

A Year of 15-Minute Daily Doses from the Harvard Classics – *Pursuing a liberal education with disciplined attention to Cicero, Swift, Hume and others on the 'five-foot shelf'**

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For years, I've had a set of the Harvard Classics in my study: 50 volumes of "great works" bound in faded green cloth -- the "Five-Foot Shelf," as the collection was called when it was first published in 1910. Our set was left to us by my husband's aunt. She acquired it secondhand during the Great Depression and willed it to us because we had a literary bent. It is unclear whether she ever looked at it. Despite our literary bent, we let it gather dust.

One day toward the end of 2013, however, I happened to peruse the slim volume titled "Reading Guide" tucked at the front of the set. I was immediately captivated by what was surely the most extravagant sales pitch for a set of books ever written. These volumes, wrote the editors, "meet every need, they entertain when no other book can, they exhilarate and they satisfy. They bring to you the rare pleasure of commingling with great minds, they feed your mind with stimulating thoughts, they turn your mind into fresh channels."

Following this general sales pitch was a more specific one. "In my opinion," pronounced the series' originator, Harvard's former President Charles W. Eliot, "a five-foot shelf would hold books enough to give a liberal education to anyone who would read them with devotion, even if he could spare but fifteen minutes a day for reading." The Guide then proceeded to offer a selection for each day of the year from among the 50 Harvard Classic volumes. Each selection would presumably take no more than 15 minutes to read.

Fifteen minutes a day of prescribed reading and a liberal education could be achieved! This was self-help I could respect.

Having long felt myself insufficiently educated (despite expensive and prolonged schooling), I was intrigued by Dr. Eliot's claim. As 2014 began, I determined to put it to the test. Now, as 2015 approaches, I can assess the result.

I discovered that a reading regimen, even if only 15 minutes a day, requires discipline. William James wrote that discipline is needed in the formation of any new habit. In this case, the habit was reading regularly and outside my comfort zone. I often had to fight against an inclination to skip a day. But the relative brevity of the selections kept me on track -- a hint to teachers who assign too much and thereby encourage cribbing and cramming. With a 15-minute assignment, I could push on, knowing that the end was near.

Some of the selections were hard to follow or lacked context. Even so, they generally yielded something of value. I did not understand Faraday's treatise on magnetism, but I could discern a method to his argument. I did not know what was transpiring in Act III of "The School for Scandal," but I could tell that Sheridan had wit.

The editors of the "Reading Guide" were working on the cusp of two worlds: the Victorian and the modern. They returned again and again to predictable classic texts. But they also excerpted repeatedly

from Darwin's work on evolution, and included selections from folk and fairy tales that reflected respect for populist culture.

I was most taken with the great essayists: Cicero and Marcus Aurelius, the Enlightenment philosophes, and the proto-bloggers of the 19th century such as Thomas Carlyle and J.S. Mill. These works, well suited to brief reading bytes, were models of critical reasoning, insight, cleverness and taste. Jonathan Swift's "Hints Toward an Essay on Conversation" clarified for me why I like to talk to some people and not to others.

I could see how many of the readings were intended to shape America's profile at the beginning of the 20th century. The assignments about exploration and conquest spoke to the country's emergence as a world power. I could trace the beginnings of an American canon. Some of the readings seemed strained in this regard, like the constitution-like "The Fundamental Orders of Connecticut," but some were superb: Washington's "Farewell Address," Poe's "The Poetic Principle," Thoreau's essay on walking. The absence of minority and regional voices was notable, although Emerson's "The American Scholar" and Whitman's Preface to "Leaves of Grass" anticipated a more inclusive future.

To read the canon of another time is to be attuned to omissions. The decision to leave out novels was not, to me, adequately explained in the series' Introduction. Marx and Freud, though culturally influential, were not part of the set. There were no contemporary non-Western readings, despite excerpts from the ancient Bhagavad-Gita, the Quran and Confucius. Perhaps most noteworthy was the absence of female writers except Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti.

Most of the big names were represented -- the major DWEMS (dead white European males), as they would be irreverently dubbed later in the century. Having spent the year in their company, I could see how their analytical and skeptical cast of mind had laid the ground for their deconstruction. I also saw the value of returning to them with renewed reverence.

One of the benefits of the regimen was to open me to authors I had never read before and inspire me to read more. I would definitely return to Hume, Voltaire and Burke. The passages from Dryden's translation of "The Aeneid" (I genuinely liked the rhyming couplets) were enticements to read the whole translation. I was so inspired by the excerpt from "Franklin's Autobiography," where Ben laid out a personal self-improvement plan (complete with charts), that I am contemplating imitating him. By the same token, I hope never to see again Richard Henry Dana's "Two Years Before the Mast," for some reason a favorite with the editors.

The year's readings began with Franklin's resolutions to improve his behavior. Looking ahead, I see they will end with Thomas Carlyle's call for diligent reading to create interest and direction in life. The American genius opened the cycle, the British one would close it. From forward- to backward-looking, from active to reflective, from youth, one could say, to age -- a worthwhile journey.

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