

# TALKATIVE LITERACY LESSONS

*Briana Tolbert*

In my life, a lot has changed personally, socially, and globally. One thing that has remained true is that most, if not all, people describe me as talkative. Growing up I was taught to speak my mind, which I think stemmed from other sayings like “a closed mouth doesn’t get fed” and “you can’t receive help if you don’t ask for it.” I have always talked about my various emotions, thoughts, and opinions. Although I have not always known how to articulate such ideas properly, I can now reflect on the past and recognize my growth. Being able to gain the luxury of expressing myself through words is something I value the most because it allows me to establish boundaries with others, which is a very important component of my life.

Although not the beginning of my literacy journey I find it appropriate to start with the story that taught me the valuable lesson of “thinking before I speak.” As a person who is so talkative, this has become a valuable lesson to maintain my peace and energy. I purposely try not to remember the specific details of this earliest memory because it was such a traumatic experience at the time, but nonetheless it is a memory I will never forget. For context, my older sister, Alexis, and I do not share a biological mother. When we were growing up she would split the years between her two households. With me being the youngest, my attitude was

not always the best, which created conflict among other family members and myself. One day I was disagreeing with my mother and my sister wanted to provide me with some guidance. At the time that is not how I took her words of wisdom, so instead of hearing her out I just became more annoyed and frustrated until I snapped. The specific detail that I can not escape is my exact words to her, which were “leave and never come back”, Unfortunately for me, that is what she did. She had been gone for weeks and I was left heartbroken from the loss, even if temporary, of my older sister, but I could not be mad at anyone besides myself. In the weeks of her absence, I had nothing but time to contemplate what could have gone differently. In the end, I learned that speaking my mind did not only come with positive individual consequences but also negative internal and external consequences. As I have grown older I have now recognized that everything does not need a response and every emotion and thought does not need to be expressed. This has allowed me to prioritize what is most important and beneficial to my journey.

Although literacy narratives also reflect on reading, learning, and listening, my story would be insufficient if I did not focus on talking. Throughout my whole life talking has affected my literacy in enormous ways. Starting from the beginning, I was enrolled in speech therapy with Ms. Brizendine. In Kindergarten my teacher recognized I had some trouble with my words, so twice a week I was taken out of class to practice more. I remember the majority of my time being spent on blended “r” words. There were notecards that Ms. Brizendine would help me practice; they had the word and a small image to help connect the two. I would spend my time with her practicing words like crayon, crocodile, crooked, drawer, frisbee, pretzel, present, and treasure, along with other words. By the time I was in first grade and still enrolled in speech therapy, I could acknowledge that my peers were not struggling the way I was. That is when I became very self-conscious to speak up in class

and around my friends because others could also acknowledge my areas of difficulty and would make fun of me. I began to feel behind academically and, even though I was making progress with speech therapy, it was still something I was ashamed of. Even when I was at a level of proficiency with my peers there were still words that stuck as a reminder of this era; words like orange. It was always “What did you say?”; “That’s not what you said.”; and “Say it again!” It seemed as if I could not escape this comparison to my peers which made me feel like an academic failure. Later on in life, I realized I was not failing, I just needed more assistance and nothing was wrong with that.

Even with my struggles with verbally talking I developed a love for reading during my earlier years which continuously evolved my literacy journey. The first book I remember falling in love with was *One for the Murphys* by Linda Hunt. It was my first chapter book and I fell in love because I was able to connect with the book on a deeper level. After struggling to connect with literature for so long I was finally able to read a book that I enjoyed and no longer needed assistance in pronouncing words that were written throughout. The book was about a young girl whose mother died which placed her in the foster care system and later placed her with the Murphy family. Ironically, I never finished the book, but somehow it is one of my favorites. Personally, it was more about my experience of reading the book than the context of the book. I remember checking the book out every two weeks, reading a chapter or two, and talking to the librarian about what I had read. I felt accomplished, just reading and being able to think more critically about what I was reading, and it made me feel thoroughly content with the progress I was making as it related to my academic success.

The year before I entered middle school, I met Mr. Joyua, the debate coach/teacher. I stayed after school one day in his classroom and he convinced me to join the debate team even though I knew

very little about the activity. When I finally entered middle school I signed up for debate and it was an opportunity for me to learn about real-world issues for the first time. I signed up with some of my peers who at the time were nothing more than acquaintances. Over the years we created this sacred bond that stemmed from this activity and now they are some of my closest friends. The debate team made me feel like an intellectual since I had access to knowledge outside of the classroom. I had to learn about what international and domestic issues were current at the time and what consequences may come from changing the status quo. Uniquely, debate also taught me to understand both sides of an issue and how to articulate an opposing viewpoint, even if I disagreed. In my opinion, this is one of the most significant lessons life has taught me and in return, it has made me a very logical person. Unlike my era of speech therapy, my debate era made me feel academically ahead compared to my peers, but I also never wanted to make them feel less than me. I wanted to take my expertise and share it with my peers which made me realize I had a love for open discussions.

In 2020 I was forced into quarantine along with the rest of the world. Once again I was faced with real-world issues and, like with my experience with debate, these issues were important to me; I felt like I had a duty to speak on these subjects. I began to talk with my family considering we all could now hold an in-depth conversation about these sorts of issues. At this point in my life I realized how others felt when I heard them say “In the real world, my voice doesn’t matter.” I didn’t want to believe this as true, for myself as well as my generation, so I decided to create something of my own. In January of 2021, I released my own podcast; *New Generation Speaks*. I do not believe that many people were listening, outside of family members but, similarly to *One for the Murphys*, it was about the experience more than anything. During this era, I also started journaling intensely to help me release my emotions, thoughts, and opinions in a new way. I learned that

talking was the healthiest way for me to discover myself. When I talk to myself, as crazy as it sounds, on paper or out loud it allows me to figure out how my mind works. The more I work individually to figure out those things about myself the more likely I am to have better conversations with others.

Most recently, my life has taken a drastic shift. For the first time I experienced death. On November 11, 2022, my papa, Robert, passed away and I was left devastated. I remember being in the kitchen with my family when we got the call from my father. Throughout the night I was filled with pain, not only for my loss of my grandfather, but for others who lost a father, brother, cousin, uncle, friend, and so much more. That was the first time I was mute while my mind was trying its best to process chaos and trauma. It was such a strange feeling to not want to express what was happening to me, but the feeling of not wanting to overshadow anyone else's grief was overpowering. Through this experience, I have noticed that I have truly never been open about the trauma I have experienced and I believe it is because I know everyone else has a side to trauma that is different from my point of view. This might be related to my experience in debate considering I always have to consider other sides of a situation. After a few months passed I continued to express myself through conversations and journaling and have become more flexible about talking about trauma as well. Death has taught me that silence can also be a good thing and a method of being one with your thoughts.

The first thing I learned how to do was talk and over the years I have gained multiple lessons on how to maneuver through my literacy. Being talkative largely makes up who I am as a person. As I transition to new chapters of my life, it will be interesting to see how other aspects of my life will be sponsored to my journey.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How does this literacy narrative differ from others in this *Sosland* issue? How is it similar? (See Scanlon's "Saving the Damned" and Balentine's "Bleached Mexican.")
2. Note that most (if not all) of the paragraphs in this essay begin with dependent clauses. How does this structure reflect the theme of the essay?
3. Think about past books you have read, particularly any you have a strong like or dislike of. How did your experiences while reading the book influence your feelings about it?
4. The title "Talkative Literacy Lessons" suggests that the author learns multiple principles about their literacy over the course of the essay. Analyze these lessons, then discuss what lessons you have learned about literacy through your own experiences.