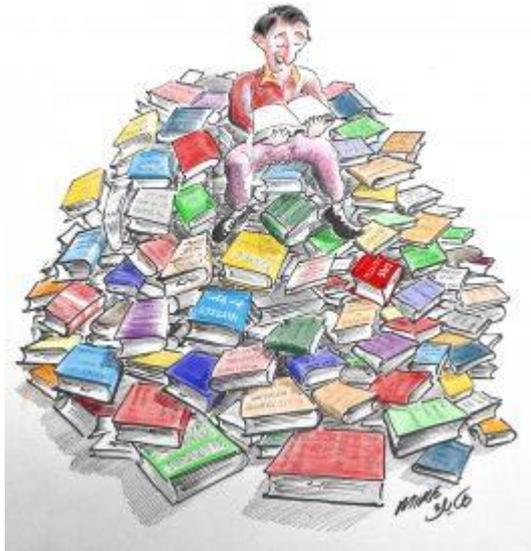


Insightful Reading: Benefits of Reading with Goodwill in a Hurried Age



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Repeatedly we are reminded about the importance of reading. There has been much research pointing to the benefits to physical *and* psychological health. **Sue Wilkinson**, CEO of *The Reading Agency*, notes that reading can help prevent conditions such as stress, depression:

“people who read for pleasure regularly report fewer feelings of stress and depression than non-readers. Large scale studies in the U.S. show that being more engaged with reading, along with other hobbies, is associated with a lower subsequent risk of incidents of dementia.”

A **recent survey** of 1,500 adult readers found that 76% of them said that reading improves their life and helps them feel good. **Josie Billington**, at the *Centre for*

Research Into Reading at the University of Liverpool, adds that it has also been shown to improve empathy and increase social support:

"In addition to enhancing willingness and ability to communicate with others, reading helps promote respect for and tolerance of others' views. "

"Readers find it easier to make decisions, plan, and prioritize, and this may be because they are more able to recognize that difficulty and setback are unavoidable aspects of human life."

The benefits of reading go beyond health and social issues. These benefits can also be a powerful tool for Leadership Development. Top entrepreneurs and key political figures make reading a major part of their daily lifestyle: **Warren Buffett, for instance, devotes about 80% of each day to reading. Bill Gates reads a book a week while Elon Musk, when asked how he learned to build rockets, he said "I read books"**.

Barrack Obama is also an avid reader and recalled in a **recent interview** that his interest in public service and politics merged with the idea of storytelling as it enabled him to "learn how to listen to people's stories" and "find what's sacred in other people's stories, then you'll be able to forge a relationship that lasts".

These intelligent readers are not just isolated examples. A **study of 1,200 wealthy people** found that they all have a dedication to reading in common. They do not just read anything. They are highly selective about what they read and prefer to be educated to being entertained or reading for killing time. They see books as a powerful gateway to learning and knowledge.

Indeed, when surveying what scholars and practitioners have to say about the benefits of reading for Leadership Development, we found that it can serve two functions. **At a personal level**, books can expand awareness of world around us and enhance our understanding of our own life. **At a society level**, they may help us in questioning the roles of our institutions and of those people who administer them and how we, individually and collectively, should find and create meaning for ourselves and our fellow humans. These are questions any worker, in any sector, face today. In summary, reading can:

- Sharpen intelligence and broaden perspectives
- Allow us to examine how people think, judge and act.
- Make people better communicators or conversationalists

- Improve emotional intelligence
- Expand mind and create a new path for self
- Enhance our thoughts and actions
- Build and deepen relationships through shared learning
- Give us (and our organisations) a sense of place in the expanse of human history
- Offer a lifelong learning toolbox to think about ourselves and the world

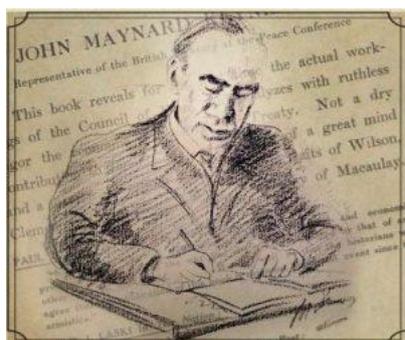
You are *how* you read

As important as acquiring a healthy habit of reading carefully selected books is attending to ***how we read them***. This is particularly key in times when ‘power-reading’ is highly promoted across the web (think about the many articles with tips on *how-to-read-so-many-books-a-day-or-week-or-year*) and when there is a growing attention-deficit disorder, making us more susceptible to information overload (often of fake news and half-truths).

So we may start to read more, but how well are we reading? And what is the reading *doing* for us?

Is it purportedly providing a list of quick-fix formulas or is it helping us think about our own thinking and the thinking of others?

At The Keynes Centre we work with a type of reading – and we actually extend the term ‘reading’ to other types of ‘texts’, including films – that is both ‘slow’ and ‘close’. We call it ***Reading with Goodwill***, following John Maynard Keynes who believed that:



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“A reader should acquire a wide general acquaintance with books as such, so to speak. He should approach them with all his senses; he should know their touch and their smell. He should learn how to take them in his hands, rustle their pages and reach in a few seconds a first intuitive impression of what they contain. He should, in the course of time, have touched many thousands, at least ten times as many as he really reads. He should cast

an eye over books as a shepherd over sheep, and judge them with the rapid, searching glance with which a cattle-dealer eyes cattle. He should live with more books than he reads, with a penumbra of unread pages, of which he knows the general character and content, fluttering round him..."

('On Reading Books', broadcast on the BBC Radio on 1 June 1936).

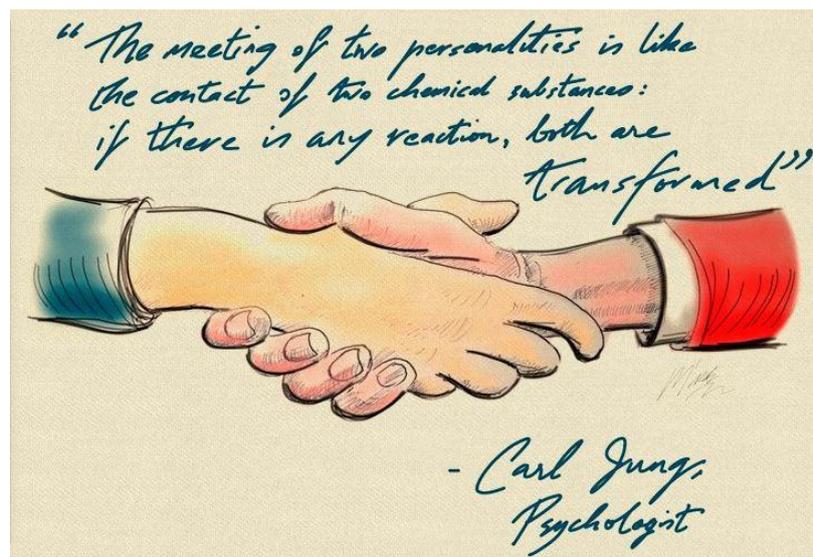
How to Read with Goodwill?

Reading with Goodwill requires entering in **two types of dialogue**: one with **yourself** and one with the **author**. A third type of dialogue, with peers, may come in when you are reading as part of a Reading circle or even a Book Club.

There are many ways of engaging in these two types of dialogue and one particular method we like is *Close Reading*.

Also called '*Close Analysis*' and '*Explication de texte*', this method is commonly associated with New Criticism within Literary Studies. It experienced great popularity in the period between 1930s and 1970s. For us, it should never go out of fashion.

Since then, there have been various debates ranging from its efficacy in meticulously analysing elementary features of a text to its failure in taking into account historical context. We will not get into these debates, but you can get a sense of these [here](#) and [here](#). Suffice it to say how we have been using *Close Reading* in our [Personal Professional Development](#) programmes:



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For us, *Close Reading* is more than a literary technique – it is an ***etiquette of reading***, an (ethical) attitude for engaging in a dialogue with yourself and with authors. It is a tool of *genuine* dialogue which has the below features:

- **Taking responsibility for the reading encounter** – understanding that both yourself and the author are ‘meaning-making systems’, i.e. you are both trying to make sense of the world
- **Slowing down the mind while reading** – read with a pen/pencil in hand, annotate, “break down the book”
- **Observing your reactions to the ideas as you engage with the thinking of the author** – use the power of journaling to capture and record these observations and the subsequent reflections and evaluations
- **Posing questions and working out answers** – this is a crucial way to *read to understand* (not read to ‘critically’ react to) an author’s point of view or argument – he/she might be working out their ideas – stay with him/her, be patient!
- **Practicing using the author’s ideas** – Once the author’s main ideas are *really* understood, you can decide whether you want to make them your own and use them for better thinking, judging and relating to other people

Ultimately, *Close Reading* is about attending to your own reading and thinking and discovering what happens when you think and engage with another ‘thinking’ being. You will then see that the learnings from your reading encounter translate to ‘the business of life’ as Virginia Woolf noted in her great book *A Room of One’s Own*:

“since a novel has this correspondence to real life, its values are to some extent those of real life”.

There is a truthfulness involved in reading with goodwill, or close/slow reading – a relationship of agreement, if only temporary for the duration of the reading experience, between the reader and the book– as we attend to both our reading and the author’s writing.

For this reason, in all of The Keynes Centre’s [programmes and experiences](#), we think of our approach to *Close Reading* in terms of a metaphor taken from the book of a friend, Garrett Barden, called *Towards Self-Meaning* (1969):

“If you are trying to teach someone how to drive a car there comes a point when you have to vacate the driving the seat and let the learner take your place. Eventually the

learner has to teach himself. Certainly he can profit from the hints that the experienced driver gives him, but in the end he must drive himself."

Our approach to *Close Reading*, then, is something like the hints the experienced driver can give.

Off you go driving...

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