FORTIFIED THROUGH WORDS

A lesson in owning our stories

By **Renée Watson**

My mother taught me that words are meant to be spoken.

Once, after my siblings and I had been put to bed and the noise of the house had hushed to a loud stillness, I could hear her in her bedroom whispering something. I tiptoed to her bedroom and stood at the door, which was cracked open just enough for me to see her at her desk, lamp on, glasses on, Bible in her hand. She wasn't talking to anyone. She was reading. I didn't understand why she was reading scriptures out loud to an empty room. Up until then, I thought reading out loud was for story time in the classroom or at bedtime just before saying good night.

Because my mother was the eyes-behind-her-head kind of mother—a woman with supersonic hearing who knew if I was sneaking to talk on the phone to a crush or my best friend—she heard me. Without turning, she said, "Renée, do you need something?"

I asked her why she was reading out loud. She answered, "Spoken words are powerful words."

Even now, my mother hangs inspiration on the walls in her bedroom—scriptures on loving your neighbor as yourself, quotes, song lyrics, poetry. She knows most of them by heart, she recites them in times of hardship. "Words fortify," she says.

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I inherited my mother's love of words. When I was a girl, I loved walking to the North Portland Library. I remember browsing the aisles for the next book in the Ramona series

(HarperCollins) and picking up Judy Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* (Atheneum) for a second, third, and fourth time. I related to Ramona and Margaret, often feeling like the not-good-enough, not-smart-enough younger sister and obsessing with my girlfriends over who was ready to wear a training bra and who had started her period.

Reading these novels made me feel less alone and let me know that other girls my age had the same questions and fears, the same desires. But I was also different from these characters. I was black. I was fat. I didn't see these identities represented in the novels my library had, so I turned to poetry.

In middle school, I started reading the poetry of Maya Angelou, Lucille Clifton, and Nikki Giovanni. Nikki's poems "Knoxville, Tennessee" and "The Reason I Like Chocolate" taught me that even the small things could be celebrated, that the ordinary could be worthy of a poem. Maya and Lucille wrote about their bodies in a way I had never seen. I cherished "Phenomenal Woman" and "Homage to My Hips." A new confidence was birthed in me. In their poems, I saw the everydayness of black women right alongside our resilience and strength.

Their poems inspired me not only to keep reading but also to tell my own stories. As a young black girl, I knew there were assumptions and stereotypes about me. Adults were often speaking for me or about me. Statistics of what would happen to girls like me, who grew up in neighborhoods like mine, felt like a prophecy I had to prove wrong. I wanted control of my own narrative. My journal became a storehouse of words.

Reading poetry taught me how to write. Not just the rules of writing, but how to put emotion on the page. How to use the pages as a container for all my questions and fears. I wrote poems about my parents divorcing, about my grandmother and how sad I was that she died before I got to say goodbye. I wrote odes to my dark skin and my thick hair. I wrote about the rose bush that grew in our front yard. How barren it would be in one season but then bloom fire red, teaching me about patience. I wrote about the sweet taste of marionberry pie, the sourness of huckleberries. Somewhere in those pages between poems about first loves and heartbreaks were poems about Mulugeta Seraw, an Ethiopian man murdered by skinheads in my community.

I wrote and wrote and wrote. But I never read these poems out loud.

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"You're going to fail the final," my English teacher told me one day when I refused to read my poems to the class. The oral presentation was a significant portion of the grade. I was terrified. I didn't mind writing poetry. I didn't even mind people reading my poems. But I had never considered reciting my words. Sure, I had read aloud in class before and I loved reading picture books to my younger cousins. I had even performed in plays and recited Easter speeches in front of the congregation at my church.

But this was different. This was reading my own words, my own story.

My desire to get a good grade outweighed my fear, so I stood up, walked to the front of the class, and opened my mouth. It was just a whisper. That's all I could muster. I didn't make eye contact with anyone and I held the paper too close to my face. My teacher stopped me. "You chose these words for a reason. Say them with some meaning," he said. "You never know, someone else might need to hear what you've got to say."

I tried again. I managed to hold the paper down so I could at least make eye contact with the audience. By the end of the presentation, my voice was owning the words. I was louder, stronger.

I don't know if my teacher intentionally planned to teach me a lesson about the power of my voice. I don't know if he knew of someone in the class who could really benefit from hearing my words. It could be that it really was about the grade. Maybe it was about teaching public speaking skills.

But nothing is ever just one thing.

I learned so much about storytelling that day. Speaking my story made me feel powerful and the poem took on meaning in a different way once it leapt off the page. Hopefully, my classmates got something out of it. But even if they didn't, I did. I was fortified.

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I believe there are many ways to speak. We all have a choice to use or not use our voices. To engage or to keep to ourselves. When I teach writing workshops with young people, we talk about our artistic voices. We talk about how what we create is a way of speaking up for what we believe. We talk about our everyday voices, how we can be kind with our words, how we can use our words to bring comfort to someone. I push my students to read widely, to take in stories they relate to and don't relate to. I encourage my students to write their world. As it is, as it can be. I invite students to speak their truths.

Together, we explore the relationship between reading, writing, and speaking. Together we hold space for each other—we fortify each other, and ourselves. ■

ILA 2019

Renée Watson will take the stage during the ILA General Session on Friday, Oct. 11. For more information, visit **ilaconference.org.**

Renée Watson (@reneewauthor) is a *New York Times* best-selling, Newbery Honor, and Coretta Scott King Award–winning author. Her most recent books include *Watch Us Rise*, coauthored with Ellen Hagan, and *Some Places More Than Others* (Bloomsbury), due in September.