



Photo by Lorraine Chwazik,
NHS Librarian

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Mrs. Thornton, *The Ghost House*, AND THE REMARKABLE VALUE OF CARE

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My librarian in elementary school is the reason I am an author today. Mrs. Esther Thornton. Ah, just writing her name makes me smile. Mrs. Thornton was in her late fifties, small-boned, white-haired. She wasn't gushy, effusive, or touchy-feely—but she *cared*. She knew every student's name; she was generous with her smile, and she curated her shelves thoughtfully. She made her school library a welcome place for us to learn, explore, question, research, and—of course—read. Picture books, encyclopedias, chapter books, historical fiction, mysteries...and a special section just for Dr. Seuss. Plus two swiveling racks of paperback novels for older kids. The books on those shelves! The worlds they opened!

Caring came as naturally as breathing to Mrs. Thornton; for others of us, it takes practice.

Luckily, there are different expressions of care. You know the old saying: "different strokes for different folks." With that in mind, I offer the following examples of care, selected from the robust repertoire of Mrs. Thornton.

The Bean Bag Effect, or Why "Shushing" is Good for Students

Mrs. Thornton was a master of creating a peaceful environment. Her expectations for students' behavior were clear from our first library visit as kindergartners—quiet voices and settled, respectful bodies. The school library wasn't huge, but it was blessed with natural light, to which Mrs. Thornton added comfy chairs (I remember bean bags, but I might be making that up, because bean bags are actually quite loud, aren't they?), a kid-

sized water pitcher and cups, and a shelving scheme that offered cozy nooks to snuggle up, settle down, and read. It's a truism that human beings must feel safe and secure *before* learning can occur. School libraries can be safe havens for students: quiet places to decompress, without classroom pressures (grades, time limits, assignments) or social stresses (cliques, bullies, the negotiations of friendship). Reading and quiet offer respite for the weary souls of children. This is especially true for introverted kids, but even extroverts need some downtime now and then. So, go ahead, put your finger to your lips, and "shh"—smiling while you do.

Less Talking, More Doing

Mrs. Thornton didn't say, "I care about you, Jenny Johnson. You are special to me" (although it would have been fine with me if she had!).

More than giving me her words, she let me share her quiet. This was companionable silence, which roughly means: “We don’t need to talk. I just like being with you.” And I hope you’ll forgive my gross generalization, but I do think boys tend to be better at this than girls. Shared activity helps. I’ve learned to practice companionable silence while mountain biking or rock climbing with my son; sometimes he talks, sometimes he doesn’t, but I’m always too winded to ruin the moment with my usual verbiage.

Back in the Perry Browne School library, Mrs. Thornton let me sit and read while she sorted books. She invited me into her tiny office—remember what a kick it was, as a kid, to see a grown-up’s office?—while she used the laminator. Don’t get me wrong; I didn’t live in the library. These were ten- or fifteen-minute chunks, accumulated from kindergarten to sixth grade. Cumulative Companionable Silence. In today’s distracting, rushed, digital world, good old-fashioned companionable silence is a greatly undervalued and rare commodity. And I recommend it.

Being Real

More than anything, Mrs. Thornton made me feel like a real person, not Just A Kid. Mrs. Thornton did not patronize or make excuses for children. She expected good behavior. Books were to be returned on time. No funny business. But she cultivated critical thinking. Every time a student returned a library book, she would ask what we thought of it. (Less book report, more *I’m truly interested in what you think.*) I remember collecting my thoughts as I walked down the hall to the school library—nervous and excited to tell Mrs. Thornton my opinion of *Ramona and Her Father*. Had I liked it enough to read all the way

through? *Yes!* Would I recommend it to a friend? *Yes.* Were there any tears that needed mending? *Mrs. Thornton, I’m really sorry, but someone made pencil marks on page 33.* Listening, she would nod earnestly and ask follow-up questions—with never a whiff of condescension, but always a twinkle of delight.

Cultivating a Lifetime Love of the Written Word

And if you’re wondering, my answer is—yes, I believe that e-ink, story apps, “real” paper bound books, and audio books are all just fine—wonderful, in fact. They all develop an appreciation for good stories, good storytelling, and, thus, clear thinking and good writing. When I was in the second grade, Mrs. Thornton helped me discover that I loved to *write* stories as much as I loved reading them. She made me an offer she gave to every interested student: If I worked hard creating a book, and I sat down with her to make it the best it could be, she would laminate it, catalog it, and place it on the bookshelf.

Really, Mrs. Thornton?
My own book? You’re not teasing me, are you?

My first book was about a haunted house. Black marker on yellow construction paper. Surely it would make the awards shortlists. Probably win the Caldecott.

Uh, no. Mrs. Thornton respected me enough to tenderly quash my delusions of grandeur.

Carefully, gently, she edited *The Gost House* with me, correcting my repeated misspelling of “ghost;” wondering aloud how best my illustrations could help tell the story; making sure my narrative had a beginning, middle, and end.

When—and not until—the book was worthy, she cataloged it and helped me shelve it. Talk about pride of place.

I may be the only student who ever checked out *The Ghost House* by Jenny Johnson, but the pleasure of seeing my book on the library shelf told me everything I needed to know about becoming an author, and more importantly, it demonstrated the remarkable value of a school librarian’s care.

J.J. Johnson is the author of the YA novels *This Girl is Different* (Peachtree, 2011; winner of the Parent’s Choice Foundation Silver Honor) and the forthcoming *The Theory of Everything* (Peachtree, autumn 2012). J.J. grew up in Norwich, a small town in upstate New York, and graduated from Binghamton University. She has a Master of Education in Adolescent Risk and Prevention from Harvard University. J.J. believes in good libraries, good friends, good fun, and taking good risks. Find out more about J.J. and her books at <http://jjjohnsonauthor.com>.

