

Karen Swallow Prior: Good Books Make Better People

Why history's wisest figures have seen a connection between reading well and living well.

Karen Swallow Prior December 12, 2018



When I was a young girl, I gathered up all my books from my bedroom, carried them downstairs into our finished basement, arranged them on a bookcase, and opened my own little library. I'd like to say I did this in order to let my friends check out the books to read, but I think it's more accurate to say that I *made* them do it. Now as an English professor, I make my students read books, and it has been both my passion and my job to encourage people to read widely.

When I began teaching, I found I had to become a kind of apologist for literary reading. Some of my Christian students (along with their nervous parents) were wary of reading "worldly" literature by authors who, perhaps, were hostile to the Christian worldview. As a young professor at an evangelical university, I developed an approach to teaching my classes that began with a biblical basis for reading literature, including literature that is not necessarily "Christian." I came to relish every opportunity to teach my students (and sometimes their parents) how such reading ultimately can strengthen one's Christian faith and worldview. I became an evangelist for reading widely.

Then, over the past several years, something began to shift. Now nearly everyone seems to be reading more—and more widely. I seldom encounter students who have been sheltered from diverse points of view, transgressive ideas, or atheistic arguments. Or even Harry Potter. Between blog posts, Twitter feeds, listicles, and long-winded Facebook rants, everyone seems to be reading something most of the time—right from the palm of their hand. Yet we don't seem to be better readers. In fact, we seem to be worse. (Just spend two minutes following a Twitter thread if you have any doubts about this.) Yes, reading seems to be on the rise. But reading well? That's another story.

Story, in fact, is where we might turn to improve our reading skills. Numerous studies by cognitive and behavioral scientists over the past several years have indicated that reading literary fiction cultivates empathy. This is because literary fiction—which shows rather than tells—requires readers to make the same kind of predictions, assessments, and evaluations we must make every day in real life. Indeed, the connection between literature and character goes all the way back to Aristotle, who argued that literature is a training ground for the proper development of human emotions.

Jesus himself affirmed the power of stories by telling parables, little stories that cast a real-life truth alongside the fictional one. In the Old Testament, Nathan used the form of a story to confront King David with the truth about his sin. The wisest people in history have always known that good literature is a school of virtue. In rediscovering the art of reading well, we can recover our sense of virtue, too.

Reading with Excellence

The word *virtue* simply means *excellence*. A virtuous person is someone of excellent character. Reading virtuously, or with excellence, means putting into reading all that it demands so that you can harvest the fruit it is designed to yield.

Reading is inherently virtuous. Consider the fact that Christianity is a religion of the word, a faith centered on words and, ultimately, the Word itself. From the inscription of God's will in stone at Mt. Sinai to the God-breathed inspiration of the Bible's 66 books (which include numerous literary genres, from poetry to epistles, from history to prophecy), Christianity places primacy on reading—and reading well. Indeed, the widespread literacy of the modern world was a gift from Christianity; followers of Christ wanted to spread the Word of God by teaching as many people as possible to read it.

Now, centuries later, in the midst of what many cultural critics describe as a post-literate age, the major questions we face in both the church and our nation center on reading: How do we read Scripture? How do we read the Constitution?

Two inseparable disciplines are at the heart of virtuous reading: the straightforward task of comprehending the words on the page and the more complicated project of judiciously interpreting their meaning, both within and beyond the text.

Reading well isn't just a virtuous activity in itself. It can also help cultivate other virtues. Consider what reading requires of the body and the mind: stillness, rest, reflection, focus, attentiveness. It's easy to imagine how luxurious and indulgent such an activity was hundreds of years ago, when life, for most people, revolved around long hours of hard, physical labor. Yet even as life has become more sedentary in the 21st century, our lives are anything but quiet and focused. So even today the very act of reading helps moderate the excesses that characterize much of modern life. And this is the essence of virtue in traditional thought: It is the mean between an excess and a deficiency, or the moderation between two extremes.

In a world rife with choice, where so many activities compete for our attention, the simple decision to set aside time to read requires a kind of temperance. If, like me, you have lived long enough to have experienced life—and reading—before the internet, perhaps you now, again like me, find your attention span shortened and your ability to sit and read for long stretches diminished. Researchers have studied the disruptive, fragmentary, and addictive nature of our digitized world—the demands of its dinging, beeping, and flashing devices—and cataloged its dangerous effects on our minds. As Nicholas Carr explains in *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, “the linear mind is being pushed aside by a new kind of mind that wants and needs to take in and dole out information in short, disjointed, often overlapping bursts—the faster, the better.” Our brains work one way when trained to read in logical, linear patterns, and another way when continually bouncing from tweet to tweet, picture to picture, and screen to screen.

To read virtuously is to rebel against this chaos. Above all, reading well requires reading closely: being faithful to both text and context, interpreting accurately and insightfully. The attentiveness necessary for deep reading—the kind we practice in reading literary works as opposed to skimming news stories or social media posts—requires patience. Careful interpretation and evaluation require prudence. To practice any of these skills is to cultivate the virtues they demand.

Virtue and Vice

It's not only that the act of reading cultivates virtue. Just as importantly, the *stories themselves* impart valuable lessons in virtuous living. In portraying virtue (and vice) in action, great works of literature provide vicarious experience in exercising virtue or bearing the consequences of vice. Want to know what happens when we cast off all internal and external restraints? Read Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Want to

witness the destructive power of vengeance? Read Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Want to examine the implications of an existential worldview? Read Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Want to encounter the indestructibility of the human spirit? Read Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The process of evaluating characters in literature—good, bad, or a mixture of both, like most everyone in life—is a process that shapes our own character. It is a virtue-building enterprise.

The virtue of humility is thought to be the foundation of all other virtues. *Humility* comes from the same root word as *human*, one that means earth or ground, the substance of our bodies' origin and ultimate decay. To have humility, then, is to understand our origins and our place in the world, to have an accurate sense of who and what we are. Thus, virtuous humility isn't just a matter of acknowledging our limitations and weaknesses; it recognizes gifts and strengths, too. Humility is an accurate assessment of oneself in relation to the world and to God.

Humility is one of the most prevalent themes in the novels and short stories of Flannery O'Connor. Her odd, startling, and frequently violent stories often feature a painful but necessary humiliation that opens a character to receiving grace and redemption. "Revelation" is one such story. The bulk of the narrative occurs in a doctor's waiting room, where the main character, Ruby Turpin, observes those around her, judging them in light of the superficial manners and shallow morality she mistakes for true Christianity. Ruby clearly enjoys seeing herself as superior in comparison. She and her husband, Claud, are farmers, and Ruby literally thinks their pigs don't stink.

Suddenly, amidst Ruby's self-righteous musings, the college-aged daughter of a woman with whom she has been chatting hurls a book at her head, screaming, "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog." Humiliated and hurting—not only physically, but emotionally and spiritually—Ruby returns home, where she begins an angry conversation with God in the hog pen. It ends with a vision, a revelation, in which she sees all kinds of saints marching into heaven: black, white, poor, and crippled too. And in that glorious procession, she sees people like Claud and herself—people with greater advantages in life—bringing up the rear. When her revelation of the first becoming last concludes, Ruby turns back to the house with the voices shouting "Hallelujah" still ringing in her ear.

We can't face the truth about ourselves—that we are not always as good as we think—without humility. It also can require courage, another of the classical virtues. Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* offers excellent insights into courage, both the true and false versions. When Huck runs away and befriends another runaway, the slave Jim, he must confront everything he has been taught about right and wrong. Huck's humane heart and malformed conscience war with one another when he deliberates over what to do with this "stolen property." Although his upbringing has

taught him that returning Jim would be “right,” he can’t bring himself to be so cruel. And so he decides to do what he thinks is “wrong” and risks (or so he believes) being sent to hell for committing so terrible a sin as hiding a slave. Huck demonstrates courage, but because he is acting on that misshapen set of moral values, he does not exemplify the most virtuous form of courage.

Huck’s pal Tom, who agrees to help him hide Jim, doesn’t display the virtue of true courage at all. Virtuous courage is the mean between rashness and cowardice. But Tom, who loves danger and adventure for their own sake, errs too much on the side of rashness, building extra risks into their endeavor just to increase his fun. True courage neither avoids nor seeks danger.

It is Jim, in fact, who demonstrates the most virtuous courage of all. When Tom’s foolhardy risks end up getting him shot in the leg, Jim stays around to protect the boy, knowing full well that doing so will put him in danger of being recaptured and returned to slavery. Jim counts the cost and puts Tom’s life before his own freedom. More than any other character, he embodies the virtue of true courage.

The “most unpopular of the Christian virtues,” C.S. Lewis once quipped, is chastity. Chastity, or sexual purity, is the mean between self-indulgence and self-denial, and it involves far more than what evangelicals mean when they speak of “abstinence.” Chastity is not a negative, but a positive quality: The chaste person expresses sexuality, but only within a biblical sexual ethic. It is not limited to bodily acts but includes purity of mind and will as well. Thus, an unchaste mind is guilty of lust, while a victim of sexual abuse loses no purity by having her will, along with her body, violated.

We learn a great deal about the virtue of chastity from Edith Wharton’s devastating short novel *Ethan Frome*. The story centers on a lonely young man who, while married to a sickly and quarrelsome woman, falls in love with a young, cheerful aide who arrives to help care for her. As we are drawn into Ethan’s story—sympathizing with his suffering, feeling his loneliness, repulsed by his wife’s bitterness, and delighting with him in this young woman’s innocent vivacity—we see how being unchaste begins subtly, is easily nurtured, and quickly develops into something overpowering. We see how indulging the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life paves the way for Ethan Frome’s disastrous end.

Practice Makes Perfect

These are just three examples. There are many more virtues and an infinite library of good books in which to explore them. Yet for most of us, sustained reading, particularly

of literature (as opposed to informative, argumentative, or even theological writing), is becoming increasingly difficult for the reasons described above.

Whether you feel you have lost your ability to read well or you never acquired that ability at all, be encouraged. The skills required to read well are no great mystery. Reading well is simple. It just takes time and attention. Reading well begins with understanding the words on the page. Digital-age reading conditions us to pivot quickly to interpretation and evaluation, which means we often skip the fundamental task of comprehending what the words actually mean. Attending to the words on the page requires deliberation, and this improves with practice.

Practice makes perfect, but pleasure makes practice more likely, so read something enjoyable. If a book is so agonizing that you avoid reading it, put it down and pick up one that brings you pleasure. Life is too short and books are too plentiful not to. Besides, one cannot read well without enjoying reading.

On the other hand, the greatest pleasures are those wrought of labor and investment. A book that requires nothing from you might offer the same diversion as a television sitcom, but it is unlikely to provide intellectual, aesthetic, or spiritual rewards long after the cover is closed. Therefore, even as you seek books that you will enjoy reading, demand ones that make demands on you. In so doing, you can't help but grow in virtue.

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