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On Reading Profitably

OUR printing presses are devouring a great tonnage of paper, and authors are covering it with words telling all that has ever been thought, felt, seen, experienced, discovered and imagined. Never before has so much information, guidance and entertainment been so readily available to everyone. Our problem is to make the best use individually of what is printed.

There are many different motives for reading. We may seek knowledge, relaxation, comfort, background, inspiration, or something that will enable us to compose all these into a way of life. In earlier days mankind flourished with merely barbaric flashes of thought, but in this period of civilization we need a co-ordinating philosophy built upon and making use of all the experiences of the past.

The accumulated factual knowledge of the past few hundred generations of human beings is too great to be acquired through experience in a lifetime. We must take it vicariously from books. Books push out the boundaries of our ignorance, factually into the past and speculatively into the future.

Consider this: we have only three ways of evaluating human existence: the study of self, which is the most dangerous and most difficult method, though often the most fruitful; the observation of our fellow men, who may hide their most revealing secrets from us; and books, which, with all their errors of perspective and judgment, are constant, detailed and always at our beck and call.

It is interesting and useful to read how crises similar to our own in form, though perhaps not in magnitude, were handled by our predecessors. Books unroll the great scroll of history so that things that are remote in time and place help us to judge things that are near at hand today.

Books are friends

Perhaps the highest use of books is not as sources of information about nations, people, or foreign lands, but as friends. Reading is one of the most effective means of

getting away from disturbing and unalterable circumstances. Intimate association with noble works, literary, philosophic, artistic, is a promoter of thought, a refuge from almost all the miseries of life.

Books are good for us because they tend to shake us up. Our environment is confusing. It is made up of a tangle of complicated notions, in the midst of which individuals are inclined to sit apathetically. Greek philosophy, we recall, leaped to heights unreached again, while Greek science limped behind. Our danger is precisely the opposite: scientific data fall upon us every day until we suffocate with uncoordinated facts; our minds are overwhelmed with discoveries which we do not understand and therefore fear.

What we find in books can make us look again at things we have taken for granted, and question them; it can arouse us to appreciate once more the ideas and ideals that are being stifled under the flow of technical marvels. If a book moves us to thought, even to angry thought, the chances are that it is doing us a good turn.

Lastly in this brief tabulation of the value of reading, consider the benefit good reading is to the person who seeks ability in self-expression. The woman who wishes to excel in conversation and the man who must make his letters and orders clear: both these need to read wisely.

From whence come the quotations we run across continually in conversation, correspondence, public addresses and articles? All branches of the English-speaking world would include these six sources in any list: the *Bible*, the plays of Shakespeare, Aesop's *Fables*, *Alice in Wonderland*, the classic myths, the Gilbert and Sullivan operas. The French-speaking world turns similarly to the *Bible* but otherwise are more likely, of course, to use expressions from the fables of La Fontaine and the great works of Racine, Corneille and Molière.

We are not interested in reading as critics, but as human beings in search of some human values. If a book gives you the feeling that you are being inspired,

informed, helped, or entertained, never mind what anybody else says about it, it is good.

Literary theorists are often mistaken. Shakespeare's plays attracted enormous and enthusiastic audiences, so it seemed clear to the theorists of the period that there must be something wrong with them. Said William Hazlitt, the essayist: "If we wish to know the force of human genius we should read Shakespeare. If we wish to see the insignificance of human learning we may study his commentators."

A business man's reading

The business man who never, in spite of good resolutions, gets around to reading books that are not directly associated with his trade, is depriving himself of the habits, the skills, the understanding, and the increased freedom of thought which a well-balanced pattern of reading would give him.

Reading in technical books, learned journals and trade magazines is necessary according to a man's way of making a living, but this reading should not be the end. A person who has to fit his life into a groove in his daily work may become a unique individual in his reading. He may have a dual life: as a business man among scholars and as a scholar among business men.

A skilled artisan, extremely wise in matters of his own art, is cheating himself of the greatness in life that might be his if he reads nothing else but technical books and light magazines and newspapers.

Reading furnishes the tools and material to take us out of blind-alley conversation. But it goes further. It advances our prospect of getting out of the routine of our profession, business or art.

Search for knowledge

The person who reads wisely and widely often finds that he has the enormous advantage of knowing more about his subject than others do. Knowledge builds self-confidence and self-reliance.

Some people profess to despise knowledge based upon books, but one must suspect that they are envious. There is no surer sign of intellectual ill-breeding, says Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch in *On the Art of Writing*, than to speak, even to feel, slightly of any knowledge oneself does not happen to possess.

It is true that knowledge is not necessarily a good in itself; it needs to be assimilated by the intellect and the imagination before it becomes positively valuable. We are wise to soak ourselves in as many facts and ideas as we can, so that our minds have material with which to work.

Books will provide us with the material information we can use to answer vital questions. When we are puzzled as to why human beings behave as they do we

cannot find the answer in our surroundings but in the long perspective of history.

A person reading well-selected books becomes a denizen of all nations, a contemporary of all ages. In books one meets all kinds of people, the wisest, the wittiest and the tenderest.

Whether you read Jane Austen, dealing with her little community of country gentlefolk, clergymen and middle-class persons, or Somerset Maugham, ranging over the world and an infinity of characters, you are adding to your own experience that of others. You tend to become many-sided and to take large views. You expand your range of pleasures; your taste grows supple and flexible.

You may be so fortunate as to find in books not only the record of things as the author saw them, but shadows of things to come.

In Tolstoy's *Fathers and Sons* he depicted for the first time in fiction the Nihilist who was the fore-runner of the Communist; dictators in every age have found much useful advice in *The Prince*, where Machiavelli declares it proper for a statesman to commit in the public interest acts of violence and deceit that would be reprehensible in private life; if non-Germans had taken the trouble to read *Mein Kampf* when it was written in 1924 they would have found Hitler's entire programme spelled out in all its shocking detail; it was half a century after Thoreau's death before his doctrine of civil disobedience was applied by Mahatma Gandhi in India.

Fires stirred by the writings of Malthus, Adam Smith and Tom Paine have never died down. Controversies continue to rage. Some two-thirds of the world's rapidly increasing population suffer from malnutrition. This makes the issues raised by Malthus in 1798 as vital today as they were then. When Paine wrote in 1775 that oft-quoted line: "These are the times that try men's souls", he wrote for our time also. It was seventy years ago that Einstein published his article on the use of atomic energy, giving the world the most celebrated equation in history: $E=mc^2$. Where the atomic age, then born, will lead mankind, no one knows.

It is because we are called upon to apply intelligent thought to these and other problems that it is necessary for us to read with industry and discernment.

Choosing books

How are we to go about selecting the books to read? Shall we use the time-honoured formula: choose the books you would like to have with you if you were wrecked on a desert island? Shall we read Sir John Lubbock's hundred best books, or the other hundreds selected by his imitators?

Selection of books to read is highly personal. Whatever the learned may say in praise of a book, it is not for you unless you can get interested in it. And literature suited

to desolate islands may not be the thing at all for reading on a bus or train or airplane, or at a lunch counter.

One guide can be stated without equivocation: if you want to be vitalized into the power of thinking real thoughts; if you wish to be qualified to debate the issues of the day; then resolutely leave out whatever is not of the best. To spend time on naughty narratives in a world that holds Hugo and Dickens and Toynbee, Shelley and Shakespeare and Churchill, is like being told you may have your choice of all the diamonds in Tiffany's, and then walking out with a bit of broken glass. Or, as Ruskin put it: "Will you go and gossip with your housemaid or your stableboy, when you may talk with queens and kings?"

Some of the books we choose will not be crammed full of information, but are valuable because they contain exquisite nose-gays of wisdom. Some will not deal with details, but with principles, and principles are the most hardy, convertible, portable and usable species of literary property.

Great books

The "great" books are not made great because someone names them so, but because they contain lessons for all times. In them we find the accumulated thought of mankind, a rich inheritance, a transcription of a distinguished conversation across the ages. A great book does not speak to a lonely and sympathetic figure here and there, but to a whole world.

One cannot pose as a scholar because he has read so-and-so many great books, but he feels more of a scholar than if he had not read them. His understanding is deepened and his insight clarified by what the authors have to say. Their principles and their solutions have an astounding relevance to today's problems of the business man and the housewife, the politician and the school-teacher, the tool maker and the clerk.

What is the attribute that binds these books together as being worthy of the term "great"? It is sincerity. They have nothing to do with the sham, the fraudulent, the frivolous.

No one who reads the great books will learn from them the way to make better atomic bombs, but many will find that the problems of war and peace are problems that deal with people, and that these problems are much the same whether wars are fought with clubs, swords, gun-powder or plutonium. The real problems of good and evil, of love and hate, of happiness and misery, have not changed very much over the centuries.

Some of the great books are classics, a word that stands for the books that have worn best. They appeal to the minds of people of all sorts, and they remain significant, or acquire a new significance, in new ages.

It is true that Aristotle's science has little relevance to science as we know it today, and that his logic is

challenged by semanticists of a new order, but his philosophy remains illuminating and profound. There is no writer who would not benefit by reading Aristotle's *Poetics*. It is true that Homer sometimes nods and Shakespeare on occasion wrote passages of empty rhetoric, but the gold far outweighs the dross.

Some people turn away from an author if they discover a personal fault in his life or an inaccuracy in his descriptions. Mark Twain complained that Fenimore Cooper played ducks and drakes with a stream in *Deerslayer*. He had a boat 140 feet long working its way around river bends only a third as long, while six hostile Indians hid in a "sapling" to attack it. Most readers would have been so interested in watching the Indians that they would have paid no attention to the dimensions of the boat or the size of the tree. It is good advice for readers: keep your eyes on the Indians, for the story's the thing.

Nor should our judgment of a book be affected by the circumstances of an author's life. Somerset Maugham said in an essay: "That Emily Dickinson had an unhappy love affair and lived for many years in seclusion: that Poe tumbled and was ungrateful to those who befriended him, neither makes the poetry of the one any better nor that of the other any worse." And a great philosopher who preceded Maugham by more than two thousand years had this to say: "do not mind whether the writers of books are good or bad, but think only of the good that is in their books." This does not mean passive perusing, but that we should think critically of what is said, not of the writer.

A pattern of reading

Every good book leads, if you let it have its way, to another book. The trails in bookland cross and recross. When you lay down Wells' *Outline of History* or Durant's *Story of Philosophy* after reading the last page you are, like a graduating university scholar, at "commencement". These two books, typical of many, point the way to enough reading to keep a reader busy for the rest of his life.

Another way to start is by selecting four departments of reading, such as history, poetry, philosophy and science. Get a book that appeals to you in each department, and read according to your mood. Change from one to another: we are told that Oliver Wendell Holmes laughed heartily at a musical comedy for half an hour, and then, tired of laughing, read the *Thoughts* of Marcus Aurelius.

Every department of literature has its own contribution to make to our welfare and happiness. Poetry sets down in winged words the things we think and feel but cannot say. When you read poetry you are broadening your facility in the use of language and increasing your ability to say things in different and more attractive ways.

Prose fills more books, and it is the common way of communicating ideas. We lose something if we do not go back to some of its earlier forms, like letters and essays, for both interest and entertainment. Essays are important sources of idea-starters, whether they are gentle, witty and seductive, or rude and quarrelsome. *The Letters of Lady Mary Montagu* have contributed quotable quotes to our language, as Cicero's *Letters* have given us priceless snatches of philosophy still usable.

There is no need for us, in seeking a profitable pattern of reading, to allow ourselves to be bullied by publishers' advertisements into reading books that are second-rate. The feeling of hopeless or helpless indignation into which we are plunged by roughneck prose does not contribute in the way we seek to our mental stature or our peace of mind.

Let's get started

In his latest book Robert R. Updegraff says this: "In spite of our protestations that we are 'too busy' to do any serious reading, we might as well honestly admit that it is . . . either because we do not organize our time to fit in reading, or that we do not utilize our odd hours."

There may be people who honestly believe that they are too important, and too occupied with affairs, to spend time with books. But reading may be the most important thing they could do in life; upon their reading may depend the continued success of their undertakings; upon it certainly rests their mental well-being.

We do not need to sit down with a book for two or three hours in order to read effectively. Norman Vincent Peale tells us in one of his essays about a man who read all of Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in the intervals of waiting for his wife to dress for dinner.

The average reader can read an average book at the rate of 300 words a minute. That means 4,500 words in quarter of an hour, or 1,642,500 words in a year. If you spend just fifteen minutes a day, you can read twenty average-length books between January 1st and December 31st.

Sir William Osler, busy man as he was, set his fifteen minutes reading time just before going to sleep. If bedtime was set for 11 o'clock, he read from 11 to 11.15; if research kept him up until 2 a.m., he read from 2 to 2.15. Over his very long lifetime, Osler never broke this rule. And what was the result? Paul D. Leedy reports in his book *Reading Improvement for Adults* (McGraw-Hill, 1956) that Osler developed from this 15-minute reading habit an avocational specialty to balance his vocational specialization. Among scholars in English literature, Osler is known as an authority on Sir Thomas Browne, 17th century English prose master.

There is no other occupation which you can more easily take up at any moment, for any period, and more

easily put aside when other duties press upon you. Tudor court ladies wore little jewelled books; today's reading woman carries a small book in her purse; men use their pockets or their brief-cases. Out come these books during periods of waiting — waiting for meals, buses, trains, hair cuts, telephone calls, dates, performances to begin — or just waiting for something to happen.

Included among the small books suitable for carrying are the "paperbacks" which include some of the very best writing of all the ages. The really important thing in books is the words in them, not their binding. But if you do not like the appearance or touch of a paper cover, there are detachable book covers to be had, looking and handling like leather, that turn a dollar book into a sumptuous-feeling volume.

Reading for use

All wise thoughts have been written already thousands of times, but to make them truly ours we must think about them as we read. How does the opinion or belief expressed by the author square with ours? Even a statement that seems to offend our common sense may be worth thinking about. Indeed, it may be worth more than the sum of many notions with which we agree.

One of the big advantages of having books of our own is that we may mark them as we read. We may talk to our friend the author as well as listen, adding our own reflections in the margin or in foot-notes.

As we read, we should ask questions. It is questions, not answers, that keep the mind alive. Our questions will start trains of thought, awaken our reasoning, bring our judgment into play, and make our experience of life fuller and more interesting.

There is no finality

One is never at the end of reading. What we know is still infinitely less than all that still remains unknown. We continue to welcome information and ideas, always wondering as we climb successive hills "What lies beyond?"

Edison said towards the end of his fruitful life that he had no conclusions to give: "I am just learning about things myself." Confucius remained tireless in his search after knowledge and learning. Socrates was famed for wisdom not because he was omniscient but because he realized at the age of seventy that he still knew nothing.

Reading is not an exercise or an act of penance, but something that holds for us the assurance of a better way of life. There are no formal educational requirements for admission to the reading elite. You just start reading; reserve the time necessary, and go on from book to book.