

Jennifer Dodge

The Most Important Thing

One of my fondest childhood memories takes place in the dining room of my family's cape style home. Situated between the entryway and the kitchen, nestled to the left of the stairway, it was my father's favorite room of the house. This was, in part, due to his pride and joy: the massive formal dining room set he and my mother spent months deciding on. It was a lustrous polished oak with heavy beams and a sturdy frame, the type with pop out leaves and extra seating for lavish holiday gatherings. On one side of the room, two identical seven-foot hutches flanked a window overlooking the screened porch and expansive wooded yard. The immense hutches were intimidating and ornate, with beveled glass doors to protect my parent's crystal and porcelain figurines, souvenirs of their honeymoon in Germany.

This is where you would find my father in the evenings, seated at the head of the table with a newspaper in hand. Once I began the first grade, you would find me here in the evenings too, although not as an act of free will. The life of homework packets and responsibility were upon me, and my father wanted me close to supervise all of it. There were no distractions at this great table beneath a brass chandelier in the dining room, making it ideal for studying and learning under my father's watchful eye. The table's design was not for comfort in the regular sense, but for focus. When you were in this room it was for a specific purpose. No children left the table until their task was complete, whether it was dinner or homework -no excuses.

Of course, none of this held any of my interest. It was my fledgling and naïve belief schoolwork belonged in school, not at the huge table in our dining room. When directed to practice my letters, I balked; when told to sound out my letters, I stalled; and when asked to string my letters together I threw my pencil down in frustration. I was still so young and wanted

to play as children always do. It seemed unnatural anyone would force this type of labor on a tiny first grader. I groaned over a group of three letter words and pleaded with my father.

“Dad, why do I have to do this? When can I be done? Can I finish later?”

My father folded his newspaper just enough to peek over the top, revealing his silver hair and thick rimmed glasses. His warm but icy blue eyes met mine; he spoke softly and clearly.

“No you may not finish another time. Right now it is time, and you may only be finished once you can read your homework to me.”

His silvery head disappeared behind the paper again.

Looking at my worksheet filled with letter combinations yet unidentified, I became discouraged. It seemed as though I would be sitting at our hulk of a table forever, left to grow old in the dining room as my father patiently waited with nothing but The Providence Journal and a glass of water to sustain him. Avoidance of a dreary fate tethered to the polished table was worth fighting for; I was not quite ready to give in.

“But, whyyyyyyyyyyy??? Why do I have to read this? You can read it!”

Slowly, deliberately, he folded his newspaper. I wiggled in my seat and once again he looked me straight in the eye. He was so calm.

“Because it is important.”

“But, why is it important?”

“Because learning to read is the most important thing you will ever do ...and also because I say so.”

I was stuck on the first part of his answer. Even at six, I knew challenging an “I said so” was a dead end with no reward. I leaned across our shiny table, which only closed a quarter of the distance between us.

“How can reading be the most important thing? There has got to be something better than that! I don’t believe it!”

He smiled, and with a glimmer in his eye, leaned forward, closing another half of the distance.

“Oh Really? What do you think is more important than reading, little girl? If you can name one thing more important than learning to read I will excuse you from the table.”

An entire lifetime of grown-up activities and adventures swept through my imagination. I knew I had to make my answer count. I tried to be clever. An idea jumped into my mind, I was excited.

“Reading cannot be more important than learning to drive a car! Without driving, we would not be able to go anywhere, including school! Learning how to drive is definitely more important than learning how to read!”

I sat straight in my high-backed chair, so pleased with myself. Although confident I stumped my father, I did not. My inner gloating stopped the second he chuckled and opened his paper again. His response was so simple.

“And how will you know where you are driving if you cannot read the signs? How will you pass a driving test without reading the questions? It would be impossible. First and foremost, you must learn to read because it is important everywhere in life. You need to read all the time. Nice try though ...now do your homework.”

He continued reading his paper and I slumped into my sturdy chair at the table utterly defeated. My father was always right. There was no choice but for me to pick up my pencil and begin making sense of all the three letter words on my worksheet.

It has been over twenty-five years since my first evening in the formal dining room with my father -and no, I am no longer sitting there in frustration. Both he and the heavy table are long gone, but not the memory of the conversation or the lesson he taught me there. With a third of my life behind me, I am still unable to disprove his argument: reading is and has been essential –and even enjoyable- in my life, just as he predicted.

Occasionally, I help my Goddaughter with her homework. She sometimes complains about sitting at her kitchen table with pencil in hand, discouraged by groups of words. Calmly I smile, and with a glimmer in my eye, tell her what she needs to hear.

“Little Love, you must learn to read because it is the most important thing you will ever do...”

Naturally, she does not believe me.