



Emma (right) talks with Liu Fang (center) and Zhang Hong, who have both overcome unimaginable adversity to achieve great things. — Ti Gong

before and after Qomolangma; it taught me how to objectively look at issues and live in harmony with others.”

I put the same question to Liu, herself an acclaimed author with honors such as National Modern Citizen of the Times.

“For me, there isn’t a single book,” she smiles. “It’s like each grain of rice that nourishes your bones. Every book is part of your being. We learn and grow from all of them.”

The last book Liu read before going blind was “The Smiling, Proud Wanderer” by Jin Yong. Characters have various disabilities and overcome challenges to be masters of martial arts. “Through reading literature like this, I acquired the confidence and courage to go on my journey with books as a guide.”

For Liu, once a teacher who now serves on various boards, including the China Blind Association Literature Committee, reading is more like a limb than a pastime. “Like my hands or feet, books are part of my body I cannot live without. They are essential.”

This primal connection drew Liu to move from education to writing. “I wanted to promote reading and create opportunities for blind people in China.”

Liu has always drawn confidence and determination from reading, a gift

she wants to give back. “You’ll find desperation in my stories, but life becomes good. Writing to me is soil; we plant seeds, and beautiful flowers will grow.”

The experiences of Liu and Zhang highlight that reading is not just about consuming information or getting lost in an unknown land. Literature allows us to step outside of our experiences and see the world from new perspectives. Books also offer faith when life brings us to our knees.

For Shari Rosen, co-founder of ELG — a company that provides special education, developmental and counseling services, and consulting in Shanghai and across China — that moment came when she sought care in a mental health center. Despite the support of her loving husband and business partner Monte, an extended and severe spell of depression got her there. On arrival, Rosen’s belongings were taken, and replaced by a sack of books. Least to say — and amid group therapy and experiential activities that tested her patience — Rosen read. A lot. She read like she had never read before and, in doing so, began to heal in ways she didn’t expect. One book immediately comes up in conversation, “The Drama of the Gifted Child.”

“That book changed my life,” she stresses. “The day I opened it, I figured

out why I was who I was, and thus it became the day I began to heal. All the anger and sadness started to ease.”

I asked Rosen to define connection in the context of literature and her healing journey.

“It’s critical. For people who are overcoming trauma, literature can significantly reduce social isolation by providing companionship and empathy through characters and their experiences,” she says.

Rosen was diagnosed with ADHD in her 30s, and her work is centered around supporting people living with various needs. “Literature is a powerful tool to bridge the gap between people with disabilities and the rest of society. Storytelling creates a more inclusive and accepting society.”

I asked Rosen what she makes of Liu and Zhang.

“They are role models,” she says. “People with disabilities will always be stigmatized to some degree. But we must be willing to educate ourselves. For anyone, anything is possible. But nothing is ever easy.”

Preparing to leave, Zhang tells me: “Without literature, we are like the walking dead. It is the soul of a learned life. The difference between us and animals is that we have the words to record and make sense of our history. Literature

will forever be significant.”

For Liu, the soul of writing is something technology will never replace. “In China, we talk about writing with good form and spirit. The form is easy to imitate. But you cannot imitate the soul.”

We all know the fog of confusion and sting of isolation. The self-help section of any bookstore is enough to signify that. And one only needs to turn on the television or scroll social media to understand that inclusiveness and acceptance are in short supply. The problem with snippets of experiences and character-limited takes on complicated topics is that there’s little to no place to connect or empathize with others. Aren’t we screwing ourselves over? Missing the collective experiences of people who’ve faced challenges, traveled afar, fallen in love, lived life and faced death. It’s all there in black and white, and yet we think Facebook has the answer.

In his best-selling book “Lost Connections,” Johann Hari writes: “The opposite of addiction is not sobriety. The opposite of addiction is connection.” And in a world hooked on devices, here’s your call to action: put down your phone and pick up a book. For there, between its chapters lies connection, and within its sentences the words you may need to help you heal.