

Reading Allowed by Steve Gentile

It is a slow time of year during my first 29-day cycle of giving. Time seems almost to have come to a halt. Folks go on vacations, get ready to shuttle older kids to college, and the younger ones ready themselves for school. Feeling aimless, I find myself today in the town library, where my mother and I often visited when I was young. My phone won't ring, I won't be tempted to send or read emails, which are few and far between anyway. In the few hours I plan to spend here, I don't think I'll miss many developments in the outside world.

I go inside empty-handed, like I did so many times as a kid. I find the first classic book that comes to mind – Jack London's *Call of the Wild* – and search for a spot to read. Settling into a quiet corner near a window, I am soon joined by a small group of children having just the same plan, it seems. The four of them whisper like kids do (which isn't whispering at all), form a small circle, and start reading their shared book aloud.

It is *Charlotte's Web* by E. B. White. *What a great choice*, I muse, resigned to the loss of peace and quiet I expected to find. Each child takes a turn reading a few paragraphs, shows a picture if available, and passes it to their neighbor to continue. I stop reading my book, finding myself pleasantly distracted and oddly attracted to this simple activity. When I move to face them, they grow timid.

"Sorry, sir," one says.

"No need for that. Please read on."

They do. And I listen. Each child in the circle reads as quietly as possible. Each helps with words another can't pronounce, doesn't understand, or has difficulty breaking down. When that fails, their first inclination is to turn to me and ask for help with their eyes or voices. I guess it's because I am the closest adult.

"Some words are tough, keep trying." I encourage them.

It is a wonderful experience in so many ways. Without kids of my own, I have missed out on this simple pleasure. The sound of young voices trying on newfound words on for

size is priceless—the hesitation before an unknown word, the upturn of the voice when pronouncing it, as if to ask, “*Is that right?*” It’s a gift to be treasured.

Listening to their young voices, I am once again a kid myself. And at the same time, I am my mother hearing me read aloud. Their words are in my head, in my mouth, and suddenly in the air around me. The moment is so delicious, present, and abundant, it seems never ending.

I realize my gift to them is rich. In allowing these children to continue without feeling as if they are imposing, and in listening to them completely, they are free to read fearlessly, to show off their command of the language. Somehow, through some small miracle, we all hold that sacred space.

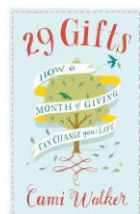
Just as mysteriously as it all began, it ends. My young readers disperse. The world around us goes back to what it is. Clocks begin to measure time again. Life goes on, inside and outside the library—as real as the memory of the woman who brought me into this world of loving words and language, my mom.

Thank you kids, for your gift of this quiet memory.

Steve Gentile shares his East Coast home with his wife and their two hilarious Airedale terriers.

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