

Pillars

1st Place Stuckey Contest Winner

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It is a theory of mine that there is one central pillar that every single person on the planet builds his identity around. There's a single element in his life that provides a structure for his thoughts, desires, and actions; the detail that fills in the outline provided at birth. The pillar can be anything from sports to art, from music to science. It's immediately evident in the truly successful, not necessarily because they love what they are doing, but because they approve of whom they've become. Who would Nikola Tesla be without his curiosity or Nelson Mandela without his compassion? These are people who have managed to find and nurture the spark that makes them unique human beings. And for me? Well, my pillar is reading.

If I was told to point to one part of my life that has influenced me the most, it wouldn't be reading. No, I'd point to my drive to study computer science, or my interest in philosophy. These are things I think about often, things that most frequently motivate me. On a deeper level, however, they aren't truly what make me...well, *me*. In fact, you could strip away huge chunks of my "identity" and still wind up with a mostly Connor-shaped block at the end. However, if you were to take away reading, I would cease to be the person that I am today. It is because so many of my beliefs and values are ultimately sourced in literature that I would be fundamentally different if I didn't read as much as I do. Honestly, it's practically impossible for me to explain just how integral the stories that I immerse myself in are to who I am.

What's interesting about this is that I don't read what most people would call classical literature. I find Charles Dickens dull, George Orwell illogical and unable to relate to F. Scott Fitzgerald's admittedly excellent works. To tell the truth, the whole concept of classical literature seems stifling, as though you can separate every book into either a worthwhile experience or a piece of trash. It seems to me that a book's excellence is relative to a reader's situation. And that each reader must define a book himself. This is what I find so fascinating about written works in general, whether its novels, short stories, or even graphic novels. A piece of literature is what you choose to make it, and that is what makes reading unique among human pursuits.

Literature is singular among human creations in its ability to both be influenced by and influence one's perception. A piece of writing can introduce whole new perspectives on existence for one person, and be simple-minded for another. A children's book might be completely inane to an adult, but still heavily influence a child's future. Conversely, that same book might be simply extended nap time for a child, but reveal basic and profound truths to an adult. In my opinion, no other realm of human endeavor is as capable of changing someone as thoroughly, regardless of age, gender, or race. It simply resonates with who you are.

I usually read science fiction and fantasy, or, as my mom calls them, "junk". This, for her, it might well be. For me, however, the novels I read are windows into completely different worlds, while at the same time having startling parallels to my comparably "Joe blow" life. Concepts like human decency and honor gain actual value in the overly dramatic lives of the characters I read about, and I find myself emulating them, as well as noticing these traits in other

people. The philosophical concepts one can find in the most ridiculous of today's penny dreadfuls are surprising. I'm quite proud of being able to describe most of the Transcendentalist philosophy before reading anything about it, purely from Brandon Sanderson novels. And while I'm a huge fan of science fiction and fantasy, hand me a history book and I'll get absolutely nothing from it, besides regurgitable facts.

Still, we've just touched the tip of the iceberg. While information about reading could (and does) fill libraries, it still wouldn't quite describe what it is about reading and writing that makes them so prolific throughout human history. Aside from the obvious benefits of being able to write information down, literature allows humans to expose themselves to experiences in a way that's impossible or at least highly difficult, to attain any other way. No human could ever hope to express his thoughts and feelings as well or to as many people as he can through a book. This, combined with the technological age, means that people's lives have the potential to live on forever, to become immortalized in the minds of the masses. Going forward, I believe humanity will become less and less violent as the mistakes of the past are made more and more accessible to the present. While firsthand accounts of the Crusades are hard to come by, everyone has seen at least one presentation on the mistakes of the Holocaust. It's my belief that reading about these experiences will be the machine of change going into the future.

On a more superficial level, reading is extremely entertaining. In no other medium of entertainment can you saturate your imagination quite as well as a good novel. For the cost, reading a good book is an unparalleled bargain. It is not limited by a production budget or song length and is completely reliant on what your brain makes of what you read. One day you could be witnessing epic world-building with Robert Jordan, next walking alongside gritty Joe Abercrombie characters. With a good imagination, a \$5 Kindle eBook becomes a blockbuster movie that lasts for several days.

I think this where many people tragically decide to stop reading for entertainment. I don't think anyone ever explains that a book meant for entertainment is just a framework that the imagination is supposed to fill. No book will ever describe the entirety of a story; every blade of grass, every yard of cement. It gives you the direction and the vehicle, and leaves it up to your inner creativity to fuel it. Unfortunately, I don't think that's explained in elementary education or wherever you'd find those cheesy motivational reading posters. And once you stop reading for entertainment, all of reading becomes a chore. Every assigned reading for English class, every Wikipedia article you have to slog through for your-so-called reputable research sources, all becomes much more difficult than it should be.

My pillar is reading. In the end, I think it simply comes down to connection. Whether it's for entertainment or information, persuasion or objectivity, reading is simply the best way to connect—to the author, to one another, to the entire world. Reading is the central support that I have molded myself around. It has shaped or at least modified almost every single belief I have had, and has led me to many new ones. It's expanded my ability to think with different perspectives, and has allowed me to more effectively and eloquently convey my ideas to others. I could never adequately describe just how important reading is to me, so I'll just have John Locke do it for me: "Reading furnishes the mind only with materials of knowledge; it is thinking that makes what we read ours."