

**IRA OPENING GENERAL SESSION
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I'm proud IRA is the world's major professional organization devoted to literacy. What is the reason for that success? IRA is a "big tent." All who love literacy are welcome here. IRA's ability to publish the finest research, to hold the best professional meetings, and to advocate effectively for sound public policies is strengthened by our unwillingness to be held prisoner by any ideology or method.

Our diversity, our ability to learn from our differences and to respect those with whom we may be in dispute are not a sign of weakness, but our greatest strengths. At IRA, we don't accept diversity, we embrace it. We don't just acknowledge our differences; we seek to learn from them. It is our civil engagement with those with differing opinions that is the source of our public trust and of so much of our individual and collective growth.

At IRA, we usually talk about how to teach reading or build the habit of reading. But today I want to devote my remarks not to the how, but to the why.

Truth be told, I work both sides of the street: I try to help children read better, but I also try to reduce society's inappropriate over-reliance on literacy. You see, I'm committed to a full-participation society—one in which all individuals can take part in and benefit from our shared economic, civic, and social life. But that can only happen if the requirements of literacy balance with the levels of literacy that can commonly be attained. We must improve literacy levels, but we also need to knock down the needless barriers that literacy sometimes poses.

For example, research at the Veteran's Administration hospital in Chicago reveals the survival value of literacy. What prevents unnecessary hospitalizations? What supports treatment compliance? What protects the health and lives of these men? Studies show

that there are two major factors: social connectedness and literacy. Men who have someone in their life—a wife, a daughter, a friend—are more likely to make their appointments or take their medications. Likewise, those who can read are more likely to follow their health regimens, too. Men who are socially connected but low in literacy do fine; men who are literate but without social connections do fine; but those who are both socially isolated and low in literacy don't care for themselves well, and so we seek ways that doctors can identify them and tailor their treatments in ways that increase success.

Or another example: I spend much time testifying in legal cases that turn on literacy issues; mainly on consumer fraud. Imagine you're a woman who has been through a painful divorce. Your ex- has run up big charges on the credit card and you are contesting; you don't believe that you owe these charges, you don't want to pay them, and as a result the bank cancelled your credit card.

But you receive a letter—a very simple, easy to read letter—in 14-point type, with multicolored graphics, and lots of white space. And this letter offers a solution. The lender offers a low-limit credit card—just \$50 per month—but enough to get you started again. What a great relief; an opportunity to rebuild your credit and to again have the convenience and safety of a credit card.

And the reason for my involvement? Well, on the back of the letter, in black and white, in very long lines, and no graphics, and very small print with no leading, and violating every established standard of clear communication is a message written at a high college level that explains the offer, an explanation that reveals that if you take this credit card, all of that contested debt will be loaded onto it, and that you are acknowledging the debt to be yours, and that you are surrendering all right to appeal.

Banks, mortgage lenders, and other creditors can go into our private records to identify who has lost their credit, or who has gone bankrupt, or who may be limited in literacy. One of my favorite analyses was of a loan offer, the required legal disclosures of which were printed in a shade of gray on white so faint that fewer than 20% of senior citizens would even notice the marks on the page. This offer was aimed, as you probably guessed, at a target audience over the age of 65.

It isn't just banks and lenders who use literacy in ways that take advantage of people or that present barriers to their participation. I live in Cook Co., Illinois, where

600,000 children live in poverty. U.S. law requires medical care for poor children—including annual physicals, glasses, and dental care. However, more than 450,000 of these children have never seen a doctor. For this reason, the Sargent Shriver National Center for Poverty Law sued the state of Illinois over this horrific situation. I testified on the elements of the case that turned on literacy. I examined the explanations of this program that were mailed to the parents, foster parents, and guardians of these children and found that the information was too difficult; there was no way these mothers and fathers could know of their children's rights, that these services were free, or how to obtain them.

In a landmark decision widely hailed by Civil Rights groups and health groups like the American Academy of Pediatrics—and in response to the testimony I provided, Judge Joan Lefkow ruling for the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, Eastern Division concluded that, indeed, the health information provided to these parents was not adequately accessible—to the low educated, to the non-English speaker, to the disabled (*Memisovski v. Maran*, 2004). Judge Lefkow ruled that Human Services offices needed to employ communications specialists who could write such texts at more accessible levels and, that they had to go even further. They had to recognize that no matter how readable this information could be made, that communicating solely in writing, solely through the literacy which we in this room are so passionate about, would not convey this critical information to all parents and that therefore they had to tell parents—using oral language—what medical care was available to their kids. As much as I revere literacy, I so much appreciate Judge Lefkow's recognition that sometimes literacy places too high a barrier and that lowering that barrier in certain essential areas—like children's health care—is the safest way to go.

There are other examples, too. Back in the year 2000, there was a presidential election in the U. S. You might remember it. It was the one that went on for a long time. (I'm an election junky. I love following the returns, and that year I had to vote absentee ballot because I was leading an education delegation in China. I always thought it was nice that they held the election over until I got back.) That was the election that made “hanging chads” a household term, and everyone knows that the voting machines messed up that election. But popular memory is incorrect. After the election, the Tribune

Corporation came to me and asked that I analyze ballots from Florida. The reason was that their analysts noted a peculiar pattern, that more votes had been lost in the paper-ballot counties than the machine-ballot ones. They wondered if literacy may have played any role, since the paper-ballot counties served those with the highest poverty rates and the lowest education levels. My task was to figure out if literacy played a role in depriving people of their constitutional right to vote. I analyzed the ballots predicting what readers might find difficult or confusing and the Tribune reporters then matched this information against the actual ballots that had been cast. Sadly, I was able to predict with a reasonable degree of accuracy how the votes had been lost (Kunerth, 2001, 2004).

In the 1960s, the U.S. Supreme Court banned the use of literacy tests as a barrier to voting. They concluded that all citizens should have the right to vote, no matter what their education or literacy level. But here we were 40 years later and citizens were being disenfranchised, not by literacy tests, but by the ballots themselves which required unnecessarily high levels of literacy. On the basis of this, the Tribune published articles that led to ballot reform in Florida. When the original articles appeared the various county clerks—those who are in charge of these elections—claimed that the changes I suggested could not be made. Two years later, the Florida state legislature mandated those “impossible” changes and more votes are now being counted in Florida elections.

I have been doing this work, for the same reason you and I do our school work: we want everyone to be able to take care of their health needs, we want everyone protected from those who will exploit them and separate them from the fruits of their labors, we want everyone to be able to be included in the body politic. It is easy to forget about those purposes in the daily hurly-burly of schools, in the pressures of classroom life, in the public arguments over what it will take for us to do better. When you work on removing these literacy barriers, you are never allowed to forget the consequences of inadequate literacy. My work—and the work of others—in removing these barriers is seemingly a perfect complement to your work as educators. But it is not quite a perfect match, and for that reason even if all such barriers were torn down, I would still be deeply dedicated to the teaching of literacy. Those who cannot read well may struggle with a ballot or may not be able to read the newspapers. What is less obvious is that low-literacy adults are less likely to rely on radio or TV news—media that require little or no

reading (Venezky, Kaestle, & Sum, 1987). . A poor match of literacy level and literacy requirement is a real barrier to full participation, but the lack of literacy itself may serve as an important psychological barrier as well. In that, illiteracy is the friend of fatalism, as being low in literacy discourages people from taking part even when they have sufficient functional skills.

Removing inappropriate literacy requirements from certain essential tasks is the right thing to do, but the meaning of literacy is more than functional in modern societies, and therefore the implications of your work as teachers is more than functional, too.

Literacy allows people to obtain political and health information and to understand consumer offers. But even more importantly, literacy plays a critical role in helping individuals to escape from fatalism and helps them to believe in the possibility and social value of their own actions. Extremists who turn to violence do so as a result of the frustration that arises from their fatalistic sense that there is no place for them at the table, and an impoverished acceptance of the idea that there is nothing they can do to affect the world in which they live. Suicide bombing only makes sense in the context of failure and frustration that says that one's only chance of reward will be in another life. Literacy is essential because it fosters a sense of possibility, while actually enabling participation.

It may not be just an issue of how well we do our job either. Research suggests that how we teach literacy may matter as well. In a landmark study in Liberia, Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole (1981) tried to uncover the impact of literacy learning on cognition. They wanted to know if literacy made people think differently. What they found was that there were no general cognitive differences caused by literacy, but the kind of literacy one learned and how one became literate did shape cognition. For example, those learning to read in Arabic ended up with greater memories than those who learned to read in English or Vai, and this stretching of memory seemed to be due to how they learned Arabic reading.

We need to continue to work to spread literacy. But, literacy must be taught in a way that truly opens up the possibilities of participation. We must dedicate ourselves to advancing not just simple literacy, but critical literacy, a literacy that allows and encourages persons to look beyond the author's claims, that allows one to evaluate

arguments and to recognize the source of information, that allows one to reflect deeply on the meaning of what is read, that allows one to transform messages, that allows one to see the connections among diverse ideas, that allows one to consider both what has gone before and what may arise in the future. Literacy is not a low level skill, it is a way of thinking, a way of life—it is the enemy of fatalism and in that it makes it difficult for extremism to take root. We need to teach literacy to all, but it must be a literacy that opens up the lessons of history and science, that considers the relationships among human beings, and that is based upon participation, individual dignity, and social responsibility. It is to that that we must dedicate ourselves and it is that shared dedication that ultimately unifies us as a profession, and it is why we are together this week.

We are being asked at this point in history to reach out to the 800 million people in the world who cannot read, and to lead them to a better life. We are being asked to raise literacy achievement in Western societies, beyond any levels we have ever accomplished before. The challenges and pressures this poses are great and it would be easy for us to despair. So in closing, let me leave you with the words of the theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, who wrote:

“Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope.

“Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith.

“Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love.” (Niebuhr, 1952)

As literacy teachers we understand that extending the gift of literacy to all cannot be accomplished in our lifetimes despite our best efforts and so we must be saved by hope.

As teachers we understand that what we are trying to provide to children is true and beautiful and good, but that it does not make complete sense in our immediate context, and therefore we too must be saved by faith.

As teachers and parents we know that what we strive for cannot be accomplished alone, but that we must depend upon our collective efforts, and therefore we must be saved by love.

Here today, at the beginning of the 52nd Annual Convention of the International Reading Association as your president, I wish for you an abundance of hope and faith and love to improve literacy for all, everywhere.

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