**Jacqueline Woodson’s TEDtalk: “What Reading Slowly Taught Me about Writing”**

A long time ago, there lived a Giant, a Selfish Giant, whose stunning garden was the most beautiful in all the land. One evening, this Giant came home and found all these children playing in his garden, and he became enraged. "My own garden is my own garden!" the Giant said. And he built this high wall around it.

The author Oscar Wilde wrote the story of "The Selfish Giant" in 1888. Almost a hundred years later, that Giant moved into my Brooklyn childhood and never left. I was raised in a religious family, and I grew up reading both the Bible and the Quran. The hours of reading, both religious and recreational, far outnumbered the hours of television-watching. Now, on any given day, you could find my siblings and I curled up in some part of our apartment reading, sometimes unhappily, because on summer days in New York City, the fire hydrant blasted, and to our immense jealousy, we could hear our friends down there playing in the gushing water, their absolute joy making its way up through our open windows. But I learned that the deeper I went into my books, the more time I took with each sentence, the less I heard the noise of the outside world. And so, unlike my siblings, who were racing through books, I read slowly -- very, very slowly.

I was that child with her finger running beneath the words, until I was untaught to do this; told big kids don't use their fingers. In third grade, we were made to sit with our hands folded on our desk, unclasping them only to turn the pages, then returning them to that position. Our teacher wasn't being cruel. It was the 1970s, and her goal was to get us reading not just on grade level but far above it. And we were always being pushed to read faster. But in the quiet of my apartment, outside of my teacher's gaze, I let my finger run beneath those words. And that Selfish Giant again told me his story, how he had felt betrayed by the kids sneaking into his garden, how he had built this high wall, and it did keep the children out, but a grey winter fell over his garden and just stayed and stayed. With each rereading, I learned something new about the hard stones of the roads that the kids were forced to play on when they got expelled from the garden, about the gentleness of a small boy that appeared one day, and even about the Giant himself. Maybe his words weren't rageful after all. Maybe they were a plea for empathy, for understanding. "My own garden is my own garden."

Years later, I would learn of a writer named John Gardner who referred to this as the "fictive dream," or the "dream of fiction," and I would realize that this was where I was inside that book, spending time with the characters and the world that the author had created and invited me into. As a child, I knew that stories were meant to be savored, that stories wanted to be slow, and that some author had spent months, maybe years, writing them. And my job as the reader -- especially as the reader who wanted to one day become a writer -- was to respect that narrative.

Long before there was cable or the internet or even the telephone, there were people sharing ideas and information and memory through story. It's one of our earliest forms of connective technology. It was the story of something better down the Nile that sent the Egyptians moving along it, the story of a better way to preserve the dead that brought King Tut's remains into the 21st century. And more than two million years ago, when the first humans began making tools from stone, someone must have said, "What if?" And someone else remembered the story. And whether they told it through words or gestures or drawings, it was passed down; remembered: hit a hammer and hear its story.

The world is getting noisier. We've gone from boomboxes to Walkmen to portable CD players to iPods to any song we want, whenever we want it. We've gone from the four television channels of my childhood to the seeming infinity of cable and streaming. As technology moves us faster and faster through time and space, it seems to feel like story is getting pushed out of the way, I mean, literally pushed out of the narrative. But even as our engagement with stories change, or the trappings around it morph from book to audio to Instagram to Snapchat, we must remember our finger beneath the words. Remember that story, regardless of the format, has always taken us to places we never thought we'd go, introduced us to people we never thought we'd meet and shown us worlds that we might have missed. So as technology keeps moving faster and faster, I am good with something slower. My finger beneath the words has led me to a life of writing books for people of all ages, books meant to be read slowly, to be savored.

My love for looking deeply and closely at the world, for putting my whole self into it, and by doing so, seeing the many, many possibilities of a narrative, turned out to be a gift, because taking my sweet time taught me everything I needed to know about writing. And writing taught me everything I needed to know about creating worlds where people could be seen and heard, where their experiences could be legitimized, and where my story, read or heard by another person, inspired something in them that became a connection between us, a conversation. And isn't that what this is all about -- finding a way, at the end of the day, to not feel alone in this world, and a way to feel like we've changed it before we leave? Stone to hammer, man to mummy, idea to story -- and all of it, remembered.

Sometimes we read to understand the future. Sometimes we read to understand the past. We read to get lost, to forget the hard times we're living in, and we read to remember those who came before us, who lived through something harder. I write for those same reasons.

Before coming to Brooklyn, my family lived in Greenville, South Carolina, in a segregated neighborhood called Nicholtown. All of us there were the descendants of a people who had not been allowed to learn to read or write. Imagine that: the danger of understanding how letters form words, the danger of words themselves, the danger of a literate people and their stories. But against this backdrop of being threatened with death for holding onto a narrative, our stories didn't die, because there is yet another story beneath that one. And this is how it has always worked. For as long as we've been communicating, there's been the layering to the narrative, the stories beneath the stories and the ones beneath those. This is how story has and will continue to survive.

As I began to connect the dots that connected the way I learned to write and the way I learned to read to an almost silenced people, I realized that my story was bigger and older and deeper than I would ever be. And because of that, it will continue.

Among these almost-silenced people there were the ones who never learned to read. Their descendants, now generations out of enslavement, if well-off enough, had gone on to college, grad school, beyond. Some, like my grandmother and my siblings, seemed to be born reading, as though history stepped out of their way. Some, like my mother, hitched onto the Great Migration wagon -- which was not actually a wagon -- and kissed the South goodbye.

But here is the story within that story: those who left and those who stayed carried with them the history of a narrative, knew deeply that writing it down wasn't the only way they could hold on to it, knew they could sit on their porches or their stoops at the end of a long day and spin a slow tale for their children. They knew they could sing their stories through the thick heat of picking cotton and harvesting tobacco, knew they could preach their stories and sew them into quilts, turn the most painful ones into something laughable, and through that laughter, exhale the history a country that tried again and again and again to steal their bodies, their spirit and their story.

So as a child, I learned to imagine an invisible finger taking me from word to word, from sentence to sentence, from ignorance to understanding.

So as technology continues to speed ahead, I continue to read slowly, knowing that I am respecting the author's work and the story's lasting power. And I read slowly to drown out the noise and remember those who came before me, who were probably the first people who finally learned to control fire and circled their new power of flame and light and heat. And I read slowly to remember the Selfish Giant, how he finally tore that wall down and let the children run free through his garden. And I read slowly to pay homage to my ancestors, who were not allowed to read at all. They, too, must have circled fires, speaking softly of their dreams, their hopes, their futures. Each time we read, write or tell a story, we step inside their circle, and it remains unbroken. And the power of story lives on.

Thank you.