



**“Be as careful of the books you read
as of the company you keep;
for your habits and character will be as much
influenced by the former as the latter.”**

— Paxton Hood

**“Books don’t change people, paragraphs do;
sometimes even sentences.”**

— John Piper

An Exercise: My Required Reading List [My Syllabus]

— **What are the books, stories, characters, and ideas that help form a person?**

My writing colleague, Lauren de Vore, recently directed my attention to an Op-Ed piece in *The New York Times* written by Christy Wampole of “*The Stone*.” It is titled “My Syllabus, My Self.” It got my attention in a big way (notice I didn’t use the recently made-up bogus word “bigly”) and I am hoping it will interest you as well.

→ What is a “syllabus?” If you recall, when you walked into a college class on the first day, the professor would hand out the syllabus of the course. Back in those days, we knew it as the required reading list of the course; but in the years between those days and these, it has come to mean much more. Ms. Wampole’s definition is described in detail at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/17/opinion/my-syllabus-my-self.html?emc=eta1>, and it’s worth reading. She wrote, “It’s more than a reading list. It’s a personal and political statement.”

For my purpose today, I’d like to use part of her definition – a compilation of the books, stories, paragraphs, sentences, songs, and characters that have contributed ideas to making someone into the person they have become. Try answering two questions for yourself: If you made a list of books you have read, words you have heard, ideas from movies, song lyrics, and/or characters that have meant a lot to you, and identified WHY they matter to you, even if the list were incomplete, would that help someone know more about who you are?

I realize, of course, that such an exercise would be incomplete. It has to be. The forces that shape each of us are complicated, interrelated, maybe even contradictory, they probably span a long period of time, we can’t remember them all, and they can’t easily be put into a complete and tidy list. Even if I tried to do it, I reasoned, as soon as I showed it to someone I’d have to quickly say, “Oh, I left out some important things. There could be lots more.”

Well, I’ve taken a shot at making such a list — anyway — and my first reaction is . . . well, I left out some important things. There could be lots more.”

In my case, I narrowed it to a fairly short list of novels, plays, poems, and the ideas found in them. After my first try, all I can say is that it isn't a complete picture; but it does reveal some things that matter to me and, well, could give someone the opportunity to explore those ideas further if they wanted to. In addition to the titles, I decided to quote some words from each of them that matter to me (brief excerpts), and I've identified a "MESSAGE" — that is, a single idea that summarizes what matters to me about it.

So, here goes . . .

If this seems like an interesting project, in whatever form that makes sense to you — even if it is just a list of titles or ideas — I encourage you to share it with us. With your permission, I will publish it here on *ConVivio*. Anonymously, if you want. Might be interesting.

Dan's (Incomplete) Required Reading List

The Plague — Albert Camus, 1947

"I have no idea what's awaiting me, or what will happen when this all ends. For the moment I know this: there are sick people and they need curing."

"For who would dare to assert that eternal happiness can compensate for a single moment's human suffering."

What's true of all evils in the world is true of plague as well. It helps men to rise above themselves."

"The evil that is in the world almost always comes of ignorance."

"The most incorrigible evil being that of an ignorance that fancies it knows everything and therefore claims for itself the right to kill."

→ THE MESSAGE: "We learn in time of pestilence: there are more things to admire in men than to despise."

It Can't Happen Here — Sinclair Lewis, 1935

"Why, America's the only free nation on earth. Besides! The country's too big for a revolution. No, no! Couldn't happen here!"

"Said Doremus, "Hm. Yes, I agree it's a serious time. With all the discontent there is in the country to wash him into office, Senator Windrip has got an excellent chance to be elected President, and if he is, probably his gang of buzzards will get us into some war, just to grease their insane vanity and show the world that we're the toughest nation going. And then I, the Liberal, and you, the Plutocrat, will be led out and shot at 3 A.M. Serious? Huh!"

→ THE MESSAGE: "First you are afraid, then you carry a gun."

The Odyssey — Homer, late 8th century BC

(Odysseus:) "We are Achaians coming from Troy, beaten off our true course by winds from every direction across the great gulf of the open sea, making for home, by the wrong way, on the wrong courses. So we have come. So it has pleased Zeus to arrange it."

"(Zeus): 'Oh for shame, how the mortals put the blame on us gods, for they say evils come from us, but it is they, rather, who by their own recklessness bring sorrow beyond what is given.'"

→ THE MESSAGE: "Over a long journey, loyalty, self-control, perseverance, and compassion may be the keys to a successful return 'home.'"



The Princess Bride — William Goldman, 1973

- *“Inigo Montoya: Hello! My name is Inigo Montoya! You killed my father! Prepare to die!*
Count Rugen: Stop saying that!
Inigo Montoya: HELLO! MY NAME IS INIGO MONTOYA! YOU KILLED MY FATHER! PREPARE TO DIE!
Inigo Montoya: Offer me money, to save yourself.
Count Rugen: Yes!
Inigo Montoya: Power, too, promise me that.
Count Rugen: All that I have and more. Please...
Inigo Montoya: Offer me anything I ask for.
Count Rugen: Anything you want...
Inigo Montoya: I want my father back, you son of a bitch!”
 - *“Vizzini: You fell victim to one of the classic blunders—the most famous of which is, “Never get involved in a land war in Asia”—but only slightly less well-known is this: “Never go against a Sicilian when death is on the line”! Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ... ”*
 - *“The Grandson: Grandpa, maybe you could come over and read it again to me tomorrow.*
The Grandpa: As you wish.”

→ THE MESSAGE: Sometimes you have to pass through the fire swamp to get where you need to go.

The Moon Is Down — John Steinbeck, 1941

- “We have defeated them.” . . . Defeat is a momentary thing. A defeat doesn’t last.”*
“[The people] are orderly under their own government. I don’t know how they will be under yours.”
“The people don’t like to be conquered. Things are going to happen. It is a great mystery that has disturbed rulers all over the world — how the truth of things fights free of control.”
“Fear began to grow in the conquerors, a fear that it would never be over. A fear that one day they would crack and be hunted through the mountains like rabbits. For the conquered never relax their hatred.”
“We told our soldiers that they were brighter and braver than other young men. It was kind of a shock to them to find out that they aren’t a bit braver or brighter than other young men.”
“They think that just because they have only one leader and one head, we are all like that. They know that ten heads lopped off will destroy them; but we are a free people; we have as many heads as we have people, and in time of need leaders pop up among us like mushrooms.”
“Free men cannot start a war, but once it is started, they can fight on in defeat. Herd men, followers of a leader, cannot do that and so it is always the herd men who win battles and the free men who win wars. You will find that is so, sir.”
“If I tell them not to fight; they will be sorry, but they will fight. If I tell them to fight, they will be glad, and I who am not a very brave man will have made them a little braver. You see, it is an easy thing to do, since the end for me is the same.”
The Mayor’s wife: “I wish you would tell me what all this nonsense is all about.”
The Mayor: “It is nonsense, dear.”
The Mayor’s wife: “But they can’t arrest the mayor.”
The Mayor: “No, they can’t arrest the Mayor. The Mayor is an idea conceived by free men. It will escape arrest.”
The Mayor: “Yes, the debt shall be paid.”

→ THE MESSAGE: “My people don’t like to have others think for them.”



The Great Gatsby — F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1925

Nick: *"If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him."*

Daisy: *"Do you ever wait for the longest day of the year and then miss it? I always wait for the longest day of the year and then miss it!"*

Nick: *"Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter — to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . . And one fine morning — —"*

Nick: *"His dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him."*

Nick: *"And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes - a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder."*

The MESSAGE: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

Lost Horizon — James Hilton, 1933

"The will of God or the lunacy of man - it seemed that you could take your choice, if you wanted a good enough reason for most things. Or, alternatively, the will of man and the lunacy of God."

"The jewel has facets; and it is possible that many religions are moderately true."

"We have reason. This vision was so vivid and so moving that I determined to gather together all things of beauty and culture that I could and preserve them here, in Shangri-la, against the doom toward which the world is rushing. Look at the world today. A scurrying mass of bewildered humanity crashing headlong against each other. The time must come, my friend, when brutality and the lust for power must perish by its own sword. For when that day comes, the world must begin to look for a new life. And it is our hope that they may find it here."

"If I could put it into a very few words, dear sir, I should say that our prevalent belief is in moderation . . . the virtue of avoiding excesses of all kinds — even including, if you will pardon the paradox, excess of virtue itself."

→ THE MESSAGE: "The time must come when brutality and lust for power must perish by its own sword."

The Swerve — Stephen Greenblatt, 2011

"Something happened in the Renaissance, something that surged up against the constraints that centuries had constructed around curiosity, desire, individuality, attention to the material world, the claims of the body."

"Just when the gods had ceased to be, and the Christ had not yet come, there was a unique moment in history, between Cicero and Marcus Aurelius, when man stood alone."

If you can hold on to and repeat to yourself the simplest fact of existence -- atoms and void and nothing else, atoms and void and nothing else, atoms and void and nothing else-- your life will change ... and you will be freed from the terrible affliction – what Hamlet many centuries later described as 'the dread of something after death/the undiscovered country from which/no traveler returns.'"

"I am," Jefferson wrote to a correspondent who wanted to know his philosophy of life, "an Epicurean."

→ THE MESSAGE: "It became possible - never easy, but possible ... to find the mortal world enough."



Le Morte d'Arthur ("Camelot") — Thomas Mallory (and many others), 15th century (and earlier and later)

From Mallory (Translated)

"Whoso pulleth out this sword of this stone and anvil, is rightwise king born of all England."

Arthur: *"I have promised to do the battle to the uttermost by the faith of my body, while me lasteth the life, and therefore I prefer to die with honour than to live with shame."*

"Yet some men say in many parts of England that King Arthur is not dead, but had by the will of our Lord Jesu into another place; and men say that he shall come again, and he shall win the holy cross. I will not say it shall be so, but rather I will say: here in this world he changed his life."

From "Camelot," Lerner and Lowe, 1960

Arthur: *"By God, I shall be a king. This is the time of King Arthur when violence is not strength and compassion is not weakness!"*

Arthur: *"I have stumbled on my future. I-I-I've done - the right thing!"*

Lancelot Du Lac: *"Did you ever doubt it, your majesty?"*

Arthur: *"Oh, of course. Of course. Only fools never doubt."*

Merlyn: *"Thinking, boy, is something you should definitely get into the habit of doing, as often as possible. Thinking helps in everything but love. Love is a sort of seventh day, so thinking can rest."*

Arthur: *"Ginny, suppose we create a new order of chivalry? A new order where might is only used for right! To improve instead of to destroy. Look, we'll invite all the knights, all the kings of all the kingdoms, to lay down their arms to come and join us. Oh yes, Ginny. I will take one of the large rooms in the castle, put a table in it, and all the knights will gather at it."*

Guinevere: *And do what?*

Arthur: *Talk across it. Debate. Make laws. Plan improvements!*

Guinevere: *But, Arthur, do you think all the knights will ever want to do such a ridiculously peaceful thing?*

Arthur: *We'll make it a great honor. Very fashionable! Everyone will want to join! Only now, the knights will whack only for good. Might - FOR - right. That's it, Ginny. Not might IS right. Might - FOR - Right!*

Guinevere: *It's very original.*

Arthur: *Yes. Yes-Yes. And civilized, Ginny.*

Guinevere: *Arthur, it will have to be an awfully large table. Won't there be jealousy? All the knights will be claiming superiority and want to sit at the head.*

King Arthur: *We'll make it - a round table. So, there is no head.*

Pellinore (After newly knighted Young Tom of Warwick leaves): *"Arthur, who was that?"*

Arthur: *"One of what we all are, Pelli! Less than a drop in the great blue motion of the sunlit sea. But, it seems, that some of the drops - Sparkle, Pelli! Some of them doooooo - Sparkle!"*

→ THE MESSAGE: "Sometimes the sole purpose of great deeds is the telling of the story."

Where the Wild Things Are — Maurice Sendak, 1963

"Max, the king of all wild things was lonely and wanted to be where someone loved him best of all."

"And the wild things roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws."

"And now, cried Max, let the wild rumpus start!"

"And [he] sailed back over a year and in and out of weeks and through a day and into the night of his very own room, where he found his supper waiting for him and it was still hot."



Our Town — Thornton Wilder, 1948

George: "Emily, if I do make a big change ... would you be ... I mean could you be...?"

Emily: "I ... I am now; I always have been."

George: "So I guess this is an important talk we've been having."

Emily: "Yes ... yes."

Emily: "Live people don't understand, do they?"

Mrs. Gibbs: "No, dear — not very much."

Emily: "They're sort of shut up in little boxes, aren't they?"

Simon Stimson: "That's what it was to be alive. To move about in a cloud of ignorance ... trampling on the feelings of those about you. To spend and waste time as though you had a million years. ... Ignorance and blindness."

Mrs. Gibbs: "Simon Stimson, that ain't the whole truth and you know it."

Emily: "They don't understand, do they?"

→ THE MESSAGE: Mrs. Gibbs: "No, dear. They don't understand."

A FEW POEMS (there are so many!)

The People Will Live On — Carl Sandburg, 1936

"The people will live on.

The learning and blundering people will live on.

They will be tricked and sold and again sold

And go back to the nourishing earth for footholds,

The people so peculiar in renewal and comeback,

You can't laugh off their capacity to take it."

"In the darkness with a great bundle of grief

The people march . . . "Where to? What next?" "

→ THE MESSAGE: "This old anvil laughs at many broken hammers."

Mending Wall — Robert Frost, 1916

He is all pine and I am apple orchard.

My apple trees will never get across

And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.

"He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."

Spring is the mischief in me and I wonder

If I could put a notion in his head:

"Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it

Where there are cows? Here, there are no cows.

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know

What I was walling in or walling out,

And to whom I was like to give offense."

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,

That wants it down.



Directive — Robert Frost, 1946

*“Back out of all this now too much for us,
Back in a time made simple by the loss
Of detail, burned, dissolved, and broken off
Like graveyard marble sculpture in the weather.”
“And put a sign up CLOSED to all but me.
And make yourself at home.”
“First there’s the children’s house of make-believe,
Some shattered dishes underneath a pine,
The playthings in the playhouse of the children.”
“Weep for what little things could make them glad.”
“I have kept hidden in the instep arch
Of an old cedar at the waterside
A broken drinking goblet like the Grail
Under a spell so the wrong ones can’t find it,
So can’t get saved, as Saint Mark says they mustn’t.
(I stole the goblet from the children’s playhouse.)
“Here are your waters and your watering place.
Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.”*

Short Pieces

The Complete Humorous Sketches and Tales of Mark Twain, 1863-1904

From “Speech On Babies” “ (a speech in honor of the President of the United States, 1879)

*“And in still one more cradle, the future illustrious commander-in-chief of the American armies is so little burdened with his approaching grandeurs and responsibilities as to be giving his whole strategic mind at this moment to trying to find some way to get his big toe into his mouth — an achievement which, meaning no disrespect to the illustrious guest of this evening turned **his** entire attention to some fifty-six years ago; and if the child is but a prophecy of the man, there can be no doubt that he succeeded.”*

From “Speech On the Weather” (1877)

“Mind, in this speech I have been trying merely to do honor to the New England weather; no language could do it justice.”

*“If we hadn’t our bewitching autumn foliage, we should still have to credit the weather with one feature which compensates for all its bullying vagaries - **the ice storm** - when a leafless tree is clothed with ice from the bottom to the top - ice that is as bright and clear as crystal; when every bough and twig is strung with ice beads, frozen dewdrops, and the whole tree sparkles, cold and white, like the Shah of Persia’s diamond plume. [Applause.] Then the wind waves the branches, and the sun comes out and turns all those myriads of beads and drops to prisms, that glow and burn and flash with all manner of colored fires, which change and change again, with inconceivable rapidity, from blue to red, from red to green, and green to gold; the tree becomes a spraying fountain, a very explosion of dazzling jewels; and it stands there the acme, the climax, the supremest possibility in art or nature, of bewildering, intoxicating, intolerable magnificence! One cannot make the words too strong.”*



Prelude to a song from a musical (just one, there are so many ...)

The Fantasticks — T. Jones and H. Schmidt, 1960

For further study: <http://www.thefantasticks.com/>

(Prelude to *The Perfect Time To Be In Love* (30th Anniversary Tour, 1992)

"You wonder how these things begin. Well, this begins with a glen. It begins with a season which, for want of a better word we may as well call- September. It begins in a forest where the woodchucks woo, and the leaves wax green, and vines intertwine like lovers; try to see it, not with your eyes, for they are wise, but see it with your ears: the cool green breathing of the leaves. And hear it with the inside of your hand: the soundless sound of shadows flicking light. Celebrate sensation! Recall that secret place. You've been there, you remember: That special place where once- Just once- in your crowded sunlit lifetime, you hid away in shadow from the tyranny of time. That spot beside the clover where someone's hand held your hand and love was sweeter than the berries, or the honey, or the stinging taste of mint. It is September- before a rainfall- a perfect time to be in love."

→ THE MESSAGE: "Don't let it slip away for it may never come again."

Sophie's World — Jostein Gaarder, 1991

"The stupidest thing she knew was for people to act like they knew all about the things they knew absolutely nothing about. Wisest is she who knows she does not know."

"A philosopher knows that in reality he knows very little. That is why he constantly strives to achieve true insight. Socrates was one of these rare people. He knew that he knew nothing about life and the world. And now comes the important part: it troubled him that he knew so little."

"So now you must choose... Are you a child who has not yet become world-weary? Or are you a philosopher who will vow never to become so? To children, the world and everything in it is new, something that gives rise to astonishment. It is not like that for adults. This is precisely where philosophers are a notable exception. A philosopher never gets quite used to the world. To him or her, the world continues to seem a bit unreasonable - bewildering, even enigmatic. Philosophers and small children thus have an important faculty in common. The only thing we require to be good philosophers is the faculty of wonder..."

"Life is both sad and solemn. We are led into a wonderful world, we meet one another here, greet each other - and wander together for a brief moment. Then we lose each other and disappear as suddenly and unreasonably as we arrived."

"What if you slept? And what if, in your sleep, you dreamed? And what if, in your dream, you went to Heaven and plucked a strange and beautiful flower? And what if, when you awoke, you held the flower in your hand? Ah, what then?"

→ THE MESSAGE: "Acting responsibly is not a matter of strengthening our reason but of deepening our feelings for the welfare of others."

Bobby McGee — Janis Joplin, 1970

"I'd trade all of my tomorrows for one single yesterday/to be holding Bobby's body next to mine."

"Freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose / Nothin', don't mean nothin' hon' if it ain't free, no no / And, feelin' good was easy, Lord, when he sang the blues / You know, feelin' good was good enough for me, god enough for me and my Bobby McGee."



Watching the Wheels — John Lennon, 1980

*"People asking questions lost in confusion
Well I tell them there's no problem, only solutions."
"I'm just sitting here watching the wheels go round and round
I really love to watch them roll
No longer riding on the merry-go-round
I just had to let it go."*

Maybe I'm Amazed — Paul McCartney, 1970

*"Baby, I'm a man, maybe I'm a lonely man
Who's in the middle of something
That he doesn't really understand."
"Maybe I'm amazed at the way you help me sing my song,
Right me when I'm wrong-
Maybe I'm amazed at the way I really need you."*

From the collected works (there are so many) — Bob Dylan (Nobel Laureate), 1960s

*"But you know somethin's happ'nin' but you don't know what it is,
Do you, Mr. Jones?"
"How does it feel, to be on your own, with no direction home
Like a complete unknown, like a rolling stone."
"The line it is drawn, the curse it is cast
The slow one now will later be fast
As the present now will later be past
The order is rapidly fadin'.
And the first one now will later be last."*

→ THE MESSAGE: "For the times they are a changin'."

Chantilly Lace — The Big Bopper (Jiles Perry Richardson -- shhhh), 1958

*"Chantilly lace and a pretty face; And a pony tail, hangin' down"
"There ain't nothing in the world like a big-eyed girl
"To make me act so funny, make me spend my money"
"Make me feel real loose, like a long-necked goose
Like a girl – yeah baby, that's a what I like!"*

→ THE MESSAGE: "Something lives on from every person, even a teenage boy."

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock — T. S. Elliot, 1958

"Do I dare disturb the universe"

→ THE MESSAGE: "Same as the message from The Big Bopper."

Sonnet #116 — William Shakespeare, 1609

"If this be error and upon me proved, I never writ, nor no man ever loved."

→ THE MESSAGE: "Same as the message from The Big Bopper."

That's my list. How about YOU write your own 'required reading list?' I'd love to see it.

