

The Persistence of Seuss
2nd Place Stuckey Contest Winner
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For many of us, books are like pants: we buy them, we grow out of them, we hand them down to our siblings, we start again, and so on and so forth until we finally stop growing. At this point, our wardrobes begin to gain consistency. We accumulate a few timeless pieces; we cycle through trendier ones. We each find a size and cut that works for us, and for the most part, we stick with it. Books can be the same way. We zip through reading levels with increasing comprehension and a proliferating vocabulary, abandoning picture books for chapter books, chapter books for novels, even novels for nonfiction, until we achieve a sort of literary equilibrium. Still, while none of us can ever hope to get even one leg through our kindergartner-sized trousers, books seem to have a bit more stretch- who among us has not smiled at *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* or *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* long after elementary school graduation? I'm no exception; for me, the works of Dr. Seuss are the one pair of pants that I have never outgrown.

From a young age, I, like nearly every other budding reader, found comfort and challenge in the meandering prose of Dr. Seuss. As a young bibliophile, I graduated quickly from *Hop on Pop* to *One Fish Two Fish Read Fish Blue Fish* to *Horton Hears a Who*, pouring over each book with a vigor rivaled only by high school students during finals week. Like any kid, as the years went by those gallivanting rhymes went the way of the Cat in the Hat, packing themselves up into a box when maturity kicked in, but there was still something about Dr. Seuss I just couldn't seem to shake.

Take, for example, *The Lorax*. I first cracked open the truffula-adorned cover in kindergarten, plucking the friendly-looking volume from the shelf during a snack break. Initially, I had a number of questions- where did all the trees go? Who is the Once-ler, anyway? What on earth is a thneed? - But by the end of the book, the answer to just one evaded me: why? Why would anyone *want* to destroy the earth? Since then, one line has become my personal mantra: "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not". It was then that I decided to save the planet.

Within a few weeks of reading it, I had my first opportunity to live up to *The Lorax*. Our school had started a new "green" initiative, and Wednesdays became trash-free lunch days; for every Wednesday a student finished his meal with no waste to contribute to a landfill, he would receive a small, blue certificate. I *loved* it. Every Wednesday morning I would diligently pack my sandwich in a Tupperware container with the anticipation of another award and the pride of helping the earth. I knew that, somehow, I was saving another truffula with every passing Wednesday. In other words, I was hooked on being green.

By high school, life had become a bit more complicated than a plastic-bag versus-container decision. the first major obstacle came not as a truffula-hacking entrepreneur, but as a challenge of organizing my participation in an enormous array of extracurricular activities,

ranging from the marching band to the environmental club to the dance team. As time snuck by, I piled on more and more clubs and associations and organizations. I became a regular tutor in chemistry. I dabbled in improv. I even ran for a student council office. Finally, after one night too many to which Dr. Seuss's *Sleep Book* did not apply, I turned to my time-honored author for advice; perhaps, like the poor protagonist of *The Five Hundred Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins*, I had been wearing an overabundance of hats. Just as Bartholomew peels off hat after hat after hat on his way to the castle, so too my junior year found me paring down on an overworked schedule. And when Bartholomew's hats grew more extravagant with each one he removed, I also thrived in, even took charge of, the few things I kept pursuing.

Take, for example, my participation in the school environmental team. My inner Lorax leaping into action at the mention of "climate change" or "coal power", I found my home among the students seeking composting and solar panels for our school. Like any participant, though, I often found myself in the shoes of Gerald McGrew of *If I Ran a Zoo*, in his words, "if I ran the zoo, I'd make a few changes!". After two years of membership, I got my chance to step up and take charge. Like the young McGrew, I tried my best to breathe new life into the team, assembling the best and brightest environmentalist-in-training to design a composting program for twenty-nine schools. I never had any issues finding a Never-Been-Caught Natch, but I certainly had problems hunting down the equally-evasive biodegradable lunch trays; I may not have traveled to the Northeastern West Part of South Carolina like McGrew, but we made the courageous journey to the school board to pitch our plan; the New Zoo, like McGrew, but we made the courageous journey to the school board to pitch our plan; the New Zoo, McGrew Zoo, would be quite fantastic, but our team, a star team, more enthusiastic. The motivation of Mr. McGrew was a constant encouragement, spurring me to reach out into the community and accomplish what I had never thought possible: district-wide composting service.

I soon found that, no matter the zeal, there was one audience that was nearly impossible to get on board with composting: middle school students. Teaching a seventh-grader to compost is comparable to banging your head against a brick wall: you gain little aside from a headache. After one disheartening discussion with a sixth grade class about the insurmountable difficulty of sorting trash into three bins instead of two, I stood at a crossroads. Distraught, I called upon Dr. Seuss once more for support. *How*, I thought, *can I be the Lorax if I can't even get someone to compost?* At last, I realized: I am Sam. Sam I am. They would like green eggs and ham. Motivation renewed, I scrambled to the next science class to indoctrinate the eighth-graders against the ways of food waste. They might say that they would not compost-not in a box with a fox, not on a train in the rain, and especially not on a boat with a goat- but I was determined to get through to them. Dr. Seuss had re-instilled in me a resolute patience; if Sam I Am's friend could stomach green eggs, I was certain that middle-schoolers could stomach a greener cafeteria. Sure enough, fifteen classrooms and forty-five presentations later, our team had preached composting to every single student, entreating them to expend a few seconds to sort their food scraps. Their improvement may have been slower than Yertle the Turtle, but the progress was evident and the compost was cleaner. Six weeks later, the district sustainability director declared the program a success.

"Congratulations!" read my chemistry teacher; she had set down her test tubes and pipettes in lieu of a picture book. "Today is your day. You're off to Great Places! You're off and

away!” It was November 1st, the day that college applications were due, and if my brain was miles from chemistry, it had been light years from Dr. Seuss just a few minutes before. “You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose,” she read, trying to instill in us some encouragement on what had otherwise been an exceedingly stressful day. As she peeked over her faded copy of *Oh! The Places You’ll Go*, I couldn’t help but reflect upon the subtle, yet persistent, presence of the bouncing anapestic tetrameter of my beloved Dr. Seuss. His works have a certain, universal morality that goes vastly unnoticed and underappreciated. The untainted simplicity of his themes is too pervasive to ignore, no matter our age. The likes of Sam I Am, Gerald McGrew, and the Lorax have shaped my life in infinite, infinitesimal ways. The fact is, Dr. Seuss books cannot be outgrown. There isn’t a single pair of pants in this world that can claim the same.