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Reflections on Reading

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REFLECTIONS ON READING

TILTING AT WINDMILLS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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In recent years, as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and other forms of communication exploded, some have seen the focus of the Chief of Naval Operations Professional Reading Program (CNO-PRP)—advocacy of reading books of consequence—as a rather *quixotic* undertaking. This term, derived from the great novel *Don Quixote de la Mancha* by the Spaniard Miguel de Cervantes, in which the title character does battle with a windmill, often is used to describe wasted and foolish endeavors.

On closer examination, however, promoting literature is less quixotic these days, in part because of technological developments in the area of electronic reading devices. The popularity of electronic readers such as the iPad, Kindle, and Nook actually has revived the art of reading. These devices do not replace reading; they make it easier! They also make it, in the eyes of many, a “cool” thing to do; whereas reading a dusty old book from some library shelf is decidedly “old school,” reading the same material as an electronic book (e-book) on the screen of a high-tech tablet is somehow more socially acceptable.

The purchase of an e-book reader, now costing less than a hundred dollars in some formats, opens the door to hundreds of thousands of books from every genre, often for a minimal fee and many for free. As a bonus, the wireless communications technology that makes such devices possible means that the time lapse between thinking about obtaining a book and beginning to read it can be measured in mere seconds. Never have information and entertainment been available so readily.

So, if e-book readers make reading easier and more socially acceptable, how best do we encourage people to read books in general, whether on these devices

or in hard-copy form? One way is to consider what some well-known and highly intelligent folks have had to say over the centuries about the value of reading.

- One of the earliest recorded quotes about reading comes from the Chinese philosopher Confucius, who noted, “No matter how busy you may think you are, you must find time for reading, or surrender yourself to self-chosen ignorance.”
- Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus (ca. 1466–1536) wrote, “When I get a little money, I buy books; and if any is left, I buy food and clothes.”
- In the eighteenth century, columnist Richard Steele wrote, “Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body.”
- One of America’s greatest writers and humorists, Mark Twain, has been quoted (correctly or incorrectly) as saying: “The man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who can’t read.”
- At least two U.S. presidents have shared their thoughts about reading:
 - Harry S. Truman noted, “Not all readers are leaders, but all leaders are readers.”
 - Lyndon Baines Johnson said, “A book is the most effective weapon against intolerance and ignorance.”
- In more recent years, management consultant and best-selling author Stephen Covey wrote: “There’s no better way to inform and expand your mind on a regular basis than to get into the habit of reading good literature. . . . You can get into the best minds that are now or that have ever been in the world.”
- The highly popular and prolific author Stephen King called books “a uniquely portable magic.”
- Publisher Charles Scribner wrote, “Reading is a means of thinking with another person’s mind; it forces you to stretch your own.”
- Educator and reading expert Mortimer Adler said, “It’s not how many books you get through, it’s how many books get through to you.”
- And finally, motivational speaker Charlie “Tremendous” Jones said: “You’re the same today as you’ll be in five years except for the people you meet and the books you read.”

Many of these pithy quotes would make great bumper stickers, and they serve an important purpose by helping to capture the joy and fascination that can be found in reading. The CNO-PRP is the Navy’s focused effort to make books of consequence available at little or no cost to sailors throughout the fleet. Our hope is that these works will be read, in whatever form, to improve

the professionalism of the men and women of the finest Navy in the world. The program's actual motto is "Read Well to Lead Well"—a bumper sticker I might even stick on my Corvette!

JOHN E. JACKSON

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