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Nancy Jolly
Boerne, Texas

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ADULT READING PLANS: ENJOYMENT, ENRICHMENT AND INQUIRY

Nancy Jolly

READING TEACHER
MIDDLE SCHOOL, BOERNE, TEXAS

Purposeful reading can ennoble and expand any person's life and serve as a constant problem-solving device. Most adult Americans, however, do not read either regularly or purposefully. Book sales are higher than ever but only ten percent of the population reads eighty percent of the books. Robert Karlin, in *Teaching Reading in High School*, cites a poll of adults which reveals that 79 percent "had not read a book within the past month."

Although many adults realize that vocational competence—"keeping up" and "getting ahead" on the job—requires reading, too many of us fail to turn to reading for other needs. Thousands of perplexing questions face us as consumers and voters. Retirement, use of leisure time, and the search for meaning also present problems or the need for knowledge. Reading can provide answers and unlimited enjoyment.

Consumerism

Health, safety, and pocketbooks are often at stake as we make choices in a marketplace which has become a jungle of products and services. The government attempts to protect the consumer with a host of regulations. Can we expect the state—in a free society—to shield us from the cradle to the mortuary? We must learn more about the products and services we buy.

Libraries, bookstores, and newsstands overflow with consumer literature concerning nutrition, taxes, insurance, housing, the automotive industry, appliances, and so forth. Market magazines such as *Consumer Reports* give the pros and cons of specific products with brand names usually included. General interest publications offer many "how-to-choose-it" articles and, ironically, "how-to-fix-it" advice. Books on marketing in general abound: Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders*, McKay, 1957, is a basic for those who would understand advertising and its effects upon us.

Government agencies publish a wealth of free or inexpensive brochures about everything from keeping the basement dry to selecting amiable pets. A request sent to the Consumer Information Center, Pueblo, Colorado 81009, will bring a lengthy list of selections and an order form.

Consumer knowledge doesn't require a lifetime of study to begin to pay. Bits and pieces of information—gathered as needs arise or are foreseen—soon add up to responsible and money-saving action.

Government

Two centuries ago Benjamin Franklin was stopped as he left a meeting

at Carpenter's Hall, Philadelphia, and asked what kind of government the new nation would have. "A republic," he replied, adding, "if you can keep it."

The warning is no less meaningful 200 years later. It is the freedom of speech and the free flow of information that preserves our society and other freedoms. The Founding Fathers safeguarded this basic freedom (which includes the right to read what we choose) through the First Amendment to the Bill of Rights. The Supreme Court has called the First Amendment "the master matrix of liberties."

We must be aware of issues and events in order to "keep" Franklin's republic — knowledge must precede action at the ballot box or in the political sphere. Many of us, however, receive too little news; we rely too heavily on encapsulated broadcast news. Newspapers and magazines offer broader and more in-depth coverage of events.

Often, however, we have difficulty interpreting the news. Understanding what we read in newspapers must begin with the use of critical reading skills, the basis of which is the separation of fact from opinion. Too many of us believe that anything in print is a fact. We fail to examine who wrote it, who said it before that, and their motivations, if any. As one experienced newsman put it, "The validity of any news story is its source." It is only through sharpening our ability to "read between the lines" — critical reading — that rhetoric can be weeded from reality.

Many people suffer from a basic misconception about the meaning and nature of news itself. Many readers become discouraged, fearful, and disgusted when all the news is bad. We fail to remember that, in most instances, good news is not news. "The news is not the norm," explained an editor. "The news is the odd and the unusual, and most of the time good things are the normal occurrences." He added that he'd hate to live in a world in which the reverse was true: Headlines might read, "No Children Kidnapped Today."

Basically, newspapers give us immediate history, what newsmen call the "Four W's": What happened, Who made it happen, Where it happened, and Why it happened. As we learn to read newspapers, we can begin to speculate about the future, or what *might* happen. It is then that we can turn our critical reading into power by defining our individual part — our action — in preserving Franklin's republic.

Retirement

Old age is no longer defined by decrepitude. As life expectancy grows, the length of service in the labor market is shortened. We are being asked, feeble or not, to step down earlier and earlier to make room for the young. Many government agencies offer retirement after twenty years of work; retirees in their forties are not unusual. Young adults can expect to spend more time out of the "mainstream" than in it.

Few want to "sit on the shelf," and yet few plan for later years. Purposeful reading can be used to map out the future or to fill it. General suggestions for retirement can be found in such books as Dr. Joseph H. Peck's *Let's Rejoin the Human Race*, Prentice-Hall, 1963.

Many have developed hobbies into second vocations through reading and practice. A local dentist with an interest in furniture refinishing opened a small garage-type shop upon retiring; he said that he found *Restoring Junk* by Suzanne Beedell, McDonald, 1971, both useful and amusing. Help with such undertakings is as close as the library: Texts like *Resources for the Aging, An Action Handbook*, published by the Office of Economic Opportunity, give sources for loans and other aid.

Travel—planned by many for their later years—can take on greater meaning and enjoyment through prior reading. General travel books such as *Mexico*, Rand McNally, 1969, will insure that the most interesting sites are put on a trip itinerary. Fiction or biography set in other countries, however, can make a new culture more understandable. Elizabeth B. Trevino, for example, describes the customs and traditions she encountered when she married a Mexican in *My Heart Lies South*, Crowell, 1953.

Reading and learning in themselves can fill years that might easily become a time for stagnation. Everyone has some interest that could be pursued, and many universities offer reduced-price tuition to older persons. Stay-at-homes or those planning for the future might consider correspondence study: The National University Extension Association prints a complete list of accredited programs in *The Guide to Independent Study Through Correspondence Instruction*, available at One Dupont Circle, Washington, D.C.

Leisure

The eight-hour day is the shortest in history, and experiments with the length of the work week are providing even longer periods of free time. Self-improvement courses and books proliferate as we attempt to fill our leisure hours both pleasantly and constructively. Books such as Maxwell Maltz's *Creative Living for Today*, Essandress, 1976, offer positive suggestions. Bookworms have no problems: Reading is not only enjoyable in itself but a door into new or expanded undertakings. And, thanks to Benjamin Franklin's "invention" of the public library, reading is the least expensive leisure activity around. It's free.

Any interest can be enriched through reading. Sports fans might be weaned from their televisions with Lee Allen's *The National League Story*, Hill, 1965. Crossword puzzle addicts, for example, will find the beginnings of their "sport" detailed in Roger Millington's *Crossword Puzzles, Their History and Their Cult*, Pocket Books, 1977. Special-interest magazines are almost without number; there's even one for people who like spotted horses: *Appaloosa News*, Box 403, Moscow, Idaho.

Those who enjoy crafts or hobbies will find their pursuits and skills growing as they read about them. Lynn and Joel Rapp tell how to *Grow with Your Plants*, Bantam, 1976. Wood sculptors can carve out leisure time and find new ideas in *Ben Hunt's Whittling*, Bruce, 1959. Many of these books make pleasant reading even if one is not involved in the specific pursuit.

Pleasure reading *per se* is often the last time-filler on most people's list of leisure activities. Many of us fail to look for reading material that relates

to our interests or problems. Related to our own unique concerns, reading becomes as fascinating—or more so—than a television show or a movie.

Like Victorian grandmothers, some people condemn the reading of fiction as a non-constructive activity. Even less-than-classic novels and short stories offer something. In the science-fiction series, *Nebula Award Stories*, for example, (Berkley) editors such as Isaac Asimov discuss the scientific basis of the tales. A noted scientist and writer himself, Asimov says that his interest in science began when he read “pulp” magazines that brought frowns from his elders.

Taste in fiction is said to grow as we read more and more of it and become more and more adept at judging the reality of the settings, characters, and plots. Fiction is an art, of course, and the reading of it is a hobby akin to visiting picture galleries or going to concerts. Reading “classic” fiction needs no defending: Probing individual authors or periods of writing can become an art in itself.

Personal Meaning

Millions are troubled and seeking meaning in their lives. Reading can help. Fiction gives us characters, problems, and value systems to consider, to accept or reject. Relating these ideas to our own lives and problems—bibliotherapy—can help us see and know ourselves. In addition to triggering introspection, reading is a relaxing activity. Those seeking structured solutions or discussions of the problems that seem to face us all might profit from modern philosophers such as Erich Fromm, whose book *Man for Himself*, Fawcett, 1947, attempts to explain existence in up-to-date terms.

Why Don't We Read?

The answers to many of the questions we ask as adults can be approached—if not completely found—through purposeful reading. And yet most adults continue to leave the handiest and most pleasant source of enlightenment—books—untouched. Why?

Unfortunately, many of us were “turned off” in school by being forced literature that was above our instructional and maturational levels. Reading for personal meaning was not stressed. Solving individual problems or answering our own questions through books was overlooked.

Print saturation—“Too Much Too Fast”—afflicted us in high school and college. We came to believe we could learn all there was to know about Shakespeare or geology in one or two semesters. Overdependence on the vocational necessities of higher education led us to forget the value of a liberal arts education, and we never learned that reading—which is its foundation—is a lifetime pursuit.

First and foremost, we forgot that reading is “fun.” We put that fundamental in the attic and let it grow dusty along with other childish things such as the insatiable curiosity and wonder of youth that makes reading so rewarding.

What Should We Read?

Reading matter should be chosen for *pleasure*. A second criterion might

be problem-solving. If the two mix, so much the better. Either way, we'll be motivated to dip into our book selections.

Dutiful or medicinal attitudes toward reading should be forgotten while we give away all those books someone else said we SHOULD read. Sets of *The Harvard Classics* or poetry anthologies received as gifts make handsome decorative objects but they are rarely read, regardless of their worth. Most of us have too many duties to turn reading into one of them. Books chosen that bore or fail to live up to their covers should also be abandoned: One of the least lauded prerogatives of adulthood is the freedom not to finish "the whole thing."

There are books that exist that purport to be "reading plans" and will tell us at least 500 titles that every "educated" person should read. The mere length of such lists would discourage most people. It is best to follow our natural interests, pleasures, and problems in selecting reading material and forming a loose reading plan.

Habits, the behaviorists say, are built on the positive reinforcement which follows the directed action. In other words, if we make books a source of enjoyment, we'll continue to read more of them. Purposeful reading builds upon itself and will become even more purposeful or specific as it grows. One reader, for example, might begin by looking for interesting books about history and then find himself specializing at a later date in a particular period.

Reading with purpose shapes our lives and experiences. We must use actual experience in order to read at all. Basic concepts such as color, sound, and smell must begin with reality, and they are built from early childhood. As we read we broaden these concepts, coloring them and giving them individual connotations or meanings from our own lives and our reading. A novel read by 1,000 persons is 1,000 somewhat different and separate experiences. At some point, reading and reality merge: What we read shapes our expectations and our actions; reality—what we experience determines our choice of reading matter.

An Individual Choice

Just as each of us is completely unique as a person, each of our reading plans or choice of books will be different and individually our own. One man's "poison" may be another man's joy. A staid high school principal, for example, read everything he could find about tiger hunting in India. A bat flew out of my attic one day, and "bat" went on my reading list. Silly? Perhaps. I found myself traveling from the encyclopedia entry on "bats" to Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle* as an interest in animal behavior grew. Although Darwin is on many of those forbidding lists of "must" reading, I would never have taken him up if I had not "followed my own nose."

There is an accidental and mysterious nature to reading that is not unlike natural selection. A mis-shelved book—a biography found in the fiction, for example—can spark a new interest. A quote in one book can lead to a new author. As interests and problems change, reading plans change. The excitement of the "hunt" also enters into it as we seek special or hard-to-find materials through book clubs, university libraries (most

offer special cards for non-students), and inter-library loan. The latter will bring any book or piece of written material IN THE NATION right to your local library.

Anyone can begin purposeful reading and form a loose plan for it by setting the very limited goal of providing himself with plenty of reading material that is truly INTERESTING TO HIM. The only action necessary is a trip to the library every so often, occasional bookstore and newsstand browsing, and one small notebook. The notebook is for jotting down ideas, authors, titles, and questions as they arise and before they are forgotten.

Many people find it interesting to pursue several subjects at once, selecting one or two novels, a hobby book, and something pertaining to another interest or problem. With such a start, reading WILL GROW. Such a start IS a purposeful reading plan.