Children's books through the eyes of adults

By Julia Lee Ai Cheng

AS a university lecturer, teaching educational psychology to teachers, I am fond of discussing with colleagues, the development of their children and the kinds of books their kids read.

One day, while I was discussing child development and the antics of her two-year-old daughter with a colleague, she showed me several books written by Dr. Seuss that she had introduced to the little girl.

The enthusiastic discussion led me to an interesting path. I began reading Dr. Seuss's collection of books and other books written by Leo Lionni. That path led me to a garden of new-found knowledge. To my surprise, reading those books from an adult's perspective gave birth to a whole new idea about how philosophical those stories can be.

I found that these books contain a treasure of lessons not only for children but also for grown ups like us. Two of the books I read and thought were very entertaining, educational, and enlightening were written by Dr. Seuss and Leo Lionni, which I purchased from Amazon.com.

The first book, entitled 'Oh! The places you'll go' (by Dr. Seuss) begins like this:

You have brains in your head.
You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself
any direction you choose.
You're on your own.
And you know what you know.
And YOU are the guy
who'll decide where to go.

This particular introduction is about the unlimited potential that we need to uncover during our life's journey. It is also about making choices since this life is ours to live, various talents and intelligences have been bestowed upon us, and we are the ones who will decide which paths we would like to pursue in life.

Dr. Seuss has successfully written the story by contextualising an abstract idea such as life, by using an analogy of having all the tools we need (such as our head, our shoes, ourselves, our goals) to decide what we want to do with our lives.

Dr. Seuss adds, in his wonderful story,

You'll look up and down streets.
Look em over with care.
And some you will say, "I don't choose to go there.

With your head full of brains and your shoes full of feet,
You're too smart to go down any NOT-SO-GOOD STREET.

This is a fantastic illustration of discernment. In life, we need to identify what is right and what is wrong and choose what is best for us, simply because we have brains to think!

Another colourful illustration by Seuss:

You'll be on your way up!
You'll be seeing great sights!
You'll join the high fliers who soar to high heights.
You can be the best except when you don't it's because you won't.
When you get down into the lurch, you have to unshack yourself.

The lesson is that where we go, the decision is ours and we can climb as high as we want to and if we do not, it is because we do not have the willpower to do so. But if we fail, we just have to try again and again and persevere because our life's journey is filled with many ups and downs.

This story ends with a convincing statement. Regardless of our names, today is the day to start getting on our way towards that mountain of ours. It is never too late to work on what we want to achieve in life.

A second book that I find particularly enlightening is 'Fish is Fish', written by Leo Lionni. I have used this story many times in a course I teach to teachers because it portrays how important it is to respect the beliefs, preconceptions, and prior knowledge of learners of all ages.

This story has proven that it is highly respected and accepted by educationists and researchers as it was quoted in 'How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School', written by the Committee on Developments in the Science of Learning, National Research Council in America.

This is a story about a fish and a tadpole that grow up together in the same pond. Over time, the tadpole grows into a frog and the fish, into a full-fledged fish. The frog eventually goes out on land.

Days and weeks go by. Suddenly the frog returns to report what he has seen. "I have been about the world — hopping here and there," says the frog, and "I have seen extraordinary things."

"Like what?" asks the fish.

"Birds," says the frog mysteriously.

"Birds."

And he tells the fish about the birds, with wings, two legs, and many colours. As the frog talks, the fish sees in its mind, birds as large feathered fishes. The frog continues to describe cows as animals with four legs, horns, eat grass, and carry pink bags of milk.

Cow, in the fish's mind, becomes birds with mammary glands. As for people, the fish imagines the frog's newfound friends as birds all dressed up and could walk.

The fish decides to see what land is like. However, on land, it gasps for air. The frog comes to its rescue and pushes the fish back into the water. At last the fish realises that the underwater world is the most beautiful and suitable place to live. The fish realises that frogs are frogs and fish is fish.

The moral of the story. There are two major lessons that I would like to share with you.

Communication

Communication is a complex process. When a sender sends a message to a receiver, that same packet of information may be affected by various factors such as values, culture, socioeconomic background, beliefs, and perception. People construct knowledge based on these currently held factors. Therefore, we should not take communication for granted. We need to understand how messages might be interpreted or misinterpreted. When we communicate, it is necessary to be sensitive to the fact that sending and receiving messages is not as simple as it seems to be. We must consider that when miscommunication occurs, it could be due to the fact that we have different mindsets about a particular issue being discussed.

Acceptance

Accept ourselves for who we are. The fish finally accepts the fact that it is better off living in the underwater world. There is no need to live as someone else because each one of us has our own niche areas. We are endowed with so many talents and intelligences, all at our disposal. We might as well identify those talents (rather than compare with what others have), polish those talents, and develop them into niche skills. The idea is to continually advance towards a culture of excellence.

The conclusion of the story is interesting, however, because like the fish that tried to go on land, if we do not step out of our boxes, take risks and give ourselves a chance, we will never discover ourselves. So give it a try today so that we can discover ourselves in our life's journey.

These stories are presented in a light-hearted manner. They are very simple to read, heavily illustrated, and are filled with lessons on life. They also rekindle a sense of creativity in all of us. One is never too old to read children's books.

* It is perfectly normal to read children's book. There are many lessons for children as well as for adults in this seemingly childish and heavily illustrated literature. Start reading one today and see how much you can learn from these books.

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