



The Personal Syllabus Exercise:

“What are the books, stories, characters, and ideas that help form a person?”

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My Personal Syllabus

~Lauren de Vore~

When I read *The New York Times* recent Op-Ed piece, “My Syllabus, My Self,” by Christy Wampole, I was caught by her premise that a syllabus is more than a reading list, that it’s “a personal and political statement.” I wondered, what would I include in a personal syllabus? Could I reach back across the years and identify the books and other pieces that have influenced me, that have shaped me? Could I put together a list such that someone who read those pieces could gain an understanding of me beyond what I put forward for the world to see?

Although there are myriad other “influencers” that have contributed to making me “me,” from music and artwork to movies, seminal events and remarkable people, for the purposes of this exercise, I limited myself to written pieces. In putting together my syllabus, the hard part was (1) separating favorite pieces from those that influenced me and then (2) trimming the list to a reasonable length. I kept thinking, “Oh, I should add that...and that...and that...” In the end, I offer a dozen or so poems and quotes and another dozen or so books. The first four (the Milton, Wilcox, Guest, and Whittier pieces) were regularly quoted from during my growing-up years; the others I collected along the way in the decades that followed. You probably already know some of these; for the others, who knows, you may be intrigued enough to go look them up.

Poems and Quotations

“Paradise Lost” (John Milton, Book 1)

“The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.”

This is particularly compelling when you realize that this is Lucifer speaking shortly after he’s been expelled from Heaven ...

“The Winds of Fate” (Ella Wheeler Wilcox)

One ship drives east and another drives west
With the self-same winds that blow.
Tis the set of the sails
And not the gales
Which tells us the way to go.
Like the winds of the seas are the ways of fate,
As we voyage along through the life:
Tis the set of a soul
That decides its goal,
And not the calm or the strife.

“Myself” (Edgar Albert Guest)

I have to live with myself and so
I want to be fit for myself to know.
I want to be able as days go by
Always to look myself straight in the eye;
I don't want to stand with the setting sun
And hate myself for the things I have done.

I don't want to keep on a closet shelf
A lot of secrets about myself
And fool myself as I come and go
Into thinking no one else will ever know
The kind of person I really am;
I don't want to dress up myself in sham.

I want to go out with my head erect,
I want to deserve all men's respect;
But here in the struggle for fame and wealth
I want to be able to like myself.
I don't want to look at myself and know
Than I'm bluster and bluff and empty show.

I never can hide myself from me
For I see what others may never see
And I know what others may never know.
I never can fool myself and so,
Whatever happens, I want to be
Self-respecting and conscience free.

Quotes/Poems (John Greenleaf Whittier)

"If thou of fortune be bereft,
And in thy store there be but left
Two loaves, sell one, and with the dole
Buy hyacinths to feed thy soul."

"Of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these, 'It might have been.'"

"O Me! O Life!" (Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 1892)

Oh me! Oh life! of the questions of these recurring,
Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill'd with the foolish,
Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who more
faithless?)
Of eyes that vainly crave the light, of the objects mean, of the struggle ever renew'd,
Of the poor results of all, of the plodding and sordid crowds I see around me,
Of the empty and useless years of the rest, with the rest me intertwined,
The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?

Answer.

That you are here—that life exists and identity,
That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.

"The Need of Being Versed in Country Things" (Robert Frost, 1920)

The house had gone to bring again
To the midnight sky a sunset glow.
Now the chimney was all of the house that stood,
Like a pistil after the petals go.

The barn opposed across the way,
That would have joined the house in flame
Had it been the will of the wind, was left
To bear forsaken the place's name.

No more it opened with all one end
For teams that came by the stony road
To drum on the floor with scurrying hoofs
And brush the mow with the summer load.

The birds that came to it through the air
At broken windows flew out and in,
Their murmur more like the sigh we sigh
From too much dwelling on what has been.

Yet for them the lilac renewed its leaf,
And the aged elm, though touched with fire;
And the dry pump flung up an awkward arm;
And the fence post carried a strand of wire.

For them there was really nothing sad.
But though they rejoiced in the nest they kept,
One had to be versed in country things
Not to believe the phoebes wept.

“Nothing Gold Can Stay” (Robert Frost, 1923)

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.

“The Summer Day” (Mary Oliver, 1992)

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean—
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

“Kissing a Horse” (Robert Wrigley, 2006)

Of the two spoiled, barn-sour geldings
we owned that year, it was Red—
skittish and prone to explode
even at fourteen years—who'd let me
hold to my face his own: the massive labyrinthine
caverns of the nostrils, the broad plain
up the head to the eyes. He'd let me stroke
his coarse chin whiskers and take
his soft meaty underlip
in my hands, press my man's carnivorous
kiss to his grass-nipping upper half of one, just
so that I could smell
the long way his breath had come from the rain
and the sun, the lungs and the heart,
from a world that meant no harm.

“Touched by an Angel” (Maya Angelou, 1995)

We, unaccustomed to courage
exiles from delight
live coiled in shells of loneliness
until love leaves its high holy temple
and comes into our sight
to liberate us into life.

Love arrives
and in its train come ecstasies
old memories of pleasure
ancient histories of pain.
Yet if we are bold,
love strikes away the chains of fear
from our souls.

We are weaned from our timidity
In the flush of love's light
we dare be brave
And suddenly we see
that love costs all we are
and will ever be.
Yet it is only love
which sets us free.

“The honorary duty of a human being is to love.” —Maya Angelou

“All my work, my life, everything I do is about survival, not just bare, awful, plodding survival, but survival with grace and faith. While one may encounter many defeats, one must not be defeated.” —Maya Angelou

“No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same man.” —Heraclitus of Ephesus

Books

Black Like Me (John Howard Griffin, 1961)

A real eye-opener for an 11-year-old white girl living in suburban California.

Messages from My Father: A Memoir (Calvin Trillin, 1997)

“You might as well be a mensch.”

Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day (Judith Viorst, 1972)

“Some days are like that, even in Australia.”

The Pastures of Heaven (John Steinbeck, 1932)

Striving, ever striving to achieve unfulfillable aspirations (for love, connection, belonging, etc.) yet failing due to personal foibles or weaknesses—an everyman version of the classic hero myth.

The Red Pony (John Steinbeck, 1933)

“The Gift”: The hazard of loving...as soon as you admit you want something or care for somebody or something, it's taken from you.

“The Promise”: Be very careful what you wish for; it often comes in ways you didn't expect and with a cost far higher than you anticipated.

“Junius Maltby”: The soul-crushing effect of accepting another's view of yourself instead of your own, of following the dictates of convention instead of being true to yourself.

Siddhartha (Herman Hesse, 1922)

“What could I say to you that would be of **value**, except that perhaps you seek too much, that as a result of your seeking you cannot find...”

“**Words** do not express **thoughts** very well. They always become a little different immediately after they are expressed, a little distorted, a little foolish. And yet it also...seems right that what is of value and wisdom to one man seems nonsense to another.”

1984 (George Orwell, 1949)

Newspeak, the fragility and strength of language, the idea that by eliminating words, their very concepts can be eliminated—particularly relevant vis a vis today's thin skins combined with the current intolerant obsession with political correctness.

Tales from Shakespeare (Charles and Mary Lamb)

Planted the seeds for a love of Shakespeare, playing with words, live theater...

The Winter's Tale: "Exit, pursued by bear."

Hamlet: "A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of of the fish that hath fed of that worm. ... What dost you mean by this? ... Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar."

Penseés (Blaise Pascal, 1688)

The great gamble—believe/live as if God exists and he does, you have gained everything; believe and he doesn't exist, you have lost nothing... I vehemently disagree—you have lost dreadfully if you have not valued this life and lived it fully.

Black Beauty (Anna Sewell, 1877)

"...there is no religion without love, and people may talk as much as they like about their religion, but if it does not teach them to be good and kind to man and beast, it is all a sham..."

Bulfinch's Mythology: The Age of Fable, or Stories of Gods and Heroes

Don't piss off the gods.

Into the Woods (Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine, 1986)

Beware what comes after "happily ever after."

Candide (Voltaire, 1759)

"All is for the best, for we live in the best of all possible worlds."

"We must cultivate our own gardens."