Podcast #198 Believe Me

I thought I’d engage you in a little experiential learning today that ties together two of this month’s topics of Music and Ireland.

There’s an old song I really hated for a long time and here is how it starts:

I remember it from cartoons of my childhood where Loony Tunes used it as a running gag where Yosemite Sam or Wily Coyote or Daffy Duck would rig a piano or xylophone to a stick of dynamite, so that when the high note was played, it would all blow up. Or there was the ever memorable rendition by Alfalfa from Our Little Rascals who sang the song in his classroom to earn an ice cream bar, and every time he hit the high note –which he never could quite get on pitch—and took a breath, there was a whistle sound that would come out of him.

So, when that song would come up in my piano lessons, that’s what I’d associate it with. It wasn’t a song to be taken seriously, for sure. And I just didn’t like it.

Until I learned the story behind the song.

Thomas Moore was an 18th century Irish poet who married a beautiful young actress named Elizabeth. He was a Catholic—she was a Protestant—even worse, she had no dowry, so it was some time before he let his parents know he was married. Even his friends rarely saw his bride and chided him that she was all in his imagination.

Well, one time when he was on an extended trip to Bermuda, his beautiful wife contracted smallpox which was a terribly disfiguring and scarring disease. When he returned, as the story goes, she locked herself in her room and despite all his pleadings, she would not let him in. She was afraid he would no longer love her because of the way she looked.

He then retired to his study for several hours and returned with a poem he had written that he read to her through the closed door.

*Believe me, if all those endearing young charms,
Which I gaze on so fondly to-day,
Were to change by to-morrow, and fleet in my arms,
Like fairy-gifts fading away,
Thou wouldst still be adored, as this moment thou art,
Let thy loveliness fade as it will,
And around the dear ruin each wish of my heart
Would entwine itself verdantly still.*

*It is not while beauty and youth are thine own,
And thy cheeks unprofaned by a tear,
That the fervor and faith of a soul may be known,
To which time will but make thee more dear!
No, the heart that has truly loved never forgets,
But as truly loves on to the close,
As the sunflower turns on her god when he sets
The same look which she turned when he rose!*

He finished the poem and waited and then the door quietly opened and she melted into his arms.

They had five children together—all of whom preceded them in death, their three daughters dying while young. When a trusted employee embezzled funds from him and caused him to face debtor’s prison, they fled to France in Exile until the debts could be satisfied. Yet, they remained steadfastly together in love through all the storms of life.

His words were later put to an Irish folk tune. Folk tunes spring from hearts, you know. Many of his poems were put to Irish folk tunes and he is said to have been most influential on Irish hearts in this way.

With this simple story, the song has become one of the treasures in my heart. I can’t hear the word ‘endearing’ or ‘charm’ without my brain instantly traveling down a neural pathway leading me back to this song where the feelings it stirs remind me of the timely lesson of this song—the lesson of unconditional love and self-worth.

You can explain unconditional love to me all day long, you can give me definitions and analysis and try to teach the principle to me, and it will not have anywhere near the impact on my heart that this simple poetical expression in song has upon me now that the story has deepened my understanding.

And that is the magic and power of the Arts in teaching our children life’s most important lessons.

I just recorded the story of Charles Dickens in this month’s My World Story Book series, and was especially struck with this passage:

“A very queer thing happened between Charles Dickens and the world. His writings took the form of stories. ..The world read these stories of Charles Dickens in exactly the same way as children listen to the stories of their mothers. They never thought of anything else when reading them. They laughed and said, “Isn’t that funny?” They sighed and wept and said, “Isn’t that touching?” They held their breath and whispered to themselves, “I wonder how this is going to end!”

But an extraordinary thing was happening to these grandfathers and grandmothers of ours while they bent over the magical pages of Charles Dickens. They were becoming different people. All the time they were reading a strange new light was entering their minds, a light that slowly burned away no end of their old thoughts, a light that brought out into bold relief ideas they had never seen before, and a light which created in them feelings they had never known till then. A most curious thing! This writer who had once tied down and labelled bottles of boot-blacking was changing the character of England, changing it for the better, and changing it by making people laugh and cry.

“How did he do this? He did it by making people see life with that uncommonly sharp eye of his, and making them feel things as he had felt them with the markedly impressionable mind of his. He lent the world his eyes; he gave the world his heart; and the world saw what it had never seen or felt before.”

I was talking with someone yesterday who asked a group of young college students if they would rather reach for a self-help book or a work of literature for self-improvement. Overwhelmingly, they chose the self-help book. I remarked that I wasn’t surprised because we are raised in a fast food culture. Perhaps they had never experienced what I hope you experienced in the relating of this story of Thomas Moore and his wife and her endearing young charms.

 A colleague of this person I was talking to—also a college professor—then observed that he can pick up a self-help book and teach the principles just by glancing at the table of contents. But it never has the depth of impact as when he allows his students to discover those same principles as they quietly unfold in the richness of good literature. And once you experience the second way, you can never go back. Self-help books, as helpful as they may appear at the surface, are shallow by comparison.

This is why we spend so much time with the Arts. All the lessons on ‘being’ you hope to teach to your children while at home are woven into them and delivered, perhaps without them even being aware of what is happening. As they immerse themselves in the finest gifts the world offers, as they associate with the noble and great ones through their creations, the character of your children is being shaped at the deepest levels.

Thomas Moore is to Ireland what Robert Burns is to Scotland.

His epitaph reads:

Dear Harp of my country! In darkness I found thee,

The cold chain of silence had hung o’er thee long;

When proudly, my own Island harp, I unbound thee

And gave all thy chords to light, freedom and song!

I couldn’t say it better myself. So I’ll leave that there and let you now listen to the song, sung as it deserves to be sung. With no stick of dynamite attached to it.

Believe me—Trust this process of personal transformation through Music, Poetry, Imagery and Story.

It works.

(song)