

# Everyday Heroes



## Benjamin Carson, M.D.

“Benjamin, is this your report card?” my mother asked as she picked up the folded white card from the table.

“Uh, yeah,” I said, trying to sound unconcerned. Too ashamed to hand it to her, I had dropped it on the table, hoping that she wouldn’t notice until after I went to bed.

It was the first report card I had received from Higgins Elementary School since we had moved back from Boston to Detroit, only a few months earlier.

I had been in the fifth grade not even two weeks before everyone considered me the dumbest kid in the class and frequently made jokes about me. Before long I too began to feel as though I really was the most stupid kid in fifth grade. Despite Mother’s frequently saying, “You’re smart, Bennie. You can do

anything you want to do,” I did not believe her.

No one else in school thought I was smart, either.

Now, as Mother examined my report card, she asked, “What’s this grade in reading?” (Her tone of voice told me that I was in trouble.) Although I was embarrassed, I did not think too much about it. Mother knew that I wasn’t doing well in math, but she did not know I was doing so poorly in every subject.

While she slowly read my report card, reading everything one word at a time, I hurried into my room and started to get ready for bed. A few minutes later, Mother came into my bedroom.

“Benjamin,” she said, “are these your grades?” She held the card in front of me as if I hadn’t seen it before.

“Oh, yeah, but you know, it doesn’t mean much.”

“No, that’s not true, Bennie. It means a lot.”

“Just a report card.”

“But it’s more than that.”

Knowing I was in for it now, I prepared to listen, yet I was not all that interested. I did not like school very much and there was no reason

why I should. Inasmuch as I was the dumbest kid in the class, what did I have to look forward to? The others laughed at me and made jokes about me every day.

“Education is the only way you’re ever going to escape poverty,” she said. “It’s the only way you’re ever going to get ahead in life and be successful. Do you understand that?”

“Yes, Mother,” I mumbled.

“If you keep on getting these kinds of grades you’re going to spend the rest of your life on skid row, or at best sweeping floors in a factory. That’s not the kind of life that I want for you. That’s not the kind of life that God wants for you.”

I hung my head, genuinely ashamed. My mother had been raising me and my older brother, Curtis, by herself. Having only a third-grade education herself, she knew the value of what she did not have. Daily she drummed into Curtis and me that we had to do our best in school.

“You’re just not living up to your potential,” she said. “I’ve got two mighty smart boys and I know they can do better.”

I had done my best—at least I had when I first started at Higgins Elementary School. How

could I do much when I did not understand anything going on in our class?

In Boston we had attended a parochial school, but I hadn't learned much because of a teacher who seemed more interested in talking to another female teacher than in teaching us. Possibly, this teacher was not solely to blame—perhaps I wasn't emotionally able to learn much. My parents had separated just before we went to Boston, when I was eight years old. I loved both my mother and father and went through considerable trauma over their separating. For months afterward, I kept thinking that my parents would get back together, that my daddy would come home again the way he used to, and that we could be the same old family again—but he never came back. Consequently, we moved to Boston and lived with Aunt Jean and Uncle William Avery in a tenement building for two years until Mother had saved enough money to bring us back to Detroit.

Mother kept shaking the report card at me as she sat on the side of my bed. “You have to work harder. You have to use that good brain that God gave you, Bennie. Do you understand that?”

“Yes, Mother.” Each time she paused, I would dutifully say those words.

“I work among rich people, people who are educated,” she said. “I watch how they act, and I know they can do anything they want to do. And so can you.” She put her arm on my shoulder. “Bennie, you can do anything they can do—only you can do it better!”

Mother had said those words before. Often. At the time, they did not mean much to me. Why should they? I really believed that I was the dumbest kid in fifth grade, but of course, I never told her that.

“I just don’t know what to do about you boys,” she said. “I’m going to talk to God about you and Curtis.” She paused, stared into space, then said (more to herself than to me), “I need the Lord’s guidance on what to do. You just can’t bring in any more report cards like this.”

As far as I was concerned, the report card matter was over.

The next day was like the previous ones—just another bad day in school, another day of being laughed at because I did not get a single problem right in arithmetic and couldn’t get any words right on the spelling test. As soon as I came home from school, I changed into play clothes and ran outside. Most of the boys my age played softball, or the game I liked best, “Tip the Top.”

We played Tip the Top by placing a bottle cap on one of the sidewalk cracks. Then taking a ball—any kind that bounced—we’d stand on a line and take turns throwing the ball at the bottle top, trying to flip it over. Whoever succeeded got two points. If anyone actually moved the cap more than a few inches, he won five points. Ten points came if he flipped it into the air and it landed on the other side.

When it grew dark or we got tired, Curtis and I would finally go inside and watch TV. The set stayed on until we went to bed. Because Mother worked long hours, she was never home until just before we went to bed. Sometimes I would awaken when I heard her unlocking the door.

Two evenings after the incident with the report card, Mother came home about an hour before our bedtime. Curtis and I were sprawled out, watching TV. She walked across the room, snapped off the set, and faced both of us. “Boys,” she said, “you’re wasting too much of your time in front of that television. You don’t get an education from staring at television all the time.”

Before either of us could make a protest, she told us that she had been praying for wisdom. “The Lord’s told me what to do,” she said. “So

from now on, you will not watch television, except for two preselected programs each week.”

“Just two programs?” I could hardly believe she would say such a terrible thing. “That’s not—”

“And only after you’ve done your homework. Furthermore, you don’t play outside after school, either, until you’ve done all your homework.”

“Everybody else plays outside right after school,” I said, unable to think of anything except how bad it would be if I couldn’t play with my friends. “I won’t have any friends if I stay in the house all the time—”

“That may be,” Mother said, “but everybody else is not going to be as successful as you are—”

“But, Mother—”

“This is what we’re going to do. I asked God for wisdom, and this is the answer I got.”

I tried to offer several other arguments, but Mother was firm. I glanced at Curtis, expecting him to speak up, but he did not say anything. He lay on the floor, staring at his feet.

“Don’t worry about everybody else. The whole world is full of ‘everybody else,’ you know that? But only a few make a significant achievement.”

The loss of TV and play time was bad enough. I got up off the floor, feeling as if everything was against me. Mother wasn't going to let me play with my friends, and there would be no more television—almost none, anyway. She was stopping me from having any fun in life.

“And that isn't all,” she said. “Come back, Bennie.”

I turned around, wondering what else there could be.

“In addition,” she said, “to doing your homework, you have to read two books from the library each week. Every single week.”

“Two books? Two?” Even though I was in fifth grade, I had never read a whole book in my life.

“Yes, two. When you finish reading them, you must write me a book report just like you do at school. You're not living up to your potential, so I'm going to see that you do.”

Usually Curtis, who was two years older, was the more rebellious. But this time he seemed to grasp the wisdom of what Mother said. He did not say one word.

She stared at Curtis. “You understand?”

He nodded.

“Bennie, is it clear?”



“Yes, Mother.” I agreed to do what Mother told me—it wouldn’t have occurred to me not to obey—but I did not like it. Mother was being unfair and demanding more of us than other parents did.

The following day was Thursday. After school, Curtis and I walked to the local branch of the library. I did not like it much, but then I had not spent that much time in any library.

We both wandered around a little in the children’s section, not having any idea about how to select books or which books we wanted to check out.

The librarian came over to us and asked if she could help. We explained that both of us wanted to check out two books.

“What kind of books would you like to read?” the librarian asked.

“Animals,” I said after thinking about it. “Something about animals.”

“I’m sure we have several that you’d like.” She led me over to a section of books. She left me and guided Curtis to another section of the room. I flipped through the row of books until I found two that looked easy enough for me to read. One of them, *Chip, the Dam Builder*—about a beaver—was the first one I had ever checked out. As soon as I got home, I started

to read it. It was the first book I ever read all the way through even though it took me two nights. Reluctantly, I admitted afterward to Mother that I really had liked reading about Chip.

Within a month I could find my way around the children's section like someone who had gone there all his life. By then the library staff knew Curtis and me and the kind of books we chose. They often made suggestions. "Here's a delightful book about a squirrel," I remember one of them telling me.

As she told me part of the story, I tried to appear indifferent, but as soon as she handed it to me, I opened the book and started to read.

Best of all, we became favorites of the librarians. When new books came in that they thought either of us would enjoy, they held them for us. Soon I became fascinated as I realized that the library had so many books—and about so many different subjects.

After the book about the beaver, I chose others about animals—all types of animals. I read every animal story I could get my hands on. I read books about wolves, wild dogs, several about squirrels, and a variety of animals that lived in other countries. Once I had gone through the animal books, I started reading about plants, then minerals, and finally rocks.

My reading books about rocks was the first time the information ever became practical to me. We lived near the railroad tracks, and when Curtis and I took the route to school that crossed by the tracks, I began paying attention to the crushed rock that I noticed between the ties.

As I continued to read more about rocks, I would walk along the tracks, searching for different kinds of stones, and then see if I could identify them.

Often I would take a book with me to make sure that I had labeled each stone correctly.

“Agate,” I said as I threw the stone. Curtis got tired of my picking up stones and identifying them, but I did not care because I kept finding new stones all the time. Soon it became my favorite game to walk along the tracks and identify the varieties of stones. Although I did not realize it, within a very short period of time, I was actually becoming an expert on rocks.

Two things happened in the second half of fifth grade that convinced me of the importance of reading books.

First, our teacher, Mrs. Williamson, had a spelling bee every Friday afternoon. We’d go through all the words we’d had so far that year. Sometimes she also called out words that we

were supposed to have learned in fourth grade. Without fail, I always went down on the first word.

One Friday, though, Bobby Farmer, whom everyone acknowledged as the smartest kid in our class, had to spell “agriculture” as his final word. As soon as the teacher pronounced his word, I thought, I can spell that word. Just the day before, I had learned it from reading one of my library books. I spelled it under my breath, and it was just the way Bobby spelled it.

If I can spell “agriculture,” I’ll bet I can learn to spell any other word in the world. I’ll bet I can learn to spell better than Bobby Farmer.

Just that single word, “agriculture,” was enough to give me hope.

The following week, a second thing happened that forever changed my life. When Mr. Jaeck, the science teacher, was teaching us about volcanoes, he held up an object that looked like a piece of black, glass-like rock. “Does anybody know what this is? What does it have to do with volcanoes?”

Immediately, because of my reading, I recognized the stone. I waited, but none of my classmates raised their hands. I thought, This is strange. Not even the smart kids are raising their hands. I raised my hand.

“Yes, Benjamin,” he said.

I heard laughter around me. The other kids probably thought it was a joke, or that I was going to say something stupid.

“Obsidian,” I said.

“That’s right!” He tried not to look startled, but it was obvious he hadn’t expected me to give the correct answer.

“That’s obsidian,” I said, “and it’s formed by the supercooling of lava when it hits the water.” Once I had their attention and realized I knew information no other student had learned, I began to tell them everything I knew about the subject of obsidian, lava, lava flow, super-cooling, and compacting of the elements.

When I finally paused, a voice behind me whispered, “Is that Bennie Carson?”

“You’re absolutely correct,” Mr. Jaeck said and he smiled at me. If he had announced that I’d won a million-dollar lottery, I couldn’t have been more pleased and excited.

“Benjamin, that’s absolutely, absolutely right,” he repeated with enthusiasm in his voice. He turned to the others and said, “That is wonderful! Class, this is a tremendous piece of information Benjamin has just given us. I’m very proud to hear him say this.”

For a few moments, I tasted the thrill of achievement. I recall thinking, Wow, look at them. They're all looking at me with admiration. Me, the dummy! The one everybody thinks is stupid. They're looking at me to see if this is really me speaking.

Maybe, though, it was I who was the most astonished one in the class. Although I had been reading two books a week because Mother told me to, I had not realized how much knowledge I was accumulating. True, I had learned to enjoy reading, but until then I hadn't realized how it connected with my schoolwork. That day—for the first time—I realized that Mother had been right. Reading is the way out of ignorance, and the road to achievement. I did not have to be the class dummy anymore.

For the next few days, I felt like a hero at school. The jokes about me stopped. The kids started to listen to me. I'm starting to have fun with this stuff.

As my grades improved in every subject, I asked myself, "Ben, is there any reason you can't be the smartest kid in the class? If you can learn about obsidian, you can learn about social studies and geography and math and science and everything."

That single moment of triumph pushed me to want to read more. From then on, it was as though I could not read enough books. Whenever anyone looked for me after school, they could usually find me in my bedroom—curled up, reading a library book—for a long time, the only thing I wanted to do. I had stopped caring about the TV programs I was missing; I no longer cared about playing Tip the Top or baseball anymore. I just wanted to read.

In a year and a half—by the middle of sixth grade—I had moved to the top of the class. ❖