

# The Philosophy Of Reading

*Ralph M. Besse*

The Executive Vice-President of the Cleveland Electric Illuminating Company finds time both for serious reading and for writing

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT, while President, called on Justice Holmes one evening. Mrs. Holmes told the President that the Justice would be glad to see him, although it was interfering with the Justice's reading program. Roosevelt, when ushered into the room, said to Holmes, who was then past ninety, "Mr. Justice, why do you work so hard at this reading business?" Holmes replied, "I know of no other way to improve my mind!"

Holmes had recognized a number of things in that sage remark. One is that education is a continuous process. You don't "become educated" at college. You are merely prepared for an education. To be an educated person you must study continuously as long as you live, and Holmes knew that.

The second thing Holmes recognized was that to achieve mental improvement, you have to do it yourself! Essentially, nobody else can educate *you*. And that holds whether you're learning the characteristics of Chaucerian style or the rudiments of the free market economy.

While reading is admittedly indispensable to the self-improvement process, relatively few of us find the time to do much serious reading.

The Research Institute of America made a poll of executive reading habits. I think the 5.4 per cent who refused to say what they read can safely be classified as people who read practically nothing.

Again, 4.6 per cent *admitted* they read nothing. That makes a total of 10 per cent who did not read. Further, 21 per cent read only one to six books a year, and 23.6 per cent from seven to twelve books yearly. That makes a total of almost 60 per cent who read twelve or fewer books per year.

Why don't people read more? "Because I don't have the time!" That is far and away the major reason given.

THERE ARE TWO WAYS to find time to read. First, you must create the desire to read. Second, you must adopt some simple techniques to help establish the reading habit.

During the war years I dropped

book and heavy magazine reading and spent most of my time with newspapers — to keep pace, I reasoned, with history in the making. That sounded like a logical decision, and I got almost completely out of the habit of reading books for three or four years.

Then suddenly it occurred to me that I wasn't learning much from newspapers, and not a great deal more from current news magazines — that is, not much of lasting value. So in spite of radios, three children and a television set, I concluded I had to go back to some serious kind of reading.

To encourage your own desire to read, you should be aware that two of the most important creators of interest are the things you feel responsible for and the things you get credit for doing. Hence, initial reading programs should be directed at something you like, that will help in your job, something which will bring you recognition, or that is related to things you feel responsible for. And those things for which you feel responsible can range all the way from your own home to aiding in the preservation of individual freedom in America.

Now, how do you actually get started reading? What are some simple techniques? First, you should realize that serious reading takes less time than many persons

imagine. If you spend just 15 minutes a day, reading at the average rate of 300 words a minute, you will read a million and a half words a year — or an average of 20 books! But, of course, you have to devote these 15 minutes *every* day.

Sir William Osler, who was one of the greatest medical teachers of all times, did exactly that. He would take 20 minutes each day, as I recall, and he became one of the best-read doctors in the United States. I guess he cheated on the long side and would sometimes read much longer than that — but the core of his reading was a 20-minute schedule, either just before he got up in the morning or just before he went to bed at night.

Another step is to make a time chart of your day. Find out what you do with your time. Most people don't know. Once you have found what your time-schedule is — once you have charted it — you can begin planning, and very likely you will find additional moments for reading.

Also, you will learn that you can read at almost any time, and in almost any place — even in the bathroom. I have read in the bathroom for years. I just finished reading Herman Melville's great *Moby Dick* in the bathroom. I had wanted to read that book for a long time, and that's how I did it!

ANOTHER SUGGESTION. Read on the way to work. When I come to work on the Rapid Transit, I see many people sitting in their seats either dozing or looking idly out the window. They could be using that time to great personal advantage — reading a good book.

Newton D. Baker was an unusually well-read man. He was also a busy man — busy enough to have been Mayor of Cleveland and Secretary of War during World War I. He also founded a law firm and did much public speaking. But in spite of that kind of busy life, Newton D. Baker had read literally thousands of books. Asked how he did it, Baker replied: "I just fill in the little fence corners of my time reading."

By that he meant, he always had something at hand to read; and whenever he had time — even five or ten unexpected minutes — he would pull the material out of his pocket or brief case or off his desk and begin to read. So always carry a book or serious magazine with you — or keep one handy. If not in your pocket, then perhaps in your brief case or traveling bag or somewhere in your automobile — and certainly on a shelf or bedside table at home, and next to your favorite easy chair.

Another technique I find helpful is to read more than one book at a time. I read from eight to ten books

at a time, for the reason that I'm not always in the same mood. Some evenings I will sit down fresh and vigorous and want to read something in science or nature or politics. Another time I may be tired and prefer something a little lighter. So I try to keep a variety of books on the move.

To really get started on such an extensive reading program, your own personal philosophy must have led you to certain deep convictions. Very likely you believe that education — especially *self*-education — is a good thing. Probably you want to assume your responsibility for good citizenship — you want to be a good citizen, wholly aside from your job or other personal responsibilities. And probably you want to improve your job performance, whether you're a mother and homemaker, or a corporation executive.

These three things have one point in common — all require *learning*. Now, there are only three ways to learn:

1. From others
2. By thinking things out yourself
3. By experience.

I wouldn't discount the value of experience, but it is a very slow way of getting a really broad education. Thinking things out for oneself is even a better way — to the extent that we do it. But the quickest and most effective way is

to learn from others — from the experience and thinking of millions of people over hundreds of years.

You can learn from others either by reading, by taking instruction, or by observation — or by a combination of these. But there is relatively little opportunity for observation, and not enough time for continued personal instruction. So that brings us back to reading as the most valuable learning method.

READING is actually the key to learning. Why? To put it briefly, because it is the most complete, most available, cheapest, quickest and most current source of learning! Further, it is a system of multiple learning — you learn more than one thing from good reading. And it is a method of continuous personal training for self-improvement.

First, reading is the *most complete* source of learning. Francis Bacon observed that “reading maketh a full man,” and Thomas Carlyle said:

“All that mankind has done, thought, gained or been: it is lying as in magic preservation in the pages of books.”

There is no knowledge, practically speaking, that is not recorded some place in writing. The whole realm of knowledge known to man is written out — with very few exceptions.

I have also said that reading is the *most available* source of learning. This scarcely needs proof. We can have magazines and other good literature routed directly to our desks or homes. We can buy it in almost any city block. We can borrow it from company or public libraries. It is readily at hand.

Further, reading is the *cheapest* source of learning. Almost all reading matter is available without any direct cost whatsoever — at a library. And even reading material that is inconvenient to borrow need not be expensive.

Again, reading is the *quickest* source of learning. Certainly it is far faster than formal instruction, experience, observation or thinking things out. Remember, the work of a lifetime is often recorded in a single book.

Also, reading is the *most current* source of learning. Change is a major characteristic of our day. If we are to be effective, we must keep pace with change. Many things we learned in college may no longer apply. We can't keep going back to school — but we *can* read!

I also observed that reading is a system of multiple learning. In reading a single book we are apt to derive several different values. We learn the author's viewpoint or perspective, his analysis. We get sheer information or knowledge.

We learn vocabulary. We can acquire a better form of expression by studying a good writer's style. And often we get entertainment value, too.

FINALLY, reading is a method of continuous personal training for *self-improvement*. It constantly challenges your thinking processes and so can train you in good habits of thinking. It provides the discipline for gaining new fields of knowledge. Reading allows you to train yourself. And this self-training becomes easier the more you read. Each broad field of knowledge you add to your store helps in other fields of knowledge. As Alfred North Whitehead put it:

"... The more you know, the easier it is to add to your knowledge."

Having touched on the merits of reading and the techniques of going about it, we naturally come to the question: What shall I read? The answer varies greatly from person to person, but here are some comments that may have broad application:

*Newspapers.* There is some opinion among great minds that newspapers are a waste of time! Justice Holmes thought that, and certainly the word-by-word reading of the average daily paper is not justified. These papers should be skimmed. This is the place for speed read-

ing—with a great deal of skipping. But do not skip the editorials; they should be the most important part of a local newspaper.

*Magazines.* Here, generally, is a higher grade of writing. Newspaper reporting rarely permits the kind of investigation possible in magazine writing. A specialty magazine is certainly a must. If, for example, your specialty is business management, you are apt to find the *Harvard Business Review* invaluable. Or if you are eager to learn more about the libertarian philosophy of private property, free market and limited government, very likely you will read THE FREEMAN.

*Miscellaneous Publications.* A check at your library will reveal there are a great many of these. One type is the "economic letter." Some of the banks put these out — such as The Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland, The Cleveland Trust Company and The National City Bank of New York. In the field of economics and government, a great many excellent pamphlets, booklets and articles are available from the Foundation for Economic Education, Irvington-on-Hudson, New York.

*Books.* Books present the finest of all reading opportunities. The greatest thinking of the finest minds, the finest expression of the greatest writers and the most pro-

found learning of qualified experts in every field and every age is available in books.

Everyone must decide for himself what books he should read; but in the selection of books by subject matter, there is an old adage that is well to keep in mind:

"Shallow minds are concerned with people. Average minds are concerned with events. Great minds are concerned with ideas."

More specifically, here are some pointers on book selection:

1. Don't hesitate to reread the very good books.
2. Don't hesitate to read only a part of a book — if only a part serves your purpose.
3. Try to read only the *best* books.
4. Don't hesitate to read a cheap paper-backed edition of a good book.
5. Don't be afraid of any subject merely because it is published in a book. Justice Holmes said: "It is absurd to be afraid of any book."

AND NOW, let me conclude with some observations on *how to read*. Read with a definite purpose — according to a plan. Get acquainted with a book before you read it; take a few moments to investigate before you spend a few hours reading. Evaluate what you read — learn to reflect, analyze, challenge, as well as understand.

Keep an open mind as you read; don't limit your reading to what you already know and believe. Study vocabulary as you read — learn more words and the exact meaning of words. Study phrases as well as single words, and learn to avoid clichés. As you read, concentrate. Keep searching for ideas.

Finally, talk about what you are reading. People will listen to what you have to say about the books you are reading. At the same time, talking about books you're reading helps fix the ideas in your own mind and sharpens your ability to analyze the opinions of others.

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### *Ideas That Will Awaken You*

REGARDLESS of what you are going to be or do in later life, the thing that really matters when you go to college is to meet with a great teacher or a great book and to encounter ideas that will awaken you. It is in this way alone that you can gain intellectual stature. In a world that is full of ordinary people thinking and doing ordinary things, such an experience will make you an extraordinary individual.

*Adventure In Ideas, Southwestern At Memphis*



## A REVIEWER'S NOTEBOOK

John Chamberlain

THE MODERN AGE might be described as the age of the secondary objective. Bureaus are set up in national capitals to do specific jobs, but they remain on the scene to preserve themselves as bureaus. The League of Nations was established to save the peace, but it was always afraid to make a real attempt to carry out its mission for fear of losing its precarious identity. The same is true of the United Nations: it is doomed to impotence because its objective is not the primary one of justice but the secondary aim of mere existence as an organization.

Chesly Manly, author of "The Twenty-Year Revolution" and a long-term UN reporter, has documented a full decade of UN futility in *The UN Record: Ten Fateful Years for America* (256 pp., Chicago: Regnery, \$3.95). But Mr. Manly sees more in the UN than futility; he thinks of it in terms of active, overpowering malignancy. To him, as to Professor Orval Watts, the UN is a trap, a planned device for world enslave-

ment to socialism. The very circumstances of its creation (it was sired, in part, by Alger Hiss) look suspicious to Mr. Manly. He thinks it significant that UNESCO, the subordinate cultural arm of UN, has recommended books, pamphlets and articles written by Fabians and members of the socialistic League for Industrial Democracy. The clincher is the UN conception of human rights, which would plow under the U.S. Bill of Rights. The proposed UN Covenant would end freedom of the press as we know it in America, and it would also threaten a lot of other freedoms as well. In default of the Bricker Amendment, the United States would be committed to the Covenant by virtue of the Constitutional provision that treaties become the supreme law of the land.

For myself, I can follow Mr. Manly's reasoning for part of the distance. The UN *could* become a tyrannical instrument if its supporters were to have their way. But I have never believed for a moment that the UN could really