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Cultivate the Art of Thinking - By Reading (September–October 1972)

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Editor's note: Dr. Howard Hendricks is Chairman of Christian Education at Dallas, Texas. He certainly provokes serious thinking, and by this article stimulates careful reading.

NOTHING is as easy as thinking.

And nothing is as difficult as thinking well.

Thinking well may be profitable, but if it is, it is always painful. There is a price tag to thinking well.

I saw a sign in a businessman's office some time ago which jarred me. It said, "You are not what you think you are. What you think, you are." I was reminded of Proverbs 23:7, "For as he thinketh in heart, so is he

Thinking is always dangerous unless it is under the direction of the Spirit of God. Then it is eminently profitable. Philippians 4:8 says, "Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

Thinking has nothing to do with age, but it has everything to do with attitude. There is an epitaph that says, "Died - age 28. Buried - age 64." Unfortunately, that is the story of too many lives.

I have a lady friend who is 86 years old. Some time ago both of us were at a social gathering. When she spotted

me the first thing she said was, "Well, what are the five best books you've read in the last months?"

After a little conversation, she said, "Look, let's not bore one another with each other. Let's get into a discussion. And if we can't find anything to discuss, let's get into an argument." There she is - 86 years old and still thinking strong.

Her first question was about reading. And in my judgment, one of the most crucial means of stretching your mind is through the process of reading.

Readers are leaders. And leaders are readers.

The mind is like a muscle. It develops with use. You won't wear it out. No one ever dies with a brain that has been totally used. That will never happen. Though you do need to constantly stretch your mind, be careful what you feed it, because what you feed it will largely determine what you are.

Perhaps you don't have a formal education. You can get the most profound education that is possible to get . . . simply by reading. By reading you can pick the greatest minds of all the centuries.

Here are some tips on how to cultivate the art of thinking by reading:

Read Widely and Wisely

Everything in print is not worth reading, even in the Christian bookstores. Read as widely as possible, because this is the way to stretch your mind.

I read books that I don't agree with, for example. If an author does not stretch my thinking, he doesn't really help me much.

We tend to read the books that confirm our prejudices because we are such insecure people. That's why most of us are not thinking. We are just rearranging our prejudices.

Most of us do too much post hole thinking. That is, we dig down to deeply in one direction instead of moving over and digging another hole, getting another tangent of thought, another perspective. What I do, for example, when I'm studying the Scriptures is to dig another hole from another viewpoint. I imagine myself as a doctor when reading a particular passage in Luke, then I get the perspective of a medical man.

How to Choose Good Books

First, I always pick books primarily on the basis of the author. A significant author generally produces a significant book.

Second, I look for a book which has been on the market a sufficient period of time to prove its value. If a book has been around for awhile (and not just because it happens to be a book on sex or some sensational subject), then it tends to have quality. My primary sources are Time, Atlantic Monthly, Harper's Magazine and the Saturday Review.

An example of a book that has survived the fads of the moment is Herman Howe [?] Horne's Teaching Techniques of Jesus. It goes back into the early 1900's. It is still in print and it ought to be. It is a classic. For Christian leaders it is "must" reading, because it deals with the whole process of how Jesus trained His disciples.

Third, I read books which are out of my particular realm. Books out of my field. Right now I'm reading a book on architecture that is absolutely fascinating. I just finished one on ornithology, the study of birds. This is the kind of thing that gives you all sorts of enriching material, conversational and illustrative material. It can make you a more interesting person.

Learn to Read Faster

I read three books every week for a minimum and 35 journals every month. The only way you can do this is by learning to read better and faster.

If you don't read better and faster, then you're just going to have to settle for limited objectives. Norman Lewis' paperback How to Read Better and Faster will help your reading habits.

Learning to read faster is simply a process of discipline, nothing more or less. If you read faster, you will retain more. Many people think that if they slow down, they will retain more. Nothing could be further from the truth. The truth is that if you speed up your reading, you will retain more.

If it takes you 30 minutes to read a book of the New Testament and you retain 'x' amount. By learning to read better and faster, you can read the same book in 15 minutes and retain twice as much. That means that for the same amount of time you can get four times as much out of your reading.

Become a "Snatch" Reader

I have reading material all over the house. When I have ten minutes here or there, I pull down the book and read. I do lots of reading at airports and on airplanes.

Try "In-Depth" Reading

Some men develop the practice of reading quite a number of books (maybe 20 or 30) on the same subject for a period of time. This is effective. It gives you depth and breadth in a specific field that you don't get with the more scattered, wider type of reading.

My goal is to spend one hour daily reading and studying the Word. I spend one month per book and cover in depth twelve books of the Bible per year. I've been through the Bible like this about seven times in my life. I set this goal early in my ministry, for I wanted to be a minister of the Word of God.

Some Books are to be Reread

You may reread some books, but they are rare ones. Sometimes you simply can't get it all in one reading. And furthermore, you may not get all of it at your level of maturity. If you read the same book ten years from now, you get an altogether different perspective.

One book I've reread is John Milton Gregory's The Seven Laws of Teaching. It was written in the last century.

If men in the teaching field were to read this book annually, they'd never teach the same way again. I've been teaching in seminary for 21 years and have read that book every single year.

As Sir Francis Bacon said, "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and

digested." Start reading more to cultivate the art of thinking.