

Technology, Culture, and Dignity — Reading #4

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The Vanishing American Adult (2017)

Chapter Eight: Build a Bookshelf [excerpts]

Europe was created by history. America was created by philosophy.

—Margaret Thatcher

[1] America is a different kind of place. It was founded *deliberately*, by people with strong *ideas* about heaven and hell, about rights and responsibilities, about public and private—and about the kind of society that would promote virtuous living and serious thinking. And it has therefore always been a magnet for the intense.

[2] Our settlers and founders were an opinionated lot—people of controversial ideas, life-and-death ideas. They wanted the liberty to worship and to argue freely, and to not be subject to a Church of England they considered decadent. The Puritans who left the Old World for the New brought with them a particular piety and a strain of democratic civic-mindedness that would eventually give birth to modern constitutional self-government.

[3] We cannot understand them, or this nation of theirs we've inherited, without grasping that one crucial—and at the time radically new—element that made possible the widespread dissemination of the religious and political ideas they carried with them: the printed word. The men and women who founded our nation did so by riding the wave of the print revolution. Their moment was historically unprecedented, and our failure to remember this neglects the related truth that what we read, or don't read, still drives not only what we believe but also how we engage with each other and how we make decisions about our future. As has been noted often, living in a republic demands a great deal of us.

[4] Among the responsibilities of each citizen in a participatory democracy is keeping ourselves sufficiently informed so that we can participate effectively, argue our positions honorably, and, hopefully, forge sufficient consensus to understand each other and then to govern. To this end, our critical faculties must be in top condition—the ability not just to evaluate sources, weigh evidence, and check facts, but also to understand motivations, resolve apparent contradictions, cut through ambiguities, and maybe even discover truths. These skills and habits are in ill repair, and the informed contentiousness that a free republic demands is beleaguered and fraying.

[5] On the way to adulthood, young Americans must develop these skills, for themselves and for us. If they don't, we're all in big trouble. The proliferation of distractions and misdirections is growing worse by the day. As "fake news" stories spreading on social media demonstrate, we all have to be skeptical of things passed along as news. The digital communications revolution will continue to democratize people's access to information in ways that are both healthy and unhealthy. Critical, engaged reading skills are not a luxury, but rather a necessity for responsible adults and responsible citizens.

[6] America's future depends on the kind of thinking that reading presupposes and nourishes—and such thinking demands a rebirth of reading.

DIGITAL DISTRACTIONS AND THE HABIT OF READING

[7] You met my buddy Scott briefly in the last chapter, as the guy with whom I spent the winter of 1992-93 traveling abroad. In the two decades since, he's spent most of his time back home in Pittsburgh prosecuting criminals and coaching his five rowdy sons in Little League. As fathers, we compare notes about parenting—our joy in our kids' development, our worries about cultural gales threatening to blow them off course, and our uncertainty about whether we're doing a good enough job toughening them up for the future. Scott is endearingly quirky: When we graduated from Harvard, he had bills to pay and was worried about his own work ethic; so—without really telling anyone—he went and worked in an iron foundry for the better part of a year before starting his first permanent job.

[8] Last year, Scott took a similar lean-in approach to his parenting when he posed what at first seemed like a simple question, but one that ended up consuming weeks of my life: "Carrie and I worry that our kids don't understand the glories of books—they don't love them enough. What books will your kids to have read by the time they leave home?"

[9] Melissa and I work hard to shape our kids toward reading well, and loving reading, and embracing and really knowing a bunch of good books, but we'd never put it quite like this. That *end date* on Scott's query—"by the time they leave home"—nudged us to a new urgency about our calling to have them be not just functionally literate but fully habituated to reading important things by the time they depart from under our roof. We realized that for them to claim their full inheritance as Americans, they need to read and to understand the role of reading in our republic. They need to feel a desire in their chests to become people of the book, even amid the seductive lure of the screen. And this won't happen without a program for what to read. We aim for our kids to leave home for college or work, not necessarily having *finished* a great reading list but definitely having *built* and begun to get to know their own great starter reading lists.

[10] And so we direct and encourage them: to build their own long-term reading list, to persuade others to read their favorites, to be humble and curious in accepting the recommendations of others, and to actively adjust their list as they wrestle with and learn from others. This process we've created is not the same as claiming that they can develop one fixed canon of what to read that is right for everyone, but rather that they should have an evolving list of their own that they will use in prioritizing their reading of fifty or sixty key books. The primary goal is premised on the idea that there are only so many hours in a day. This makes it essential that they become stewards of their limited time as they fall in love with reading particular books. The second goal is to encourage them to engage with friends and neighbors and in the process develop a kind of list of "water cooler books" instead of just TV shows. It's fun that my kids can quote some old *Seinfeld* episodes with their cousins, but it's far more meaningful for them to be able to quote some Shakespeare together.

[11] Becoming truly literate is a choice. Reading done well is *not* a passive activity like sitting in front of a screen. It requires a degree of attention, engagement, and active questioning of which most of our children currently have a deficit. The core question is not whether you hold in your hand an old-fashioned paper book or a new electronic book, but rather that even when you read from a screen, you develop the self-discipline to ignore the temptation to check email or scores or social media every few minutes. Reading done well requires a forward-leaning brain. Our culture's ever-present distractions—the obsessive appeals to immediacy ("What 'news' might I be missing?")—conspire to blunt our curiosity and distract us from sustained thought. The relentless pull of the

digital world, with its demands that our kids submit to the shiny and the immediate, threatens to make them not just less literate but also more like subjects than citizens. At our house we challenge ourselves to read for sixty minutes without looking at smartphones, televisions, or computers.

[12] Tragically, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average American now reads only nineteen minutes per day. And younger Americans are reading far less than the national average. That our emerging adults take so little interest in reading today is not just sad for them, it's also a threat to the idea of democracy, which has long assumed the ability to read—and a desire to read. It is not only the content of a book that changes you but the shared community with those who have read it, discussed it, argued about it. Books create communities here and now, as well as across space and time.

[13] Obviously movies and television shows can also create a shared experience of a story, but a culture ruled by print is very different from one ruled by images. Print shapes the way we write, speak, think, and remember. Every presidential election year, people lament the shallow, soundbite-driven spectacles that pass for debates and pine nostalgically for the depth and honest substance that Lincoln and Douglas brought to their encounters. But few Americans would have the patience or the endurance for a Lincoln-Douglas-style debate today. When the two men met on stage in Ottawa, Illinois, on August 21, 1858, they agreed to a format that would have multiple hour-long speeches and rebuttals. At one debate, Douglas spoke three hours uninterrupted. In another forum, Lincoln suggested a break so the audience could "go home, eat dinner, and return refreshed for four more hours of talk."

[14] We aren't wired that way anymore. Or, more accurately, we no longer have the habits—the attention span that comes with concentrated and uninterrupted reading—that would make debates like that conceivable, let alone pleasurable. But a republic's survival still depends on an informed and engaged citizenry. Conscientious reading—and therefore dispassionate deliberation—remains the key to grappling honestly with the pressing issues of time.

[15] The good news is that these skills can be self-taught. And our unique history has much to offer in our quest to revive a love of reading among the rising generation.

THE BLOODLESS REVOLUTION

[16] For our emerging adults to understand America's place in world history—and to participate fully as inheritors in this project of self-government and resilient citizenship—they must first comprehend what an outlier it is, across the sweep of human experience, for every single one of us to have cheap and easy access to books. The origins and perpetuation of this experiment in self-rule are simply not understandable without grasping how unprecedented it was for our Founders to be able to make the argument for the *universal engagement of a people in deliberation* about their own self-governance . . .

[17] It's hard to exaggerate how transformative the move was from a preliterate to a mass-literate culture—and that shift was enabled by one man's invention. For that we owe our thanks to Johannes Gutenberg, my "man of the millennium." The debut of this historically unique tool in 1454, in the words of one scholar, "heralded nothing less than a *bloodless revolution*. New dimensions of knowledge, its dissemination and networking were opened up by the media revolution that was set in motion," first in Germany, and eventually everywhere. The printing press took the production of books out of the hands of scribes meticulously copying manuscripts for years and

gave it instead to typesetters who could produce hundreds of copies of a book in a matter of days. Gutenberg's invention quickly supplanted the old, inefficient way of preserving and transmitting knowledge. "Learning became book-learning," as Lewis Mumford observed, and anybody could acquire it.

[18] In arguably the most radical leveling event in history, the poor suddenly became near equals of the rich in terms of access to information. Almost every other step of inclusion of the previously economically marginalized over the coming centuries depends on this first step of inclusion into the community of those with access to knowledge. Printing democratized reading and fertilized the cultural soil that produced the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment, along with the political, scientific, and industrial revolutions that sprouted in the seventeenth century and reached full flower two centuries later. "More than a triumph of technical ingenuity," the printing press was "one of the most potent agents at the disposal of western civilization" in bringing together scattered ideas of thinkers across time and geography and then spreading those ideas far and wide. And its number-one product—the book—was "one of the most effective means of mastery over the whole world."

[19] Printing had existed before Gutenberg came along, but the process was so grossly inefficient as to not matter much. The prior measure of productivity was that one monk could reproduce, on average, just over one, nearly error-free, handwritten manuscript page per day. Gutenberg's innovations, which eventually produced presses literally millions of times as efficient as monks copying by hand, remade the world overnight—and there was unimaginable demand for the broadsheets and books he made possible. People wanted knowledge. There was insatiable appetite for old wisdom and new information, from near and far, on every subject under the sun. Within fifty years, more than 1,000 printers had set up shop in 350 cities and towns throughout Europe, publishing 30,000 to 35,000 different titles with a total output between 9 and 20 million books.

[20] Unsurprisingly, the first book Gutenberg printed was the Bible. Until about the year 1000, the most literate men in Europe belonged to the clergy, which had a monopoly on this book. Almost everybody else learned through icons and images. Before Gutenberg, churches chained down their Bibles, in part because they were so expensive and difficult to produce, but also to limit their circulation and who was permitted to read them. The cheap and quick production afforded by Gutenberg's press democratized and universalized reading, transforming hierarchies of knowledge and ultimately all of society.

[21] The shift from a manuscript culture to a print culture was radical. With manuscripts, the emphasis was on preservation. If you had the only existing copies of Cicero's *Letters* or Euclid's *Geometry*, you weren't likely to share these rare, fragile artifacts. Instead, you kept them safe from vandalism and decay. The physical book was often more important to its owner than the ideas therein. You would want to ensure the survival of those manuscripts for subsequent generations of elite, full-time scholars.

[22] After Gutenberg, print culture made copying simple. If you were a printer, you had different incentives: to see your work spread far and wide. Preservation became less of a concern than *propagation*. Books were transformed from heirlooms to *tools*. And ideas were freed to become viruses, for good and for ill.

Fareed Zakaria

America's Educational Failings

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[1] By It is now well known that Thomas Piketty — the French economist and author of the 700-page bestseller “Capital in the Twenty-First Century” — argues that the free market tends to produce inequalities of wealth that become dynastic and anti-meritocratic. The solution that everyone is talking about is taxing the rich. But in reading the book, it's clear that Piketty recognizes that, “over a long period of time, the main force in favor of greater equality has been the diffusion of knowledge and skills.”

[2] After all, countries such as India and Brazil had extremely high tax rates in the 1970s and 1980s without creating broadly shared growth. East Asian countries, by contrast, with high literacy rates and an increasingly skilled workforce, managed to achieve both growth and relative equity. This is not an argument against higher taxes but one emphasizing that, for better results, education remains crucial. Alas, it is an area in which the United States is failing.

[3] If reading Piketty reminds us of the troubling inequalities of wealth, the recent report by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) on adult skills in rich countries provides an equally grim picture of the inequalities of knowledge — one that for the United States is terrifying. Thirty-six million American adults have low skills. And these are not just older workers. In two of the three categories tested, numeracy and technological proficiency, young Americans who are on the cusp of entering the workforce — ages 16 to 24 — rank last.

[4] This is the first-ever comprehensive survey of the skills adults need to work in today's world — in literacy, numeracy and technology. As with the Programme for International Student Assessment tests that the OECD conducts for fourth- and eighth-grade children, this survey is designed to test problem-solving and not rote memorization. Scoring well on these tests turns out to be directly related to jobs, rising wages and productivity, good health, and even civic participation and political engagement. Inequality of skills is closely correlated to inequality of income.

[5] The tests demonstrate that people develop skills at a young age, peak in proficiency at age 30 and then begin to decline. So, if people start out with bad education and low skills, those disadvantages are likely to persist throughout their lives. The picture of the United States is deeply troubling. Despite having high economic performance, the country does poorly along almost every dimension. It is below average in literacy and technological proficiency, and it's third from the bottom in numeracy for 16- to 65-year-olds. Interestingly, France, Piketty's country, also fares poorly.

[6] Inequalities of skills are also becoming generational and entrenched. The United States had a wide gap between its best performers and worst performers — though it had a smaller percentage in the top range compared with countries such as Japan, Finland and the Netherlands. And it had the widest gap in scores between people with rich, educated parents and poor, undereducated parents. The United States has high levels of education and a large percentage of its workers in adult learning and training programs, and it spends lots of money on all these activities. And yet, it does worse than many countries with few advantages and resources. (And

no, it isn't just because of immigrants. About half of the OECD countries now have a larger percentage of foreign-born adults than does the United States)

[7] What we learn from this study is really just an extension of what we have discovered in the PISA results. The biggest force behind falling American rankings is not that the United States is doing things much worse but that other countries have caught up and are doing better. The U.S. system of education and training is inadequate in the new global environment. And things show no signs of improving. The bipartisan backlash against the Common Core— a set of national standards— is a tragic example. Parents raised on a culture of low standards and high self-esteem are outraged that the tests show that many American schools are not teaching their children enough. (The tests must be at fault because they know that their kids are brilliant!) Some liberals are upset with the emphasis on testing (though Randi Weingarten, the head of the AFT, has endorsed the Common Core). And Republicans now oppose it— despite having championed it only a few years ago— largely because the Obama administration also backs the project.

[8] “The principal force for convergence of wealth— the diffusion of knowledge— is only partly natural and spontaneous. It also depends in large part on educational policies,” writes Piketty. In other words, if we really want to reduce inequality, we need to reform the system, spend money where needed . . . and get to work at it now.
