelight danced on his face as he concluded: “I was the tinder ... and *she was the match*.” Then he added: “*And I have been on fire ever since*.”

*That* is the power of a teacher. To kindle the fires of others—fires that can keep burning and glowing bright for a *lifetime*. It is a power *even greater* than the magic of Merlin!

Let us be the match. Let us light a young person’s fires of creativity, curiosity, and passion to learn. *Be the match*.

### **The Teacher’s Challenge**

*Not so fast*, some of you may object. Teaching has never been so difficult and full of obstacles as it is today. How can you possibly “be the match” if society is constantly piling up more and more challenges and giving you less and less resources?

These are, indeed, extremely tough times for educators. So let's start right out by saying what does *not* help our children:

Forcing teachers to teach to tests all day long. Quite simply: *That doesn't cut it.* As Einstein said so well: "Not everything that counts can be counted; not everything that can be counted counts."

Closing libraries; firing teachers and librarians. *That doesn't cut it.*

Forgetting about the importance of multi-cultural and global literature. Or any literature! *That doesn't cut it.*

Ignoring the need for genuine critical literacy—in this age when opinions and distortions are too often disguised as facts. *That doesn't cut it.*

And finally ... losing track of a teacher's greatest role: To light those matches that kindle the fires of young people's love of learning. If that role gets shoved aside ... *that just doesn't cut it.*

At a deeper level, the problem is this: Too many people in our society have forgotten the essential wisdom of thinking about *future generations* in everything we do. We see this problem every day in the media, in the forces of materialism, in political attack ads, in short-term profiteering, in the culture of "me, me, me."

By contrast, education is *all about* investing in future generations. And many teachers, thankfully, haven't forgotten that!

That's good, because the stakes today are higher than ever. Far too many kids feel alienated and powerless. It's up to us—everyone who cares about the future of our youth—to help them realize that they do, in fact, have power. That their choices really do matter—and that, *if their choices matter, then they themselves matter.*

To convey this idea to young people, we have two tremendously valuable tools: the inspiring power of heroes; and the enduring power of stories. First, let's focus on heroes.

### **The Power of Heroes**

In this journey we take together called Life, our heroes are our guides. They have walked a similar path, faced similar struggles. They show us, by example, just how *far* we can go, how *high* we can climb. And they show us that every action—no matter how small—can make a difference.

Conveying this idea is certainly made harder because of our celebrity-oriented culture. The truth is—as a society, we are massively confused about *the difference between a hero and a celebrity.* And the difference is enormous: celebrities are about superficial qualities that lead to fame. Heroes, by contrast, are about *deeper* qualities—qualities of character, such as courage, compassion, perseverance, and hope.

And unsung heroes are all around us—people of all descriptions who are quietly holding our world together. Not because they want any fame or fortune, but simply because they want to help. They are teachers, librarians, parents, neighbors, and friends—whose courage and compassion, hope and devotion, help young people every single day.

*Shhhh*, listen ... and you can hear the sound of *millions of matches* being struck.

Yet lots of young people don't know that—and don't believe in their *own* power. All this became clear for me about 12 years ago, while I was on a book tour, somewhere in Ohio. That day I spoke to a big high school, in the school gym, about all the fictional heroes in my books—ranging from young Merlin to Kate Gordon to a tiny little fellow who becomes the greatest dragon of all times. After my speech, one young woman came up and said, “Your books are okay, I guess. But I know how it *really* works.”

“Oh?” I answered jokingly. “Do tell! I have no idea at all how it really works.”

But she didn't smile. She merely said, “People like you write all these books about kids who do something special—who save their family, or their town, or even their world. But that stuff only happens in fairy tales! It *never* happens in the real world.” Then she added: “In the real world, kids don't mean squat.”

She turned and walked away, leaving me stunned. For the rest of that book tour, and the whole way back to Colorado, I thought about her ... and the many kids like her. And I realized that what those kids need is something stronger than fictional heroes—they need real, live heroes. Young heroes.

That was the day I decided to found the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes—named after my mother, who was a hero in my own life. Each year, the Prize honors 25 diverse, public-spirited kids who are making a difference. They are all ages, genders, ethnic backgrounds, and economic circumstances. The winners get a scholarship for their higher education or their service project.

It's really just a small thing, this prize—but its sole purpose is to turn the spotlight on these courageous, outstanding kids ... so their examples might inspire others.

Something else you should know: Most of the kids who win the Prize were originally inspired ... by a *teacher*. Someone who lit their fires, who fanned their flames.

Let me quickly introduce you to a few of our winners:

[Show the trailer for the documentary film *Dream Big*, which profiles 7 diverse winners of the Prize.]

[Optional: Also show the film segment on one winner, such as Sean Henry.]

If you'd like to have a free copy of this documentary film and helpful discussion guide—just pick them up at the back of this auditorium.

Also, you might enjoy my nonfiction book, *The Hero's Trail*, which profiles over 100 young heroes from all backgrounds. And the stories of those kids, believe me, will renew your hope! In any case ... I hope you will use these materials with your students ... and light some fires!

Mind you, this won't be easy. Today's young people are literally bombarded with media messages that are, at best, superficial—and, at worst, demeaning. In addition to the celebrity culture, they are constantly urged to buy things from advertisers who view young people as merely a target market—not as our future. The underlying message in this commercial onslaught is: Your worth as a person comes from what you drink, or wear, or drive. Not *who you really are down inside*.

We need to help our children know that they are not just “consumers”—that they are, in fact, *creators*. Yes, creators—of their own lives. Their own future. Their own world.

We must help them understand that they can light a fire in themselves, and in the people around them. That they, too, can *be the match*.

To give youngsters a sense of their own power, I sometimes tell a story about a girl ... and a starfish:

*A girl lived by the sea. Every morning she would walk along the shore, and every morning she would discover something new that the ocean waves had washed up the night before. It might be a beautiful shell, a gnarled piece of driftwood, or a twisted knot of kelp. But one morning, after a great storm at sea, she found starfish—thousands and thousands of starfish. They covered the shore, so many she couldn't take a single step without crushing them. And she knew that those starfish would die very soon—unless they were returned to the water.*

*But how? There were so many of them! The problem was so vast. And she was just one person—and a small person, at that. What could she possibly do that could make a difference?*

*She bent down and picked up one lone starfish. Holding it against the sky, she admired its delicate beauty. Yet what could she possibly do to help these creatures survive?*

*Just then a boy who also lived by the sea came walking by. He saw her holding the starfish, and guessed exactly what she was thinking. He exclaimed: “What? Are you crazy? You can't possibly help! There are just too many. There is no way you can make a difference.”*

*What did that girl do? She turned toward the waves and threw the starfish into the sea. It landed with a splash. Then she turned back to the boy and said quietly, “Well ... I made a difference to that one.”*

Every action matters. Every starfish matters. Every child matters.

Sometimes I have a heart-to-heart talk with a young person who already understands that each person is a bundle of positive energy, but who is wondering what to do with that energy—what to do with his or her life.

In those conversations, I always ask two simple questions: First of all, look deep *inside* and ask, “*What do I really love?*” Second, look *outside* and ask, “*What does the world need?*” Then take the answers to those two questions—what you love and what the world needs—and put them together. The result is ... a truly *wonderful* life.

## **The Power of Stories**

Allow me to finish with a few thoughts about the power of stories. All of us have been deeply touched—as well as changed—by the great stories we have encountered. You can’t read a book like *The Lord of the Rings*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, or *The Once and Future King* without being profoundly affected. For a lifetime. As if we’d been set aflame ... by an incandescent match.

Beyond the sheer beauty of such stories—their rollicking adventures, their poetic language, their unforgettable characters—they have one more gift for us to experience: a big idea. A moral question or an important truth about life, with all its triumph and tragedy. The fact is—the most powerful way to convey an idea is in the vehicle of a story.

Now, such ideas must be thoroughly, completely embedded in the story—just as heat and light are one with a flame. Even the slightest hint of preachiness will turn off young readers in a flash. Rightly so!

But if an idea or question about life is genuinely embedded—it gives the story much more depth. Much more *heat*. And that idea will lodge in the hearts and minds of readers.

That is why stories cross all the boundaries that we humans too often erect to divide ourselves—boundaries of language or geography, time or culture. And that is also why so many people around the world have shared their most fundamental beliefs and most cherished ideals through stories—from Native American tales, to Polynesian legends, to ancient African stories, to the Greek myths, to Chinese lore, to Biblical imagery, to Celtic ballads.

In my own small way, as a writer, I have tried to warm my stories with such ideas. Here are a few brief examples:

In *The Lost Years of Merlin*, the first book of the 12-book Merlin Saga, a lone boy washes ashore on a harsh coastline. He is half-drowned, barely alive, so weak he can’t even open his eyes to see the seagulls screeching overhead. Then he realizes that he has experienced something even worse than surviving a shipwreck and almost drowning: He has lost all his memory. Every last bit of it. So he doesn’t know who he is, who his parents were, or where he came from. He doesn’t even know *his own name*.

This boy has no home, no identity, no name. Yet he does have *something*: a special quality down inside. Call it courage. Or heroism. Or ... magic. And when (over the next



several books) that boy grows more strong and wise, so does his magic—until, at last, he becomes Merlin: the mage of Camelot, the mentor of King Arthur ... and the greatest wizard of all times.

Here is the opening passage of *The Lost Years of Merlin*, as the ancient wizard thinks back to that fateful day he washed ashore:

*If I close my eyes, and breathe to the rolling rhythm of the sea, I can still remember that long-ago day. Harsh, cold, and lifeless it was—as empty of promise as my lungs were empty of air.*

*Since that day, I have seen many others, more than I have the strength left to count. Yet that one day glows brighter than all the rest ... even though it began in darkness.*

*You see ... I was just seven years old on that day I washed ashore.*

The big idea of this story? That all of us, at some point in life, feel washed ashore. And that every child, no matter how lost or alone, has some special magic down inside. The magic of Merlin.

By the way, I'd like to announce some marvelous news: Penguin's Puffin Books division has now republished all 12 books in the Merlin Saga. This includes *The Lost Years of Merlin* quintet, the *Merlin's Dragon* trilogy, and *The Great Tree of Avalon* trilogy—plus a special, illustrated companion volume (with the secret back stories of hundreds of characters and places) called *Merlin: The Book of Magic*. Nobody is more amazed than I am that this is the completion of a 17-year process! (Although I'm sure that Merlin, wherever he is right now, had this planned all along.)

Another example of story ideas is the Kate trilogy: *The Ancient One*, *Heartlight*, and *The Merlin Effect*. In these three tales, my feisty teenage girl Kate Gordon has some rather unusual travels. She goes back in time through a magical redwood tree to find a lost Native American tribe (in *The Ancient One*); out to a distant galaxy to save our world from destruction (in *Heartlight*); and down to the bottom of the sea in search of a mysterious sunken treasure ship guarded by a group of ever-singing whales (in *The Merlin Effect*).

The big idea of this trilogy? It's really a question: Are we all *connected* somehow—across time, distance, culture, gender ... and even across species? Young readers won't hear any answers from me. But I hope to inspire them to find those answers for themselves.

You will find this sort of underlying question or idea in all my stories, regardless of genre—from the slimmest picture book, to the chapter book *Tree Girl*, to my sprawling trilogies like *The Great Tree of Avalon*. Allow me, though, to give you just one more example: *Merlin's Dragon*.

In this trilogy, you will meet my *most unlikely* hero—a tiny little creature with crumpled wings who spends all his days running and hiding, trying to avoid the bigger creatures who want to eat him, crush him, or otherwise abuse him. Yet this tiny little

fellow—whose name is Basil, because he often hides under the leaf of a basil plant and takes on its scent—has big dreams. And a brave heart. And when he miraculously saves the life of the great wizard Merlin, who is now fully grown, Merlin gives him *a body as great as his heart*. That is how Basil becomes Basilgarrad—the greatest dragon of all times, who is as big as a mountain, whose wings stretch across entire realms, and whose every last drop of bravery will be needed to save his world.

The big idea? It comes in a very small package—Basil himself. It reminds us that even the smallest among us are capable of great courage ... and great love. After all, a match is rather tiny—but its flame gives us both heat and light.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, let me tell you a little story. It will, I hope, give you a sense of everything we've talked about: the importance of teachers, the power of heroes, and the lasting value of stories.

This comes from *The Mirror of Merlin*, Book Four in the Merlin Saga. In this book, young Merlin bravely goes to the most frightening place on the isle of Fincayra: the Haunted Marsh. There he discovers a magical mirror that just might reveal his true destiny. If it doesn't kill him first. When he finally faces the mirror, he finds himself staring at the last thing he ever expected—his elder self. In a cave of glowing crystals, beside a magical harp, he meets the ancient wizard Merlin.

Now, this is more than just the meeting of two people—or two times in the life of one person. It is also the meeting of *youthful ideals*, burdened with anger and frustration—and *ancient wisdom*, tinged with sadness and loss.

Young Merlin is deeply upset because all his highest ideals—everything he's been trying to do to save his world—seems destined to fail. He wonders what was the point of it all, the point of his life.

Old Merlin, meanwhile, is terribly sad about all he has lost in his many years—his home, his dearest friends, his life's true love. And yet ... there is still a spark of something else in his eye. Something like *hope*. And it *burns* ... like a match.

He reaches out his big, wrinkled hand and places it on the young man's shoulder. Then he says: "*Know this, young wizard. Camelot, our beloved realm, may fail to last. Yet even so, it may still survive—not as a place, but as an idea. For it may yet find a home ... in the heart.*"

He pauses, peering straight into the young man's eyes, then adds: "*A life—whether seamstress or poet, farmer or king—is measured not by its length ... but by the worth of its deeds, and the power of its dreams.*"

\* \* \*

Never forget the importance of your work as educators. Even though it doesn't always feel that way—the world needs you. Our young people need you. We all need you.

And never forget—the most *significant* things you do may be the *smallest* things you do—daily acts of kindness, generosity, creativity, and love.

Small things—so normal you might not even remember you did them.

Small things—so natural you might not consider them at all extraordinary.

Small things—like ... *lighting a match*.

So ... *be the match*. And burn bright!