

Honorable Finalist, Level II

Thomas Gorenc

Letter to author Kate DiCamillo concerning her book *The Tiger Rising*

Dear Kate DiCamillo:

The human heart can open and close its valves to allow the blood to flow throughout the blood vessels. Much like that, the human soul can open and close its valves, but its vessels do not carry blood, but carry emotions. And much like the heart, if someone shuts off their souls' valves, it leads to horrible things. Your short novel, *The Tiger Rising*, is a book that I can soundly relate to. The reason I can understand your book is that the protagonist, Rob, tends to shut his soul's valves from others. I did the same thing until I read your book. Your book showed me the effects of hiding your emotions, and I am truly grateful for it.

I hid my emotions to avoid others because they assume that I do not want to talk. By not showing my emotions, such as laughing or crying, I avoid attracting attention to myself, which I find nice because I am kind of shy. By avoiding attention, I feel as if not showing my emotions gives me a sense of strength. Being able to hold myself together when others fall apart makes me look and feel stronger. I used to believe these were good parts of shutting my emotions in, but now I see that no matter what I will suffer because of it later.

By not expressing my emotions, I am often kept up at night, thinking about all the unsettling and unpleasant things that happened during the day. I bottle up everything inside. When I'm alone, all I can think about are the mistakes I have committed, or a fight I got into with a friend, and then my mind constantly reminds me of that: no matter how hard I try to stop it, my mind replays those moments and I relive them again and again, which makes it hard to sleep. I remember the night after my grandmother was pronounced dead, I had tried to hide my emotions from my parents, even after they told me that it was okay to cry. When I went to bed, I couldn't sleep because I was kept awake by the heart-wrenching sadness that enveloped me.

Hiding your true emotions can also make you look like a blank slate. Just like Rob in *The Tiger Rising*, I locked up all my emotions, like in a suitcase, and ran the risk of them bursting out in a moment of sadness or anger. Rob decided to shut everything out after the death of his mother, which took a toll on his way of thinking. He thought that letting out his emotions was a sign of weakness, which caused him to develop an antisocial personality. I had this mindset as well, which caused me to often stay in my room all day, even staying off my phone so as not to be reminded of my friends texting me. It was really depressing and sad, which made me distance myself from the world. Another time was when my dog Chuck died, I did this exact thing, and it stayed like that for at least a week. Your book helped me realize that I needed to get out of this depression and talk with people, or else the pain would not go away. In *Tiger Rising*, Rob talked with Sistine, which eventually had him open up about his emotions. I, however, tried to talk to people but found it hard because I am a bashful person.

When I read about Rob losing his mother, it reminded me of how I lost my grandparent, which was devastating. When my maternal grandmother, Nanny, died it was a bright summer morning. My parents were on vacation in Italy, and I had just gone from playing video games to making myself a sandwich for lunch. Nanny had been in bed, but she told me she would be alright. Being only in Fifth grade, I didn't think much of her going to bed, because she was tired in the morning. It was at that moment that I heard her voice faintly say, "Thomas call nine-one-one ..." The rest was just a blur of me running upstairs, dialing the phone, and the ambulance team coming up into the bedroom. It was the most

intense thing I have ever experienced. I tried my best to hide my emotions, which helped me cope in this dire situation.

What was even harder than that was trying to help my grandfather keep himself together. Tiger Rising helped me realize that the best way to comfort someone is to remind them that they are not alone. Other people are there to care for them. I tried to help my grandfather, but for a long time afterwards he was not in the best mental state. Your book helped me understand how to get myself out of my depression, but also how to help my grandfather because it showed how venting your bottled emotions can help relieve you of your bad thoughts and feelings. I wished to be able to apply this in future in any tragic event. The insight helped me realize the necessity of releasing my emotions, and not to bottle them up. What goal is it if you look stoic on the outside, but on the inside, you're the most unstable person around you? This is why I have made it a personal goal to not hide my feelings and to be more open with them.

Rob justified not sharing his emotions because he thought it unnecessary and thought about the consequences of his actions before he did anything. I used to be that way, too, and I recall one time where it helped me. It was during a hike with some friends. They had crossed a river which had a long, dilapidated log barely spanning its width to the other bank. Even though I wanted to follow them, my good judgment kept me back from my friends as I could have been severely injured. Basing things off facts instead of opinions and emotions is really important in Boy Scouts when we were trying to decide on what direction we wanted to lead the troop. I analyzed the rank, leadership position, etc., of each of the scouts and deduced the best possible strategy that would contribute to our success. This showed that being able to hold back emotions and think rationally can have its benefits, such as evaluating situations clearly. Rob helped me uncover this side of my personality through reading your book. From this event, I was able to learn that holding back emotions and thinking through things factually can sometimes be a beneficial tool, but from your book I realized that it can only happen in specific events when the tool is required.

You helped me realize that it is alright for me to open up to my parents and friends. Revealing my emotions can really help when I am down in the dumps.. I also learned that it is okay to open up to people that you know and that I do not have to be the stoic figure in the midst of a tragedy. Thank you for bringing me to a better place in life with your book.

Sincerely,
Thomas Gorenc

Honorable Finalist, Level II

Paul Abou Haidar

Letter to author S. E. Hinton concerning her book *The Outsiders*

Dear S. E. Hinton:

Although it was only 192 pages long, I never would have thought that your book *The Outsiders* had such depth to it. It impacted me and changed my thinking. Initially, trying to understand and relate to a poor boy affiliated with gangs seemed abnormal to me. Upon reading the novel, however, I saw that in quite a few cases, Ponyboy's thinking and mine were quite similar. The novel made me recognize the consequences of my complacent behavior.

I learned we both ran away from trouble, rather than confronting and learning from it. I would shirk my way out of my teachers' grasps and go on to repeat the same mistakes. Ponyboy allowed me to see that I need to change the path I was headed or reap hard consequences.

In the past, running away from trouble was as automatic and instinctive to me as running away from snakes (of which I am afraid). If I was kicked out of a class, I would automatically defend myself and attempt to justify what I did even if I was wrong. I don't want to suffer the consequences of what I do, but it's the only way to learn and change my behavior. I witnessed that after Ponyboy ran away from home he assimilated the bad behaviors of the people who had negatively influenced him, like Dally. Instead of being the conscientious and innocent boy he was, Ponyboy began losing the values that made him a likeable character. Eventually, Ponyboy realized that if he had only just made better decisions none of the unnecessary drama with the police and his family would have happened. I was determined not to be like that. You opened my eyes to see that by not facing facts, I tarnished my reputation and suffered from lying.

Recently, I was involved with a good friend in an incident of cheating at school. He asked for help in writing an essay on a test, and rather than telling him how to do it, I shared mine with him, which he partially copied. With a penitent conscience, he later confessed to our teacher that he had copied from me. The worst part was that when the teacher questioned me about it I blatantly lied, angering him so much that he gave my essay a failing grade: getting into trouble with my teacher and getting the failing grade could have been avoided if only I had told the truth. I suffered harshly because I ran from the truth instead of owning up to it. Since then, I have become prudent at realizing how to cope with trouble. Perhaps my main issue was that I mistakenly perceived "loyalty" to my gang (i.e. friends) to be above honesty, which the book helped me realize (because of what happened to Ponyboy), was not the right choice. There are plenty of other ways in which I could have helped my friend in that situation and still be a true friend. Allowing him to cheat from me denigrated both of us.

Overall, your book *The Outsiders* opened me to the truth about how dishonesty can hurt a person. It helped me to dramatically change the way I conduct myself. Ponyboy's struggle and choosing the wrong path led to pernicious consequences. It is a timely warning which allowed me to open my eyes and change my direction, acting proactively to prevent any future incidents from occurring.

Thank you so much for writing such an amazing book.

Paul Abou Haidar

Honorable Finalist, Level II

Shelby Tupciauskas

Letter to author Lynda Mullaly Hunt regarding her book One for the Murphys

Dear Lynda Mullaly Hunt:

There are many different ways that people change. Whether it be through small events throughout your lifetime or one huge event that changes your whole outlook on life, no one stays as they were, whether that be from weeks or years ago. However, I've learned that what really determines how those events change us is how they are perceived. Besides physically, it is almost impossible for an event itself to change you if you are not thinking of it in a certain way, whether that be good or bad.

After going through one of these unfortunate events in my own life, your book, *One for the Murphys*, was able to pick me back up.

Parent divorce is extremely common, usually just being a mistake between the couple of having picked the wrong person. This does not mean it is not painful. Looking back on it now, I am grateful that I can be in two different households with people who can be themselves completely, not having to worry about a spouse that makes them feel unhappy or restricted. To see the happiness of my parents is something I value much more than being able to keep the idea of being in one happy family. From this, I can understand why Carley was set on separating her mother from her boyfriend, because she deeply cared about her mother. However, when that idea was relevant, I can no longer remember if I was unhappy or just drastically different than now because this event was a way to redesign my life, which I can now say was for the better.

When our family started to split, I did not know what the concept of divorce was. This went on for a while, until my parents were actually looking for new houses to settle into and new people to associate with. Days full of pain and wishing to have the feeling in just one family back eventually turned into feeling like my entire personality was being stripped from me. I became secluded from those around me, not talking unless I had to. I didn't participate in class, or get excited over school activities like I had. This led to my parents' frustration, a feeling like I could please no one even though it felt like it took all of my being just to breathe. Just like the character of Carley in your book had become accustomed to the way she was treated by her mother, I had become accustomed to the numb feeling in my stomach.

After feeling like I was seeing everything underwater for a matter of time, the numbness I had started to turn into anger. Anger that I couldn't just be in one family, where I didn't have to drive from house to house just to see the people who were supposed to raise me together. Anger that I didn't feel like I deserved one. Not knowing how to handle it, I directed it towards myself, was constantly bombarded with negative comments about all aspects of my life.

I no longer felt kind.

But a few years ago when picking out a book at the media center, I happened to pick up your book, *One for the Murphys*. The way Mrs. Murphy helped the main character, Carley, was a way for me to realize that in order to change, that is how I must treat myself, because no one was going to do it for me. The seclusion I had endured convinced me that going through hard events does not prove strength. That you can still be weak regardless of what you've been through, and that I was. But the way I related to Carley's guard on the people around her, and how she thought expressing emotion showed weakness helped me take Mrs. Murphy's words to heart when she really recognized what Carley had been through when going through being put in foster care, and how she said that she was the strongest person she'd met. When watching my parents date new people, I felt almost betrayed. After all, I wanted to be raised by my own parents. However, when seeing what Carley felt when having to stay with the Murphys, it made me realize how much people can change you for the better; moreover, that I must take chances in order to feel anything close to happiness. For this, I will have to risk changing as a person, just like Carley finally felt she was in a real family.

So instead of not even trying to look at the surface of the water, I started to relearn how to swim. I connected with people I once knew and people I'd never met before, and started to find my happiness within them as well. I'd learned their stories and how they affected them, just like when Carley had Toni, her best friend. I met new teachers who gave me not only inspiration, but motivation to try again. I then became invested in my grades because it was something that could show a fraction of the work that I put into everything that I do. I started to feel what was around me again, rather than just being able to watch it and feel like everyone else was in on something I wasn't. And I know that when I endure another event like this in my lifetime that I will be able to not only use my strength, but the strength I have learned from Carley and Mrs. Murphy in One for the Murphys to get me through it.

Thank you for everything you've done, and everything you will do for me in the future.

Sincerely,
Shelby Tupciauskas