

## ***Running and Reading***

*As we run, we become.*

*Amby Burfoot*

I went out for the track team when I was 12, and I've been running ever since. Over the years, I've gotten quite a bit slower -- honestly, it now is "jogging" instead of "running," and occasional "walking" slips in when hills get too steep. But I still say "running" because it makes me feel strong and good.

Running has been as much a part of me as working, reading, and breathing. Yet recently I began to dread running. My family had settled in a large suburban house. Large and roomy, it sat awkwardly at the end of a long lane leading from a two-lane highway. Living there, my running was a mind-numbing, unsafe endeavor. Every morning as the sun rose, I tip-toed out the front door and trudged down our gravel driveway to the highway. I ran two miles up the highway and two miles back. Same route. *Straight east, turn around, straight west.* Same thing. Every. Single. Time. Snow and rain and beating sun: I went east, and I went west. I curled deep onto the shoulder of the road when I saw cars, or concrete trucks, or semis, or whatever other lumbering vehicles were hurtling my way. Without making eye contact with the drivers, I lifted a hand apologetically as they roared past, feeling somehow accused of doing something wrong.

No wonder I'd begun to hate it.

I didn't ponder it much. I just went on and did it -- compliant, habitual, dutiful, and eager to fulfill expectations. That's me.

Then in a surprising whirl of good decision-making, my family moved into town. We're part of a quiet, quaint, hidden little neighborhood. I'm intrigued to find myself giddily enjoying my runs again; in fact, I wake up eager to lace my shoes. There are countless routes to take; there's so much to watch and see. The traffic is ghostly in its absence. The streets are cobbled; signs pronouncing "Historic Building" adorn many homes and businesses. The coffee shop is full and bustling. People walk down the sidewalks holding the hands of their children or the leashes of their dogs. Tonight I met Lyn, hanging deftly to a wagging-tailed Bear as he sniffed and snuffled. Melanie stopped by and asked if I'd like to run with her next Monday. People sat outdoors at the local tavern, laughing and holding grilled sandwiches and drinking lemonade. No matter what direction I take when I set off, I'm refreshed and inspired by the things to see and think

about.

That is exactly why we must give students choice and freedom in their reading.

If we force books upon children and insist they follow the same path their peers are taking, or worse, the same path we took as learners, we strip the joy and refreshment out of reading. Instead, we can let our students create their own path. We can ask them to choose their exploration. "What direction do you want to take today? What are you thinking about and caring about these days? Are there people you'd like to share with? Where do you want your imagination to carry you?"

Allowing choice and trusting students to make the right reading and writing decisions for themselves will inspire them to love their literacy path. We can't force them up and back, east and west, on a boring, unsafe highway; we must give them cobbled streets, coffee shops, friends and strangers, and roads headed in all possible directions.

***Jennifer Schwanke***  
***Contributor, Choice Literacy***

*Jennifer Schwanke is a principal in Dublin, Ohio. She also blogs about her personal pursuits at <http://jengoinbig.blogspot.com/>*