

Thank You M'am by Langston Hughes

She was a large woman with a large purse that had everything in it but hammer and nails. It had a long strap, and she carried it slung across her shoulder. It was about eleven o'clock at night, and she was walking alone, when a boy ran up behind her and tried to snatch her purse. The strap broke with the single tug the boy gave it from behind. But the boy's weight and the weight of the purse combined caused him to lose his balance so, instead of taking off full blast as he had hoped, the boy fell on his back on the sidewalk, and his legs flew up. The large woman simply turned around and kicked him right square in his blue-jeaned sitter. Then she reached down, picked the boy up by his shirt front, and shook him until his teeth rattled.

After that the woman said, "Pick up my pocketbook,¹ boy, and give it here." She still held him. But she bent down enough to permit him to stoop and pick up her purse. Then she said, "Now ain't you ashamed of yourself?"

Firmly gripped by his shirt front, the boy said, "Yes'm."

The woman said, "What did you want to do it for?"

The boy said, "I didn't aim to."

She said, "You a lie!"

By that time two or three people passed, stopped, turned to look, and some stood watching.

"If I turn you loose, will you run?" asked the woman. "

Yes'm," said the boy.

"Then I won't turn you loose," said the woman. She did not release him.

"I'm very sorry, lady, I'm sorry," whispered the boy.

"Um-hum! And your face is dirty. I got a great mind² to wash your face for you. Ain't you got nobody home to tell you to wash your face?"

"No'm," said the boy.

"Then it will get washed this evening," said the large woman starting up the street, dragging the frightened boy behind her.

He looked as if he were fourteen or fifteen, frail³ and willow-wild, in tennis shoes and blue jeans.

The woman said, "You ought to be my son. I would teach you right from wrong. Least I can do right now is to wash your face. Are you hungry?"

"No'm," said the being-dragged boy. "I just want you to turn me loose."

"Was I bothering you when I turned that corner?" asked the woman. "No'm."

"But you put yourself in contact with *me*," said the woman. "If you think that that contact is not going to last awhile, you got another thought coming. When I get through with you, sir, you are going to remember Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones."

Sweat popped out on the boy's face and he began to struggle. Mrs. Jones stopped, jerked him around in front of her, put a half-nelson ⁴ about his neck, and continued to drag him up the street. When she got to her door, she dragged the boy inside, down a hall, and into a large kitchenette-furnished room at the rear of the house. She switched on the light and left the door open. The boy could hear other roomers ⁵ laughing and talking in the large house. Some of their doors were open, too, so he knew he and the woman were not alone. The woman still had him by the neck in the middle of her room.

She said, "What is your name?"

"Roger," answered the boy.

"Then, Roger, you go to that sink and wash your face," said the woman, whereupon she turned him loose — at last. Roger looked at the door — looked at the woman — looked at the door — *and went to the sink.*

"Let the water run until it gets warm," she said. "Here's a clean towel."

"You gonna take me to jail?" asked the boy, bending over the sink.

"Not with that face, I would not take you nowhere," said the woman. "Here I am trying to get home to cook me a bite to eat and you snatch my pocketbook! Maybe, you ain't been to your supper either, late as it be. Have you?"

"There's nobody home at my house," said the boy.

"Then we'll eat," said the woman, "I believe you're hungry — or been hungry — to try to snatch my pocketbook."

"I wanted a pair of blue suede ⁶ shoes," said the boy.

"Well, you didn't have to snatch *my* pocketbook to get some suede shoes," said Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones. "You could of asked me."

"M'am?"

The water dripping from his face, the boy looked at her. There was a long pause. A very long pause. After he had dried his face and not knowing what else to do dried it again, the boy turned around, wondering what next. The door was open. He could make a dash for it down the hall. He could run, run, run, run, *run!*

The woman was sitting on the day-bed.⁷ After a while she said, "I were young once and I wanted things I could not get."

There was another long pause. The boy's mouth opened. Then he frowned, but not knowing he frowned.

The woman said, "Um-hum! You thought I was going to say *but*, didn't you? You thought I was going to say, *but I didn't snatch people's pocketbooks.* Well, I wasn't going to say that." Pause. Silence. "I have done things, too,

which I would not tell you, son — neither tell God, if he didn't already know. So you set down while I fix us something to eat. You might run that comb through your hair so you will look presentable."

In another corner of the room behind a screen was a gas plate and an icebox. Mrs. Jones got up and went behind the screen. The woman did not watch the boy to see if he was going to run now, nor did she watch her purse which she left behind her on the day-bed. But the boy took care to sit on the far side of the room where he thought she could easily see him out of the corner of her eye, if she wanted to. He did *not* trust the woman not to trust him. And he did not want to be mistrusted now.

"Do you need somebody to go to the store," asked the boy, "maybe to get some milk or something?"

"Don't believe I do," said the woman, "unless you just want sweet milk yourself. I was going to make cocoa out of this canned milk I got here."

"That will be fine," said the boy.

She heated some lima beans and ham she had in the icebox, made the cocoa, and set the table. The woman did not ask the boy anything about where he lived, or his folks, or anything else that would embarrass him. Instead, as they ate, she told him about her job in a hotel beauty-shop that stayed open late, what the work was like, and how all kinds of women came in and out, blondes, red-heads, and Spanish. Then she cut him a half of her ten-cent cake.

"Eat some more, son," she said.

When they were finished eating she got up and said, "Now, here, take this ten dollars and buy yourself some blue suede shoes. And next time, do not make the mistake of latching onto *my* pocketbook *nor nobody else's* — because shoes come by devilish like that will burn your feet. I got to get my rest now. But I wish you would behave yourself, son, from here on in."

She led him down the hall to the front door and opened it. "Good-night! Behave yourself, boy!" she said, looking out into the street.

The boy wanted to say something other than, "Thank you, m'am," to Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones, but although his lips moved, he couldn't even say that as he turned at the foot of the barren stoop and looked up at the large woman in the door. He barely managed to say "Thank you" before she shut the door. And he never saw her again.

Definitions:

1. another term for purse or handbag
2. A phrase meaning "to feel tempted or likely to do something"
3. **Frail** (adjective) : weak or fragile
4. a wrestling hold in which a wrestler puts their arms under their opponent's arms and locks their hands behind their opponent's head
5. a person who lives in a rented room

Study shows successful students learn self-control along with academics



Walton Elementary second-grader Janiya Smith asks to be called on for the answers in this language arts class at the Jackson, Mississippi, school on Oct. 28, 2015. AP/Rogelio V. Solis

Academic learning is usually in the spotlight at school. However, teaching elementary-age students “soft” skills like self-control and how to get along with others might help kids in other areas of their lives. A study found that it can help to keep at-risk kids out of criminal trouble in the future.

Duke University researchers looked at a program called Fast Track. The program was started in the early 1990s. It was for children who were identified by their teachers and parents to be at high risk for developing **aggressive**, or violent, behavioral problems.

Fewer Arrests, Better Health

The students were put into two groups. Half took part in the intervention. This included a teacher-led course of study, parent training groups, academic tutoring and lessons in self-control and social skills. The program lasted from first grade through 10th grade. It reduced **delinquency**, arrests and use of health and mental

health services as the students aged through the teenage and young adult years, as researchers explained in a separate study published earlier this year.

In the latest study, researchers looked at the “why” behind those previous findings. They looked at information from nearly 900 students. The researchers found that about a third of the effect on future crime outcomes was due to the social and self-regulation skills the students learned from ages 6 to 11.

Cooperation, Better Decisions

The academic skills that were taught as part of Fast Track turned out to have less of an effect on crime and delinquency rates than did the soft skills. Soft skills are associated with **emotional intelligence**. Soft skills might include teaching kids to work **cooperatively** in a group or teaching them how to think about the long-term results when they make a decision. Teaching math is an example of a hard skill.

“The conclusion that we would make is that these (soft) skills should be emphasized even more in our education system and in our system of socializing children,” says Kenneth Dodge. He is a professor of public policy and of psychology and neuroscience at Duke. Dodge was a principal investigator in this study as well as in the original Fast Track project. Parents should do all they can to promote these skills with their children, Dodge says, as should education policymakers.

“To the extent we can improve those skills, we can improve outcomes in delinquency and (youth) crime,” says Dodge. He is also director of Duke’s Center for Child and Family Policy. The study was published last week in the journal *Child Development*.

Aware Of Other People's Feelings

Neil Bernstein is a psychologist in Washington, D.C., who specializes in child and teenage behavior disorders. To him, the researchers’ findings seem to go along with what he’s seen. He has been working with children for more than 30 years. And while he says he agrees with the importance of teaching self-control and social skills, he would add **empathy** to the list, too.

“Empathy is what makes us aware of the feelings of others, and when you’re empathic, you’re much less likely to hurt someone else’s feelings,” says Bernstein. He serves on the advisory board for the Partnership for

Drug-Free Kids. Bernstein is also the author of many books, including “How to Keep Your Teenager Out of Trouble and What to Do if You Can’t.”

Being in tune with how someone else feels can help in other ways. It might also make teenagers steer clear of bullying and other “behaviors of concern,” Bernstein says.

Measuring "Prosocial Behavior"

Empathy was not one of the skills directly measured in this study, according to Lucy Sorensen, a Ph.D. student at Duke and lead author of the study. But there were several measures of “**prosocial** behavior,” Sorensen says. This is defined as voluntary behavior intended to benefit others.

Bernstein thinks the study’s findings are meaningful. They could potentially serve as a model for schools. However, he says that collectively getting a school system, teachers, parents and students all motivated enough to take part in an intervention like Fast Track is challenging.

Teaching Self-Control

Several parts of the Fast Track study have been picked up successfully in other school settings, Sorensen says. One example is a social-emotional learning course of study called Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies, or PATHS. Programs like Fast Track need buy-in from school systems, teachers and parents, she says, and that can be a tough sell. But she adds that it’s a strength of Fast Track that the students get support both at school and at home.

“There’s a growing and new understanding of what it takes to be successful as a (teenager) and an adult,” Dodge says. “It used to be that what we thought all it took was academic skills. Reading and math are very important for tasks that require reading and math. Self-control is important for life tasks that require self-control — that’s what avoiding arrest and violent crime is all about.”