

## **An Education in 404 Pages\***

If asked what America needs most today, I would reply: America needs a good liberal arts education.

But a good education is getting ever harder to find. Not everyone is fortunate enough to be able to spend four years at Vanderbilt. And not everyone can find the time to get a good education by reading all the “Great Books.”

With this in mind, I suggest the following list for the consideration of all who feel in need of a good liberal arts education. This list can provide an education, not by reading a few hundred books, but by reading only a few hundred pages.

My recommended reading list for all Americans is:

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance.” ... We must be true to ourselves. Only by being true to ourselves as individuals will we be able to build a true society of individuals that will be worth sharing. We must never be afraid to stand alone in the crowd. (36 pages)

Alexis de Tocqueville, “The Principle of Interest Rightly Understood,” from Democracy in America. ... Our real self-interest, as individuals and as a society of individuals, is in our broader as well as our narrower needs, and in our needs tomorrow as well as our needs today. We need others, and we have obligations to others. (4 pages)

Thucydides, “The Melian Dialogue,” from History of the Peloponnesian War. ... “The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.” We may be stronger than others, but that does not make us right. All of history is an effort to prove that might does not make right. (6 pages)

James Madison, Number 10 and Number 51, The Federalist Papers. ... For government to help make right into might for all of us, government must be founded on an understanding of the reality of human nature. “If men were angels, no government would be necessary.” We are capable of both good and evil. We can always make progress. We can never achieve perfection. (11 pages)

Adam Smith, “Of the Division of Labor,” from The Wealth of Nations. ... Like government, all economics must begin with an awareness of our unchanging human nature. We tend toward exchange, trade, and an ever-expanding and ever-deepening division of labor. It is in our nature. (21 pages)

Voltaire, Letter 15, “On the System of Gravitation,” from Letters on England. ... Unique to human nature is human reason. Reason made science. Science made the modern world. Science can help us make an even better world. (9 pages)

Richard Feynman, “The Uncertainty of Science,” from The Meaning of It All. ... Science gives us our technology. Science does not give us our values. And science does not give us certainty. Science is a way of living with uncertainty and also with doubt. (26 pages)

Plato, “The Cave,” from The Republic. ... We must doubt. The world may not be as it seems. We live in shadows, and we must search for the light of the truth. (9 pages)

Michel de Montaigne, “Of Cannibals,” from The Essays. ... Local custom is not necessarily eternal truth. There are other ways to live and think. There are other ways to search. We Americans do not have a monopoly on wisdom, virtue, or truth. (15 pages)

John Stuart Mill, “Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion,” from On Liberty. ... Truth emerges from free and open discussion among free individuals in a society that cherishes the freedom of thought. Truth welcomes debate. Truth welcomes criticism. (44 pages)

Karl Popper, Chapter 10, The Open Society and Its Enemies. ... In the “closed society,” there is no freedom of thought. In the “open society,” the individual is free to think and to choose. The freest society is the “open society” where the individual is free to make the most possible personal decisions about how to live. (32 pages)

Fyodor Dostoevsky, “The Grand Inquisitor,” from The Brothers Karamazov. ... In deciding how to live, we have a choice as individuals. We can choose to let others think for us, and be slaves. Or we can choose to think for ourselves, and be free. Choose. (24 pages)

Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from the Birmingham Jail.” ... We *all* must be free to choose. Freedom belongs to everyone. Lest we forget. (6 pages)

Virginia Woolf, Chapter 6, A Room of One’s Own. ... And “everyone” includes women. Again, lest we forget. (20 pages)

Abraham Lincoln, “The Gettysburg Address.” ... A lot of good people have died so that we can be free to choose. A lot. Never forget. (1 page)

Suetonius, “Augustus, Afterward Deified,” Sections 61-96, from The Twelve Caesars. ... Be skeptical of those you choose to entrust with your freedom. They, too, are human. Even Caesar Augustus, to seem taller, wore lifts in his sandals. (20 pages)

George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language.” ... Some of our leaders will lie to us. They will use words without meanings. They will hide behind empty phrases. Make them accountable. (12 pages)

Edmund Burke, “Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol.” ... The best leaders will help keep us free by telling us what we truly need to hear — and not just what we want to hear. We need their judgment, and not just their echo. (35 pages)

Samuel Johnson, Number 21, The Rambler. ... We are none of us immune to the frailties of human nature. We each imagine that we are superior in some way to others. We are not. Be humble. (5 pages)

Immanuel Kant, “On Perpetual Peace.” ... Despite our nature, despite our frailties, we can be better than we are. Thus, the world can be better than it is. Keep trying. (33 pages)

Henry David Thoreau, “On Seeing,” from his Journal. ... Try to see. Seeing is understanding. “We cannot see anything until we are possessed with the idea of it, and then we can hardly see anything else.” Keep looking. (3 pages)

Plutarch, “On Contentment.” ... Look not for fame or fortune. Fame is hollow. Fortune is fickle. We must find contentment in life no matter what blows life deals us. Keep living. (28 pages)

Soren Kierkegaard, “The Story of Abraham,” from Fear and Trembling. ... Reason alone does not suffice for living. Reason can only take us just so far toward understanding. Beyond that, we must make the “leap to faith.” Keep believing. (8 pages)

William Hazlitt, “On the Feeling of Immortality in Youth.” ... But believe in this world as well as the next. When we are young, we all think we will never die. We will. Life is short. Life is meant to be lived. So seize the day. (6 pages)

This is my list.

Total: 404 pages.

Of course, much is missing here. Poetry. Fiction. Song. Scripture. Shakespeare. The Bill of Rights. The Sermon on the Mount. And a whole library filled with a whole lot more.

My list could go on. Your list would surely be different. But try starting here. Starting with this list will give you — and will give every American — an education in 404 pages.

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\*This essay first appeared, in slightly different form, in Vanderbilt Magazine (Spring, 2003).