

AN AHA MOMENT THAT CHANGED MY LIFE



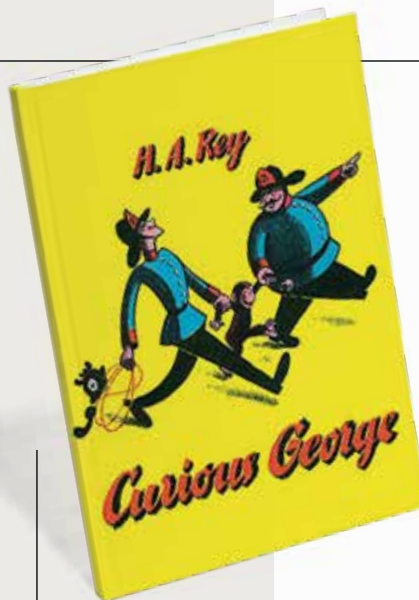
Because I've written a good bit about reading, I was invited a couple of years ago to take part in a televised roundtable

discussion about improving literacy.

The topic was too knotty to be resolved within an hour of prime-time TV, and as with most discussions like this, some of the best talk unfolded when the cameras weren't rolling.

While we waited for the taping to start, I asked one of my fellow panelists, an adult literacy instructor, about the challenges and rewards of helping grown men and women learn to read. Had he often witnessed an aha moment when something clicked, allowing the student to connect written language with meaning?

Such windfalls of revelation were often more gradual, the teacher told me, and they sometimes happened away from class, perhaps on the drive home. After navigating familiar streets, a student might park in his driveway and realize that he had *read* himself home, truly understanding traffic signs for the first time.



*From the seeming chaos of a scattered alphabet,
a pattern emerged. I understood, for the first time,
how letters made words . . .*

The story touched me because it connected reading and home, two things that for me have always been inseparable. Like many lucky children, I came to know my first written words before I started school.

My sister, two years older, sat with me in an overstuffed living room chair, sharing the private story she knew how to summon by scanning the lines of *Curious George*. I enjoyed the bright pictures of H. A. and Margret Rey's children's tale, though I couldn't fathom why my sister seemed so entranced by the nonsensical squiggles of black print that marched like tiny ants across the page. The jots of ink seemed to speak to her — or *through* her. Some strange voice, hidden within the folds of the book, was spilling from my sister's mouth as her eyes traveled from left to right. What lovely dark magic was this?

I decided to follow the lines, too, a habit I embraced during many visits with *Curious George* throughout that summer. One afternoon, as the sun blazed outside and a warm breeze ruffled the curtains, my sister's book began talking through *me*. From the seeming chaos of a scattered alphabet, a pattern emerged. I understood, for the first time, how letters made words: "This is George. He lived in Africa. He was a good little monkey and always very curious."

"Now I see it," I remember thinking to myself. I was now a reader. My life, touched by this inexhaustible miracle, would never be the same.

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