

The value of reading

“Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body”. This truism, stated by Sir Richard Steele in the 18th century is so plain and evident that it hardly needs to be emphasized. And yet, just as we allow our physical body to accumulate fat and toxins, which a little exercise could have helped to eliminate, so do we allow our minds to rust, to corrode, and to oxidize because we do not bother to find the time to read. If bypass surgery can allay some of the dangers occasioned by clogged arteries, the ignorance, uncouthness and cultural impoverishment resulting from an absence of reading cannot be bypassed.

To my mind, the only alternative to reading is reading. Of course, one should not jump to the other extreme and read only “words, words, words” as Hamlet says to Polonius or read anything that comes under the eye without discriminating between what enriches and what degrades. But the fact remains that to develop an appetite for reading is a far healthier habit than many others.

The range of benefits that can accrue from reading and the intensity of pleasure that the love of reading can provide to a reader are extensive indeed. Teachers never tire of reminding their pupils that reading is the means par excellence to expose themselves to language in all its varied forms. One can say without any hesitation that reading is the best language coaching that students can obtain. But we can go a step further and say that reading is the gateway to education because books are the storehouses of knowledge. Apart from facts and figures, they contain the thoughts, experiences and teachings of the wisest minds.

Reading is a means of travelling, both in space and time as well as inwardly, within oneself. Indeed, books tear us away from our narrow, limited world to thrust us into other climes, to connect us with other beings like or unlike ourselves. Thus, the page becomes now a mirror, now a screen for us to see and to think, to probe, to understand, to differ and to agree, to accept and to tolerate. The mind is stimulated; the mind’s eye is opened and the reader sees in the head; recreates scenes and characters and penetrates their secrets. The book becomes an intimate companion, one we are reluctant to part from. Such is the spell that books can cast.

Lucky are those who contrive to fall under that spell because once this happens, then adieu boredom and routine, adieu stress and frustrations. Indeed, reading is a good physic against these present day maladies, as long as we set out with the right disposition. And here, the advice of the famous English essayist, Francis Bacon will come in handy; *“Read not to contradict and confute, not to believe and take for granted, not to find talk and discourse, but to weigh and consider”*.

We are living at an exciting period in the history of mankind when modern communications technologies are providing us with wider possibilities of extending and disseminating the written word across the globe. The onus is on us and on the coming generations. We have to choose between living on the fringe or probing deeper to reach the core. We could choose to listen to the wisdom of Francis Bacon who says, *“Reading maketh a full man.”*