The Benefits of Rereading

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Graduation Speech for Tall Oaks Classical School Class of 2011

My exhortation for you today will be "the benefits of rereading."

My concern is that when you leave here, you will think of those books and say, "Oh, yeah, I've read that before." If one of the books we've read here appears on a syllabus in a college course you take, I'm afraid you'll say, "Good—one less thing I have to do—I've already got that one covered, because I read it with Mr. Rippon at Tall Oaks."

I want to encourage you not to think of these books we've read as items to be checked off a life list in a "been there, done that" way, but instead to take every chance to read them again as you move forward in life. Why should we bother to reread any book? I offer two reasons: first, rereading is countercultural, going against the grain of our modern consumer culture; and second, rereading is key to the historic Christian faith and practice.

First, rereading is countercultural. These days, *any* sort of quality reading is countercultural. You may have noticed the pull away from reading in your own lifetimes. I know I have, as other distractions like Facebook and the need to check the latest newsfeed tempt me away from time I might spend reading a good book. In the July/August 2008 *Atlantic Monthly* article entitled "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" Nicholas Carr observes, "What the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation. . . . Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski."[1] Carr cites studies to show that he is not alone: people do not really read on the internet; they just skim. Rereading, as I am advocating for you to do, is a discipline that can keep us rooted in deeper soil, that can counter the effects of the media on our habits of mind, training us to be more attentive to God and to others.

In addition to going against the grain of our internet-shaped brains, rereading is countercultural because our modern consumer culture encourages us to throw off whatever is old in favor of the new. As you move forward, you will be constantly bombarded with ads to upgrade your internet service or your software, to get new phones, new clothes, new cars. We seek experiences that are ever new, and we move from one thing to another with blinding speed. That mentality affects many areas of our lives, including our reading. C.S. Lewis saw this modern age emerging when he observed the reading practices of his own day. In his book *An Experiment in Criticism*, Lewis noted, "The majority never read anything twice. The sure mark of an unliterary man is that he considers 'I've read it already' to be a conclusive argument against reading a work."[2] That quote was in a chapter entitled "The Few and the Many." I urge you, graduates, to be among the few, those who reread.

Rereading is a countercultural discipline in our modern age, but there's another culture where it's right at home: Christianity. In fact, rereading is key to the historic Christian faith and practice. I'm sure many of you would agree that the Bible is not the sort of text that you can read once and check it off and say, "Okay, I've done that. What next?" No, it is the sort of book that, as you read the end, sends you back to the beginning. The New Testament is constantly quoting the Old, sending us back to reread the text in light of the work of Christ.

Even within the pages of the Gospels we see Jesus exhorting his disciples as well as his opponents to reread the Scriptures. Several times, he uses the formula, "Have you not read . . .?" (Matthew 12:3,5; 19:4; 21:16,42; 22:31). Then, following his resurrection in Luke 24, Jesus explained to his disciples how "all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning me," and then "He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures" (Luke 24:44–45). From then on, the apostles themselves were able to open up the meaning of the Gospel using the Scriptures. The people of God began to see how the Old Testament pointed forward to Jesus Christ, and that demanded a rereading of it.

Not only was rereading the Scriptures key to the foundation of our faith, but it continues to be an essential part of Christian

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practice. In most traditional Christian churches, we find a culture that embodies the value of reading and rereading Scripture, whether it be using a lectionary—having the same texts come around in a regular yearly cycle to read or preach from—and using a liturgical calendar where certain Scriptures are read each year.

Others, not so high-churchy, nevertheless have a pattern of reading Scripture that ensures regular rereading. You may work through a reading plan like the one developed by Scottish minister Robert Murray McCheyne to take you through the Bible in a year. As we continue to read and hear the same texts over and over across various seasons in our lives, they mean more to us. They serve as a standard to mark our own progress in faith. They read us.

Rereading is essential because in our daily lives we are so quick to forget. A church history professor of mine at Westminster Seminary, Clair Davis, used to say that the Christian life is "a combination of amnesia and déjà vu"; we often find ourselves saying, as Davis put it, "I know I've forgotten this before." Oftentimes, for example, we forget the sufficiency of Christ's work on the cross as we continue to try to atone for our own sins or make others atone for theirs. We try to justify ourselves instead of finding our righteousness in Christ. We need the Scriptures to remind us of what we've forgotten.

Later readers of Scripture like Saint Augustine also saw the importance of rereading as foundational to their own faith. The famous scene of Augustine's conversion recounted in the *Confessions* where he responds to the child's voice to "Tolle, lege! Tolle, lege!"[3] was not his first-ever exposure to Scripture. Leading up to that moment, Augustine had already been studying the writings of the Apostle Paul, which is why he had that book with him. Over a decade earlier, Augustine had first read the Scriptures as a young student who was enamored with Cicero's call to philosophy. He was curious about what wisdom Scripture might have, but upon initially reading it, Augustine was not impressed. As a scholar of literature and rhetoric, Augustine confused style with substance, and when the Latin translation of the Bible he was reading did not compare with the elegance of Cicero, he dismissed it. Later, as the bishop of Hippo writing the *Confessions*, Augustine would write "the Bible was composed in such a way that as beginners mature, its meaning grows with them."[4]

So we should keep rereading the Bible, but what about other works? I would argue that rereading even non-biblical, pagan literature is helpful for our Christian discipleship. Augustine serves as an example here, too. In his *Confessions*, Augustine remembers with wonder how he was so moved by *The Aeneid* as an adolescent: "What is more pitiable than a wretch without pity for himself who weeps over the death of Dido dying for love of Aeneas, but not weeping over himself dying for his lack of love for you, my God . . ."[5] However, when he wrote his *Confessions* about 25 years later, Augustine shaped his own journey to faith after that epic. Just as Aeneas moved from Carthage to Italy to fulfill his divine calling, Augustine too moved from Carthage to Italy, eventually coming under the influence of Saint Ambrose of Milan, who baptized him. The young Augustine's response to *The Aeneid* revealed his spiritual blindness, but the middle-aged Augustine shows how, when read through Christian eyes, *The Aeneid* becomes a conversion story. Aeneas's awakening to his true calling anticipates Augustine's own conversion.

In addition to being foundational to Christian practice, the willingness to reread displays a certain childlike spirit that Jesus commends, a childlike sense of wonder that does not grow bored with repetition. Here I'll borrow a favorite motif from Mr. Turley [another teacher at Tall Oaks] and invoke how G.K. Chesterton points out in a chapter of *Orthodoxy* called "The Ethics of Elfland," that children are willing to say "do it again," reflecting our God who says the same to the rising sun each day. My youngest son still loves for me to read books like *Goodnight Moon* and *Big Red Barn* to him, though he's heard them dozens of times.

But what other books should you reread, in between board books and the Bible? In his book *How to Read a Book*, Mortimer Adler divides books into several categories, the last of which are ones that you want to reread. He says, "You discover on returning that *the book seems to have grown with you*. You see new things in it—whole sets of new things—that you did not see before. Your previous understanding of the book is not invalidated (assuming that you read it well the first time); it is just as true as it ever was, and in the same ways that it was true before. But now it is true in still other ways, too."[6] Those are the types of books that we have read at

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Tall Oaks, for the most part: ones that can bear multiple rereadings.

The Iliad is one such book. G. K. Chesterton once wrote, "The 'Iliad' is only great because all life is a battle, the 'Odyssey' because all life is a journey, the Book of Job because all life is a riddle."[7] To conclude, I will share a little of my own experience reading and rereading *The Iliad* over the years, and I hope it might encourage you to read it and other works again as you move forward.

I first read *The Iliad* when I was in tenth grade, in the fall of 1989. My father was in the Air Force and my family had just moved from Hawaii to Louisiana, where I was to finish up my high school years. Having spent a lonely summer reading many Stephen King horror novels, my first reaction to reading *The Iliad* was rather unliterary: I thought the death scenes were awesome! I thought it was great that we could read a book in school that was as gory as the horror novels I had been reading on my own. Yet I had an English teacher that year, Mrs. Hemingway, who, when I proudly listed all the Stephen King books I had read that summer, did not ridicule me, but instead patiently pointed me toward better books. She did what C.S. Lewis said in *An Experiment in Criticism*, "The real way of mending a man's taste is not to denigrate his present favourites but to teach him how to enjoy something better."[8] I doubt I would be teaching literature at a classical school if it weren't for Mrs. Hemingway's encouragement when I was in tenth grade.

Since then I have had the opportunity to reread *The Iliad* several times. In between each of those readings I grew as a person, and my reaction deepened beyond my adolescent excitement at the gory death scenes. Five years later, in 1994, I reread *The Iliad* in a literature course when I was a cadet at the Air Force Academy. Having committed to serve in the military, I could better understand what war might cost and what it might mean to be an honorable soldier. Then, when I was preparing to teach a literature course at the Academy six years after that, in 2000, I read it again. Having lived overseas in Korea for almost a year, having seen the way the North Korean soldiers and South Koreans stare at each other across the de-militarized zone—I was more sensitive to the way Homer showed how war affects both sides.

Several more years passed in-between readings of *The Iliad*. I left the Air Force and went to seminary. My wife and I had two children and our third was on the way, when, in August of 2007, I showed up in a classroom of ninth-graders . . . and toward the end of each class period Mr. Todd would come up from teaching the sixth graders; he always seemed to come in at an awkward time, and point out something that I should have been paying attention to, like a certain back-row student chewing gum who deserved a demerit. Sometimes he would come when we were reading an especially gruesome scene in *The Iliad*, and he made fun of me for that, but I had to read those scenes, because that was what first got me into *The Iliad*. But studying in the context of a Christian school, we could see so much more there: we could see how tragic life was under polytheism, without the one true God; how all of that bloodshed was a perverse counterfeit of the blood of Christ, shed for us; how apart from Christ, serving our own idols, we would continue to shed each other's blood in an attempt to make things right on our own terms. The heroes of those epics are mere shadows of the one true Hero, our Lord Jesus Christ.

. . . I urge you to reread *The Iliad* because life is a battle, reread *The Odyssey* because life is a journey, and definitely keep rereading the Scriptures because they tell the story that includes and accounts for all of the other stories, not only posing riddles like Job but giving answers in the Gospel; the Scriptures are the story that God is telling through all our battles and journeys, all our losses and gains, all our commencements and all our returns home. May that great Author and Finisher of our story , our Lord Jesus Christ, bless you, graduates, as you go from here.

Notes:

1. Nicholas Carr, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" *The Atlantic*, July 1, 2008, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/
2. C.S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2.
3. St. Augustine, *Confessions*, VIII. xii. View at http://www.ccel.org/ccel/augustine/confessions.pdf
4. Ibid., III.v.
5. Ibid., I.xiii.
6. Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Dorn, *How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), 343.
7. G.K. Chesterton, *The Defendant* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1902), 47.
8. C.S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 112.