

When not knowing is
understanding



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

When Not Knowing is Understanding “ Help [. . .] is giving part of yourself to somebody who comes to accept it willingly and needs it badly, ” declared the father of narrator and author of *A River Runs Through It*, Norman Maclean (Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It, A River Runs Through It and Other Stories*, NY: Pocket Books-Simon & Schuster, 1992-1976, 1-113, 89. Print. All subsequent quotations are documented by page number only.).

Norman's attempt at helping people throughout the book is obvious as he is contrasted with a brilliant man who fly-fishes at a tremendous level, his brother Paul; however, Paul had a problem that was detrimental to his health and eventually led to his death in a bar fight. Norman's father, a minister, thought highly of Paul, telling Norman, “ He was beautiful, ” in which Norman responded with an agreement complimenting the fine father he had, “ He should have been—you taught him” (112). Norman's driving care and love towards anybody who would take it makes him a very admirable character in *A River Runs Through It*. As Paul and his girlfriend sat in jail, they did not know that Norman would come pick them up. When he did, though, Paul was speechless. Most of it was that he did not want to talk about his arrest, but a small part of it may have been his shock that Norman would come to pick his own brother up from a jail. Many times, people with brothers would not think of going to get his or her brother from a jail. Norman cared deeply for Paul, and he understood Paul, so when the desk sergeant at the jail told Norman that they were picking him up too much and that Paul was “ drinking too much, ” Norman had had enough with people telling him about Paul's troubles (26). This is more proof that Norman understood Paul. He understood him enough that he knew about Paul's trouble and was tired of people telling him about stuff that he already knows, but as Norman learns

more about Paul's drinking, the more he wants to help him. So he tries. As Norman offers help, Paul does not take it, but does he anyway? As Paul disagrees, he is helped indirectly as he sees that Norman is trying to help him. Knowing that somebody is trying to help you with something can be the greatest feeling you can have. As Norman helps Paul abstractly, he is doing another thing that he says that he cannot do, and that is to understand Paul. Norman knows right from the beginning of the book that Paul needs help with his drinking habits, which Norman says many times throughout the novel that he is unable to do. He understands Paul well enough to try to help him, he understands Paul well enough to go to jail and pick him up because he knows that Paul did not do anything wrong. He was just defending his girlfriend after another man commented rudely against her kind. In retrospect, when Norman's father says to Norman, " So it is [. . .] that we can seldom help anybody. Either we don't know what part to give or maybe we don't like to give any part of ourselves. Then, more often than not, the part that is needed is not wanted" (89). In this quote from the pastor's son's father, he manages to talk about help and knowledge of people. He says that we can hardly help anyone and sometimes we do not know how to help him. Norman does the opposite as the book progresses and helps Paul, even though Paul does not show it, and he understands Paul by just trying to help and showing that he wants to and that he cares. He even says at a point early in the book " I knew there were others like me who had brothers they did not understand but wanted to help. We are probably those referred to as 'our brother's keepers,' possessed of one of the oldest and possibly one of the most futile and certainly one of the most haunting instincts, " talking about the killing of Able in Genesis (31). This statement by Norman tells us

<https://assignbuster.com/when-not-knowing-is-understanding/>

that he was, at one point, frustrated with Paul's problem, but he did not give up on him. Paul could be trouble at times, like when he was in jail, but Norman kept helping and caring, like a superb brother. Every time the two brothers fish, there is a beautiful narration of Paul's casting or of Paul reeling in a fish. Norman symbolizes Paul as a different man when he is fishing, and many times he shows his jealousy towards him. On one fishing trip, Paul has to throw a boulder into Norman's fishing hole and Norman feels the best he has ever felt, stating " In all my life, I had got the rock treatment only a couple of times before. I was feeling more perfect than ever" (97). Later, once he was done fishing, he sat by his father talking and then went into another deep narration of Paul fishing. All of these passages about Paul that Norman writes show that he cares for and looks up to Paul when they are out fishing, and maybe that is a reason for Norman to help Paul. He wants to help Paul so that Paul may be able to help him fishing with little tips that he gives during the book. As Norman helps Paul, he gets frustrated with himself because he did not know that he was helping. Then, once Norman starts to notice that he was helping Paul, he did not have an opportunity to keep going. Early in the novel, Norman writes a very special passage that leads to the end, showing us the very similarities between when the sun rises and when the sun goes down. Sunset can also be very bright, and as some people say, people go to the light as they die. " Sunrise is the time to feel that you will be able to find out how to help somebody close to you who you think needs help even if he doesn't think so. At sunrise everything is luminous but not clear, " and at this point in time, sunrise was sunset for Paul as Norman started to help him (31).