

Simple Gifts: Thoughts from Childhood

Thank you, President Swartzendruber, Chair Dula and the Board of Trustees, faculty, staff and the graduating class of 2011:

“There is no frigate like a book to take us lands away,” wrote Emily Dickenson.

And, clearly, we are launched on our voyage of discovery to the land of reading by the fast frigate of the children’s book. Very few of us skip directly ahead to the battleships of Tolstoy, Proust or Melville. Most of us spend a prolonged sojourn wandering among the fanciful creations of the Dr. Seusses, Beatrix Potters and Maurice Sendaks of this world. It may be that our most cherished beliefs and dearly held values are formed by this early embarkation on a nurturing sea of the imagination.

The Good Ship Children’s Book has taken us all to many lands and climes, to places distant in both space and time. But it can also take us on a more intimate exploration of our own neighborhoods and backyards, our own homes and families or, even, our own thoughts and minds.

It is worthy of note, in this exploration of the inner child, that some of the best known examples of children’s literature feature an extensive cast of talking animals. This is so obvious a fact that it is, at first, difficult to perceive its underlying oddness. In reality, with the exception of parrots and a few other birds, animals simply do not talk; and, while verbose beasts are the norm in children’s books, they are exceedingly scarce in books for adults.

The question of why children’s books often depict talking animals and adult books usually do not, is too broad to explore here, but it does lead to the vitally important and intriguingly relevant subject of one particular type of talking animal—namely, talking *bears!*

It’s my belief that as soon as my parents, Stan and Jan Berenstain, created their first bear-themed children’s book, fifty years ago, people started asking them, “Why bears?” And, since I became involved with creating the Berenstain Bears books about twenty years ago, I’ve been fielding the question, too.

Bears, of course, are a traditional staple of children's books, going back to that fateful day of long ago when Goldilocks decided to engage in a little illegal entry at an inadequately secured home in the woods. Children's book bears have ranged from the large and lumbering to the cute and cuddly.

Our bears fall somewhere in-between. They are big—at least as big as people—and burly—they definitely weigh in on the "fully-packed" side. But they are friendly and funny.

They have no fangs (you may ask their dentist) and their claws have dwindled to little more than toenails. They walk on their hind legs, wear clothes, live in houses—albeit tree houses—and engage in a wide range of human activities. They drive cars, play soccer, eat pizza, go to school and watch too much TV.

But, still, why *bears*?

The fact is that bears are a natural stand-in for people. They are something like people but not too much like them. They have rounded heads with eyes toward the front, they sometimes stand on their hind legs and they manipulate things with hand-like paws. We often say of large burly people that they are "bear-like".

But bears are definitely animals. They have none of that unsettling mixed identity of monkeys or apes. Bears are of their own distinct lineage. They are analogous to human beings without being too much like them.

Children are fascinated by large, powerful animals like bears. But they are threatened by them, as well. The primary role of bears as semi-human children's book characters may be to help reassure children about their own position in the food chain.

My family's special contribution to the literary bear clan has come to be universally identified with a loosely called family values. American moms, pops and kids know and trust our characters as guides to the overwhelming task of attempting to become a sane, secure and well-adjusted family. We have received countless letters and comments from parents and their offspring who have found our books helpful in getting over those proverbial rough-spots in the bob sled run of family existence.

It was, I hasten to add, never our intention to take on this role of do-it-yourself family counselors. We prefer to leave serious psychologizing to the duly designated, licensed and recognized professional authorities, like, Dr. Phil.

But, now, we're pretty much stuck with it. People are always telling us that they like our books because "they teach good lessons." But I beg to quibble with this well-meant characterization. I think people actually like our books because "they teach lessons, good." The ethical messages of our books are not very original. They tend to lean heavily on such standbys as the Golden Rule—scarcely an innovation. Their appeal comes, rather, from the way in which this familiar material is presented. We work very hard to make our books funny and visually engaging. We try to make our characters full-dimensional, and we try to tell good stories. Our books actually do have plots—not as convoluted as, say, Harry Potter—but, still, good for turning a few pages.

The question, “Why bears?” leads, inevitably, to the question, “Why the Berenstain Bears?”

My parents started out as magazine cartoonists for such family publications as the Saturday Evening Post, McCall’s and Good Housekeeping. But the transition from cartoons about children to books for children was a natural one for them. As parents, themselves, they were interested and critical consumers of children’s books.

Their professional interest was aroused, as well, when many former cartoonists became prominent in the children’s book field during the early Sixties. Most prominent of all was Theodore Seuss Geisel (aka Dr. Seuss), also editor and publisher of the new Random House Beginner Books line, an outgrowth of Geisel’s groundbreaking title, *The Cat in the Hat*.

Stan and Jan decided to try their hands at the creation of a children’s book and found the result good. When they submitted their story about a family of bears to Dr. Seuss, he agreed with them. “Ted” became their first children’s book editor as well as their chief exhorter, mentor, fan and, at times, slave-driver in their newly-chosen careers as children’s authors and illustrators. They created about twenty books with Geisel, and then went on to produce about two hundred more over the next forty-odd years.

The character of their relationship with Ted was established at their first meeting with the great man.

“I like your bears,” Ted began. “I think they’re fun. I like the idea of family. And...”he added, encouragingly, “I love your drawings. But I need to know more about them. Who are these bears? What does Papa do for a living? What kind of pipe tobacco does he smoke?”

To my parents considerable discomfiture, Ted proceeded to subject their simple children’s story to a analysis worthy of his literary studies at Oxford in the 1920’s. In other words, he ripped it apart. They finished up their session with handshakes and Ted’s query, “How long do you think it’ll take for the next draft?” After a long, long series of drafts, sketches and layouts, the first Berenstain Bears book, *The Big Honey Hunt*, was published in the spring of 1962.

It has been sometimes remarked that my parents’ marriage must have been extraordinarily close and strong to so successfully survive the stresses of both a professional as well as a personal partnership. This is true, especially when it is considered that, from the day of their wedding in 1946 to Stan’s death in 2005, they spent about 99.99% of their lives in the same room, together. At some points they were even working on the same piece of art together at the same time. They were occasionally asked whether they ever disagreed about their work; they always replied that, no, they didn’t disagree but that they sometimes

“agreed, vigorously.” I have often thought that the principal reason for their ability to communicate to their audience so effectively on the subject of marriage and family was the intensity of their own commitment to the institution.

It has also sometimes been remarked that the father figure in their books is of the bumbling, accident-prone, foot-in-the-mouth variety a la Homer Simpson or Ray Barone. Those critical of this characterization of American fatherhood have assumed that some subversive ideological impulse was behind it perhaps rooted in their origin in the turbulent ‘60s. But I can assure them that the image of Dad and Mom they created was purely autobiographical. My father and mother really were a lot like Papa and Mama Bear. My father was not quite so goofy and accident-prone as Papa and my mother not quite so cool, calm and collected as Mama but the resemblance was pretty close.

People naturally assume that the close connection between my own family and the Berenstain Bear family extends to every detail and nuance.

“Are you Brother Bear?” people ask me.

“No,” I always answer, “I have an older brother so I guess I must be Sister Bear.”

Let me state for the record that none of us are now or ever have been bears, neither were any of us born in Bear Country. Actually, we’re from Philadelphia

This is, perhaps, the time to clear up a confusion which persists about the name. No, it is not spelled Bernstein, Berenstein or Bearstain. And it is pronounced, Beh-ren-stane as in “coffee stain” or “jello stain.”

Exactly how this particular spelling came about, we don’t know. It’s been spelled that way ever since the great grandparents got off the boat. Perhaps it was just a misprint by a weary immigration officer. Or maybe it was an attempt to reproduce phonetically a heavily accented version of “Bernstein.”

America is, proverbially, a nation of immigrants, and my family is no exception—it is a conglomeration of Jews fleeing pogroms in the Ukraine, Irishmen escaping the potato famine, one Scottish runaway who went to sea and jumped ship in an American port—what we would now call an illegal alien—and a batch of Germans who added to the ranks of the misnamed Pennsylvania Dutch.

All embodying the sentiments of Emma Lazarus inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty,

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore.”

Not exactly a *compliment* but we’ll take it.

Like all the other huddled masses, this mini melting pot of a family strove to establish itself, survive and thrive in the New World. And in doing so, they drew on the accumulated folk wisdom and common sense evolved through centuries of European hardship. When my parents began creating children’s books, they not only used their great skills as artists and authors, but they harked back to this storehouse of family tradition and lore to try and give some helpful guidance and encouragement to parents and progeny alike in the great undertaking of raising a family.

Much of this wit and wisdom was embodied in the short poems that introduce the subjects of many of the Berenstain Bears books. It occurred to me that these simple bits of verse could be viewed as markers or guideposts to young people, like yourselves, about to venture forth into the brave new world of post graduate existence.

For instance, many of you will proceed direct from here, do not pass Go, to sunnier shores—to beaches where palm trees sway for a little well deserved R&R. But let me sound a cautionary note:

“Sometimes little bears’
good behavior ends
when they pack their pajamas
and stay over with friends.”

Take a little circumspection along with your pajamas and toothbrush on the way to Cancun.

Some of you may be taking off on globetrotting trips—back-packing around Europe or other exciting destinations. Remember:

Small bears get big eyes
when they take off and roam,
and sometimes forget
all the good stuff at home.

Don’t forget your roots and the basic values of home and family.

And, as you roam, remember to be sensible and responsible with your finances.

When little bears spend
Every nickel and penny,
The trouble with money is—
They never *have* any!

Once you're off on your own, it's way too easy to fall into the temptation of burning a hole in that credit card. Remember—that's exactly what they want you to do!

When your summer fling is over and it's time to buckle down and get a job, be careful to stay true to your underlying beliefs and ethical standards—don't let an amoral corporate culture lead you astray.

When peer pressure
rears its ugly head,
it's easy for most cubs
to be misled.

Learn to reach out to others to help you on your way—after all no man, or bear, is an island:

When making friends,
the cub who's wise
is the cub who learns
to compromise.

Advice which we are currently hearing extended, too , to our political leaders.

On the other hand, you don't want to submerge your own identity to the interests of the group—watch out for “going along with the crowd” or the “path of least resistance.” Above all, don't go against your own conscience just to fit in!

One's sense of self-worth
is often undone
the first time one feels
left out of the fun.

Sometimes, of course, even genuine friends can argue and get into conflict. Always be quick to make up after a quarrel—bearing a grudge never did anyone any good.

When bears are angry

and don't get along,
a hug makes up
for what went wrong.

Getting along with others requires adherence to some basic rules of behavior—some standards of traditional etiquette—sheer rudeness and plain bad manners is one of the curses of our modern society:

“Please” and “Thank you”
Help quite a lot
To make a polite bear
Our of one who is not.

Once we do find our place in society, there's the old “keeping-up-with-the-Joneses” phenomenon to deal with. A bigger house, a fancier car, more expensive clothes, furniture, jewelry etc. etc. It's easy to fall into the spiral of wanting more and more and more:

When another bear gets
something brand new,
the Green-eyed monster
makes you want one, too.

It's important to be practical, not to get too carried away with unrealistic schemes, wants and desires. But, on the other hand, you should never lose sight of your dreams or ideals:

Some dreams make cubs laugh.
Some dreams make cubs cry.
It's interesting to think about
what they dream and why.

May all your dreams make you laugh rather than cry.

One of the great ideals of the present generation is to care for our home, the Earth—to pursue all the environmental goals we sum up as “going green.” I'm particularly conscious of this since my own son, Sam, graduating today as an Environmental Studies major, often acts as my guide to this undertaking. I'm always reminded of him when I read from *The Berenstain Bears Don't Pollute (Anymore)*:

When Bear Country's cubs
learn pollution's a fact,
they help grownups learn
to clean up their act.

The most basic rule of life is, “honesty is the best policy.” Always adhere to truthfulness as a bedrock ideal, because:

No matter how you hope,
No matter how you try,
You can't make truth
Out of a lie.

All of you will be going out into the world to get a job and discover the work that is meant for you to do. It may be a daunting task but, ultimately, it will give you a profound sense of achievement and self-worth.

So many kinds
of work to do—
so much to
look forward to.

And be reassured:

We all have something
we do the best—
a little bit better
than the rest.

It's just your job to figure out what that something may be.

Graduation from college means you are about to move on with your lives both physically and spiritually. You will face many challenges, many trials and tribulations—but many, many more joys and triumphs, successes and satisfactions. In closing, I think I can do no better than to quote from *The Berenstain Bears' Moving Day*:

Their stuff is all packed!
Here comes the truck!
Let's move with the Bears
And wish them good luck.

And may the best wishes of the Berenstain Bears go with you.