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The Urge to Know

MOST PEOPLE who read this *Letter* are no longer under educational discipline. They wish to go on learning things, but *the urge to know* has taken the place of the compulsion to study. They feed their minds continually with facts, thoughts and experiences, and as a result they are prepared to assess situations, plan actions, and cope with crises.

Other people, unmoved by the urge to know, are confused by conflicting arguments and tranquillized by propaganda. They misinterpret the causes and effects of today's events because they have not a sufficient store of knowledge by which to judge them.

The transition from confusion to illumination is made by asking questions and finding answers so as to steadily increase one's store of information. Charles Steinmetz, called "the wizard of General Electric", said "There are no foolish questions and no man becomes a fool until he has stopped asking questions."

Curiosity is one of the characteristics of a vigorous intellect. It is inspired, in its best sense, by a genuine love of knowledge. It is the spirit of intellectual inquisitiveness that sparks lively thought. It is the secret strength of those who get to know so that they are able to reason on their own from the facts they learn.

Everyone finds himself wondering about things, and the intelligent person has learned that the best way to handle wonderment is to go looking for an answer or an explanation. He does not think of the time spent in the search as having been stolen from his leisure. It is tragic when someone allows the excuse "lack of time" to limit his thinking and cripple his understanding. The man who was tutor to Nero said "Illiterate leisure is a form of death, a living tomb."

Age is not an obstacle

Knowing enough is not a destination one ever arrives at, but every birthday milestone should mark an addition of knowledge and wisdom. The sculptor Michelangelo, at ninety, having lost his eyesight, ran his hands over statues in St. Peter's Cathedral and exclaimed: "I still learn".

While drawing upon the intellectual capital we have amassed during the early part of our lives, we need to

keep up to date so as to know what the new generations are talking about.

It was at one time a common stratagem for parents to leave books open on tables where children would come upon them and be attracted by them. Perhaps in these days the young people should place their high school or university books, open at interesting illustrations, to entice their parents and grandparents to read.

Following up the urge to know protects us against fixation, that deadening force in business and private life. Mental rigidity is a foe to be brought out into the open and destroyed. The alternative is to freeze into bigotry and prejudice and out of date ideas, and then to wonder some day how life got away from us.

Living can be drab and meaningless for the person who has failed to learn that not talking and arguing but observing and ascertaining are the distinguishing characteristics of the intelligent human being. To develop activity of thought is to make mental progress toward scholarship, and that is one of the greatest delights a person can achieve.

Long ago, someone rubbed two sticks together and brought fire into being; try now rubbing two ideas together. Compare things with one another, notice wherein they agree and differ, and spark a new idea.

To wake up mentally, to rub thoughts together, to fan the spark of a new idea into flame: these are experiences available to everyone who satisfies his urge to know. He will enjoy reading a book which provides some line of disputation on which he may exercise his critical faculties, thus combining his natural endowment of skill, brain-power and wit with the illumination given by new knowledge.

The more you get to know, the more likely you are to derive pleasure from such an awakening, and the more likely you are to make discoveries or link together ideas in a way that will add to your life happiness and increase your skill in solving problems.

Geniuses differ from other people because they have developed and intensified their ability to bring ideas together and give birth to new thoughts. They have, of course, laid by a big store of facts, but they

have also amplified their perceptivity so that they can interpret the raw facts, add something of their own, and innovate.

To reach excellence

The urge to know is the desire within us to reach the excellence that it is in our power to attain. Adding a little knowledge to our stock builds self-confidence and strengthens us in our readiness to seize opportunity. It is worth repeating that a little knowledge is not a dangerous thing: the danger is in not being aware that it is little.

“Knowledge”, in the 15th century morality play *Everyman*, says: “Everyman, I will go with thee and be thy guide, in thy most need to go by thy side.”

Our need for the companionship of knowledge has increased and is increasing. Every citizen in a democracy is called upon to pass judgment on proposals relating to commerce, public health, national defense, economics, law and morals. How much better fitted he is to make sound decisions when he has background knowledge. At the very least, he knows that these are not new problems, but have been dealt with, wisely or foolishly, by citizens in the past.

Why do we obey the urge to get to know things? Not only because knowledge is useful as an end, but because the act of gaining it enriches our minds and vitalizes our spirits. Knowledge does not have to be functional in order to be worth digging for. Sought for its own sake, knowledge gives rich gifts in abundance.

To get to know, to get into the truth of anything, is a mind-elevating act. It was the Greeks who first cultivated the love of knowledge for its own sake. St. Thomas Aquinas brought this up to date when he wrote: “Of all human pursuits, that of wisdom is the most perfect, the most sublime, the most profitable, the most delightful.”

All that mankind has done, thought, seen, felt, discovered and imagined, “the funded capital of civilization,” finds its way into books, and this is where your urge to know carries you. The choice is as wide as human nature. You may wish to delve into the history and the making of music or films or tapestry, the growth of democracy, human rights, the problems of adolescence, the rule of law, the anatomy of prejudice, or the proper use of language: they are all there, in books.

Polish your mind

Here is one way to associate with greatness, to polish your mind against the minds of others. It requires that you have interest. Interest is not in the book or event, but a faculty within us and it can be cultivated. Wherever we direct our curiosity, our urge to know, there we will find interest.

There is a comforting quality about satisfying the urge to know, in that it contributes to serenity of mind. You are not seeking a formula by which to remodel your life, but a scale of values by which to

guide your living. Reading helps to fill out with substantial content such abstract and sometimes perplexing ideas as right and wrong, justice and injustice.

The urge to know about how to steer our craft will carry us into many branches of learning. One of the most attractive and exciting things about books is their variety, and to be broadminded in their selection helps to prepare a person to meet all the demands of business and social life, because it teaches him flexibility.

To read varied books is to attain the feeling of being raised to a high point from which the landscape of earth makes sense. We perceive that the feelings that divide people arise from individual points of view, differing with their environment, education and culture, and their reactions to ideas and events.

It is well known that men and women are not disturbed by things themselves but by the views they take of things. The great German artist, Holbein, painted a picture, now in the National Gallery, London, which has a curious patch in the foreground. Viewed from one position, and one position only, the patch is seen to be the representation of a skull.

A rich and wide store

Just as an invention is the outcome of a great many experiments, so a bright intellectual idea is the product of putting together bits and pieces of information and linking them with a vitalizing new thought.

Imagination, invention and theory-building yield their princely triumphs to the person who has a rich and wide store of information — rich in its intrinsic value and wide in the sense that it is not confined to the commonplace affairs of his daily life and work.

You cannot control inspiration. You cannot sit down, head poised on hand, as in Rodin’s sculpture of “The Thinker”, and say “I am going to be inspired”. But your chance of receiving inspiration at a critical moment is increased by multiplying the stock of impressions and ideas in your mind.

Having read widely does not mean that you will have the solutions to problems on the tip of your tongue, but at least you will know where to look for them. Every human being needs a frame of reference, a comprehensive view of existence, to guide him in his thinking.

Reading will lead you to look again at things you took for granted, and question them. You become many-sided and take long views; you are known and respected for your open-mindedness.

Reading needs to be followed by thinking. Why not arrange for a rambling-thought hour once a week, not for idle dreaming but for scanning mentally the events, thoughts and ideas of the past seven days, associating them and forming a theory or evolving an hypothesis? The capacity to meditate upon what one has learned with some degree of understanding is a rewarding feature of satisfying the urge to know.

This is a facility the human being has uniquely

among animals: the ability to hold a thought in mind while he works out its implications. To think something through in that way is an act of creation that gives sheer delight.

What sort of books?

In providing a short list of books for someone starting to fulfil his urge to know, this *Letter* does not profess to name the "best" books but only "outline" books that will serve to give an over-all view and guide the reader into deeper study of topics that have particular appeal to him.

Philosophy. A philosopher is not a prophet with a message, but a lover of wisdom. The master philosopher, Socrates, said: "The man who has a ready inclination to taste of every branch of learning, and enters with pleasure on its study . . . this man we may with justice call a philosopher."

The philosophy a wise reader gets from books is not wholly speculative. It relates to life as we live it. Neighbours on a suburban circle set aside one night a week for reading. They took turns reading aloud from Epictetus's *Teachings*. From the very first evening they were amazed by how relevant the principles were to the world today, and how the thoughts of Epictetus contributed to their understanding of current problems.

Myths and fables. When we were young we knew that there are ogres and witches and giants and Santa Claus. When we grew older we did not renounce these fantasies, but we modified them. Proverbs and maxims and moral lessons in fable form which functioned in the intellectual development of primitive people are still used today.

Myths, fables and fairy tales are evidence of our long ago forefathers' efforts to penetrate the darkness of the unknown. At one time every myth was a valid truth: it was the most accurate statement possible on the basis of the known facts.

Science. Knowledge of the general principles and advances in science may be enjoyed by those who have neither the time nor the desire to master the details of any particular branch. There is great satisfaction in being able to see a few hand-breadths deeper into the meanings and causes of things.

We need to learn enough about the bases of science so that we understand what developing science means for mankind. For example, here is a thought arising out of such meditation, given us by H. A. Overstreet in *The Mature Mind*: the inventions of science magnify the power of the immature no less than they do the power of the mature.

Aesthetics. Enthusiasm for any beautiful thing can exist only in a well-informed mind. This is why we should learn something about the various arts: when we pay attention to them they give insight which can enhance our level of living. Art and music are important in our lives, whether regarded as the special activity by which we apprehend beauty or as a means

of communicating feelings, experiences, inspiration and ideals. One man made himself a cultural time budget. He set aside thirty of the 240 leisure hours in a month in this way: literature, 12 hours; art, 5 hours; drama, 5 hours; and music, 8 hours.

Poetry. Nearly everyone is a poet at heart, although his fingers do not guide his pen into lyrical measures. We may, indeed, live without poetry, but we cannot live as well or enjoy life so deeply. Poetry is the language of feeling, necessary to balance the intellectual in our mental make-up.

In poetry, the right word counts. Poetry uses words that make things come alive in colour and intensity and urgency. For this reason, people who wish to enlarge their capability to say things neatly, clearly and exactly, make a practice of reading poetry.

History. How can anyone begin to understand himself or any other human being without acquaintance with the wisdom and folly of the past? To ignore history is as dangerous as it would be for a doctor to ignore the early symptoms and treat only what is evident today.

The course of mankind's progress has not been a straight line, but a tortuous path with long detours. Understanding gleaned from the record of how people answered the challenges on the journey up to now enables us to select what is vital in today's problems and discard the incidental and the irrelevant.

It is interesting to read an episode in history, big or little, and to apply one's mind to it in the light of today's knowledge. How could a threat have been better met? How a catastrophe averted? How a great opportunity seized and developed?

Biography. Dull men have been known to brush aside study of the lives of successful men on the grounds that the same conditions do not apply to them. Perhaps that is why they are dull. The usefulness of biography lies in the fact that in every man there is something which we may learn with advantage. His errors need not be repeated; his successes can be emulated. We can learn without the hardship and loss of time involved in experimenting on our own.

Classics. A classic is not a dry-rotted book but one that wears well. The test of literary merit is survival, which is itself an index of majority opinion. Here, in the classics, is the accumulated hoard of human wisdom: when you read them you are associating yourself with the greatness of the men who wrote them.

To people who live in a society that is intoxicated with noises and pictures, the classics are at hand as refuges from the hubbub. In a great conversation with one another these books discuss the persistently nagging problems of men, and present to the reader valuable points of view concerning their solution.

So relevant to today's problems are the classics that you will find that what the writers wrote makes more sense in today's situations than much of what you read in today's newspapers.

Light reading. The flowery pastures of miscellaneous literature have an irresistible appeal to some people. They say that they have no time for great books, yet they have time for others. They give the impression of being so busy nibbling at the hors-d'oeuvres that they do not get around to the steak.

Serious readers are far too wise not to read a light book now and then, and there are plenty of non-serious books worth reading for fun and pastime.

One thing to do early after you determine to make reading contribute to your urge to know is to develop enough firmness to reject the fugitive trifles about silly things and empty people, the memoirs of the unmemorable; the vulgar appeals to the latest fad; the noxious exposés of violence and sex. One reviewer was forthright enough about one of these books: "This book can be justified only where no other reading matter is available."

Translations. It is commonplace to hear learned people say that such-and-such a book must be read in the original language to be appreciated, but Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: "What is really best in any book is translatable—any real insight or broad human sentiment." Conan Doyle remarked: "Life is too short to read originals so long as there are good translations." And Alfred North Whitehead said: "Most of the good can be got out of translations."

No book has had so revolutionary influences or had such a world-wide effect as the *Bible*. After two thousand years, it is reported by the Canadian Bible Society, the Bible has been translated into some 1,450 languages and dialects. People of all races find through these translations the answers to the great problems plaguing the world: war, immorality, crime, juvenile delinquency, racial and religious prejudice, atheism and despair.

The benefit of knowing

Anyone seeking a motto for his desk or to hang over his book-case might do worse than adopt "I am still learning". The fact that a person has noticed that he does not know everything shows that he is intelligent. His determination to learn is evidence that he will ward off the sensation of emptiness which is part of so many lives.

The urge to know is a constructive force. He who follows it is seeking to build a solid foundation of knowledge accompanied by a critical sense of values. He is brushing aside the soap-opera style of life that is based on the ills and aberrations of society.

He is building the sort of mind that is capable of coping with everyday problems in the here and now, and looking ahead with serenity to the prospect pictured in the beautiful words of Santayana in *Domination and Powers*: "The firmament, as we watch it and measure its silence by the rhythm of our heart or lungs, seems a finished and unchangeable marvel; yet it is shining, burning, and speeding influences in all directions; and there is no knowing

how many things more wonderful than our own wonder it may yet produce."

Starting points

This list of books is not a list of "best" books, but only a suggestion of introductory books. One reader may find that Wells' *Outline* gives him all that he needs to know about general history, while another reader will find that, like Durant's *Philosophy*, it leads him to seek further knowledge along certain lines. None of the books is difficult to read. If the books are not in stock, a book store will order them for you. Books known to be available in paper covers are marked*.

Reading: **The Lifetime Reading Plan*, by Clifton Fadiman. Avon, Hearst Corp., New York. **Books That Changed the World*, by Robert B. Downs. Mentor, New American Library, New York.

Philosophy: *The Story of Philosophy*, by Will Durant. Garden City Publishing Co. Inc., New York. **The Conquest of Happiness*, by Bertrand Russell. New American Library, New York. **The Enchiridion*, by Epictetus. Liberal Arts Press, Inc., Bobbs-Merrill Co., Indianapolis, New York.

Myths and Fables: *The Muses' Pageant*, by W. M. L. Hutchinson. Everyman Library, J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., London. *The Age of Fable*, by Thomas Bulfinch. Review of Reviews Co., New York. *Andersen's Fairy Tales*. Grosset & Dunlap, New York. *Aesop's Fables*. Many editions. The Macmillan Co., Toronto, published an edition in verse by J. E. Wetherell.

Science: **Science and the Modern World*, by A. N. Whitehead. A Pelican Book. **Great Essays in Science*, edited by Martin Gardner. Pocket Books Inc., New York.

Aesthetics: *Complete Stories of the Great Operas*, by Milton Cross. Doubleday & Co. Inc., New York. *The Creative Impulse*, (writing and painting) by H. Caudwell. Macmillan & Co. Ltd., London.

Poetry: **The Poetics of Aristotle*. University of North Carolina Press. *The Poetic Image*, by C. Day Lewis. Jonathan Cape, London, The *Oxford Books* (anthologies) of American, Canadian, English, Greek and Modern Verse. Oxford University Press, New York and Toronto.

History: *The Outline of History*, by H. G. Wells. Garden City Publishing Co. Inc., New York. *The Story of Mankind*, by Hendrik Willem van Loon. Garden City Publishing Co. Inc., New York.

Biography: *One Hundred Great Lives*, Odhams Books Ltd., London.

Literature: *The Story of the World's Literature*, by John Macy. Liveright Publishing Corp., New York.

Religion: **The Religions of the World Made Simple*, by Dr. John Lewis. Made Simple Books, Inc., New York.

A person who has these books on his shelves has a library.