

Valdepa Stories

Ben Carson

by Jared Southwick

Do you have a dream? Something you've always wanted to do, or someone you've always wanted to be? Maybe you dream of being a doctor, an athlete, an engineer, or work in a particular trade. What is your dream? What would you give up to accomplish it? Do you want it badly enough to give up toys, TV, social media, or video games? And what would you do to make your dream happen? Would you read, study, dedicate your free time, and exercise passion to achieve your goal? Would it be easier to accomplish your dream with someone giving you correction and urging you on?

This is a story about someone who was much like many of us. He liked TV too much; and he didn't like books enough. He wasn't particularly good in school. In fact, his classmates teased him for being "the worst student" in the fifth grade. However, what Ben had going for him was someone who loved him; someone who helped him overcome the labels attached to him; someone who encouraged him to read, and to put away the things in his life that were working against him—so much so, that by the end of the seventh grade, he became the top student in every subject. And it didn't stop there. Ben Carson went on to earn a scholarship to Yale. He became a world-renowned brain surgeon, rose to become the head of pediatric neurosurgery at Johns Hopkins Hospital, then Surgeon General of the United States, and finally, a U.S. presidential candidate.

How was this possible? How did the worst student in the whole fifth grade become so successful? It all started because Ben's mother saw his value—everything he could become if he chose to. Sonja Carson would daily tell her son, "You weren't born to be a failure, Bennie. You can do it! Don't you stop believing that for a second! You can do anything you set yourself to do."

Sonja Carson's own life was difficult. Raised in a family of 23 siblings, many she didn't even know, Sonja grew up in poverty. She was only able to go to school through the third grade. Sonja married Ben's dad when she was only 13 years old. After they divorced, when Ben was 8-years-old, Sonja Carson often worked two or three jobs at a time, trying to provide for her sons. It was hard for her and her two boys. But she was an excellent mother, and she had a vision for her sons.

One day, Sonja did something that rocked their world and forever changed their lives. It was a day like every other day. Ben and his brother, Curtis, had come home from school and plopped themselves down in front of their favorite afternoon television programs. When Sonja returned home from work, without saying a word, she walked over to the TV set and turned it off.

Her boys were stunned. Was she angry with them? Then, Sonja promptly announced three new rules that they were required to live by from that time forth. First, the boys could only watch two preselected television programs per week. Secondly, they were not allowed to watch television or play until all of their homework was completed. Finally, they were to read two books a week and give her a report.

“Bennie,” she promised, “if you can read, you can learn just about anything you want to know. The doors of the world are open to people who can read. And my boys are going to be successful in life, because they’re going to be the best readers in the school.”

How would you feel if your mom put heavy restrictions on your cell phones, entertainment, or social media? Especially after having unlimited access. You may feel much like Ben did. At first, he and Curtis were annoyed. However, the boys loved and respected their mother, so they chose to obey. A couple of days later, they dragged their feet to the library...and opened the door to a whole new world.

“Her constant interest and unflagging encouragement kept me motivated,” said Ben, speaking of his mother. “She believed in Curtis and me. She had such faith in us, we didn’t dare fail! Her unbounded confidence nudged me into starting to believe in myself.”

Ben began reading subjects that interested him. And by the end of the fifth grade, he was excelling in science.

Then, one day, while sitting in his school classroom, “with spring sunshine slanting through the windows, a new thought flashed through [his] mind. ‘I can learn...any subject through reading. It is like Mother says—if you can read, you can learn just about anything.’”

That awareness was the spark that lit the flame of Ben’s own desire to excel.

“I didn’t work hard to compete and to be better than the other kids as much as I wanted to be the very best I could be—for me.”ⁱ

At the passing of his mother, in 2017, Ben Carson wrote a tribute on one of his Facebook pages. “All that I am is because of the love of my mother. She was one of God’s greatest blessings to me, and it was her foresight and discernment that pushed me to reach my dreams.”

ⁱQuotes are taken from *Gifted Hands* by Ben Carson (1990).

Thomas Paine's Uncommon Contribution

by Beth Southwick

On December 19, 1776, the Continental Army, under command of General George Washington, was encamped on the freezing shores of the Delaware River. They were bitter cold, starving, exhausted, and despairing. Beginning in mid-October, the Americans had lost battle after battle, and the British forces had seized most of New York. Through miraculous means, the Continental Army had escaped complete annihilation and had been retreating from the British ever since. To many, it felt that this small, untrained, underfed, and under-clothed ragtag army of farmers and shopkeepers had already lost the war. There was no way they could possibly win against the strongest military presence in the world! 3000 patriots had already retracted their allegiance to the American cause and signed a petition of loyalty to King George III. America was losing heart. On top of that, the army was near dissolving. At the end of the month, enlistments were to expire, and too few recruits were willing to take up the banner in their stead. Surely, the fate of the young nation, newly declared independent, hung by a spider's thread.

Huddled around a campfire, freezing and hungry along with everybody else, American soldier and patriot, Thomas Paine, contemplated the direness of the situation. Paine's pamphlet, *Common Sense*, had been extremely instrumental in persuading the undecided colonists that independence from Great Britain was necessary to ensure their freedom. Now, with the ability of obtaining independence in crisis, Thomas Paine took up the pen again and wrote these inspiring words:

THESE are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives every thing its value. Heaven knows how to put a proper price upon its goods; and it would be strange indeed if so celestial an article as FREEDOM should not be highly rated....

I turn with the warm ardor of a friend to those who have nobly stood, and are yet determined to stand the matter out: I call not upon a few, but upon all: not on this state or that state, but on every state: up and help us; lay your shoulders to the wheel; better have too much force than too little, when so great an object is at stake. Let it be told to the future world, that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive, that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet and to repulse it. Say not that thousands are gone, turn out your tens of thousands; throw not the burden of the day upon Providence, but "show your faith by your works," that God may bless you. It matters not where you live, or what rank of life you hold, the evil or the blessing will reach you all. The far and the near, the home counties and the back, the rich and the poor, will suffer or rejoice alike. The heart that feels not now is dead; the blood of his children will curse his cowardice, who shrinks back at a time when a little might

*have saved the whole, and made them happy. I love the man that can smile in trouble, that can gather strength from distress, and grow brave by reflection. 'Tis the business of little minds to shrink; but he whose heart is firm, and whose conscience approves his conduct, will pursue his principles unto death.*ⁱ

Thomas Paine valued freedom more than his life. His passion and eloquent gift of words inspired other patriots to remember what freedom meant to them as well. A fire was lit among the remaining soldiers. The men rallied with their General one more time. Just three days later, the Continental Army attacked the Hessian compound in Trenton, New Jersey, and won! Immediately, they set out for Princeton, and won that battle too. The desire of these soldiers to be independent, born of their value for freedom, gave this “ragamuffin” army of common farmers, shopkeepers, fathers and brothers, even sisters and wives, the power to achieve the impossible. Five years later, on October 19, 1781, The United States of America won their Independence against all odds.

How was it done? “Despite British superiority, the Americans had one distinct advantage. British soldiers were fighting for their paltry pay, for fear of their officers, for duty to the Crown, for a portion of fickle glory. The Americans, conversely, were fighting for personal freedom and for independence from what they viewed as intolerable oppression. In the end, it was probably not so much the makeup of the armies, or their relative strengths and weaknesses, as it was the *reason* for which they were fighting that made the difference and determined the outcome.”ⁱⁱ

ⁱ Thomas Paine, *The American Crisis* (Dec. 1776).

ⁱⁱ National Center for Constitutional Studies, *The Real George Washington*, 142.

Additional Books/Stories

- **Ish** by Peter H Reynolds (Ages 5-12). A boy who loves to draw loses his confidence, until he sees value in his unique talent.
- **Snowflake Bentley** by Jacqueline Briggs Martin (Ages 4-7). The true story of Wilson Bentley, a man who found true beauty in snowflakes and worked to make their wonder known to everybody, despite ridicule.
- **The Eighty-Dollar Champion: The Horse that Inspired a Nation** by Elizabeth Letts. (Ages 10 and up). When Snowman, an 8-year-old farm horse, was sent to auction, no one wanted him. As he was being led to a trailer doomed for the slaughter house, a horse trainer stepped forward and bought him for eighty dollars. Because of his gentle nature, the trainer trusted him with small children. After a series of events, Snowman displayed his amazing jumping ability, which led him to become famous throughout the nation.
- **More than Anything Else** by Marie Bradby (Ages 5-10). Nine-year-old Booker T. Washington wants to learn to read more than anything else in his life. Though he has to

work from dawn to dusk, his desire to read produces the power needed to achieve his goal.