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Why Read?

The Realms of Gold

June 30, 2010

Mark Edmundson, a professor of English at the University of Virginia wrote a seminal book, called “Why Read?” on the importance of a liberal education. His thesis is hardly unique. “Reading literature nurtures our intelligence, our imagination, and our very soul.” He places literature at the very heart of a liberal-arts education, which he fears is becoming an endangered tradition. “The purpose of a liberal arts education,” he avers “is to give people an enhanced opportunity to decide how they should live their lives” and literature is “the major cultural source of vital options.” Edmundson begins this notable book with these lines from physician-poet William Carlos Williams’s poem *Asphodel*:

Look at

what passes for the new.

You will not find it there but in

despised poems.

It is difficult to get the news from poems

yet men die miserably every day

for lack

of what is found there.

He goes on:

The most consequential poems offer something that is new—or, one might say “truth”—that makes significant life possible. Without such truth, one is in

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danger of miserable death, the kind of death that can come from living without meaning, without intensity, focus, or design.

“Why Read” is well worth spending some time with. I have notes which you can read on Google Docs.

“Poetry—literature in general—is *the* major cultural source of vital options for those who find that their lives fall short of their highest hopes. Literature is, I believe, our best goad toward new beginnings.”

Personally, I would modify this somewhat. I would include non-fiction, film, music, art, perhaps or especially Nature, too – whatever and wherever one finds Truth.

The Canadian author Robertson Davies often wrote about medicine. One of his masterpieces is “The Cunning Man” published in 1994. It is the fictional memoir of the life of a doctor, Dr. Jonathan Hullah, living in Toronto. Hullah is a holistic physician — a cunning diagnostician who can often get to the root of problems that have baffled others. My favourite quote from TCM is this:

"Too much machinery, too much administration and not enough brains and intuition. Research harbours a lot of second and third rate fellows. Medicine needs more humanism and less science. But humanism is hard work and so much science is just Tinkertoy." **Sawyer has two copies of this book if anyone is interested in reading it).**

The inspiration for these sessions was the Canadian physician, William Osler who was born in a parsonage at Bond Head, Tecumseth County, Upper Canada on July 12, 1849. Osler was the model for Davies’ Cunning Man.

Osler famously said: “It is astonishing with how little reading a doctor can practice medicine, but it is not astonishing how badly he may do it.”

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In the Appendix to his great collection of essays, *Aequanimitas*, Osler provides a list of 10 books which he felt would be of value for medical students to read. The preamble to the *Bedside Library* reads: “A liberal education may be had at a very slight cost of time and money. Before going to sleep read for half an hour, and in the morning have a book open on your dressing table. You will be surprised how much can be accomplished in the course of a year. I have put down a list of ten books... There are many others; studied carefully these will help in [your] inner education.”

This is in essence what we will attempt to do this summer.

In the 115 years since Osler published his list tastes have changed and only a few of Osler’s recommendations are widely read today. However, there is much we can learn from them. It is not all that important what one reads or sees as long as one approach this activity with the mind-set of a student. Osler also said: “The pupil and the teacher working together on the same lines, only one a little ahead of the other. This is the ideal towards which we should move. The pity of it all is that we should have made an intolerable burden of the study of one of the most attractive of the professions, but the reform is in our own hands and should not be far off.”

Mark Edmundson feels that “The function of a liberal arts education is to use major works of art and intellect to rejuvenate, reaffirm, replenish, revise, overwhelm, replace, in some cases (alas) even help begin to generate the web of

Edmundson introduced me to the concept that each of us needs to construct our personal Canon: that is, a choice of books, films, music, art for our personal and professional evolution. **“What shall the individual who desires to read attempt to read since he can’t read everything?”** The works of our personal

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“canon,” therefore. help to form us as doctors, care givers, parents, spouses, friends and colleagues. They will be idiosyncratic and singular. These are the testing and transforming works of art that have influenced us in exciting ways over many years. “Taking a deep initial delight in a book or an author is a little like falling in love,” to Edmundson, at least who writes. “There is a nearly rapturous acceptance of all the author brings... When you say yes to an author’s vision, you are entering into a marriage of minds.”

He goes on, “The test of a book lies in its power to map or transform a life. The question we would ultimately ask of any work of art is this: Can you live it?... Works of art matter to the degree that they can help people “unfold their promise.” Books should be called major and become canonical when over time they provide existing individuals with life options that will help them change for the better.”

What we choose to read is a highly personal. I first constructed my own Canon in 2004 and have updated it periodically. I will spend a few minutes on my current selections and they may give you an idea of what your own canon may look like. Guidelines for constructing a canon are on the website: <http://www.cell2soul.typepad.com/humanemedicine> .

1. **The poems of Emily Dickenson** have inspired me for scores of years. Her insights are a source of continual wonder and admiration. I keep discovering new gems all the time. In this poem, she articulates what we do when we formulate our own personal canon.

The soul selects her own Society --

Then -- shuts the door --

On her divine Majority --

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Present no more --

Unmoved -- she notes the Chariots -- pausing --

At her low Gate --

Unmoved -- an Emperor be kneeling

Upon her Mat --

I've known her -- from an ample nation --

Choose One --

Then -- close the Valves of her attention --

Like stone --

On medicine, I find this quatrain simply brilliant. One can use it as a mantra when taking a bx or doing an excision.

Surgeons must be very careful

When they take the knife!

Underneath their fine incisions

Stirs the Culprit - Life!

2. **Cushing's Life of Osler** is a monumental masterpiece that won the Pulitzer Prize in 1926. Think of it – the world's preeminent neurosurgeon of his time, puts out a huge tome on his favourite mentor and earns the most prestigious literature prize in the U.S.

Tackling Cushing's Life of Osler is an undertaking – but one I found fascinating and rewarding. I've posted many quotes from this book on my website – You can find most of your favourite Osler quotes there. One must bind passages like these as phylacteries to one's forehead when one enters the clinic. Quotes...

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3. **Viktor Frankel's Man's Search for Meaning** was written in 1945 over a period of "nine successive days after the author's liberation from Auschwitz with the firm determination that the book would be published anonymously." It was first issued in 1946 under the title: *Ein Psycholog erbelt das Konzentrationslager*) – According to a survey conducted by the Book-of-the-Month Club and the Library of Congress, Man's Search For Meaning belongs to a list of "the ten most influential books in [the United States.]" At the time of the author's death in 1997, it had sold 10 million copies and been translated into twenty-four languages.

Nietzches' words....

The central theme –

It is important to me to reread this book every few years. Frankl lived through hell and distilled the experience into a few pages that, to use Osler's words, can give one the "Courage and cheerfulness [that] will not only carry you over the rough places of life, but will enable you to bring comfort and help to the weak-hearted, and will console you in the sad hours when, like Uncle Toby, you have 'to whistle that you may not weep'."

4. **Ivan Illich: Medical Nemesis** is one of the first modern books to inform the public about the juggernaut that is the Health Care System. The thesis is stated early in the book: "The greatest threat to the health of the commonweal is the medical profession. It is humbling to read Medical Nemesis and surprisingly much of the criticism of today's US health care system one reads nowadays is foretold this remarkable book. I think Canadian physicians, as well, will find this volume important.

Quotes,

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5. **Francis Weld Peabody's The Care of the Patient** is the most cited article in the medical literature. This is even more surprising in that it deals with the humane aspects of medicine and not science. Peabody presages Robertson Davie's quote, "Medicine needs more humanism and less science." All care providers would benefit from reading and rereading this essay every few years. It is especially important for medical students and trainees. It used to be on the web - but not any longer. I had a student type it out a few years back and you can find it on the Cell 2 Soul Website.

6. **Middlemarch by George Eliot** is arguably the finest novel in the English language. It takes a bit of discipline to wade through this but is brilliant, captivating, memorable. Middlemarch presents a vast panorama of life in a provincial Midlands town. The protagonist is Dorothea Brooke is an idealist and a humanitarian. In a parallel story, Eliot brings us young doctor Tertius Lydgate, who is equally naïve and impractical. He falls in love with a pretty but superficial woman, whom he marries to his ruin. Eliot's characters are drawn from every social class, forming a rich and detailed portrait of English provincial life in the 1830s. Dorothea and Lydgate's struggles to retain their integrity in the midst of temptation and tragedy remind us of a world very much like our own.

How many of us as physicians once felt as Lydgate when he said:

"Apropos of what you said about wearing harness, I made up my mind some time ago to do with as little of it as possible. That was why I determined not to try anything in London, for a good many years. I didn't like what I saw when I was studying there--so much empty bigwiggism, and trickery. In the country, people

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have less pretension.

In the Finale to Middlemarch, Eliot gives us an aside which holds for all great novels. “Who can quit young lives after being long in company with them, and not desire to know what befell them in their after-years? For the fragment of a life, however typical, is not the sample of an even web: promises may not be kept, and an ardent outset may be followed by declension; latent powers may find their long-awaited opportunity; a past error may urge a grand retrieval. This is how we feel when we finish Middlemarch or those few other books which reach its heights.

7. Dr. Steven Hsi’s Closing the Chart is the story of a FP who at age 40, when most physicians are just hitting their professional stride, was diagnosed with Takayasu's arteritis--a rare, poorly understood multisystem disease that mainly targets the aorta. At that moment, he entered a parallel universe as a patient with a major serious illness. Over the next four years, he chronicled his life as the disease and the effects of three cardiac surgeries and numerous drugs played themselves out. After his death in 1997 at age 44, his wife discovered her husband’s extensive illness narrative journals. She and a journalist friend of his fashioned these notes into a remarkable book as a tribute to Dr. Hsi--a true labor of love. **This book will inspire and educate any physician or care-giver who reads it.**

Slide quote: There is a place in our busy lives etc...

8. For the sake of this canon, I have included a film, **Wit, starring Emma Thompson.** Movies are a great way to stimulate us to think about our lives, our patients and our profession. In some ways they have their limitations, but many are memorable and I suspect we will see more canonical cinema in the future.

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Keep in mind that “talkies” are less than 100 years old. What if the written word were this nubile.

The conceit of the play and movie *Wit* is Donne’s deathless death sonnet:

Death be not proud, though some have called thee mighty

””

From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,

Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,

And soonest our best men with thee do go,

Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.

Thaou are slave of Fate

Poignantly, “Death Be Not Proud” is the title of one of the earliest and most memorable pathographies, written by the newsman, John Gunther, about his teenage son’s struggle with a malignant brain tumour.

I’ve been fooling around with a medical movie blog – MedFlix – take a look if you have a chance and let me know what films you’d like to see included. This is a NFB of Canada documentary of a Toronto-based physician.

9. The New York Times is more than a paper serving Gotham and its inhabitants. More than a few times a week, I find articles that educate and inspire me. Perhaps, The Times, as we call it in the States, is not a periodical – rather it is an addiction. It’s sections (see slide) are worth scanning and this can be done in a few minutes a day to enable culling. Even if you are at the edges of the world, you can log in and be edified, educated and enthused. Here are two recent pieces (among many) that are of value to us personally and professionally.

And a wonderful piece by a med student about the nature of care giving. Her essay

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in essence starts with Peabody and takes it further. In some ways this short piece is canonical.

10. The Essential Haiku by Robert Hass. There are times when one wants to curl up with a novel of 1000 pages and lose one's self in another world. Eliot, Dickens, Hugo, Murasaki are all excellent escapes – and there are artists who excel in the minimal – such are the haiku masters. Three stand out as paragons -- Basho, Buson and Issa. Robert Hass has done a masterful job of translating some of the best of these. This anthology is well worth having in one's library and referring to occasionally. **Dai Ichi (the number One)** haiku master is Basho. About haiku, he wrote: “Don't follow in the footsteps of the old poets, seek what they sought.

Make the universe your companion, always bearing in mind the true nature of things – mountains and rivers, trees and grasses, and humanity – and enjoy the falling blossoms and the scattering leaves.

Don't imitate me –

It's as boring as

Two halves of a melon.

**And this is key, because each of us will create his or her own personal canon:
the bedrock for the Athens of your Soul.**

**Pursuing this dream you will feel like the young John Keats when he
discovered Chapman's Homer –**

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**Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes.
That is what I hope we achieve this month.**

References:

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