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WHY READ?

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Librarians must take up educating people where the school leaves off. Education does not end at 17 or 21; it starts there, if anywhere. North Carolina asked for an educated man and got a football fan. Formal education fails in so far as its graduates turn to comic books and sports for sustenance and stimulation; librarians succeed in so far as they turn adults from Superman to Plato, from football to the Federalist papers.

Many graduate from high school or even college without having read a Greek play, a Chinese poem, a Russian novel, a Hindu Upanishad, a page from Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks, a chapter of *The Federalist* or a book of the Bible. They are therefore completely uneducated.

But the school should not be blamed too much. Education is a life-long process requiring a mature mind which has come in contact with the roughness of the world. Books "teach not their own use." It is the business of the school to teach students the use of those tools, books, by which they can educate themselves. To do that and to inspire them with a desire to use those tools is about all the school can do. The public library *can* do the rest; it can provide them with the tools which they have been taught, not without labor and expense, to use.

The world of books is a pre-Einstein universe—without limits—a continent without a coast, a sea without a shore yet with many pleasant islands for the voyager. There is so great a joy in reading—say, in discovering the story of Aucassin and Nicolette, the poems of John Donne and Francis Thompson, or the novels of Hardy and Conrad—that many who fall under its spell would not willingly swap it for any other earthly pleasure.

But there is much more to it than that. The very preservation of western civilization depends on how well and widely we read. No

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one is born civilized; he attains that state if he can. Hitler came near dissolving our civilization in a solution of blood because so many supposedly educated people were unable to distinguish between evil incarnate and "the wave of the future." How close it came to extinction may be measured by the difference between the minds of Chamberlain and Churchill. Chamberlain did not believe in Hitler any more than we believe in a personal devil; Churchill recognized Hitler for what he was because reading had familiarized him with Hitler's prototypes—Iago and the villain of the Book of Genesis.

No one can know what is true without knowing what is false; no one can know what is good without knowing what is evil. The search to differentiate between them is what makes great literature. Now, when the foundations of society totter, we need, as never before, to resume that search. Therefore we need the help which great books alone can bring us—the dramas of Aeschylus and Euripides; the dialogues of Plato; the serenity of Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus; the vivid pictures of society in turmoil painted by Thucydides, Tacitus, Plutarch, Suetonius and Gibbon; those expert vivisections of the human spirit performed by Machiavelli and Dante; the Bible with varied illuminating interpretations from St. Augustine's *Confessions* to Renan's *Life of Jesus* and Wilde's *De Profundis*; the poems of Shakespeare and Shelley; the second part of Goethe's *Faust*, Shaw's *St. Joan*, and Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* which gives a preview of Hitler; the two most Christian novelists, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy; Hegel, Darwin, Marx and Hitler; and last but not least Arnold J. Toynbee's *A Study of History*, giving hope that a civilization which could produce such a work is not destined to perish yet awhile.

Is it really so important that such books be read? It cannot be doubted. The roots of our civilization are two—one reaching back to Judea, the other to Athens. It draws life from them only through the written word. There is no more illuminating experience than to read the Bible and the great Greek plays together, and to feel the power and glory of man's search for goodness. Did not our democracy come to us, starting from Judea, running thence to the Rome of Terence ("I am a man and so I think that nothing human can be foreign to me"), the Carthage of Tertullian ("Throughout the world man is one though his names be various") and so by a winding road to the Monticello of Jefferson and the Camden of Whitman? Who learns these things by reading knows beyond peradventure the foundations on which western civilization rests. And there is no other way to distinguish between good and evil, or to assess values truly.

It is not encouraging to reflect that 50 years ago we were nearer in mind and spirit to great books than we are today, with the result that we are now wandering in a wilderness of vapid magazines, moving pictures and radio programs, art and music inspired by primitive Africa and psychopathy, political isms put forth by those "who darken counsel with words without knowledge."

Our education has been neglected by the librarians. The schools can go no further. It is up to the librarians to use every method—advertisement and imprecation, force and arms, hook or crook, fasting and prayer—to get us back in touch with that great literature which is at once the rock from which our civilization was hewn and the flame in which it must be continually tempered if it is to thumb its nose at Fate.