Tough Talk, Tough Texts

Teaching English to Change the World

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For Beth, Cam, and Rebecca,

world's greatest thinking partners

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Chapter 2

Rehearsals for Social Change

Why Teaching Tough Texts Is Worth the Trouble

We completely underestimate the power of human conversation to change the world.

—**MARGARET WHEATLEY**

Teaching students how to engage in civil discourse sounded like trouble waiting to happen, a teacher recently insisted at a workshop I led. Tough texts were too heavy and complex, too dark for young readers to deal with. Why focus on them intentionally, she wanted to know. Why not make classrooms a place where innocence is preserved rather than tested? Aren't students becoming too jaded already?

They might be in some instances, I acknowledged, but I also made the case that students' cynicism is not the result of difficult questions posed, but of difficult questions posed and then banished from conversation. Living with three adolescents under my own roof for the past ten years, I know that thorny issues are as much part and parcel of adolescent life today as they are a part of the larger world. Sweeping them out of the classroom rather than acknowledging that they exist does our students a disservice. Besides, the tough texts that I recommend in this book emphasize the great strength and resilience humans, especially adolescents, are capable of demonstrating in response to the challenges they face. Even when the characters in them are in great difficulty, these texts offer the sharp relief of hope. As Jerome Bruner put it, narratives "worth telling and worth construing are typically born in trouble" (1996, 142).

The same might be said about some other tough texts we all hold dear. A recent exhibit at the Library of Congress, *Creating the United States*, provided a look at how the nation's founding documents were produced. Of all the documents, I was most fascinated to see the rough draft of the Constitution. Prior to seeing it, I'd never expected to see the words *rough draft* and *Constitution* in the same sentence. In fact I'd always imagined it being handed down from on high, much the way Moses received the Ten Commandments; but the manuscript showed evidence of hard labor. Thomas Jefferson's flowing hand was rife with strikethroughs. Carets indicated where to insert additional words and phrases. Brackets marked places where alternative wording might be in order. Comments and suggestions in the handwriting of Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and other members of the Continental Congress appeared vertically in the margins.

Standing in front of the document, I imagined Thomas Jefferson handing the draft to Benjamin Franklin, who pored over it later that evening by lamplight, quill pen in hand. I could picture the negotiations that occurred the next day with Jefferson and his fellow writers as they painstakingly worded the principles that would guide a nation. Admittedly, my first thought when I saw the draft was "killer writing group"! On further reflection, however, I realized, as I never had before, that this textual evidence and the other documents that surround it reveal that the bedrock of our democracy was forged in grand conversation. In 1776 and many times since, tough talk about tough texts has indisputably changed the world. Although it's sometimes hard to see beyond all the baggy pants, disheveled hair, and lip gloss and imagine who our students will become, our nation's future leaders are sitting in someone's classroom at this very moment. Who's to say it isn't yours?

Kelly Gallagher cites literary theorist and philosopher Kenneth Burke's 1968 argument that the value in reading books for young people (and, I would argue, for all of us) lies in providing "imaginative rehearsals" for participating in the wider world. Using *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a case in point, Gallagher argues:

> Reading and discussing Lee's novel enables students to make connections between the issues illustrated in the novel and the issues found in their world. It gives them the opportunity to read, to write, and to argue about these issues in a modern context. We do not want our students only to read stories; we want them to read novels to make

> them wiser about the world. We want to take advantage of the imaginative rehearsals that great literature provides before our students reach adulthood. (2009, 69)

I firmly believe that teaching tough texts *is* worth the trouble. In addition to acknowledging questions and issues many adolescents are likely to face in their own lives, tough texts offer many other benefits for adolescent readers. They stretch students intellectually and teach them to forge empathic connections with texts and one another that also have consequences for the culture at large. In other words, tough texts not only allow the imaginative rehearsals Burke and Gallagher describe as possible, but they also allow students to engage in civil discourse to create a more socially just world.

The Academic Benefits of Reading and Responding to Tough Texts

Time and again, reluctant readers, especially in high school, have told me that the tough text they just finished was the first (and best) book that they had read in years or perhaps ever. A few years back, six boys reading *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky 1999) in Beth's alternative high school class told me at their second book club meeting that they were struggling not to abandon the reading schedule they had agreed to, not because they fell behind but because they couldn't put the book down. One of the boys, Gerald, who later told Beth that *Perks* was the first book he had read in four years, began the discussion that day by telling the group that he had to hide the book under a pile of clothes in his room the night before so that he could get the rest of his homework done.

Beth and I had feared this group might have trouble staying on task, but our fears proved unfounded. Instead, the boys routinely wowed us by demonstrating the moves of sophisticated readers. They discussed the plot, yes, but they also read closely, analyzed character believability and the author's stylistic techniques, made connections to their own experiences, and used the book as a lens for critiquing adolescent culture and exploring cultural issues. In one discussion, they astutely analyzed Charlie, the main character of *Perks*, as well as tackling a range of topics as wide as homosexuality, the nature of truth, the effect of first-person point of view on the narrator's relationship with the reader, and the question of whether or not conventional science is primarily descriptive or

theoretical—all in the span of a half-hour discussion, mind you, *and* they did so without leaving the book behind.

Because it's impossible to examine a facilely constructed book in such a manner, this anecdote should make clear that one of the academic benefits of reading tough texts is immersion in literary quality. An added and not inconsequential bonus is that kids will willingly read them (or devour them, in the case of Gerald's book club). I've seen this phenomenon recur countless times over the years in Cam's and Rebecca's classrooms as well, and I believe I know why. Despite the challenging nature of tough texts and their inclusion of culturally sensitive topics, they often feature young narrators like Charlie and his friends with whom students are likely to connect.

It's no accident that many of these books are young adult texts. Young adult (YA) literature has suffered a bad rap over the years, sometimes seen as inferior in quality to classic literature. Even though these criticisms were arguably justifiable at one time, the literary complexity of YA literature overall has increased dramatically in the past couple of decades at the same time that its subject matter has remained compelling. Since the 1980s, plots have grown more reliably complex, the structures more experimental, the settings more realistic, and the characters more layered. Betty Carter comments that today's YA literature consists of "sophisticated, edgy books about issues that reflect today's more complex society and culture" (2000, 9), and Teri Lesesne points out that the "new YA literature tests kids' mettle as it pushes them to think critically and respond personally" (2007, 63). When we assign YA texts, then, we can be confident of the academic benefits they confer. (Notable exceptions include series books like Goosebumps and Gossip Girl, which might be fine for recreational reading but are too facile to make the cut as tough texts.)

It would be a mistake to limit tough texts to YA literature, however. Even though all YA literature features adolescents in prominent roles, all books with adolescent characters are not considered YA literature. The area between YA and more mainstream fiction has become increasingly gray. Consider *Sky Bridge*, by Laura Pritchett, for instance, another book Beth Lewis's high school students read in book clubs. The novel tells the story of Libby, a young woman who decides to adopt her sister Tess's newborn daughter when Tess skips town a few days after giving birth. Although *Sky Bridge* was a Top Ten Pick for *School Library Journal*, it also received a WILLA Award in the category of contemporary fiction for adults. Named after Willa Cather, the WILLA honors outstanding stories that

feature women and that are set in the West. Pritchett did not, however, write the book with a young adult audience in mind (personal conversation, 2008).

When I asked Laura what she made of the fact that she had apparently written a crossover book, she said that in some ways she was not surprised. After all, coming-of-age stories like Salinger's *Franny and Zooey* have appealed to both adult and young adult audiences for some time. As our conversation continued, however, we came to the conclusion that *Sky Bridge*, like other tough texts, defies the traditional coming-of-age label. For although the main characters are definitely headed somewhere developmentally by the end of the book, they haven't arrived yet. We speculated that this is perhaps because one typically comes of age not just once during adolescence but several times over in the course of growing up in our culture. In contemporary life, multiple rites of passage exist. Likewise, in tough texts, while the main character's outlook has definitely changed by the conclusion of the book, readers are unlikely to find any neat-and-tidy resolution. In its place more often than not is the *hope* that one will eventually occur.

Because Laura lives near Beth's school, we were able to invite her to be a guest speaker in Beth's class near the end of one semester. Her discussion with the students confirmed that tough texts eschew a formulaic structure in favor of literary complexity sans the easy ending. In the case of *Sky Bridge*, Laura explained that this unfinished sense at the end of the novel made it feel true to her when she wrote it, rather than "sappy like a Hallmark card." While life does not always have a happy ending, she said, "Things can get better. But in real life, you have to fight for them to get better like Libby did."

Hannah, one of the girls who had read *Sky Bridge* in Beth's class, told Laura that this was the very thing that kept her up reading all night until she finished the book: "After what happened to Libby [she is the victim of date rape], I just couldn't leave her there. I had to get to something hopeful." Another student, Carter, chimed in about a similar theme in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, observing that "even when lots of bad things happen, you just have to move on."

Whether we look for tough texts within or beyond the field of YA literature, we have lots of choices. As long as the texts we're considering feature adolescent characters with whom we suspect our students will connect and are of high literary quality, we can choose from among those written specifically for young readers (e.g., *Heaven*, *The Bridge to Terabithia*, *Looking for Alaska*); books written about them but aimed more generally at adult readers (e.g., *Life of Pi*, *The*

Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime); and books the authors themselves are reluctant to categorize (e.g., *The Golden Compass*, *Postcards from No Man's Land*). Recently, as I was browsing in an airport bookstore, I noticed that *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* was shelved in both adult and YA fiction; the same was true for both the *Golden Compass* and Hunger Games series. This crossover between YA literature and mainstream fiction is good news for us as teachers because it allows us not only to widen our search for tough texts but also to select texts that up the academic ante: students are guaranteed to encounter subtleties of style, nuanced characters, and plots with believable though often ambiguous endings. As a result, as Laura Pritchett noted with *Sky Bridge*, a chief characteristic of tough texts is that they "read true."

Another good example of a book that reads true is *Looking for Alaska*, John Green's 2005 story of the awkward young narrator Pudge's experiences in an Alabama boarding school. Among other things, these experiences include underage drinking and smoking, sex, the capacity of religion to address life's most difficult questions, class conflict, and death. Two of the most difficult topics that Green addresses in the book, however, are drunk driving and suicide. While the book does show the tragic consequences that can result when adolescents engage in risky behavior, Green comes across as anything but trite. Rather, we identify with Pudge as he deals with the glorious "before" of being accepted in a circle of friends for the first time in his life, and we suffer with him as he searches for answers in the ambiguous "after" following his friend's death. Green actually titles the first half of the book "Before" and the second half "After," thus structurally reinforcing the messy impact of life-changing events. Pudge's journey is a struggle that is funny, poignant, and heart-wrenching by turns. Ultimately, *Looking for Alaska* is simultaneously hopeful and realistic.

Over the years, Beth, Cam, and Rebecca have used the following titles as a natural inroad into teaching students how to become more accomplished readers of challenging books:

Tough Texts in Cam's Sixth-Grade Class

Almond, David. *Skellig*.
Johnson, Angela. *Heaven*.
Lowry, Lois. *The Giver*.
Lowry, Lois. *Gathering Blue*.

Paterson, Katherine. *Bridge to Terabithia.*
Philbrick, Rodman. *The Last Book in the Universe.*
Spinelli, Jerry. *Loser.*
Spinelli, Jerry. *Wringer.*

Tough Texts in Rebecca's Tenth-Grade Pre-AP English Class

Alvarez, Julia. *In the Time of the Butterflies.*
Anderson, M. T. *Feed.*
Chambers, Aidan. *Postcards from No Man's Land.*
Haddon, Mark. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime.*
Martel, Yann. *Life of Pi.*
Paton, Alan. *Cry the Beloved Country.*
Pullman, Philip. *The Golden Compass.*
Rosoff, Meg. *How I Live Now.*
Stratton, Allan. *Chanda's Secrets.*
Vijayaraghavan, Vineeta. *Motherland.*

Tough Texts in Beth's Multiage High School English Class

Alexie, Sherman. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian.*
Anderson, M. T. *Feed.*
Chbosky, Steven. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower.*
Evslin, Bernard. *Heroes, Gods, and Monsters of the Greek Myths.*
Green, John. *Looking for Alaska.*
Mikaelsen, Ben. *Touching Spirit Bear.*
Porter, Connie. *Imani All Mine.*
Pritchett, Laura. *Sky Bridge.*
Salinger, J. D. *Catcher in the Rye.*

It's not just the literary quality of tough texts like these that confer academic benefits; it's also what you teach students to do with them. In a typical civil discourse sequence (CDS), students will write a great deal, critique literary quality, use technology, and compose sophisticated multimodal interpretations of texts, all the while engaging in civil discourse. Beth refers to this combination of response strategies and assignments as "sneaky teaching" because it allows teachers to provide support as needed without "killing the books" in the process. As a result, students are able to dig into complex texts and generate well-developed interpretations that both synthesize and build on their responses over time.

In so doing, students practice critical thinking, as Freire describes it, moving far beyond mere skill acquisition to "the development of critical curiosity and thought" (2004, 93).

The Emotional and Social Benefits of Reading and Responding to Tough Texts

In addition to helping students grow academically, tough texts also contribute to their emotional and social development. Monique, one of Beth's students, demonstrates the emotional impact of Connie Porter's book *Imani All Mine* when she talks about the main character, Tasha, who is an African American teenage mother:

> For some reason reading about it and actually getting attached to the character and learning the character and everything, it's a lot harder. . . . In real life you just see it, and you just see the aftermath. You don't see how their life was before and how it affects them and devastates them. You just see, oh well, somebody got killed. You don't feel that emotion from it because you don't personally know them, and you don't personally know their mind and everything like that.

Monique's comments make it clear that even though she is white and lives nowhere near the inner city, this tough text has helped her read with empathy. In fact, she claims to have a stronger reaction to the tragic events that befall Tasha, the fictional African American, than she has to many real-life events. Having "known the mind" of Tasha through reading, Monique talks about her as if she is real, saying "I was so mad at her, so frustrated" when Tasha becomes pregnant again at the end of the book after her daughter Imani is killed in a drive-by shooting.

Monique's response confirms Robert Coles's claim that novels can remind students of "life's contingencies; and in so doing, they take matters of choice and commitment more seriously than they might otherwise have done" (1989, 90). This is exactly why Monique found the endings of both *Imani All Mind* and *Looking for Alaska* frustrating—not because she found them unrealistic but because they were "so devastating, so hard to read." Yet she framed her emotional involvement as "the sign of a good book" and insisted that both books were good book club choices for students who are "mature enough to read them."

Psychologist and novelist Keith Oatley provides insight into why books like *Imani All Mine* can help students like Monique develop the practice of empathy. Oatley draws on recent brain research and a study analyzing adults' responses to films to show the capacity for art to prompt the empathy for which the human brain is hardwired. He claims that in addition to identifying on a basic level with characters in fiction and films,

> we can start to extend ourselves into situations we have never experienced, feel for people very different from ourselves, and begin to understand such people in ways we may never have thought possible. . . . [A]rt is capable of inducing one of the most profound aspects of empathy: the ability to sensitize us to the emotions of other people, transcending the limits of our own experiences and perspectives. (2005, 14)

Oatley's insights explain why Monique and so many other students from Beth's, Cam's, and Rebecca's classrooms made similarly intense connections to characters in the tough texts they were reading. Regardless of how different the characters' circumstances are from their own, students formed intense emotional bonds with them. Something resonated, and they were able to "take the books to heart" (Coles 1989, 63).

As a result, students like Monique often inadvertently develop new communities of readers by encouraging others to read the books they have loved. Monique's book club members, as well as other students in Beth's class, had such enthusiastic responses to their tough texts, they even recommended them to their teachers. Beth said that in her many years of teaching, she has never had faculty members knocking on her door to check out books that kids were recommending. Since the word has gotten around, these books have become part of an unofficial canon at Beth's school, and students throughout the school now belong to an informal community of readers. Because many students new to Beth's class have already read *Imani All Mine* and other tough texts from her curriculum based entirely on word-of-mouth recommendations from their peers, they have charged her with finding some more books that are "just as good, but that we haven't read yet." Good problem.

Monique's willingness to recommend *Imani All Mine* to others arose from the book's ability to help her see a world that contrasted with her own through the main character Tasha's eyes. The response strategies Monique learned in tandem

with *Imani All Mine* helped her to respond to Tasha and to her peers who were also reading the book in empathic ways, even when they didn't see eye-to-eye. She summed up her reaction to her book club experience by saying that "even though the book is kind of disheartening, you know it kind of hurts to read it a little bit, it does open your eyes to a different perspective, and it's definitely pretty nice to read."

Monique's comments demonstrate how tough texts enable readers to have the *doubly dialogic* experience of measuring their own take on controversial issues against others' perspectives, both those of the book's characters and those of their peers. Numerous theorists, including Rosenblatt, Vygotsky, Bakhtin, and Freire, have commented on the dialogic nature of engaged reading that requires the reader to forge a temporary relationship with the author. Because this relationship is a conversation of sorts, the author's voice matters. That is, the reader must heed Rosenblatt's (1978/1994) warning not to leave the text behind and get lost in one's own reactions to it. Freire likewise advises the reader to make "a determined effort not to betray the author's spirit" (1998, 30). Dialogue with an author's rendering of a text can thus result in "perceptive encounters . . . [that] can bring human beings in touch with themselves" (Greene 1977, 124).

Because other points of view can function as additional "texts" for consideration, tough talk enables a *doubly dialogic* experience by extending the author-reader conversation to fellow readers as well. Freire emphasizes

> the need for reading . . . as a dialogic experience in which the discussion of the text undertaken by different readers clarifies, enlightens, and creates group comprehension of what has been read. Deep down, group reading brings about the emergence of different *points of view* that, as they become exposed to each other, enrich the production of text comprehension. (1998, 30)

By reading tough texts, students learn to grapple personally with subjects, themes, and issues that figure large in characters' lives as well as our contemporary culture. By discussing tough texts, they also figure out how to engage in civil discourse—that is, to consider the perspectives of their peers in respectful, productive ways. In a very real sense, then, reading tough texts is an activity that is perhaps best tried in the company of others, because it requires that students move beyond the "closed circle of their own minds" (Freire 1998, 10).

Forging empathic connections with texts and peers undoubtedly provides social and emotional benefits for students, but recent work has suggested that these sophisticated moves also help them grow intellectually. In *Understanding by Design*, Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe include empathy as one of the six facets of understanding along with explanation, interpretation, application, perspective, and self-knowledge. They explain that empathy

> is not simply an affective response or sympathy over which we have little control, but the disciplined attempt to feel as others feel, to see as others see. . . . [I]ntellectual empathy is essential if we are to make sense of ideas that we too quickly reject because of our assumptions. All scholars need empathy. (2005, 98–99)

Likewise, Ellin Oliver Keene (2008) identifies empathy as one of the key outcomes of deep understanding and describes various cognitive strategies to help students experience empathy for literary characters, settings, conflicts, authors, and in general.

I have no doubt that you've experienced empathy as a reader (otherwise, you wouldn't be an English teacher), so you probably have a good understanding of it as an individual, internal process. You may be less clear, however, about what empathic reading looks like in small-group discussion, so I want to offer an example from Cameron's sixth-grade classroom. You'll remember from Chapter 1 that Cam teaches in Belton Plains, a rural community known for its ideological conservatism. During one book club, his students tackled the topic of religion as prompted by their reaction to Katherine Paterson's novel *The Bridge to Terabithia*.

The group was discussing the chapter "Easter," in which Leslie, one of the book's central characters, reflects on her first time attending her friend Jess's church. Unlike Jess and his sisters, Leslie doesn't view the Bible as literally true, instead seeing the account of Jesus's death and resurrection as a "kind of beautiful story—like Abraham Lincoln or Socrates—or Aslan" of the *Chronicles of Narnia* (Paterson 1977/1987, 84). When one of Cam's students said that she saw the Bible as Leslie did because that was how she had been brought up at home, the other book club members were as shocked as Jess and his sisters. Initially, they clammed up, until Cam, who happened to be walking by about that time and overheard the discussion, dropped in on the group briefly and asked, "So what are you going to do about the elephant in the room?" Silence. Cam gently

prompted the students to refer to their book club norms to remind themselves about how they had decided to deal with difficult topics, and then he moved on to listen in other groups.

After reviewing their norms together (and undoubtedly screwing up their courage), the other students in the book club also described how their respective upbringings had influenced their views on the Bible and religion in general. The contributions made by one of the students, an English language learner named Jaime, were especially interesting. On one of my previous visits to the classroom, Cam had explained that he would be especially curious to see how Jaime participated in book clubs. Although bright and capable, and despite Cam's encouragement, Jaime was reluctant to take part in whole-class discussions because he was self-conscious about making a verbal mistake. During book clubs, Cameron was pleased to notice that Jaime participated far more than he did in discussions undertaken by the whole class.

On the day religion came up, the group had chosen Jaime to be the scribe in charge of summarizing the discussion with other students' input and recording it on the discussion record (see Chapter 5) they would turn in to Cam.[1] Jaime summed up the book club's conversation as follows:

> *The cherectors talked about the bibl and what it said. Riligin is controversial and people biliv in what thay biliv. We talked about what we bilived.*

Like countless scholars and theologians before them, these sixth graders were unable to reach a consensus on their religious views. Nor was consensus the point. Rather, by reading empathically and intersecting their own cultural perspectives with the culture of the book, the students were able to arrive at an enlarged understanding of the issue at hand. Furthermore, all of the students, including Jaime, were able to listen carefully, speak respectfully to one another, and reflect on the group's complex reactions to a culturally sensitive topic. Their access to civil discourse strategies allowed them to explore and negotiate various perspectives, in both literature and their book club, that resembled or differed from their own. They indeed demonstrated a civil approach to problem solving, one with limitless opportunities for application in similar circumstances outside the classroom.

[1]Jaime's inventive spelling reflects the wider berth for conventional correctness that Cam allows on "first-draft finals" (Atwell 2007) like the discussion record. At Cam's request, I'm including Jaime's response, letter for letter and word for word.

The Cultural Benefits of Reading Tough Texts

Sharon Bishop reminds us that "if we teach students to live well in one place, they will transfer that knowledge to a new place" (2003, 82). The examples from Monique, Jaime, and the other students I described above point directly to the academic, emotional, and social benefits of reading tough texts within the classroom, but scholars have also described how certain books can influence students' beliefs and actions beyond the classroom. Drawing on a number of titles that have been historically significant to African American males, for instance, Alfred Tatum defines an *enabling text* as "one that moves beyond a sole cognitive focus, such as skill and strategy development, to include a social, cultural, political, spiritual, or economic focus" (2006, 47). Within the context of culturally responsive teaching, such texts enable students "in some way to be, do, or think differently as a result of the texts" (13). Lisa Habegger adds that "[t]he power of these books to create controversy can also be emblematic of their power to create change and to have an impact on adolescent lives" (2004, 39).

Likewise in *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination*, Robert Coles explores the lasting cultural impact that certain texts can have on young adult readers. Coles reports on interviews conducted with students in his wife's high school English class in Georgia during the sixties, shortly after school desegregation. Although the school had been proactive in trying to help students deal with prejudicial attitudes by showing them documentaries and providing lectures by sociologists, the students found these efforts to be largely irrelevant. What made more of an impression, however, was students' reading and discussion of stories by Tillie Olson. In this school and others, students authentically engaged the social and personal issues they faced daily in school and many other personal issues besides, such as racism, alcoholism and family dynamics, social order, and identity. Coles attributes this more lasting impact to the power of stories to "address . . . life's burdens indirectly and directly" through the characters' perspectives and circumstances (1989, 62).

Why did the less didactic approach that literature provides have cultural consequences on the Georgia students beyond the particular instance of reading? As Coles explains:

> . . . Tillie Olson didn't come to them with her finger wagging or with a list of formulations they could readily ignore. Her stories worked their way into the everyday reality of their young lives: watching their

> mothers iron, and thinking of a story; watching a certain heavy-drinking friend, relative, neighbor, and thinking of a story; watching children in church, and themselves in school, and thinking of a story. (57)

Coles argues that when students let themselves "settle in" with a story, they not only experience vicariously the characters' perspectives, circumstances, conflicts, and challenges but also call up parallel issues and events in their lives and the larger culture; in other words, readers experience a "kind of moral communion" (65).

In the Georgia case, talking through divisive cultural issues with the help of a literary text, what Parker Palmer (2004) refers to as a "third thing," also gave students the distance they temporarily needed to sort through the controversies they were facing daily in the outside world. Judging by this example, tough texts allow readers to evoke a context without directly participating in it, to invest in characters without meeting them face-to-face, and to confront cultural controversy without personalizing it. Paradoxically, the empathic connection readers forge feels intimate at the same time that it is distanced.

As Cameron's sixth graders' discussion about religion illustrates and Coles's commentary suggests, a tough text can function as a bridge where students feel safe to meet and engage in civil discourse. An individual reader can ponder the culturally sensitive issues contained in tough texts and then slide the book back on the shelf. When discussing books with their peers, however, students who engage in civil discourse on these same issues come to recognize that "[w]hether we know it or not, like it or not, acknowledge it or not, our lives are interconnected in a complex web of causation. My understanding of truth impinges on your life, and yours impinges on mine, so the differences between us matter to both of us" (Palmer 2004, 126–27).

Engaging in civil discourse about tough texts simultaneously matters in the moment and functions as practice for life outside school. Thus in the process of working through their and others' reactions to racism (or any other difficult issue) as it occurs in a tough text, students are able to confront the reality of racism as it exists in their lives beyond the classroom. Maxine Greene explains that by engaging with literature and other art forms, we are urged "[to] see more, to hear more. By such experiences we are not only lurched out of the familiar and the taken-for-granted, but we may also discover new avenues for action. We may experience a sudden sense of new possibilities and thus new beginnings"

(1995, 379). Likewise, Keith Oatley insists that books like tough texts can have cultural consequences beyond the reader:

> In literature we feel the pain of the downtrodden, the anguish of defeat, or the joy of victory—but in a safe space. In this space, we can, as it were, practice empathy. We can refine our human capacities of emotional understanding. We can hone our ability to feel with other people who, in ordinary life, might seem too foreign—or too threatening—to elicit our sympathies. Perhaps, then, when we return to our real lives, we can better understand why people act the way they do, and react with caution, even compassion toward them. (2005, 15)

To sum up, here's why teaching tough texts is worth the trouble: because if students are able to use civil discourse to engage in the "imaginative rehearsals" that literature provides, they will reap a host of academic, emotional, social, and cultural benefits. At the same time that they are becoming more motivated, proficient, and critical readers, they are also learning to view both the characters they read and the classmates with whom they interact more compassionately. By using enabling texts to recognize their own humanity and treat others accordingly, students can tackle pressing social issues, one book and one discussion at a time.

If all of this can happen—and I've seen it happen—then we teachers ought to heed Margaret Wheatley's advice in the epigraph that opened this chapter. We cannot underestimate the power of human conversation, even and especially when had by students, for these conversations just might change the world.