

Good books: inoculations against despair and cynicism

Rich Heffern | Aug. 26, 2009 NCR Today

When life has become too complicated, when things are just too much, go borrow a good book from the nearest child. Or, better, revive that fine old custom of sitting down of an evening to read to children. Know for a short time once again the astonishment of being.

"Childhood is not something which dies within us and dries up as soon as it has completed its cycle," philosopher Franz Hellens wrote. "It is not a memory. It is the most living of treasures and it continues to enrich us without our knowing it." Adults need to curl up with a good tale as much as any child. Good reading can foster and restore in us and in our children a hope-filled approach to living. The encounter of one imagination with another can "purge from our inward sight," says the poet Shelley, "the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being." Good books remind us of the riches we already possess: the ability to see beauty everywhere, the capacity for awe and for compassion, for taking joy and delight in the simplest things.

Early in the famous children's book *The Wind in the Willows* Mole emerges from his underground life and ventures forth into the wide world. Right away he discovers the river. Never in his life had he seen one before. Meandering aimlessly along its banks he is bewitched, entranced, enchanted completely by this new thing. The author Kenneth Grahame writes a fitting tribute to all imaginative literature:

"By the side of the river he trotted as one trots, when very small, by the side of a man who holds one spellbound by exciting stories; and when tired at last, he sat on the bank, while the river chattered on to him, a babbling procession of the best stories in the world, sent from the heart of the earth to be told at last to the insatiable sea."

Essayist Lance Morrow recalls a difficult time in his life when he was recovering from major heart surgery. He got himself through the arduous convalescence and readjustment by plowing through Shelby Foote's three-volume history of the Civil War. A woman close to him, he recalls, lost her son by drowning the night of his high school graduation. She endured through weeks and months after this tragic loss by reading the works of Willa Cather. The calm and clarity of Cather's prose stabilized the woman and helped her through the darkest days and nights.

Reading can keep us sane and full of heart. Good books put us in genuine touch with other imaginations and intelligences. They are inoculations against despair and cynicism. With a good book under our arm or perched on our nightstand at home, we can probably rest assured we'll always be ready and able to soak up grace and spirit wherever they are found.

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