



Connected Learning

Reading and Writing

September 7, 2020

This anthology has been prepared in draft form for use in a special seminar curriculum and are provided for private, non-commercial use in extraordinary times. Additional information about the seminar and this volume is available from The Aspen Institute, 2300 N Street NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20037.

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Other resources,

including daily meditations, periodic podcasts, on-line seminars and discussions, and occasional on-line conversations about this week's curriculum, are available at:

aspeninstitute.org/programs/executive-leadership-development/resources-for-living-and-leading/

How to Use this Curriculum

Connected Learning in Times of Confinement is designed to support people and their families, neighborhoods, organizations, and networks by building upon the Aspen Institute's unique expertise in facilitating meaningful conversations in a seminar setting.

We envisage a weekly curriculum that can be used in pieces, or all at once, or in various combinations. Our hope is that these readings and guidance will allow you and others to reflect on fundamental human questions in ways that nourish our hearts, minds, and fellowship in a time of confinement. A curriculum (from the Latin *currere*, to run) is a path, an exploration, not something to be mastered but an invitation to discovery and wonder. These materials are curated to intrigue and delight you, and we invite you to reflect upon them on your own, and to share them—with family, friends, neighbors, teams, networks. In this, the journey itself is the destination, a call to thought, dialogue, and action.

In a journey it is often helpful to have a guide, and in this curriculum you will find three guides:

First, the authors themselves—

we do not need to follow the authors, but we do well to understand what they are saying;

Second, guiding questions—

for each reading, there is a set of guiding questions designed for individual and collective reflection; they are not the only (or even most important) questions, but a way of getting started; these may be found at the back of the packet and are best read after you have read the texts;

Third, general guidance—

for each discussion, participants and discussion leaders may want to remind themselves of some best practices; these may be found at the back of this packet.

We invite you to share these readings widely and encourage others to engage in conversation. As you do so, know that fellow seminar graduates and their families, friends, and colleagues are doing the same. We all contribute to a global chorus of conversation about ideas worth sharing and acting upon.

**—Todd Breyfogle, PhD
Managing Director, Aspen
Executive Leadership Seminars**

About Aspen Institute Seminars

The Aspen Institute Executive Leadership Seminars Department drives change through reflection, dialogue, and action in service of a more free, just, and equitable society. We do this by: curating brave spaces of shared meaning which help people become more self-aware, more self-correcting, and more self-fulfilling; deepening participants' humane sensibilities and capacities for moral judgment through an examination of the humanistic traditions; establishing meaningful connections among diverse people and organizations in service of a better society.

For more information, including information about customized programs for companies and other organizations, please contact Kalissa Hendrickson, PhD, Director, at Kalissa.Hendrickson@aspennst.org or 202-736-3586. [Learn more.](#)

Philosophical Basis

The Aspen Institute starts from an act of faith in the humanistic tradition: one must be reflective in order to insure that all human activity – political, scientific, economic, intellectual or artistic – will serve the needs of human beings and enrich and deepen their lives.

The Institute believes in the value both of the “Great Ideas” of the past as well as the importance of the sometimes inelegant and highly controversial ideas of the present.

The Institute is dedicated to the fundamental educational value of dialogue for mature men and women from different nations and cultures -- intercommunications between people of comparable competence from various backgrounds and specialized fields of experience.

The Aspen idea recognizes that the processes by which persons learn and develop or change their ideas are not mechanical or even purely rational. As there is a mystery at the edge of human thought, so there is a magic about human relationships, and the magic we attempt to invoke in Aspen is that of the sheer beauty of this area of the Rocky Mountains.

With Erasmus, we hold that “nothing human is alien” to the inquiring purposes of the Aspen Institute. The Institute intends to be, in sum, a place of excellence and excitement where men and women of the finest qualities of mind and spirit from all walks of life in the United States and abroad can meet to learn from one another through serious discussion of and work on significant problems facing society and the greatest ideas which have been expressed throughout history and today concerning these problems.

—J. E. Slater, President, The Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, 1972

Reading

- 5 Simone Weil, "Essay on the Concept of Reading"
- 9 George Orwell, "Why I Write"

Essay on the Concept of Reading

by Simone Weil
(1909–1943)

1 We shall attempt to define a concept that has not yet found a suitable name, but for which the name “reading” may be the best one. For there is a mystery in reading, a mystery that, if we contemplate it, may well help us, not to explain, but to grab hold of other mysteries in human life.

5 All of us know that sensation is immediate, a brute fact, and that it seizes us by surprise. Without warning a man is punched in the stomach; everything changes for him before he even knows what happened. I touch something hot and I jerk my hand back before I even know that I burned myself. Something seizes me here—it is the universe, and I recognize it by the way it treats me. No one is surprised by
10 the power that punches, burns, or sudden noises have to grab hold of us, for we know, or at least believe, that they come from outside us, from matter, and that the mind does not play any part in the sensation, except to submit to it. The thoughts that we ourselves form may bring on certain emotions, but we are not seized by them in the same way.

15 The mystery is that there are sensations that are pretty much insignificant in themselves, yet, by what they signify, what they mean, they seize us in the same way as the stronger sensations. There are some black marks on a sheet of white paper; they couldn’t differ more from a punch in the stomach. Yet, they can have the same effect. We have all experienced, to a greater or lesser degree, the effect of
20 bad news that we have read in a letter or newspaper. Before we have fully taken account of what is going on, we feel ourselves seized and thrown down just as if we had been hit; even much later the sight of the letter remains painful. Sometimes, when time has lessened the pain a bit, in themselves, yet, by what they signify, what they mean, they seize us in the same way as the stronger sensations. There
25 are some black marks on a sheet of white paper; they couldn’t differ more from a punch in the stomach. Yet, they can have the same effect. We have all experienced, to a greater or lesser degree, the effect of bad news that we have read in a letter or newspaper. Before we have fully taken account of what is going on, we feel ourselves seized and thrown down just as if we had been hit; even much later

From Simone Weil, “Essay on the Concept of Reading” in *Simone Weil: Late Philosophical Writings*, translated by Eric O. Springsted (Notre Dame Press, 2015), pp. 21-28.

1 the sight of the letter remains painful. Sometimes, when time has lessened the
pain a bit, one is shuffling through papers and suddenly the letter jumps out, an
even more stabbing pain surfaces, just as piercing as any physical pain, seizing
us as if it came from outside ourselves and as if the letter itself were on fire. Two
5 women each receive a letter saying that her son is dead. The first one glances at
it, faints, and until the day she dies her eyes, her mouth, and her movements will
never again be the same. The second one remains unmoved; her face, her posture
do not change at all: she doesn't know how to read. It isn't the sensation, it is the
meaning that has seized the first woman by striking her mind, immediately, as
10 a brute fact, without her participation in the matter, just the way that sensations
strike us. Everything happens as if the pain were in the letter itself, and jumped out
from the letter to land on the face reading it. With respect to the actual sensations
themselves—the color of the paper or the ink—they do not even come to mind. It
is the pain that is given to one's sight.

15 Thus at each instant of our life we are gripped from the outside, as it were,
by meanings that we ourselves read in appearances. That is why we can argue
endlessly about the reality of the external world, since what we call the world
are the meanings that we read; they are not real. But they seize us as if they were
external; that is real. Why should we try to resolve this contradiction when the
20 more important task of thought in this world is to define and contemplate insoluble
contradictions, which, as Plato said, draw us upwards?

What is peculiar here is that what we are given is not sensations and meanings;
what we read is alone what is given. Studies of eyewitness accounts have notably
shown this. Proofreading is difficult because while reading we often see letters
25 that the typesetters have actually forgotten to put in; one has to force oneself to read
a different kind of meaning here, not that of words or phrases, but of mere letters,
while still not forgetting that the first kind of meaning exists. It is impossible not to
read; we cannot look at a printed text in a language we understand that is placed
in front of us and not read it. At best, one could do this only after a lot of practice.

30 The "blind man's stick," a favorite example of Descartes, furnishes an image
analogous to reading. Everybody can convince himself that when handling a pen
his touch goes right through the pen to the nib. If the pen skips because of some
problem with the paper, the pen's skipping is what is immediately felt; we don't
even think about the sensations in our fingers or hand through which we read.
35 However, the pen's skipping is really only something we read. The sky, the sea,
the sun, the stars, human beings, everything that surrounds us is in the same way
something that we read. What we call a correction of a sensory illusion is actually
a modified reading. If at night, on a lonely road, I think I see a man waiting in
ambush instead of what is actually a tree, it is a human and menacing presence
40 that forces itself on me, and, as in the case of the letter, it makes me quiver even
before I know what it is. I get closer and suddenly everything changes, and as I
read a tree, and not a man, I no longer quiver. There is not an appearance and then

1 an interpretation; a human presence has penetrated to my soul through my eyes,
and now, just as suddenly, the presence of a tree....

Thus meanings, which if looked at abstractly would seem to be mere thoughts,
arise from every corner around me, taking possession of my soul and shaping
5 it from one moment to the next in such a way that, to borrow a familiar English
phrase, "my soul is no longer my own." I believe what I read, my judgments are
what I read, I act according to what I read; how could I act any other way? If I read
in a noise honor to be won, I run towards the noise; if I read danger and nothing
else, I run far from the noise. In both cases, the necessity of acting the way I do,
10 even if I regret it, is imposed on me in a clear and immediate way, as the noise,
with the noise. I read in the noise....

Whether it is a question of action on oneself or another, there are two issues
to deal with, that of technique and that of value. Texts, whose appearances are
characters, take hold of my soul, then abandon it and are replaced by others. Is
15 one worth more than the other? Is one truer than the other? Where does one find
a norm? Thinking a text to be true even though I am not reading it, that I have
never read it, assumes that there is a reader of this truthful text, which is to say, it
assumes God. But as soon as we do that, there is a contradiction, for the concept of
reading does not fit our concept of God. Even if it did, it still would not let us order
20 our readings of texts according to a scale of values....

Notes

Why I Write

by George Orwell
(1903–1950)

1 ...When I was about sixteen I suddenly discovered the joy of mere words, i.e.
the sounds and associations of words. The lines from *Paradise Lost* –

So hee with difficulty and labour hard
5 Moved on: with difficulty and labour hee,

which do not now seem to me so very wonderful, sent shivers down my backbone;
and the spelling ‘hee’ for ‘he’ was an added pleasure. As for the need to describe
things, I knew all about it already. So it is clear what kind of books I wanted to write,
10 in so far as I could be said to want to write books at that time. I wanted to write
enormous naturalistic novels with unhappy endings, full of detailed descriptions
and arresting similes, and also full of purple passages in which words were used
partly for the sake of their sound. And in fact my first completed novel, *Burmese
Days*, which I wrote when I was thirty but projected much earlier, is rather that
15 kind of book.

I give all this background information because I do not think one can assess
a writer’s motives without knowing something of his early development. His
subject-matter will be determined by the age he lives in—at least this is true in
tumultuous, revolutionary ages like our own – but before he ever begins to write
20 he will have acquired an emotional attitude from which he will never completely
escape. It is his job, no doubt, to discipline his temperament and avoid getting
stuck at some immature stage, or in some perverse mood: but if he escapes from
his early influences altogether, he will have killed his impulse to write. Putting
aside the need to earn a living, I think there are four great motives for writing,
25 at any rate for writing prose. They exist in different degrees in every writer, and
in any one writer the proportions will vary from time to time, according to the
atmosphere in which he is living. They are:

(i) Sheer egoism. Desire to seem clever, to be talked about, to be remembered
after death, to get your own back on grown-ups who snubbed you in childhood,
30 etc., etc. It is humbug to pretend this is not a motive, and a strong one. Writers

From George Orwell, “Why I Write”. Originally published in *Gangrel*, No. 4 (Summer 1946).

1 share this characteristic with scientists, artists, politicians, lawyers, soldiers,
successful business men—in short, with the whole top crust of humanity. The
great mass of human beings are not acutely selfish. After the age of about thirty
they abandon individual ambition—in many cases, indeed, they almost abandon
5 the sense of being individuals at all—and live chiefly for others, or are simply
smothered under drudgery. But there is also the minority of gifted, willful people
who are determined to live their own lives to the end, and writers belong in this
class. Serious writers, I should say, are on the whole more vain and self-centered
than journalists, though less interested in money.

10 (ii) Aesthetic enthusiasm. Perception of beauty in the external world, or, on
the other hand, in words and their right arrangement. Pleasure in the impact of
one sound on another, in the firmness of good prose or the rhythm of a good
story. Desire to share an experience which one feels is valuable and ought not
to be missed. The aesthetic motive is very feeble in a lot of writers, but even a
15 pamphleteer or writer of textbooks will have pet words and phrases which appeal
to him for non-utilitarian reasons; or he may feel strongly about typography,
width of margins, etc. Above the level of a railway guide, no book is quite free
from aesthetic considerations.

(iii) Historical impulse. Desire to see things as they are, to find out true facts
20 and store them up for the use of posterity.

(iv) Political purpose – using the word ‘political’ in the widest possible sense.
Desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people’s idea of the
kind of society that they should strive after. Once again, no book is genuinely free
from political bias. The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is
25 itself a political attitude.

It can be seen how these various impulses must war against one another,
and how they must fluctuate from person to person and from time to time. By
nature – taking your ‘nature’ to be the state you have attained when you are first
adult – I am a person in whom the first three motives would outweigh the fourth.
30 In a peaceful age I might have written ornate or merely descriptive books, and
might have remained almost unaware of my political loyalties. As it is I have been
forced into becoming a sort of pamphleteer....

The Spanish war and other events in 1936–37 turned the scale and thereafter
I knew where I stood. Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936
35 has been written, directly or indirectly, *against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic
socialism, as I understand it. It seems to me nonsense, in a period like our own,
to think that one can avoid writing of such subjects. Everyone writes of them in
one guise or another. It is simply a question of which side one takes and what
approach one follows. And the more one is conscious of one’s political bias, the
40 more chance one has of acting politically without sacrificing one’s aesthetic and
intellectual integrity.

1 What I have most wanted to do throughout the past ten years is to make
political writing into an art. My starting point is always a feeling of partisanship,
a sense of injustice. When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, 'I am
going to produce a work of art'. I write it because there is some lie that I want
5 to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern
is to get a hearing. But I could not do the work of writing a book, or even a long
magazine article, if it were not also an aesthetic experience. Anyone who cares to
examine my work will see that even when it is downright propaganda it contains
much that a full-time politician would consider irrelevant. I am not able, and do
10 not want, completely to abandon the world view that I acquired in childhood. So
long as I remain alive and well I shall continue to feel strongly about prose style,
to love the surface of the earth, and to take a pleasure in solid objects and scraps
of useless information. It is no use trying to suppress that side of myself. The job
is to reconcile my ingrained likes and dislikes with the essentially public, non-
15 individual activities that this age forces on all of us....

Looking back through the last page or two, I see that I have made it appear
as though my motives in writing were wholly public-spirited. I don't want to
leave that as the final impression. All writers are vain, selfish, and lazy, and at
the very bottom of their motives there lies a mystery. Writing a book is a horrible,
20 exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness. One would never
undertake such a thing if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can
neither resist or understand. For all one knows that demon is simply the same
instinct that makes a baby squall for attention. And yet it is also true that one
can write nothing readable unless one constantly struggles to efface one's own
25 personality. Good prose is like a windowpane. I cannot say with certainty which
of my motives are the strongest, but I know which of them deserve to be followed.
And looking back through my work, I see that it is invariably where I lacked a
political purpose that I wrote lifeless books and was betrayed into purple passages,
sentences without meaning, decorative adjectives and humbug generally.

Notes

Image of the Week



Sadegh Tirafkan, *Untitled (#6)* from the series *Secret of Words* (2002)

Notes

Guiding Questions

The best questions arise from careful listening (to the author, oneself, and others), and from the spontaneity of wonder

Simone Weil, "Essay on the Concept of Reading"

- How does Weil describe the sensory dimension of reading?
- In what ways is reading a mystery?
- Does reading, as Weil suggests, help us understand other mysteries in life?
- To what extent does our experience of reading inform our disposition to action?

George Orwell, "Why I Write"

- What seems to be the relationship between the Orwell's youthful experience of reading and his desire to write?
- What, according to Orwell, are the "four great motives for writing"? As a writer or reader, how would you prioritize the four motives?
- What from nature or circumstance drives (or would drive) you to write?
- "And the more one is conscious of one's political bias, the more chance one has of acting politically without sacrificing one's aesthetic and intellectual integrity." What does this mean?
- In what ways is good prose "like a windowpane"?

Sadegh Tirafkan, *Untitled* (#6)

- Set a timer and look at the image for 3 minutes: What do you see? What feelings does the image evoke?
- What is revealed? What is concealed?
- What does this image suggest about the mysteries of reading and writing?
- Is an image, like good prose, "like a windowpane"? How do an image and prose differ?

General questions for the week

- Do you read? Do you write? Why? Why not?
- How do you describe the experience of reading? Of writing?
- What have you noticed in your own habits of reading and writing over the last 6 months? The last 6 years?
- What do reading and writing give you that other activities do not? What do they lack?

Notes

Short Guide to Leading a Discussion

General Principles for Participants

- Read the text(s) to be discussed in their entirety (ideally twice)
- Make notes about what you understand, don't understand, agree or disagree with
- Focus comments and conversation on the ideas expressed in the shared text(s), not on outside
- knowledge
- Seek to understand your fellow participants, not to persuade them
- Be freely authentic and morally present
- Listen to the text, to others, and to yourself

General principles for discussion leaders:

- Hold the space for honesty and vulnerability: be honest and vulnerable yourself
- Ask questions, don't teach: the aim is shared understanding and meaning, not agreement
- Be attached to the conversation: avoid rigidly following your planned order of questions
- Make sure every voice is heard: don't move too quickly to fill the silence
- Start and end on time: end not with conclusions but with questions you're taking away

Format:

- Match the texts to the time allotted (*Each text can productively stimulate 20-40 minutes of discussion, and can be read discussed individually or together in one sitting, depending on the time available; it is better to end with more to be said, rather than straining to fill the time*)
- Begin with introductions:
 - name (if not everyone is well known to one another)

- what is on your heart and mind?
- the person speaking chooses the next person
- Set the frame:
 - remind participants to enjoy the gift of time and conversation by avoiding other
 - distractions
 - revisit the key general principles above
- It always helps to read a passage aloud
- Layer your questions: be patient, each layer builds upon the next
 - What does the text say? (sometimes we read the same thing different ways)
 - What does the text mean? (sometimes we interpret the text differently)
 - What does the text mean to me? (sometimes we apply the texts to ourselves differently)
 - What does the text mean for us? (we may have different understandings of what the text means for living in community)
 - What does the text mean for society? (we may have different approaches to what the text implies for action in society)

Some helpful tips to keep the conversation going (for discussion leaders and participants):

- "say more about that"
- "where do you see that in the text?"
- "how is that related to what N said earlier?"
- "do you think that's true?"
- "do others see it the same way?"
- "what did you see in the text that we haven't addressed?"



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