The Reader

Life Lines

A Shared Reading activity pack
to read wherever you are

Issue 21

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"It was her own, her darling, her individual baby, already, though not an hour old, separate and sole in her heart, strangely filling up its measure with love and peace, and even hope."

Ruth *by Elizabeth Gaskell*

The Reader is a charity which usually brings people together to listen to stories, extracts and poems in free, weekly Shared Reading groups. In these Life Lines activity packs we hope to offer everyone the same comfort, meaning and connection through great literature that our reading groups provide – wherever it finds you.

Now that we all have time on our hands, we face the strangely demanding task of filling our days in a way that feels good. Each Life Lines pack will bring you some of a story and a poem, which you can read in your own time. Along with the reading, you'll find a selection of thoughts and feelings shared by other fellow readers about the chosen pieces. We suggest that reading the poem or the story out loud is a great way to get below the surface and make your own connection with them. It may feel strange but it does make a difference, so do please give it a try!

As always, do feel free to make notes on your own thoughts and feelings as you go, perhaps marking words or sentences that particularly stand out to you…

This week's story is called Mother and Child, and it comes from Chapter 15 of Elizabeth Gaskell's novel Ruth. Ruth is a young woman who is about to give birth to her first child. The father has abandoned her and she has been taken in by the Bensons, a brother and a sister who live together in a small village and who sympathise with Ruth's situation. However, they do ask her to adopt a fictional name and story to prevent local gossip. Ruth is not known in the neighbourhood and to ensure a fresh start, they ask her to tell people that she is a young widow called Mrs Denbeigh. Ruth agrees but is not comfortable living under the shadow of a lie. Here we see her trying to settle into her new home.

‘Mother and Child’ by Elizabeth Gaskell (Chapter 15, *Ruth*)

"Here is a parcel for you, Ruth!" said Miss Benson on the Tuesday morning.

"For me!" said Ruth, all sorts of rushing thoughts and hopes filling her mind, and turning her dizzy with expectation. If it had been from "him," the new-born resolutions would have had a hard struggle for existence.

"It is directed 'Mrs Denbigh,'" said Miss Benson, before giving it up. "It is in Mrs Bradshaw's handwriting;" and, far more curious than Ruth, she awaited the untying of the close-knotted string. When the paper was opened, it displayed a whole piece of delicate cambric-muslin; and there was a short note from Mrs Bradshaw to Ruth, saying her husband had wished her to send this muslin in aid of any preparations Mrs Denbigh might have to make. Ruth said nothing, but coloured up, and sat down again to her employment.

"Very fine muslin indeed," said Miss Benson, feeling it, and holding it up against the light, with the air of a connoisseur; yet all the time she was glancing at Ruth's grave face. The latter kept silence, and showed no wish to inspect her present further. At last she said, in a low voice,

"I suppose I may send it back again?"

"My dear child! send it back to Mr Bradshaw! You'd offend him for life. You may depend upon it, he means it as a mark of high favour!"

"What right had he to send it me?" asked Ruth, still in her quiet voice.

"What right? Mr Bradshaw thinks— I don't know exactly what you mean by 'right.'"

Ruth was silent for a moment, and then said:

"There are people to whom I love to feel that I owe gratitude—gratitude which I cannot express, and had better not talk about—but I cannot see why a person whom I do not know should lay me under an obligation. Oh! don't say I must take this muslin, please, Miss Benson!"

What Miss Benson might have said if her brother had not just then entered the room, neither he nor any other person could tell; but she felt his presence was most opportune, and called him in as umpire. He had come hastily, for he had much to do; but he no sooner heard the case than he sat down, and tried to

draw some more explicit declaration of her feeling from Ruth, who had remained silent during Miss Benson's explanation.

"You would rather send this present back?" said he.

"Yes," she answered, softly. "Is it wrong?"

"Why do you want to return it?"

"Because I feel as if Mr Bradshaw had no right to offer it me."

Mr Benson was silent.

"It's beautifully fine," said Miss Benson, still examining the piece.

"You think that it is a right which must be earned?"

"Yes," said she, after a minute's pause. "Don't you?"

"I understand what you mean. It is a delight to have gifts made to you by those whom you esteem and love, because then such gifts are merely to be considered as fringes to the garment—as inconsiderable additions to the mighty treasure of their affection, adding a grace, but no additional value, to what before was precious, and proceeding as naturally out of that as leaves burgeon out upon the trees; but you feel it to be different when there is no regard for the giver to idealise the gift—when it simply takes its stand among your property as so much money's value. Is this it, Ruth?"

"I think it is. I never reasoned why I felt as I did; I only knew that Mr Bradshaw's giving me a present hurt me, instead of making me glad.''

"Well, but there is another side of the case we have not looked at yet—we must think of that, too. You know who said, 'Do unto others as ye would that they should do unto you'? Mr Bradshaw may not have had that in his mind when he desired his wife to send you this; he may have been self-seeking, and only anxious to gratify his love of patronising—that is the worst motive we can give him; and that would be no excuse for your thinking only of yourself, and returning his present."

"But you would not have me pretend to be obliged?" asked Ruth.

"No, I would not. I have often been similarly situated to you, Ruth; Mr Bradshaw has frequently opposed me on the points on which I feel the warmest—am the most earnestly convinced. He, no doubt, thinks me Quixotic, and often speaks of me, and to me, with great contempt when he is angry. I suppose he has a little fit of penitence afterwards, or perhaps he thinks he can pay for ungracious speeches by a present; so, formerly, he invariably sent me something after these occasions. It was a time, of all others, to feel as you are doing now; but I became convinced it would be right to accept them, giving only the very cool thanks which I felt. This omission of all show of much gratitude had the best effect—the presents have much diminished; but if the gifts have lessened, the unjustifiable speeches have decreased in still greater proportion, and I am sure we respect each other more. Take this muslin, Ruth, for the reason I named; and thank him as your feelings prompt you. Overstrained expressions of gratitude always seem like an endeavour to place the receiver of these expressions in the position of debtor for future favours. But you won't fall into this error."

Ruth listened to Mr Benson; but she had not yet fallen sufficiently into the tone of his mind to understand him fully. She only felt that he comprehended her better than Miss Benson, who once more tried to reconcile her to her present, by calling her attention to the length and breadth thereof.

"I will do what you wish me," she said, after a little pause of thoughtfulness. "May we talk of something else?"

A Pause for Thought…

This gift from Mr Bradshaw has certainly caused quite a stir in the Benson's household – I wonder what we make of it all?

Miss Benson is certainly very puzzled by Ruth's initial reluctance to accept the gift. There is a funny little discussion which follows over the 'rights' of the matter. Ruth asks 'What right had he to send it me?' While Miss Benson is at a loss to understand Ruth's use of the word 'right' in the context of one person giving a gift to another. 'What right?' Miss Benson asks, 'I don't know exactly what you mean by 'right.'"

People talk about earning 'rights' to things in relationships, but it is often in relation to qualities such as trust say, or confidence, rather than the giving of a gift. I wonder how many of us have ever felt like Ruth on receiving a present? Or whether we have ever been on the other side, such as Mr Bradshaw?

While Miss Benson seems unable to follow Ruth's train of thought, her brother perhaps does a better job. He talks about how he has also felt like Ruth at times, on receiving gifts from Mr Bradshaw, but also suggests another way of responding in place of outright refusal.

He reminds Ruth that there is always another side to things and quotes the saying 'Do unto others as ye would that they should do unto you'. How might Ruth understand this? He also advises on the manner in which she might receive the gift, advising her to 'thank him as your feelings prompt you. Overstrained expressions of gratitude always seem like an endeavour to place the receiver of these expressions in the position of debtor for future favours'.

I wonder how we make sense of the phrases 'overstrained expressions of gratitude' here and being 'in the position of debtor'? I wonder what advice we would offer to Ruth in this situation? Let's see how Ruth takes this in...

The present gave a new current to Ruth's ideas. Her heart was as yet too sore to speak, but her mind was crowded with plans. She asked Sally to buy her (with the money produced by the sale of a ring or two) the coarsest linen, the homeliest dark blue print, and similar materials; on which she set busily to work to make clothes for herself; and as they were made, she put them on; and as she put them on, she gave a grace to each, which such homely material and simple shaping had never had before. Then the fine linen and delicate soft white muslin, which she had chosen in preference to more expensive articles of dress when Mr Bellingham had given her carte blanche in London, were cut into small garments, most daintily stitched and made ready for the little creature, for whom in its white purity of soul nothing could be too precious.

The love which dictated this extreme simplicity and coarseness of attire, was taken for stiff, hard economy by Mr Bradshaw, when he deigned to observe it. And economy by itself, without any soul or spirit in it to make it living and holy, was a great merit in his eyes. Indeed, Ruth altogether found favour with him. Her quiet manner, subdued by an internal consciousness of a deeper cause for sorrow than he was aware of, he interpreted into a very proper and becoming awe of him. He looked off from his own prayers to observe how well she attended to hers at chapel; when he came to any verse in the hymn relating to immortality or a future life, he sang it unusually loud, thinking he should thus comfort her in her sorrow for her deceased husband. He desired Mrs Bradshaw to pay her every attention she could; and even once remarked, that he thought her so respectable a young person that he should not object to her being asked to tea the next time Mr and Miss Benson came. He added, that he thought, indeed, Benson had looked last Sunday as if he rather hoped to get an invitation; and it was right to encourage the ministers, and to show them respect, even though their salaries were small. The only thing against this Mrs Denbigh was the circumstance of her having married too early, and without any provision for a family. Though Ruth pleaded delicacy of health, and declined accompanying Mr and Miss Benson on their visit to Mr Bradshaw, she still preserved her place in his esteem; and Miss Benson had to call a little upon her "talent for fiction" to spare Ruth from the infliction of further presents, in making which his love of patronising delighted.

Another pause for thought...

I wonder how we might understand Ruth's response here? Rather than using the fine muslin to make clothing for herself, she uses it to make clothes for her as yet unborn baby? And why does she select in contrast the very 'coarsest linen, the homeliest dark blue print' to make clothes for herself? Also, what do we make of Mr Bradshaw's interpretation of Ruth's use of his gift?

Well, the seasons progress for Ruth as for all of us and she still finds that 'Some element of harmony was wanting—some little angel of peace, in loving whom all hearts and natures should be drawn together, and their discords hushed.' Soon though, the baby comes...

It was a boy; beforehand she had wished for a girl, as being less likely to feel the want of a father—as being what a mother, worse than widowed, could most effectually shelter. But now she did not think or remember this. What it was, she would not have exchanged for a wilderness of girls. It was her own, her darling, her individual baby, already, though not an hour old, separate and sole

in her heart, strangely filling up its measure with love and peace, and even hope. For here was a new, pure, beautiful, innocent life, which she fondly imagined, in that early passion of maternal love, she could guard from every touch of corrupting sin by ever watchful and most tender care. And her mother had thought the same, most probably; and thousands of others think the same, and pray to God to purify and cleanse their souls, that they may be fit guardians for their little children. Oh, how Ruth prayed, even while she was yet too weak to speak; and how she felt the beauty and significance of the words, "Our Father!"

She was roused from this holy abstraction by the sound of Miss Benson's voice. It was very much as if she had been crying.

"Look, Ruth!" it said, softly, "my brother sends you these. They are the first snowdrops in the garden." And she put them on the pillow by Ruth; the baby lay on the opposite side.

"Won't you look at him?" said Ruth; "he is so pretty!"

Miss Benson had a strange reluctance to see him. To Ruth, in spite of all that had come and gone, she was reconciled—nay, more, she was deeply attached; but over the baby there hung a cloud of shame and disgrace. Poor little creature! her heart was closed against it—firmly, as she thought. But she could not resist Ruth's low faint voice, nor her pleading eyes, and she went round to peep at him as he lay in his mother's arm, as yet his shield and guard.

"Sally says he will have black hair, she thinks," said Ruth. "His little hand is quite a man's, already. Just feel how firmly he closes it;" and with her own weak fingers she opened his little red fist, and taking Miss Benson's reluctant hand, placed one of her fingers in his grasp. That baby-touch called out her love; the doors of her heart were thrown open wide for the little infant to go in and take possession.

"Ah, my darling!" said Ruth, falling back weak and weary. "If God will but spare you to me, never mother did more than I will. I have done you a grievous wrong—but, if I may but live, I will spend my life in serving you!"

"And in serving God!" said Miss Benson, with tears in her eyes. "You must not make him into an idol, or God will, perhaps, punish you through him."

A pang of affright shot through Ruth's heart at these words; had she already sinned and made her child into an idol, and was there punishment already in store for her through him? But then the internal voice whispered that God was

"Our Father," and that He knew our frame, and knew how natural was the first outburst of a mother's love; so, although she treasured up the warning, she ceased to affright herself for what had already gushed forth.

"Now go to sleep, Ruth," said Miss Benson, kissing her, and darkening the room. But Ruth could not sleep; if her heavy eyes closed, she opened them again with a start, for sleep seemed to be an enemy stealing from her the consciousness of being a mother. That one thought excluded all remembrance and all anticipation, in those first hours of delight.

A last pause for thought...

'It was her own, her darling, her individual baby, already, though not an hour old, separate and sole in her heart, strangely filling up its measure with love and peace, and even hope...'

So thinks Ruth as she takes in the beauty of her son. It is humbling to see how the birth of a newborn baby often grounds people with a new sense of perspective on life – not only for the parent, but for the friends and family members around. Before the baby's arrival, Ruth and Miss Benson were fretting over the details of life – the 'rights', for example, of whether to do this or that, accept a gift or refuse one. Now Ruth's thoughts enter what is described as a realm of 'holy abstraction' and 'the doors of [Miss Benson's] heart were thrown open wide for the little infant to go in'.

However, that is not to say that all is a bed of roses now for anxiety still clearly remains. For Miss Benson, there was clearly a struggle at first...I wonder how we felt about her 'strange reluctance' to look upon the new baby at first and how she overcomes that? Also, she warns Ruth "You must not make him into an idol, or God will, perhaps, punish you through him." Can we understand Miss Benson's words to Ruth?

Poor Ruth immediately experiences 'a pang of affright', she worries 'had she already sinned and made her child into an idol, and was there punishment already in store for her through him?' What is going on for Ruth here? Can we understand her fears?

But again comes the grounding voice to help Ruth stay connected to a new sense of truth, where 'the internal voice whispered that God was "Our Father," and that He knew our frame, and knew how natural was the first outburst of a mother's love; so, although she treasured up the warning, she ceased to affright herself for what had already gushed forth.'

What is this 'internal voice' about I wonder? Is it something unique to motherhood, to 'the consciousness of being a mother'? Or are there other ways in which we might also experience such reassurance?

Ruth still has quite a journey to go on, as does Miss Benson, Mr Benson, and Mr Bradshaw. We would highly recommend the novel if you are interested in the subtle complexities of love and duty within a family home.

Time for a Poem

This week's poem is called 'Love' by George Herbert. If the giving and receiving of gifts can be more complicated than at first appears, so can the giving and receiving of love, from one person to the next. Many of us find it hard to accept kindness from others and many of us have puzzled over how we might best help another. This poem explores such tensions. You'll notice that there is a bit of religious language in this poem, but that need be no bar to accessing some of the feelings. If the word 'Lord' feels at odds with your own beliefs, simply think what else you might put in its place. George Herbert was writing as a religious man, but also as a human being. How you interpret it is up to you...

Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lacked any thing.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
My dear, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

Some thoughts...

I wonder what we make of the opening lines 'Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back/Guilty of dust and sin.' How might we understand 'Love' here? And why would we draw back from it? 'Guilty of dust and sin'...what kind of a feeling is that to have about ourselves?

Many of us may have felt like turning away from an open doorway, feeling perhaps 'unworthy' to be there; equally, many of us may have seen others turning away. But in this poem 'Love', whoever, whatever that is, manages to get the person in and make the connection that is needed. But how does this happen though? What does 'Love' do in the poem that feels helpful? What would help us?

I wonder what we make of Love's response 'Who made the eyes but I?' The person has just spoke of themselves as being 'unkind, ungrateful' and because of those feelings, not being able to look on Love. And then Love replied, smiling, 'Who made the eyes but I?' I feel as if we could be encouraged by this but am not sure why?

The person does join Love in the end. 'So I did sit and eat' is the last line of the poem. How do we feel about this? Have we ever experienced anything like this moment?

We've left this page blank for you to make notes, draw a picture, have a go at writing yourself or jot down something you'd like to tell us…

Time for a Puzzle

There's been a lot in our story and poem this week about different acts of kindness and how they might mean different things to different people. Today's wordsearch explores some words for kindness – see what you make of them over a cuppa of your choice! Enjoy!

T	G	O	O	D	W	I	L	L	E	E	A	L	N
B	E	N	E	F	I	C	E	N	C	E	I	G	D
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S	N	Y	T	I	M	I	N	A	N	G	A	M	I
U	I	F	L	C	O	U	R	T	E	S	Y	E	A
E	C	E	G	E	M	H	U	M	A	N	I	T	Y

Sympathy
Magnanimity
Tolerance
Good Will
Gentleness
Humanity
Affection
Decency

Benevolence
Altruism
Charity
Solicitude
Beneficence
Courtesy
Unselfishness