Where Does Reading Lead?

By Simon Pelletier

I have an inner voice – and I think we all do. This voice tells me what I think and what I want. A companion throughout my life, starting from when I began to read in my head. It narrates the happenings of my life and provides a reason for each event. Encouraging, critiquing, ruminating, cursing, praising, questioning. A narrator to my dreams and desires. These thoughts are there every moment of everyday. A deluge of self-talk that often goes unnoticed – white-noise tuned out like the refrigerator. However, if I sit and listen, I can hear what I'm saying. Meditators will name what their mind is doing. "Thinking," "sadness," "thinking," "fear,"; emotion after thought, after emotion after thought. Through mindfulness I can observe these constant visitors.

In therapy I express my inner dialogue to my therapist. She returns these thoughts and feelings back to me. I can then see them in new light.

I can be anxious and grieving without realizing what I'm telling myself. I might say that I'm alone, that I'm un-lovable, that I will never get what it is I desire. A sense of calm might be reached I told myself that I'm worthy of love, that I'm beautiful and capable of great things. I'm trying to show the power of the inner voice on our life. These thoughts come from within, and thoughts, often, lead to action.

When I read, the letters on the page use this thought machine. My inner voice paired with the authors words fills my head, and if the writing is captivating, I'm caught in the moment.

Reading fiction can transport me to another world. The characters lives feel as vivid as mine. A few hours of my mundane life traded out for a grand adventure in a far-away place. My desire for adventure comes from the stories I've read as a young child. To steer a barge down the Mississippi River. To drive across America. To sail a boat to Indonesia. To lead an army to victory. To live on a ranch in the rolling prairies.

Or I could read non-fiction. Non-fiction tells what the world is, what it should be, what it could be. It shapes how I see life. The person I want to be, the places I want to live, the work I want to do.

Mostly I want to talk about non-fictions ability to change my mind. I will acknowledge that fiction has an equal effect, perhaps in a subtler way, but I'm going to leave that argument

for someone else.

There are two ways in which I change myself. I either act on an idea or I mirror an action I see in the world.

When someone tells me an idea in person I'm more likely to accept the idea if it aligns with my values. My values are an extension of the inner voice. If I don't like what I hear, the inner voice will say something. But if I read about the idea, the text is spoken by my inner voice. And it's harder for the voice to defend what it thinks because it's busy telling me what the author thinks. It's a subtle thing but quite different. Change can only come from within and reading a book of ideas I'm opposed to is more apt to sound correct when I speak them myself than if someone is telling me the ideas out loud. A book plants someone else's vision into my mind.

In the Vietnam war pow's were made to write essays that explained why communism was superior to capitalism. When they were finally released, at the end of the war, the majority of these prisoners were against America and it capitalist system. The point is that I can convince myself of something if I'm are forced to speak and reason out why it might work. Even if initially I might not believe in the idea.

While reading a book written by someone else isn't the same as writing the book myself. It's close enough to using my own voice that it hijacks some of the same mechanisms. I'm more likely to take on the position that the author is holding than if she was reading it to me out loud.

And so the power of books is the melding of others ideas with our own inner dialogue. If we want our mind to change we simply bring those ideas into this inner realm and recite them to ourselves. A powerful force. Be careful….