

Why Read?

by Sergio Troncoso

I believe this is the crisis of our times: we are losing readers, we are forgetting why reading is important as well as pleasurable, and we are becoming accustomed to a culture focused primarily on images. What happened to our long-term attention span? Why are logic and fact-based analysis overshadowed by rhetoric and politics? Why can't we slow down? Why do we believe responding in real time on Twitter and Facebook is 'meaningful involvement' with society or family? Why is reading more important than ever?

Over the past few weeks, I have been reading Edith Wharton's novels at night, and have marveled at the modernity of the protagonists, from Lily Bart to Undine Spragg, and at Wharton's ability to keep the story moving, the characters evolving, and the reader surprised. I like to learn from good novelists, and I am learning from Wharton.

I have timed my reading to finish whenever a Yankee game is on the Yes Network, and if no game is at hand, then at least *Storage Wars* or *American Pickers*. That's it. That's about the only TV I watch, or I feel is worth watching. My kids rarely watch TV, and my wife only watches the news, if that. They do see episodes of *The Office*, *The Daily Show*, and *The Colbert Report* on their computers, which prompts me to consider whether I should cut cable TV once and for all. But I don't. Not yet. I want to, but I don't.

Since Aaron and Isaac were toddlers, my wife and I read to them. Every night. Thirty minutes for Laura. Thirty minutes for me. This was our religion through their grade school years. Not surprisingly Aaron and Isaac as high-school students are enthusiastic readers for pleasure. After school, they are as likely to guffaw at Stephen Colbert on their MacBooks as they are to read their novels in bed. But this family culture of reading, if you can call it that, took years to foment, took attention and care to implement and nurture, and took active dismissal of what I would call the normal American culture of not reading.

I am often asked how I became a reader, in part because many know that I grew up poor along the Mexican-American border of El Paso, Texas. My parents did not read to me. They could read and did read in Spanish, but most of my reading was in English. My parents did hand me two or three dollars for paperback books I ordered at South Loop School from Scholastic Books every other Friday. But more importantly, they left me alone. They left me alone with my massive collection of paperbacks, and they never disparaged my love of reading. The opportunity to read and the space to read are as important as having your parents read to you. I still remember the lime-green bookshelves my handy father built in my room. These bookshelves housed my treasures. I have never forgotten how he took the time to do what mattered to me.

So I don't know if you are made a reader, or if you are born a reader. What I do know is that reading widely—reading beyond your time and culture, reading different genres, reading in different languages—changes your perspective profoundly. Television becomes a bore, and what is said and done on television is amusing. But it's rarely

Source: <http://chicolingo.blogspot.com/2012/05/why-read.html>. Used with permission from the author.



importa
shoutin
little no
well, a
read. TH
another
because

Yes,
ism, if y
who stu
Will any

We
not bea
official
we are

I mean
ignore
to thin

world a
have yo
What ki

its pris

Beca

humorle

and cat

goodnig

know th

meanin

Think

WHY D

Consid

ing rea

and cur

encour

read? H

explain

Crit

than sin

to read

sary ski

profess

commu

important. The crisis of the day or the outrage of the day becomes just more inane shouting to get your attention. On the Internet, online status updates are interesting little notes about your life, but never more than that. It's not really who you are, and well, a serious reader would know that. But you worry about the others. Those who don't read. Those who take television as the truth. Those who sell stocks at the clarion call of another 'crisis,' or buy gold as they anticipate a Mayan apocalypse, or attack an 'other' because 'they' are after us, aren't they?

Yes, I worry about our American culture and how it is shaping us. It's short-termism, if you can call it that, its obsession with fluff and images, its endless talk about who stunned in what dress. Are any of us ever going to look like Victoria Secret models? Will any of us ever get a chance to date them?

We are not 'censored' in the traditional way in the United States: writers are not beaten or killed because of their words, and no Ministry of Truth enforces an official version of what can be printed and thought. But in this culture of images, we are censoring ourselves. That may be more insidious and long-lasting. What I mean is that we disparage long-term complexity, and extol superficiality. We ignore reading, and lavish time on images. To read, in my mind, is to consider and to think. To see an image is to react. What happens when we start believing the world and what is important in it are only these reactions and prejudices? What have you become when the most expected of you is simply to press a 'Like' button? What kind of gulag is it when its inhabitants are too stupid to understand they are its prisoners?

Because I live in a different milieu of my own creation, and also because I'm rather humorless unless the joke is really quick and clever and insightful, I'd rather be reading and catch a Yankee game afterwards. For me, that's the perfect night. I can kiss my wife goodnight, and kiss my boys goodnight too (yes, remarkably, they still let me), and know that I am happy to do things the simple way, the slow way. I focus on how I find meaning in my life over the long-term. That is how I work to be free.



Thinking-Writing Activity

WHY DO YOU READ?

Consider what Sergio Troncoso said about the importance of reading and how losing readers is "the crisis of our times." In a paragraph or two, describe your past and current reading habits. For example, did you grow up in an environment that encouraged reading for pleasure? What do you read now, and how often do you read? Have your reading habits changed over time? If so, describe how, and then explain your feelings about whether or not this might be a crisis of our times.

Critical thinkers and thoughtful writers are avid readers. But there is more to it than simply reading. In order to fully absorb and engage with a text, a reader needs to read actively and critically. The following sections will help you hone this necessary skill, and whatever, however, or wherever you plan to communicate in your professional life, these fundamental reading skills will make you a better writer and communicator.
