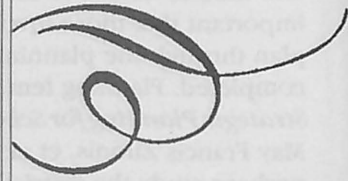


SIMPLE AS A PENNY PICNIC

by Jane M. Myers



My neighbors tell stories about the lady who used to live down the street. I didn't have the pleasure of getting to know her; my husband and I didn't settle into the neighborhood until after she had moved. Her personality, however, remained a constant in the neighborhood through the stories she left behind.

One of my favorite stories was the adventure she created with her grandchildren. It is told that she took the children on a "Penny Picnic" whenever they visited. After a picnic basket had been prepared, grandmother and grandchildren headed out the door with a penny. They decided on the direction of their journey with the flip of a coin. One side indicated a left turn and the other side of the coin meant a right turn. Each crossroad obligated the children to stop and flip the coin to establish their route. When their adventure led them to a good spot, or they tired, they sat and enjoyed their picnic. They could end up in the middle of the park or on the front steps of the high school. I would guess that the enjoyment of the adventure with their grandmother had to be what they most remembered.

Ruby K. Payne's (1996) book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, states simply, "No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship" (p. 9). Payne emphasizes that the key to achievement with students is creating a relationship with them. While we may not be able to create a familial relationship with adult students, like that of grandmother with her grandchildren, we do have an opportunity to create a significant bond resulting in successful education.

For the last two years a small group of literacy advocates, the Indiana Literary Association (ILA), has been meeting with the plan of expanding adult volunteer literacy tutoring to every county in the state. Tutoring, by its nature, is successful when student and tutor develop a sincere working relationship. Acknowledging that each community has a different approach with different neighborhood dynamics, these literacy advocates developed a goal, formed a non-profit corporation, and set out to assist those who need help

forming a literacy program. A clear message of the ILA is that "Children Need Parents Who Read." This motto indicates that the relationship between parent and child leads to life-long practices.

Many volunteer literacy tutoring programs are housed in public libraries. Most libraries have different names for their adult literacy programs, which is great for individuality, but a bit mind-boggling for someone exploring what might be best for his or her community. That is why the ILA has created a professional organization for Indiana literacy volunteers. The ILA trains volunteers who can then help extend the literacy boundaries of their residents. Adult literacy is different from preschool literacy. By the time we have moved into our adult bodies, we carry physical and emotional baggage. Those extra "pounds" show up in dependencies, defensiveness, and defeat. The ILA indicates that about 62 counties in Indiana have volunteer literacy programs (<http://www.indianaliteracy.org/index.php?p=search&sub=litinfo>). The other thirty Hoosier counties may offer adult programming, but the opportunity to work with a trained volunteer tutor is only available in about two-thirds of our state.

The truth of the matter is that we have a silent crisis. Successful companies are at a loss to hire or promote local residents because of Hoosier literacy issues. The Workforce Literacy Summit held in Indianapolis in 2005 offered some disappointing facts: The Indiana Chamber's Economic Vision 2010 report had a 2004-2005 Report Card that indicated that Indiana received a grade of "F" in the workforce category ("Economic Vision"). Several key factors contributed to this grade: according to data from the 2000 census, only 19.4% of Indiana residents age 25 years and older hold a bachelors degree; that is significantly lower than the U.S. population average of 24.4% (U.S. Census Bureau). Additionally, a study shows that, in 2002, between 960,000 and 1.23 million employed Hoosiers had literacy skills below minimum standards (FutureWorks, 2005, p.5). Further exacerbating the problem, only 20% of adults in the two lowest literacy levels saw an immediate need for remediation (FutureWorks, p. 24).

An effort has been implemented to help Indiana businesses address and work toward improving their workers' skills. *Ready Indiana*, a program to educate business employers in preparing their workforce for higher skill level literacy employment, was established as a direct result of the 2005 workforce literacy study. This program offers a concierge to assist employers by making it easier for employers to 1) identify the basic skill needs of their workers and 2) provide or obtain training to improve those basic skills (Ready Indiana). This personal assistance is another form of tutoring and will also create a relationship and better result with the education of the employer. A follow-up survey will be available this summer.

Indiana businesses and agencies, including the Indiana State Library and the Department of Education, have reacted to the literacy skill deficit in our population. The Indiana State Library commissioned a 2007 Economic Impact study by the Indiana Business Research Center that found that, on average, Indiana communities "received \$2.38 in direct benefits for each dollar of cost" (Indiana, p. 10). Some of the factors for this figure include the impact that staffing the library has on the economy of that community and purchases of goods and services. Libraries are good for the economy and good for the residents. Not only are libraries valuable for their economic impact in a community, they serve as a venue for equalizing racial, cultural, and socio-economic diversities through literacy services. Could they be even more valuable? Obviously, libraries could have a tremendous impact on the community by offering various types of adult literacy programming. The library will always have an intrinsic value, but the added combination of the literacy figures for workforce development could create more substantive value.

The Indianapolis Star recently received many letters to the editor for the January 18, 2008, front page headline, "I Ain't Kill Them Kids!" (Ryckaert, 2008, page A1). People complained that there was prejudice shown by printing it. The complaints prompted a response from Dennis Ryerson, *Star* editor. He stated, "We typically would paraphrase a quote to avoid repeating poor grammar. Likewise, had we quoted a child (sic). But in this case the individual contacted us. His language reflects a level of education and perhaps other life skills commonly associated with crime, no matter a person's race" (Ryerson, 2008, p. E1). Nothing screamed of prejudice in the headline more than a community unable to meet adult literacy needs. Prejudice, due to race or socio-economic standing, was not the issue in this article. Certainly a component of the uneasiness that people felt as they read the headline was the devastating handicap of illiteracy.

Communities can engage in bridging literacy gaps if residents are willing to commit to taking time to step

into another person's life. Members of organizations, faith communities, and most residents can become volunteer literacy tutors. The response to this need could be surprisingly favorable if it was understood that literacy impacts families...not just adults. In time, our workforce literacy statistics could improve, our communities could enjoy better neighborhood relationships, and children's educational experiences could be enhanced. Literacy will not guarantee success but never will it inhibit it.

Improved literacy skills could positively impact every part of an adult's life. The thrill and adventure of seeking literacy tutoring could cause some to wonder what is inside the picnic "basket." The picnic will come. Just as the children anticipated the coin flipped at each crossroad, so may an adult student feel anxious and challenged. Once the adult student crosses the literacy road, however, he may enjoy more of the treats inside the picnic basket of life.

Wouldn't life be different if adult literacy tutoring opportunities were as simple as a penny picnic?

Flip a coin!

Heads...an adult learns to read!

Tails...a family moves toward success!

Children *deserve* parents who read!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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