I Wish I'd Read That Sooner: A Young Person's Guide to Compassionate Skepticism

By age 12, I had acquired a knack for asking inconvenient questions such as: *If an education is supposed to make me happy, why does school make me unhappy? Why do we accept the destinies society imposes on us: to be like other people, to be a girl, to be black? How do we know we're being educated in school, and not made more ignorant?* Sadly, my friends and family considered these kinds of questions to be a sign of frivolity, of immaturity. In fact, the opposite was true: few questions could be more serious. It is only when raised by young people that we do not take such things seriously.

Despite my lack of support, I tried to figure out ways to articulate my doubts, my questions—to bring them to life. But because I was drawing only on my own meager experience, my efforts formed only wisps and clouds that added up to nothing. Without other voices to draw on, my thoughts festered inside of me like a thick fog, and they made me feel sick, producing nothing but unhappiness.

My friends and family thought it was a mental health issue. But I now suspect that all I really needed during that time of doubt was a proper collection of books. If I could fill a small time capsule with the most important books I've stumbled upon in the last six years and send it back in time, I might perhaps have sooner figured out the power of compassionate skepticism. Instead, I wasted many years as just another angry iconoclast. It's an easy trap to fall into. We end up feeling we alone are smart enough to see the corruption and incompetence in every person and institution, and that we alone are qualified to pass judgment on them. But this attitude is poisonous. It accomplishes nothing, and is wearisome to be around.

Likewise, it's easy to be compassionate if we don't notice the flaws of people and institutions. If we shut our eyes and determinedly look away from ignorance, from inconsistencies, from blatant falsehoods, then nothing could be easier than a kind of general, bland compassion for mankind. But this willful ignorance leaves us open to manipulation, and we should not be surprised to wake up one day and realize that we have been accidentally complicit in some great evil.

The truly impressive feat is to combine compassion with skepticism: to be fully aware of the flaws in people and societies, and yet to still have goodwill towards all. This combination is perhaps the rarest and most valuable attribute a human being can possess.

I have chosen these books specifically because each one has made the case for compassionate skepticism in its own way—some with philosophical analysis, as in *The Second Sex,* and others with a simple narrative and illustrations, as in *Hope for the Flowers.* Especially of interest to my past self would have been *How Children Learn* and *Teen 2.0: Saving Our Children and Families from the Torment of Adolescence.* These two deal most directly with the problems I was struggling with at the time. They could have freed me from much of the misinformation I had been given about my mind, my situation, and my education, and helped me to see that the truth about young people is far more liberating, far more beautiful, than my wispy speculations could on their own have grasped.

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevalier. New York: Vintage Books, 2011.

Beauvoir forces a mirror onto us as readers, and shows us—gently, without chastisement—how the story of woman has unfolded from simple animal biology in prehistoric times into a modern play, a tragedy, in which we as readers feel compassion for all of the characters. Beauvoir makes us question why we feel attraction, why we marry, and why we force one another into compartments rather than helping each other climb out of them. Her portrayal of the sexes, and of the feminist struggle, challenge and stimulate our every faculty as readers.

Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose.* New York: Plume Printing, 2005.

This secondhand find is a favorite of mine because of the inscription inside the cover, which is addressed to its previous owner: *Read this book when you have a few extra minutes. Enjoy the wisdom. Love, Angelica.* Because this book was donated, it seems likely that Angelica was disappointed—though I was not. Whether I was lucky, or simply came to Tolle at the right time (when I had a few extra minutes), his impact on my life cannot be measured. Tolle teaches us to fight our own selfish and spiteful impulses—not with platitudes and high-flown morals, as many spiritual writers do—but with everyday skepticism. When we are honest, when we engage our deepest critical thought, we will find that materialism, selfishness, and the constant desire to rise above others, do not actually make us happy—and, in fact, are incapable of doing so.

Darrell Huff, *How to Lie with Statistics.* New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1954.

First assigned as summer reading for my AP Statistics class in my final year of high school, this book is that rare combination of informative, accessible, and delightful. Its dated 1950s illustrations are pleasantly reminiscent of Dr. Seuss, and so keep even math challenged readers feeling safe while reading this surprisingly technical book. Nearly all of its lessons are still applicable today, and help us to develop a healthy skepticism of numbers and for those who would abuse them.

Robert Epstein, *Teen 2.0: Saving Our Children and Families from the Torment of Adolescence.* Fresno: Quill Driver Books, 2010.

Teen 2.0 is the most complete account one could wish for of the (sadly) hidden potential of teenagers in a society that is too willing to believe the worst of them. Although people of all ages could gain much from this book, it is especially important for teenagers themselves to read. During those years, I half believed the things people (even scientists) told me about myself: that I was irrational, unfocused, incapable of accomplishing anything at my age. I now believe this did long-lasting damage to my intellectual development. Dr. Epstein attacks this cynicism about young people with equal parts scientific skepticism and human compassion, and teaches us to see them in a better light.

Trina Paulus, *Hope for the Flowers*. New York: Paulist Press, 1972.

I came across this children's book just as I was beginning my career at St. John's, and found it an immense help in justifying my choice of a liberal arts education. In this book, the human condition is laid out in the lives of caterpillars, who strive for success—to climb the great "caterpillar pillar," but do not realize that within their reach is a metamorphosis that is far greater. This book might be a favorite of Socrates, if given the chance.

John Holt, *How Children Learn.* Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1982.

Until I read *How Children Learn,* I did not imagine that a thoughtful critique of the modern school system could also be delightful, compassionate, and so thoroughly human. This book is comprised mostly of anecdotes and reflections on the author's experience as a teacher of small children. He invites us to question many of many common assumptions about children and the field of education, such as the idea that children need to be forced to learn. Learning, he argues, is by definition an exercise of freedom, and therefore a teacher's greatest virtues must be compassion and trust.

Spencer Johnson, *The Precious Present.* New York: Doubleday, 1984.

In line with Eckhart Tolle, this children's book provides an accessible version of his argument for compassion, for skepticism in our material lives, and for living in the present. The title invites is to reflect on the duality of this word.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince,* trans. Richard Howard. Hong Kong: Harcourt, 2000.

I first read this book aloud to the St. John's Storytellers Guild, and had to fight to keep my voice steady towards the end. It is a book that speaks both to adults and to children, and shows them both the tragedy of growing up. We have only two choices in life: to lose ourselves in our adulthood, to become so practical and straight-laced that we waste our lives—or to become nostalgic of childhood, and try to keep it alive as best we can, even though we can never truly recapture the magic. It is in some ways a sober book, and skeptical, but still filled with compassion and delight.

Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa.* New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1973.

As a lover of ephemera, I appreciate this copy for the blank mail-in donation slip inserted into the middle of this book, addressed to the Margaret Mead Fund in honor of her 75th birthday (which would have been in 1976). In this book, Mead immerses us in the village life of Samoa, bringing its personality to life, and showing that coming of age need not take the form it has been given by western culture: defined by storm and stress. This book fills me with an odd mixture of envy and sadness: envy for her experience, and sadness that this unique way of life is no more. This is why Mead's critics have been unable to properly verify her research: the civilization she studied is gone forever.

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*. New York: Signet, 1968.

No book I have ever read can compare with this. When I carried this book around, I felt I was holding a friend in my hand. When I read his stunning account of his life as a slave, I felt he was not trying to arouse my pity, but was merely confiding in me, as one good friend might to another. He left his experience complex, unedited, with all of the details that our schoolbooks left out: the fact that his fellow slaves usually treated each other just as badly as their masters did, the fact that masters tried to hide their cruelty to their slaves. A thousand details popped out bright as a photograph from his world, a real world, which had been hidden for centuries behind the bullet point histories and political convenience that until now had passed for my education. Douglass was my companion, my true teacher. I sometimes grieve that other authors cannot make me feel as whole, as welcome as he did.