

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Read Widely, Wisely, and Well

by Dr. Mike Armour

In one of his storied political debates, Abraham Lincoln made a telling criticism of his opponent. Lincoln said the man reminded him of a steamboat he once saw on the Mississippi. According to Lincoln, the boat had a three-foot boiler and a five-foot whistle. And every time it blew its whistle, it stopped.

Lincoln found an unforgettable image for describing someone who offers so little substance that they quickly exhaust it.

His comments remind me of a similar comparison from the Middle Ages. A noted writers of that era described many preachers as like water spigots: They quickly pour out everything they hold and must be refilled before they can offer anything more, he lamented.

Others, he said, preach like a great reservoir, full and deep. They speak from the "overflow." What they share with their audience does not seem to diminish their reservoir in the least.

None of us wants to be known as a steamboat with a three-foot boiler and a five-foot whistle. We would like to think of ourselves as people of substance. We prefer to be a reservoir, full and deep. But how do we get there?

Did It Stretch You?

During my first year of graduate study I had a professor who spoke often about building the reservoir. He was a member of my thesis committee, so we spent hours together. And as a teaching assistant, I had an office four doors down from him, which meant that we visited several times a week.

He had a tireless mantra: "Read wisely, widely, and well." He repeated it over and over in class. And when he became part of my committee, I discovered how deeply he was committed to this principle.

As I was sitting in his office one day, my briefcase beside his desk, he reached down, opened the case, and took out the books inside. Thumbing through the first one, he asked, "How long have you had this book checked out of the library?"

"Two weeks," I replied.

"And has anything in it stretched you to the point that it made you uncomfortable?" he queried. "Has anything in it forced you to rethink basic assumptions about life and values? Is there anything in it so new and different that you've had to re-read a passage several times to make sure you understand it?"

"No, I can't think of anything like that," I answered.

He promptly opened his desk drawer, tossed the book inside, and closed the drawer.

"What are you doing?" I asked incredulously. "I'm going to take the book back to the library and check it in for you," he replied.

"But I'm enjoying the book," I protested.

"No," he retorted, "you're wasting your time. You've spent two weeks on a book that has given you some enjoyment and maybe a bit of information, but it hasn't changed you in the least. You don't have time for books like that."

You Can't Read Them All

He then ensconced himself as the referee for what books I would read and not read over the next year. I chafed under the experience. Yet looking back, I realize the wisdom of what he was doing.

"There are several million books in the university library," he would note. "You can't read them all. So focus on reading that will make you stronger, broader, and deeper." Read widely, wisely, and well.

I never gave up "fluff" reading, even under his watchful eye and strict tutelage. And I still enjoy light reading. But I've never forgotten his mantra.

Read widely. Get outside your discipline, your special interests, the "how-to" books of your profession. Be curious about other arenas of human endeavor. I'm continually amazed at how many times an idea from one subject cross-fertilizes with ideas I discover in a seemingly unrelated field. This cross-fertilization makes it easier to "think outside the box" and to develop a truly global perspective on issues.

Read wisely. There's a place for light reading, for reading as entertainment, whether from the bookshelf, the morning paper, or the internet. But keep asking yourself the professor's blunt, unrelenting question. Is your reading stretching you? Challenging you? Making you genuinely broader in your outlook and deeper in your substance?

Read well. Follow the writings of people who use language magnificently, imaginatively. Fill your mind with great models of effective communication. No matter how deep your reservoir, people are unlikely to notice unless you communicate well. So learn from master communicators. Notice how they engage you. How they make their thoughts clear. How they lead you to compelling conclusions.

More Books Than Ever

The rise of the internet and media was supposed to mark the end of book publishing. But the explosion of mega-bookstores in recent years, plus the on-line success of Amazon.com, suggests that we will continue producing new books by the thousands. So when it comes to reading, you have unprecedented variety to choose from. Read widely. Read wisely. Read well.

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