

Remarks by Hon. David Adams Richards

*2018 Champion for Literacy, Literacy Coalition of New Brunswick
PGI Dinner and Auction, April 26, 2018*

Honored guests I am extremely grateful to be

able to speak to you tonight, to tell you something

about how I view literacy in our province

and our country. I suppose like so many of us here,

I did not think much of reading when I was a boy-

oh I do know there are those who always had

that inclination, and that is a good thing,

and I suppose too with that inclination there

were parents who encouraged it, and that too is

a good thing. And though I had parents who

did encourage learning, and school work etc.

I did not really begin to read until I was 14 years of age.

That book was Oliver Twist, and was given to me

by a friend for Christmas, and I remember thinking

when I looked at it, that I could never read it

because it did not have any pictures.

And who would put a book in my hand that

did not have at least one of two.

At any rate some months later, sometime in March

I did pick the book up after it fell from my night table

and I began to read, and as I later stated

I finished the book in three days and at that time

I decided two things. I decided that Dickens was

a great writer, and that I wanted to be a writer too.

There was one remarkable moment in that text that

when I read it, I realized that yes not only is that

exactly true, but the exact truth must be sought,

understood and known, and if known it should in

some way be imparted to others, and in imparting

this we must do it with compassion and understanding. That is what that sudden moment gave me, and

it changed my life—or at least the direction of my life

and made me realize that without compassion

there was neither understanding nor truth.

You see what that moment revealed was the soul

of a boy—not Oliver, but some other orphan on the

street, and gave us a certain knowledge about his

tragic little life, through empathy and love. For the rest of my life, or at least for the rest of my life until now, I have been obsessed by that perimeter, and a needing to testify about it, if to no one else in the world, to myself. It was only a single line or two in a book that has long since been misplaced, but it indicated to me a part of my nature that until that moment I did not know I had. Or if in fleeting moments of my youth, I knew I had, I didn't measure the consequences of having it.

But it also allowed me a mirror into the soul of men and women—and Dickens when writing this in 1837 could not have imagined that a boy reading this in the spring of 1965 would be so overcome by it that he would relate it to you in the spring of 2018.

The soul of men and women were sacred—that is what Dickens was saying. That is why Tolstoy, who said one could see the heavens in ditch water said that all the mad and overwrought characters of

Dickens were his friends. Because he showed us the template of goodness in human beings—a woman named Nancy, hardly a saint, and many times a thief would die protecting a child from Bill Sykes; the artful Dodger and all the irascible crew of little lady and gentleman thieves who could never read or write and who would suffer penury or death in the workhouses of London, or be forced into hard labour or hanged by the neck until dead at the age of 9, were still protective of one another and the orphan Oliver. This was the soul and it had nothing to do with reading, except in reading was revealed to us. A rather strange counterbalance in life. It made me realize what I had realized as a child, that all people were in fact important—why I found solemnness and goodness in the most unremarkable and derelict of people.

For you see I already knew these people. I had seen them on the streets and embankments of my little town. Girls like Nancy and men who had suffered

through neglect and war and drink. I knew the rich middle classes too, and a cross section of society that middle class suburbia never experienced. So I knew these people too in my heart.

Yet in a way it did take a book to allow me to realize it.

What does this have to do with literacy—in a certain way everything. For not only did these Dickensian children never have the means to read or write, even where I grew up in the 50ies reading and writing to broaden souls was in some ways discouraged by many.

And worse there were times growing up that I saw those who knew how to read and write, use it to triumph over others, never to help them. That is the conceit of learning that we must all be aware of, the haughtiness of a degree, which has nothing to do with what a degree is for. It is why I loved all my life the

boys and girls of the street more than the boys and girls of the classroom. It is why I have sat with men

who have no education more than with those who have. But I have also seen in them the struggle—like the man who spent his life in the woods and was terrified to take his firearms acquisition test because though he had hunted and guided from the time he was 12, he could not read. And he whispered this to me as we sat side by side. So a friend of mine and I managed to tell the forest rangers his predicament, and they allowed him an oral test. For you see in the woods and on the rivers that man who couldn't spell woods or rivers would outshine us all.

Let us understand this now and forever.

Or the young man who did not want his wife who was discovered to be exceptionally bright to go back to school because he was afraid she would become educated and leave him. And how frightened he was when he spoke of this. And it was out of selfishness yes, but it was also out of loneliness, forsakenness and

love. For he himself had never learned to do what she was now being given a chance to.

Therefore I know the boys and girls of the classroom have a great duty—like a writer or a politician, a grave duty to help those who have been denied access in whatever way to the classroom itself. Shame on us if we do not recognize the obligation. But shame on us too if we ever think a labourer as that young man was is less than a professor.

I remember when I was a boy, my first time in Toronto, and I saw in a restaurant a group of students from Osgoode Hall making fun of a waitress who did not understand their big words. Nothing showed less kindness or understanding of responsibility to the human heart than that. There are two things detrimental to the human soul, Ignorance coupled with arrogance, and knowledge without compassion. It would be fine if those who have knowledge always made a point of understanding compassion. Children

have no other protectors than us. We have an obligation to ourselves and the greater world not to let them down. Years ago children who had nowhere to go in summer lined up to put their names down with my friend Helena Waye, a teacher at their elementary school hoping for a chance to go to summer camp, where my son worked. Some had never been to a place where they could canoe or swim. And because the list was so long many were not picked. And every day from April to June they were ask her:

‘Am I going to go too?’

How sad for children left out—and now in New Brunswick its industry fast becoming outmoded, how do we make sure our children are honored and not left out again? To those who can it seems impossible to believe that there are those who can’t, but many children have struggled to adulthood and have been determined to hide this fact of illiteracy most of their lives.

There is a program now on the Miramichi I am proud

of

, which will allow two teachers to tutor children

at a camp this summer. It is not a big thing but to

those children who have fallen behind,

some who through no fault of their own come

from poverty and neglect it is a great thing.

This was inspired by the literacy council

of the Miramichi

under the director Ann Morrissey

and helped by the MP, Pat Finnegan from that region.

I hope it helps—

and if it helps one child, it helps the world.

But you see now the world is going fast beyond us,

and it will take everything for us here in this

little province to keep up.

Now they speak of algorithms, data bases,

artificial intelligence, quantum physics,

renewable energy and reaching to Mars.

Will we too someday be like those children
standing on the side streets forgotten in the great
calumny of events?

Hopefully not. Hopefully we will meet the challenges
of the future time head on,
with courage and gallantly bring those
who have fallen behind with us.

Dickens wrote a story about work houses
and pick pockets in the spring of 1837.

But if it was just a story about that time and place
it would have
had little to say to a boy in the spring of 1965,
and less to us in the spring of 2018.

But in a way it sanctified them,
made us realize they were a part of us,
now and forever. Hopefully we take this with us,
no matter where our authors come from
or our individual education demands,
hopefully we take this then, no matter what part in life

we play, and realize that the greatest part

is to be both generous and noble, the greatest part

is never to leave others out, or behind,

but to realize as they are loved and sanctified

we are loved and

sanctified too.

David Adams Richards, April 26th 2018