

## Level I Winner - 2011

Dear Daniel Defoe,

Your book, Robinson Crusoe, taught me that desperation and necessity can bring about positive change. Robinson never would have considered befriending Friday, a savage and cannibal, but Robinson was isolated from humanity and desperately needed companionship. He realized that Friday was raised to be a cannibal and savage and knew no other way of life. Friday was a prisoner and faced certain death by his captors. By accepting their differences and working together, they not only survived life-threatening encounters, but prospered.

While you wrote this book nearly 300 years ago, your message has never been more important. I am of mixed race, my mom is Indian, and my dad is of European descent. Sometimes people give us a look that makes me feel uncomfortable when my family is together, because we are not all the same color. I know there are those who are prejudice against mixed races and consider my parents' marriage wrong. My mom is a doctor. If someone who does not like Indians is desperate and needs her to save his or her life, do you think it matters to that person what race my mom is?

We all rely on each other in a multitude of ways. I do not know the ethnicity of the people who grow my food, make my clothes, or provide my drinking water; all I know is that I need them to survive, and I am thankful they exist. I do not need to know their race or ethnicity; I just need to know that I can depend on them. The world's population is growing and our resources are diminishing. In the future, we must treat each other as Robinson and Friday did to ensure the survival and prosperity of mankind. We will have to accept each other's differences, and learn to judge people not by their ethnicity or cultural past, but instead by their actions and how they contribute to the common good of society.

I hope that one day the people who once gave my family a look will need me and perhaps I can show them that my race does not matter, and what matters is how I can help them. Everyone in the world will feel more comfortable knowing that they are treated equally with respect no matter which ethnicity they are.

I anticipate that one day desperation or necessity will not be needed for us to get along; until then I hope that people will keep reading your book!

Sincerely,

Conrad Oberhaus  
Lincolnshire, Illinois

## Level II Winner - 2011

Dear Mark Pfetzer,

Lately I've learned that life is like a hallway of closed doors. Behind every door lies an outcome, and through that door lies another hallway of closed doors. Sometimes I wish I could have opened a different door. Unfortunately, life doesn't work that way; there's no going back to different doorways. All I can do is look forward and hope that the choices I made for my future were the right ones.

I found myself facing new doors recently; I'd just broken my wrist during a football game. Since I'd trained throughout the summer, the injury crushed me more on the inside than on the outside. What really hurt was the fact that football had been the last constant in my life; every other aspect of my life had become shaky and unsteady. Cancer had crept into my family, and life was taking a different turn for me. For two days after the injury, I moped around feeling devastated and irritable. One day, looking into the mirror, I could see how the injury had changed me more than just by a broken wrist; I had become weaker. Then I saw Within Reach on one of my bookshelves. As I was reading it, I learned that even if your entire life has taken a twist for the worse, you should never ever give up. You have to move forward, whatever the cost.

The most important lesson I learned from Within Reach was that life has its own agenda. While you were climbing Everest, you fractured a rib during a coughing attack. I can imagine exactly what they felt like; the unfairness of it and the realization that you lost a year of hard work in one moment. When I fractured my wrist, I felt the same way. I kept remembering how during the weeks and months before football had started, I'd wished with all my heart that my hard work would pay off, and that this year would be *my* year to be special. It tears me up inside to think of what I could've been.

Unfortunately, the lesson that connected to me the most was your father's cancer. When I read how he fought with every fiber of his being, I knew that it would be a huge struggle for you and your mother to watch him suffer. I know this because my mom has to go through the same ordeal. I was stunned when your father died. When my mom said she'd been diagnosed with breast cancer I had been so shocked to speak. Instead I'd thought "Why her? Why us? Why now?" I thank God now that the tumor was discovered before the cancer had spread too far. When you said that you could control climbing mountains but you couldn't help your father, I thought maybe you were wrong. Supporting a loved one with cancer is all we can truly do, and that means so much to that person.

Facing my mom's cancer is where I learned my final lesson. I may not be able to change what life has on its agenda, but I can choose my reaction to it. If I take a defeatist attitude then I'll only experience loss. But if I fight until there's nothing left, then I can choose how my future unfolds. After reading your book, that's the way I hope to succeed, by not giving up if I've been brought down, but by doing everything I can to overcome the challenge, and I want to thank *you* for teaching me to face challenges with dignity.

Sincerely,

Naasir Haleem  
Naperville, Illinois

## Level III Winner - 2011

Dear Ms. Helen Siiteri,

Every Christmas that I can remember my father and I have settled down in the rocking chair and very carefully opened up a yellow, worn, bent and well loved book. It is the copy of *The Adventures of Nicholas* that my father received for Christmas forty-four years ago. Ever since that day, my father has read that book every Christmas, a tradition that the two of us have continued. Your book, not only made for an enjoyable read, but also created a father-daughter tradition that, even now at age seventeen, I look forward to every year.

Reading *The Adventures of Nicholas* has, for me, proven to be even more than just a Christmas tradition. When I was little, I always knew that Nicholas was a fourth century saint, but at age five, it was really hard for me to imagine that as the beginning of Santa Claus. It was your book that helped me realize that the kindly man named Nicholas and Santa Claus were one in the same. It helped to make Santa really real for me. It made him more of a person, who had a childhood, parents, and friends. It made my belief in Santa Claus that much stronger as I learned how he came to become Santa Claus. Your book answered all of my questions. Why does Santa wear a red suit, why reindeer, stockings and Christmas trees? Why? Why? Why? With all of this newfound knowledge, I had no doubt that Santa Claus was real and no one could tell me otherwise. It was your book that helped me remain strong in that belief.

But like all children, I grew up. Even with my strong belief in Santa Claus, I began to think more logically and wonder how it all could be possible. So, at the age of ten (a little old to be finding out), after a couple of hours of consideration, I went and asked my mom the big question "Does Santa really exist?" She looked me in the eyes and very plainly said, "No, he doesn't." I will tell you, I was crushed. That night, I went to my room and cried. Even though I'd had my doubts, I was hoping that when I asked, my parents would tell me I was just being silly, of course Santa existed. The truth hit me harder than I had expected. I felt I had lost something really important and special in my life. I began to wonder why parents even bothered to implant a belief in Santa into their children, only to later tell them he doesn't exist.

So as December rolled around, it once again was Christmas Eve and time to read *The Adventures of Nicholas*. Only this time, I wasn't so excited. I remember wondering, *what's the point, none of its real anyway?* So I reluctantly settled down next to my dad to begin the story again. I don't think I can even describe what happened. As his comforting voice read those familiar words, the story came to life all over again. The magic became real. I wanted so badly to believe in Santa Claus again. And that year I got my wish.

I had an epiphany. Maybe Santa Claus the person, the physical being doesn't exist, but that doesn't mean that Santa Claus doesn't exist. When I believed that Santa didn't exist, I forgot the end of the story. I forgot about the power of a kind and giving spirit. I realized why it is important to believe in Santa Claus. It is not simply the belief in a jolly man in a red coat, but a belief in the giving spirit, the generosity of Christmas itself. What better way to learn that lesson as a child than Santa Claus, the kind-hearted, jolly embodiment of giving. That is why we encourage children to believe, so they will learn to find joy in giving as well as receiving. It is your book that helped me to realize all of this, that brought me back to Santa Claus.

So now I am happy to say that I am seventeen years old and I believe in Santa Claus. And the best part is that I get to believe in him forever. Maybe a single human being who travels around the world in an entire night does not exist, but the gentle, giving spirit of Santa Claus most certainly does. He exists in every parent who leaves presents under the tree from Santa, in every person who gives of their time and resources to make someone else's Christmas just a little bit better. This is the lesson that *The Adventures of Nicholas* taught me. It was your book that reminded me who the spirit of Christmas really is, who Santa really is. So for that, I thank you. You have given me not only a much beloved tradition with my father, but also a lifelong belief in Santa Claus.

Sincerely,  
Stacie Cler  
Bloomington, Illinois