



English: Loving Texts

What if reading were about learning to love a text?

David was teaching secondary English literature and began to wonder whether he could help students to experience important texts in a less consumerist manner.

“Christianity has a long tradition of thinking about how to engage in ‘spiritual reading,’ the kind of slow, engaged reading of sacred texts that can lead to spiritual growth. While we were not reading the Bible, it still seemed that with a great piece of literature we should approach the text with respect, love its author as our neighbor, and be open to the possibility that the reading could change us. It seemed to me that too often the texts we read were digested hastily and used as raw material for getting good grades on worksheets. So I set about to make some changes.

“I assigned a very rich poem (I chose one by Gerard Manley Hopkins) and asked students to read it several times for homework. Then in class I led the group in a few different ways of reading it. I asked them to read through it as fast as they could, and then to say how much they had gotten from it that way. Then I read it aloud to them, pausing after each thought or image for a few moments of silence, and we talked about how that was different. I also had them read it silently and focus on where they would choose to pause, and then read it aloud to each other. Next, we started looking at particular lines and discussing what questions we could bring to them that would help us find out more of what was hidden there. I talked to them about what it might mean to love a text—did that necessarily mean liking it (as in “I love ice cream!”), or could it mean giving it respectful attention and being open to hearing from it (as in “love your neighbor”)?

“At the end of the class period I told them that their homework was to read the same poem again and to bring notes on things they thought we had missed in our first class discussion. Too often we read things only once and then check them off, making them into things to be consumed or tasks to be completed.”

What's going on here?

David **saw** his English lesson as a chance to practice reading with loving, respectful attention. He saw reading as connected to love and respect and encouraged his students to make the same connection.

He **engaged** students in rethinking the act of reading and experiencing reading in different ways. He encouraged them to reflectively contrast different ways of reading, and gave them concrete ways of practicing focused attention (slow and repeated reading, silence). By talking about reading in terms of loving one's neighbour, he offered a way of connecting faith to the way we read.

He **reshaped his practice** by choosing a new frame (reading as loving) and specific question, providing different ways of participating in reading, explicitly planning for reflection on how we read, and attending to the structure of the lesson (questions, repetition, silences).

What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

It is easy for students to go through life glancing at the world, giving it superficial thought and attention. **Loving** attention is grounded in humility and respect, a willingness to believe that there is something worthwhile that escaped our first glance. This is an attitude that others deserve to be heard and that recognizes their worth as people made in the image of God. In learning to love a work, we step outside our immediate likes and dislikes and seek to give our attention to something that is important to someone else. This does not have to be an emotional response; it is more of a commitment with a willingness to be challenged.

What difference does it make?

The way David taught this lesson made students aware of the way their usual ways of reading could limit their engagement with deep texts. It offered students concrete practice in extending their ways of reading and challenged them to move beyond immediate likes and dislikes.

Where could we go from here?

Looking and listening with loving attention could be encouraged in other subjects (e.g., developing ways of viewing artworks or listening to music that are slow and attentive).

Digging deeper

Casual glancing can be the result of our overstimulated environment, but our own self-absorption, superficiality, and lack of respect can also lead to paying scant attention. We need to cultivate a deep way of viewing the world so that we can look away from self to the object or person seen. We need to try to see things on their own terms and not just from our perspective. This is a way of viewing the world that is not centered on self.

Do you wish to be great? Then begin by being. Do you desire to construct a vast and lofty fabric? Think first about the foundations of humility. The higher your structure is to be, the deeper must be its foundation. Augustine

If we value others, we give their lives, ideas, and what they produced careful attention. A painting takes time, skill, creativity, and hard work. The artist gives something of him- or herself. Paying loving attention to what we study is a mark of respect and that takes humility. Humility was an attitude exemplified by Jesus (Philippians 2:5).

By paying loving attention to others' work, we recognize their worth. The Bible teaches that people have worth by virtue of being created by God and made in his image or likeness (Genesis 1:27). If everyone is made in God's image, that means we can learn from a wide range of people, not just Christians, though discernment is needed. All people have the potential to reflect the image of God.

Scholars differ in how they understand what being made in the image of God means; it could be our creativity, our role in bringing order in the world, our ability to make moral decisions, and our social relationships. It could be our abilities to think or to have a relationship with God. All these are related; the image of God cannot be reduced to one thing. The image of God is marred in humanity, like a cracked mirror. Only Jesus perfectly reflected God.



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