

2017 PSR/Sacramento Essay Contest Submission

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“A word, after a word, after a word, is power.” - Margaret Atwood

Margaret Atwood's words have never rang truer. Today, in the turbulent era of global communication, people have more access to information than there has been at any point in human history. But, with that access, must also come the ability to discern between rhetoric and sincerity, truth and falsehood. Words have power. They can persuade and galvanize, but they can also vilify and manipulate. The deluge of information overwhelms an individual with conflicting ideologies, facts, and fiction masqueraded as facts. An uneducated mind is a vulnerable one. Education empowers one with the objectivity to assess the intentions behind the words. True democracy, therefore, cannot function without education, for if citizens are not capable of making completely informed, independent decisions, the will of the people will never be executed.

History must be taught the way that the events transpired, not the way we wish they would have. Only by acknowledging our faults can we teach the next generation to learn from them. The ugly history of racism, misogyny, and homophobia in this country must be recognized in order to advance past it. The past has influenced who we are, but only we determine who we will be. But the grand accomplishments of America's past should also be emphasized, because instilling pride in one's country is the first step towards cultivating a sense of responsibility to one's country. And with a sense of responsibility comes the desire to improve, to be a part of the movements that change society. A citizen must be taught how their government functions so that they can be involved in the political sphere. They must be familiar with the mechanisms by which they can enact change. They must be taught their rights, so that they do not allow themselves or others to be taken advantage of. They must be taught how to articulate their opinions and not to relent in the face of dissent.

Above all, educational institutions should also function as socializing institutions. What I mean by this is a place where young, developing minds are exposed to a myriad of people of different ethnicities, beliefs, and class. After all, how can an individual truly empathize with a person they've never met? This is one of the most dire problems plaguing our society today. In the absence of personal connections, politicized media stereotypes dominate our perceptions. But, when people interact with each other, as equals, they become a team member, friend, daughter, brother- human, rather than "other".

And that is what education does-it teaches us to understand. Understand both ourselves and the world around us. Without education, democracy can easily fall prey to demagogues. Democracy is a treasure, but it is also a privilege. We must be unrelenting in our pursuit of education if we wish to maintain it.