

## Thou shalt not burn books!

Written by Natnael Yebio W.  
Friday, 31 March 2017 23:50

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Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772– 1834), British poet, has said that readers are divided into four classes: The first are like the hourglass and their reading being as the sand, it runs in and runs out, and leaves not a vestige behind, only reading for the sake of getting through time.

A second is like the sponge, which imbibes everything, and returns it in nearly the same state, only a little dirtier. A third is like a strain bag, allowing all that is pure to pass away, and retaining only the refuse and dregs. And the fourth is like the slaves in the diamond mines of Golconda, who, casting aside all that is worthless, retain only pure gems. These are the kind who profit from what they read, and enable others to profit by it also.

My uncle, Biniam, had been reading the Psalms (Dawit) in Ge'ez for the last forty years, with tears in his eyes, but if you ask him the meaning of what he had just been reading, he would simply gawk at you and blink his eyes. He read because he had to. He did not read with understanding, no, not at all. He read just for the sake of reading, or maybe he thought that by reading the Scriptures day and night, he might assure himself of a soft landing in heaven.

It would have been more profitable for my uncle had he read the Psalms not with the intention of acquiring sainthood (which is less certain) but to learn the complex Ge'ez grammar. He could have profited from reading.

If you are reading without a purpose and you don't understand what the book wants to tell you, then you are not reading; you are simply scanning the pages without mental processing. You

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can compare yourself to Ge'ez software in a computer trying to read passages in English.

Reading should trigger the mind causing one to relate things and formulate ideas. It should light the 'candles' that remain unlit in one's brain. It should by all means be able to effect some change in one's thinking and attitude.

Unbeknown to us, as we lead our daily lives, we are reading all the time: reading signs, symbols, icons; reading people's faces, reading body language, reading between the lines, reading people's emotions and reading the skies and the times we live in.

Once, there was this lady who was invited to a jet set dinner party along with her husband. It so happened that the group with which her husband conversed and sipped red wine began to talk about the political development in China, Turkey and Greece. The lady thought it was an easy subject to jump into and thus found herself throwing remarks now and then in the course of the high-flown and highbrow conversation.

Anyway her husband who knew better advised her to stay out of the discussion and told her sternly to simply listen with a feigned interest. But to his horror and dismay she insisted in joining the discussion and began to talk about where she had bought her beautiful set of china, and how she used it to serve her well-cooked turkey, and how she took much care that the grease did not run over and stained her silk tablecloth..... It was her last attendance in similar receptions.

This lady could have kept quiet and could have listened to what the people had to say, learning simply by reading their minds. But foolish as she was, she found it too demeaning to learn from others. In fact, she could have learned a lot by moving around and analyzing people's attitudes in a reception where food and drink come in plenty and free of charge.

Before the invention of the alphabets and books, people read the language of birds, the imprints of wild animals left on the ground, the various smells emitted by plants, the threatening grimaces of the enemy, the threatening looks of clouds, the signs in the sky, an impending earthquake, the behavior of insects and fish, etc.

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Ancient Egyptians read pictures that symbolized sounds or maybe ideas. The Incas or Aztecs read more or less similar symbols. And astrologers have always been reading the shape of constellations and the movement of stars.

The American Red Indian read the smoke puffs that rose from the mountain yonder and knew that negotiation did not pay and that he had to be ready for war against the paleface. Geronimo here I come!

Madam Olga, the fortune teller, read palms and told you that you would be laughing all the way to the bank, only to find out your assets have been frozen. The South African Bushmen read broken twigs and dried animal droppings to stalk their preys.

Reading is as much a habit as a cultivated skill which requires interest and insight. There are people who trot around the world and if you ask them to tell you something about the places they had visited or the people they had encountered, they remain dumb and unable to relate things. It is certain that they could have seen the Statue of Liberty, the Coliseum or even the Moulin Rouge. But it is their outer eyes and not their inner eyes they had used to see these historical monuments. Alas, they are unable to relate it to anything not because they are illiterate or because they have not read anything in life to make connections of events they have experienced in the past, but they are not gifted with the capacity to see things in an intelligent way, or maybe they are not inclined to do so.

However, reading should not be confined to books alone. It should include the reading and interpretation of anything that surrounds us, as demonstrated in the examples above.

Have you ever gone through a telephone directory lately? What about classified ads? Have you ever tried to read between the lines in government press releases? Can you learn anything from a restaurant menu? Magazine's anyone? Never! says the serious-looking company manager. Why not? If you don't see the lighter side of things, you will be condemned to see the dark side of things for the rest of your life.

If there is some habit that people should cultivate, it should be the habit of reading indiscriminately. Don't be lead by other people's opinion which book or magazine to read. Simply choose what interests you and begin to read. It may be the type of literature people call

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'garbage', but read it just the same if you happen to like it.

Some people say that we should be very careful in what we read, but I have seen people who read 'garbage' in English with ease and relaxation because they liked them and who finally showed significant change in their mastery of that language. By rubbish is meant cheap fiction. Strangely enough, I found out that those who read 'garbage' with ease and relaxation expressed themselves in English more fluently than those who read 'serious' books with much strain and effort.

Still some wits have left us pithy aphorisms and maxims that might discourage those who want to go on reading books of their own choice. They say that certain books emit light more if we burn them than if we read them. Again they say: Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested. And again someone had this to say: Thank you for sending me a copy of your book. I'll waste no time reading it. A bit cruel, isn't it?

I think it is better to read 'garbage' than never to read at all, for your mere reading of 'garbage' might induce some kind of habit in you and as you get bitten by the bug of reading, it will become a lifetime habit which is certain to bring untold joy to your otherwise humdrum life.

You may start with sick jokes or even commix, and once the reading habit established you might by some sort of miracle pass to the reading of heavy material such as contemporary literature and weighty dissertations.

I myself have developed the habit of reading from cheap fiction. From such books I learned hundreds of American idiomatic expressions and the ability to understand the use of everyday English spoken by simple people and in a matter-of-factly manner. This helped me to express myself in English with ease when people older than me struggled with their Essential English Book One, Two, Three, etc. with the result that at the end of the day they still continued to murder the Queen's English with impunity. Lucky me, I developed such confidence in my linguistic skills that I began to write simple essays in English while still young.

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Reading should be likened unto a mine rich in inestimable gems. It depends on the miner to get the finest of gems by hard work and patience. A miner comes over, looks around, begins to dig and sifts for gold, and after an hour or two packs up and leaves disappointed. Another prospector arrives along with his mule, looks around, takes his spade and begins to dig. No luck. He starts again and digs all around. No luck. He persists and begins to dig, plough, shove, and sift with the utmost patience. And finally he finds not only gold dust but small specks of diamond as well.

If you look carefully around you, you can find the most precious things in even the most unlikely places. There's no lousy book or literature but lousy brain or attitude. Of course, all books are not the same. Many are worth to be tossed away if it were not for the respect well-bred people have for writers who try their best. Well, on the other hand even fools have something to say to us if we listen carefully. Go on reading books written even by birdbrains with a special capacity to bore people to death, you can toss their books into the bottomless pit afterwards.

How many books in this world have begun as blockbusters and ended up in gutters; and how many books have begun with shouts of boos and insults and ended up as the brightest stars in the firmament of learning. The first commandment in this case should be: thou shalt not burn books!

Tired of books? Then read the world from which you came and with whose dust you will mingle one day.