



Why Reading Matters

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'I could never have dreamt that there were such goings-on in the world between the covers of books, such sandstorms and ice blasts of words, such staggering peace, such enormous laughter, such and so many blinding bright lights, splashing all over the pages in a million bits and pieces all of which were words, words, words, and each of which were alive forever in its own delight and glory and oddity and light.' While Dylan Thomas expressed his feelings this way, Emily Dickinson saw books as frigates that bear human souls and take us lands away. Hemingway considered books as men's most loyal friends. Borges' love for books was so great that he thought paradise would be a kind of library. Of course, there are reasons for such loyalty and such high regards. From reasons as plain as seeking companionship to pleasure, from improving personal inadequacy to therapeutic benefits, from overcoming difficulties to growing sensitivities, we rely on books. Be it reading with the clock or

against it, whether we read to dispel illusions or to understand the world better, whether to ignite the soul or to beguile our sorrow, for finding inner calm or serendipity, reading matters.

Simply put, reading carves out a private space for the reader, a space where to indulge in fantasies and also work over moral dilemmas through the activities of others. Reading improves our cognitive power and in the process helps us make better judgments in life. Through reading we learn to see through the shadow of mortality to understand others better, discover emotions and appreciate the need for unhappiness, win over our in-built selfishness and develop a certain grace to face all obstacles without losing patience. Reading takes us to an oasis of consciousness from where we can see the true pursuits of life and muse upon its essence.

Through reading we perceive imagination as pleasure and learn to use it to see the world in different lights and use it as a defense against the cruelties of the world. We muse whether man can escape his sinful heritage or stay perpetually bemused in the petrified forest of his dubious intentions. We ponder whether our society is based on fallacies or disenchantments. We learn to doubt whether growth requires a clash of diverging ideas, whether all our virtues are artificial and our potentials are actually dashed by our own ridiculous ego. We suspect whether we are ruined by our habits or inhibitions. We ask whether we have the capacity to choose our own good. We wonder whether an unexamined life is worth living.

A good book enables a kind of a quiet interchange of sentiments, like an intimate conversation between understanding minds. We reflect, learn to reflect, upon reflections of others. The mere act of reading is based on pure contemplation, which reassures the authenticity of silence, and the transcendentalists hold that true silence can unveil grand alters leading to civilizations. However, there are puzzle of originality and falseness of romantic nostalgia and blind prejudices and the candor of their impressions. There is this allusion that the righteous suffer involuntarily and the guilty are obsessed with sin, not seeking redemption. Also, there is this notion that life pulsates between order and chaos, duty and pleasure, between hope and despair, between bitter truths and vicious lies, all of which need to be weighed and considered to embellish the soul.

Studies show that readers respond to critical situations with courage and empathy. They sleep better; have high self-esteem and low stress level, therefore, experience lower rates of depression than non-readers. While solitary reading can help releasing pains and quieting nerves, reading in groups can stimulate thinking. New researches show that readers have the ability to deal with daily emotional challenges, like frustration, and can easily find remedies for social diseases like meanness and lack of mutual respect. While some meditate on lessons from books, others may resort to contextual approaches of bibliotherapy. With possibilities of all these benefits it's no wonder why Sigmund Freud used literature during psychoanalysis sessions to help patients fight traumas.

Besides providing psychological introspection, books always help us, when we are down, to overcome grief. George Eliot did resort to books after losing her life partner. Authors like Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, Sylvia Plath and David Foster Wallace had constantly relied on books as primary friends in their gloomy hours. Extensive reading reflects on an author's writing as well, examples of such authors are many; in the writings of George Orwell, James Joyce and Ralph Waldo Emerson we notice an elegant display of eloquent and refined prose.

Now, one big question is, can reading provide a comprehensive guide to living a meaningful life? While the answer can emphatically be 'yes', it, of course, depends on what we read and how. It also depends on the basic principles we have chosen for living our life. Life can be an intellectual adventure or an unvisited grave full of prejudice. Gustav Flaubert said, 'Don't read, as children do, to amuse yourself, or like the ambitious, for the purpose of instruction. Read in order to live.'

For our civilization to move forward, in order to inherit the wind, we must be strong, both in morals and in knowledge. In this fast changing world, when the electronic media is threatening to eclipse the practice of reading, when an avalanche of internal revolutions is holding sway, even the tiniest of tasks against the trends proves to be cumbersome undertaking. There is constant clash of conflicting ideologies, social inequality, erosion of faith, bric-a-brac fantasies with hideous ecstasy of fear and vindictiveness spreading like wildfire. Perhaps, what we need is a broader perspective to promote and appeal to the natural goodness in all beings. Reading books may not guarantee that completely but is definitely a 'good enough' option to try.

There is a horizon beyond all our material needs, beyond all serious flairs and whimsical smiles, where all our secret virtues meet, where there is no distinction between black lambs and grey falcons, where disinherited does not necessarily mean destitute and where we are no longer frightened by grotesque absurdities or instinctive beliefs. In order to reach that landscape, in order to give our ever fragmented lives a gravitas; we need to set free the imprisoned artist in each of us. And the best possible way to have it done is through reading books.