

The Christian Family and Social Movement

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The skill of reading

I am an ardent advocate of reading for information, education, and pleasure.

I read voraciously when I was young. This continued into my adulthood where despite having to read and write a lot in my work, I read for pleasure when commuting (earlier in the bus) and late in airports, planes, etc. Now I am retired and have more time – to read, of course.

My family were infected by this bug. My two daughters read, far beyond their school texts. As adults now, they still read for pleasure, books, periodicals, etc. outside of their “work reading”. My wife was a school teacher before she retired. She too shares our reading materials and thoroughly enjoyed the activity.

Now, my grandchildren are similarly infected. The eldest, when in Primary 2 read all the seven “Harry Potter” books among numerous others. The younger one, in kindergarten 2, can often be found curled up in the sofa in my house, reading Calvin and Hobbes.

I read an article in the periodical “The New Yorker” recently, which should be very instructive information for our members. The whole article is long – running about 14 columns covering 6 pages. I extracted about 4 columns to share with all the members of the CFSM especially those with younger school going children. For those who want to read the whole article, it is in the New Yorker Magazine – the last issue of the year 2007. Similar to the mining for diamonds where one has to sift through a lot of ordinary rocks, to find gems like these, one has to read, lots.

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Extracts from an article titled:

“Twilight of the books” by Caleb Crain

In the magazine “New Yorker “ Dec 24-31 2007.

The author was talking about the decline of the reading habit over the last 50 years or so. He traced the history of mankind reading ...from 8,000 to 5,000 years BC of Sumerians starting to read cuneiforms on clay tablets, and the various authors who explored the brain and other mental developments that are likely to have taken place to match this - literacy.....

“Upon reaching classical Greece, (Maryanne) Wolf (an author he was quoting) abandons history, because the Greek’s alphabet-reading brains probably resemble ours, which can be readily put into scanners. Drawing on recent imaging studies, she explains in detail how a modern child’s brains wires itself for literacy. The ground in laid in pre-school, when parents read to a child, talk with her, and encourage awareness of sound elements like rhyme and alliteration, perhaps with “Mother Goose” poems. Scans show that when a child first starts to read she has to use more of her brains than adults. Broad regions light up in both hemispheres as a child’s neurons specialise in recognising letters and become more efficient, the regions activated becomes smaller.

At some point, as the child progresses from decoding to fluent reading, the route of signals through her brain shifts. Instead of passing along a “dorsal route” through occipital, temporal, and parietal regions in both hemispheres, reading starts to move along a faster and more efficient “ventral route”, which is confined to the left hemisphere. With the gain in time and freed-up brain-power, wolf suggests, a fluent reader is able to integrate more of her own thoughts and feelings into her experience. “The secret at the heart of reading,” Wolf writes, is “the time it frees for the brain to have thoughts deeper than those that came before.” Imaging studies suggests that in many cases of dyslexia the right hemisphere never disengages, and reading remains effortful.

In a recent book claiming that television and video games were “making our minds sharper,” the journalist Steven Johnson argued that since we value reading for “exercising the mind,” we should value electronic media for offering a superior “cognitive workout.” But, if Wolf’s evidence is right, Johnson’s metaphor of exercise is misguided. When reading goes well, Wolf suggested, it feels effortless, like drifting down a river rather than rowing up it. It makes you smarter because it leaves more of your brain alone. Ruskin once compared reading to a conversation to the wise and noble, and Proust corrected him. It is much better than that Proust wrote. To read is “to receive a communication with another way of thinking, all the while remaining alone, that is, while continuing to enjoy the intellectual power that one has in solitude and that conversation dissipated immediately.”

Wolf has little to say about the general decline of reading, and she doesn't much speculate about the functions of the brain under the influence of television and newer media. But there is research suggesting that secondary orality and literacy don't mix. In a study published this year, experimenters varied the way people took in a Power Point presentation about the country of Mali. Those who were allowed to read silently were more likely to agree with the statement "The presentation was interesting," and those who read along with an audiovisual commentary were more likely to agree with the statement "I did not learn anything from this presentation." The silent readers remembered more, too, a finding in line with a series of British studies in which people who read transcripts of television broadcasts, political programs, advertisements, and science shows recall more information than those who had watched the show themselves.

The antagonism between words and moving images start early. In August(2007) , Scientists at the University of Washington revealed that babies aged between eight and sixteen months know on average six to eight fewer words for every hour of baby DVD and videos they watched daily. A 2005 study in Northern California found that a television in the bedroom lowered the standardised test scores of third graders. And the conflict continues throughout a child's development. In 2001 after analyzing data on more than a million students around the world, the researcher Micha Razel found "little room for doubt" that television worsened performance in reading, science and maths. The relationship wasn't a straight line but an "inverted check mark": a small amount of television seemed to benefit children; more hurt. For nine-year-olds, the optimum was two hours a day; for seventeen-year-olds, half an hour. Razel guessed that the younger children were watching educational shows, and indeed, researchers have shown that a five-year-old boy who watches "Sesame Street" is likely to have higher grades even in high school. Razel noted, however, that fifty five percent of students were exceeding their optimal viewing time by three hours a day, thereby lowering their academic achievement by roughly one grade level.

The internet, happily, does not so far seem to be antagonistic to literacy. Researchers recently gave Michigan children and teenagers computers in exchange for permission to monitor their Internet use. The study found that grades and reading scores rose with the amount of time spent on line. Of course, such synergies may disappear if the Internet continues its YouTube fuelled evolution away from print and towards television."

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NEWS: Our Spiritual Director - Fr. A Christophe is away in France on home leave, for about 3 months. We hope that he will as usual enjoy this time to catch up with his brothers, one in a monastery and the other also a priest - recently retired from his teaching position in a University. We look forward to his return, and as usual, reading his insightful ruminations on his latest observations of the development institution of the family in France.