
PERSPECTIVE

Earl Palmer

I won't soon forget my Princeton Seminary senior-class dinner. The speaker was George Buttrick, pastor of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. He challenged our group of future pastors in two directions.

First, he urged us to be with the people, listening in the marketplace to know and understand people's thoughts and feelings. But his second counsel seemed to contradict the first: "When you're on Coney Island, don't tell the people of the concessions on the boardwalk about which they know—tell them of the mystery of the sea, about which they know not."

He went on: "Don't read only what your people are reading. Read what your people are not reading."

Buttrick impressed upon us the importance of cultivating a mind that is alive. In addition to being physically well and spiritually committed, we need to grow intellectually if we're to be effective Christians in the world. We need to learn the mystery of the sea so we can explain that mystery to others.

There are many ways to keep the mind alive, but I think Buttrick was right to emphasize reading. The desire to read raises questions, however. First, how can I find time to read about the mystery of the sea when I have so many important responsibilities among the boardwalk concessions? Second, when I've found the time, what should I read?

So Who Has Time to Read?

Each of us has been given the gift of time and the privilege of organizing it. But this gift has some snares, espe-

cially for those who aren't self-starters or who allow the hours of the week to become a jumble of low-quality segments.

The first challenge confronting the person who wants to study and read seriously is to have a clear philosophy of the week. The key to the

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philosophy? Rhythm.

To have quality time for my family, spiritual formation, work, reading, ministry to people, writing, and recreation is to have a rhythm for each week. I must think primarily in terms of seven-day periods rather than years, months, or days. It's no mistake that the seven-day week is the most basic biblical yardstick for life measurement. "Six days thou shalt work, and one day thou shalt rest." It's a rhythmic week that the fourth commandment describes.

Furthermore, I can survive high-intensity demands if there is also opportunity for a respite from those demands. And I'll enjoy my rest if it follows real work. The rhythmic contrasts such as fast-slow, many-few, rich-lean, exterior-interior, time to keep the body healthy-time to keep

the mind alive are necessary and make all the difference.

For the second question—What shall I read?—the rhythm principle also applies. I want to read intensively and extensively, light and heavy, prose and poetry, theology and geology, the Bible and other works. I want to read and be read to.

While electronic media, TV, and film play an increasingly influential part in human communication, they can't replace books. When it comes to image building within that greatest of all collectors of dreams and ideas—the human mind—there is still nothing to match a book read aloud.

In *The Silver Chair*, C.S. Lewis describes Jill's encounter with the lion Aslan: "The voice was not like a man's. It was deeper, wilder, and stronger; a sort of heavy, golden voice. I did not make her any less frightened than she had been before, but it made her frightened in rather a different way." No television or computer screen could capture the vast features of that golden lion quite so wonderfully as the human imagination set in motion by Lewis' words.

There are several authors with whom I have developed a special sort of friendship (of course they don't know me, but I know them). I'm trying to read everything they have written. They aren't masters of my mind because I don't always agree with what they write; they're more like companions who especially challenge me and encourage my pilgrimage as a Christian. They're my mentors. I feel I understand how they think and how they approach the serious question. Not only do I read their works, I reread them. They describe the mystery of the sea.

The following books (after the Bible) and authors have had the most influence in my intellectual and spiritual journey:

Books

- *Pensées*, Blaise Pascal. Herein lies the sheer thrill of a mind alive to the relevance of Jesus Christ.
- *Institutes*, John Calvin. An impressive and exciting grasp of the large outline of the gospel's meaning.
- *Lectures on Romans*, Martin Luther. As fresh and electric today as in the 16th century.
- *The Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien. How can anyone miss out on the adventures of Frodo and Sam Gamgee?

Authors

- Karl Barth. Begin with *Dogmatics in Outline*. I deeply appreciate his boldness and serious intention to hear and obey the biblical text. He is the theologian's theologian.
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Begin with *Cost of Discipleship*. He called out to me to decide, once and for all, what matters most in my life.
- C.S. Lewis. Begin with *The Chronicles of Narnia*. I owe so much to C.S. Lewis, especially my understanding of the wonderful mixture of God's goodness and sense of surprise.
- G.K. Chesterton. Begin with *The Everlasting Man* and *Orthodoxy*. I love his humor and ability to stir up my imagination.



"This concludes this week's discussion on free will."

- Helmut Thielicke. Begin with *How the World Began*. I learned about preaching from Thielicke.
- Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Boris Pasternak, Alexander Solzhenitsyn. These Russian writers have stirred me emotionally and spiritually more than all other novelists.
- T. S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, Robert Frost. These poets have given me a deep respect for words.
- Mark Twain and Robert Benchley employ rich humor and have unique insight into personality.
- Paul Tournier possesses great psychological wisdom and evenhandedness. Try to find his book *Secrets*.

The Best I've Read

- The greatest novels are *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, both by Dostoyevsky, and *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo.
- The most impressive recent novels are Herman Wouk's *Winds of War* and *War and Remembrance*.
- The most helpful book about the Christian faith is Karl Barth's *Dogmatics in Outline*.
- The most persuasive case for the Christian life is C.S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*.
- The most impressive biographies are *Karl Barth* by Eberhard Busch and *William Borden* by Mrs. Howard Taylor. ♦



Earl Palmer is pastor of University Presbyterian Church in Seattle.