

To Learn Something

The best thing for being sad...is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honor trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then---to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the thing for you. Look at what a lot of things there are to learn—pure science, the only purity there is. You can learn astronomy in a lifetime, natural history in three, literature in six. And then, after you have exhausted a million lifetimes in biology and medicine and theocriticism and geography and history and economics---why, you can start to make a cartwheel out of the appropriate wood, or spend fifty years learning to begin to learn to beat your adversary at fencing. After that you can start again on mathematics, until it is time to learn to plough.

White, T. H. (1939). *The once and future king*.

The Pleasures of Learning

As most schools are set up today, learning is compulsory. It is an "Ought: even worse, a Must, enforced by regular hours and rigid discipline. And the young sneer at the Oughts and resist the Musts with all their energy. The feeling often lasts through a lifetime. For too many of us, learning appears to be a surrender of our own will to external direction, a sort of enslavement.

This is a mistake. Learning is a natural pleasure, inborn and instinctive, one of the essential pleasures of the human race. Watch a small child, at an age too young to have had any mental habits implanted by training. But if the pleasure of learning is universal, why are there so many dull, incurious people in the world? It is because they were made dull by isolation, by surrender to routine; sometimes, too, by the pressure of hard work and poverty; or by the toxin of riches, with all their ephemeral and trivial delights. With luck, resolution and guidance, however, the human mind can survive not only poverty but even wealth.

This pleasure is not confined to learning from textbooks, which are too often tedious. But it does include learning from books. Sometimes, when I stand in a big library like the Library of Congress, or Butler Library at Columbia, and gaze round me at the millions of books, I feel a sober, earnest delight hard to convey except by a metaphor. These are not lumps of lifeless paper, but minds alive on the shelves. From each of them goes out its own voice, as inaudible as the streams of sound conveyed by electric waves beyond the range of our hearing; and just as the touch of button on our stereo will fill the room with music, so by opening one of these volumes, one can call into range a voice far distant in time and space, and hear it speaking, mind to mind, heart to heart.

But, far beyond books, learning means keeping the mind open and active to receive all kinds of experience. One of the best-informed men I ever knew was a cowboy who rarely read a newspaper and never a book but who had ridden many thousands of miles through one of the western states. He knew his state as thoroughly as a surgeon knows the human body. He loved it, and understood it. Not a mountain, not a canyon that had not much to tell him; not a change in the weather that he could not interpret.

As for reading books, this contains two different delights. One is the pleasure of apprehending the unexpected, such as when one meets a new author who has a new vision of the world. The other pleasure is of deepening one's knowledge of a special field. One might enjoy reading about the Civil War, and then be drawn to a particularly moving part of it—the underground railway, say, which carried escaping slaves northward to freedom. One would then be impelled to visit the chief way stations along the route, reconstructing the lives of those resolute organizers and thankful fugitives.

Many people have played themselves to death, or eaten and drunk themselves to death. Nobody has ever thought himself to death. The chief danger confronting us is not age. It is laziness, sloth, routine, stupidity, forcing their way in like wind through the shutters, seeping into the cellar like swamp water.

Many who avoid learning, or abandon it, find that life is drained dry. They spend 30 years in a club chair looking glumly out at the sand and the ocean; on a porch swing waiting for somebody to drive down the road. But that is not how to live.

No learner has ever run short of subjects to explore. The pleasures of learning are indeed pleasures. In fact, the word should be changed. The true name is happiness. You can live longest and best and most rewardingly by attaining and preserving the happiness of learning.

Hightet, G., *The immortal profession: The joys of teaching and learning* (1976)