

The
WELL-
EDUCATED
MIND



ALSO BY SUSAN WISE BAUER

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The Well-Trained Mind:

A Guide to Classical Education at Home

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The
WELL-
EDUCATED
MIND



*A Guide to the Classical Education
You Never Had*

Updated and Expanded

SUSAN WISE BAUER



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*For my mother
who taught me to read,
and my father
who gave me all of his favorite books*



Contents



Acknowledgments

9

PART I

BEGINNING:

PREPARING FOR CLASSICAL EDUCATION

Chapter 1

Training Your Own Mind:
The Classical Education You Never Had

13

Chapter 2

Wrestling with Books:
The Act of Reading

25

Chapter 3

Keeping the Journal:
A Written Record of New Ideas

35

Chapter 4

Starting to Read:
Final Preparations

42

PART II
READING:
JUMPING INTO THE GREAT CONVERSATION

Chapter 5
The Story of People:
Reading through History with the Novel
59

Chapter 6
The Story of Me:
Autobiography and Memoir
118

Chapter 7
The Story of the Past:
The Tales of Historians (and Politicians)
170

Chapter 8
The World Stage:
Reading through History with Drama
249

Chapter 9
History Refracted:
The Poets and Their Poems
317

Chapter 10
The Cosmic Story:
Understanding the Earth, the Skies, and Ourselves
401

Permissions
471

Index
473

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PART

I

Beginning:

PREPARING

FOR

CLASSICAL


EDUCATION

Chapter 1

Training Your Own Mind: The Classical Education You Never Had

All civilization comes through literature now, especially in our country. A Greek got his civilization by talking and looking, and in some measure a Parisian may still do it. But we, who live remote from history and monuments, we must read or we must barbarise.

—WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS,
The Rise of Silas Lapham

 THE YEAR I turned thirty, I decided to go back to graduate school.

I'd taken years off from school to write, teach literature as an adjunct lecturer, have four children. Now I was back in the classroom, on the wrong side of the teacher's desk. All the graduate students looked like teenagers. And graduate programs aren't designed for grownups; I was expected to stuff my family into the schedule designed for me by American Studies, live off a stipend of six thousand dollars per year while forgoing all other gainful employment, and content myself with university-sponsored health insurance, which supplied bare-bones coverage and classified anesthesia during childbirth as a frill. And I found myself dreading the coming year of classes. I'd been teaching and directing discussions for five years. I didn't think I could bear to be transformed back into a passive student, sitting and taking notes while a professor told me what I ought to know.

But to my relief, graduate seminars weren't lectures during which I meekly received someone else's wisdom. Instead, the three-hour weekly sessions turned out to be the springboard of a self-education process. Over the next year and a half, I was directed toward lists of books and given advice about how to read them. But I was expected to teach myself. I read book after book, summarized the content of each, and tried to see whether the arguments were flawed. Were the conclusions overstated? Drawn from skimpy evidence? Did the writers ignore facts, or distort them to support a

point? Where did their theories break down? It was great fun; trashing the arguments of senior scholars who are making eighty times your annual stipend is one of the few compensations of grad-student serfdom.

All of this reading was preparation for my seminars, in which graduate students sat around long tables and argued loudly about the book of the week. The professor in charge pointed out our sloppy reasoning, corrected our misuses of language, and threw water on the occasional flames. These (more or less) Socratic dialogues built on the foundation of the reading I was doing at home. On evenings when I would normally have been watching *The X-Files* or scrubbing the toilet, I read my way through lists of required books with concentrated attention. The housework suffered and I missed Mulder's departure from spook hunting; but I found myself creating whole new structures of meaning in my mind, making connections between theories and building new theories of my own on top of the links. I wrote better, thought more clearly, read more.

I also drove myself into work-induced psychosis. I stayed up late at night to finish my papers and got up early with the baby; I wrote my dissertation proposal on the living room floor, with a Thomas the Tank Engine track in construction all around me; I spent the night before my required French exam washing my four-year-old's sheets and pillows after he caught the stomach flu; I sat through numerous required workshops in which *nothing* of value was said.

Here is the good news: You don't have to suffer through the graduate school wringer in order to train your mind—unless you plan to get a job in university teaching (not a particularly strong employment prospect anyway). For centuries, women and men undertook this sort of learning—reading, taking notes, discussing books and ideas with friends—without subjecting themselves to graduate-school stipends and university health-insurance policies.

Indeed, university lectures were seen by Thomas Jefferson as unnecessary for the serious pursuit of historical reading. In 1786, Jefferson wrote to his college-age nephew Thomas Mann Randolph, Jr., advising him to pursue the larger part of his education independently. Go ahead and attend a course of lectures in science, Jefferson recommended. But he then added, "While you are attending these courses, you can proceed by yourself in a regular series of historical reading. It would be a waste of time to attend a professor of this. It is to be acquired from books, and if you pursue it by yourself, you can accommodate it to your other reading so as to fill up those chasms of time not otherwise appropriated."¹

¹Thomas Jefferson, in a letter to Thomas Mann Randolph, Jr., in Paris, dated August 27, 1786. This letter is in the University of Virginia Library, where it is titled "Education of

Professional historians might take umbrage at their apparent superfluity, but Jefferson's letter reflects a common understanding of the times: Any literate man (or woman, we would add) can rely on self-education to train and fill the mind. All you need are a shelf full of books, a congenial friend or two who can talk to you about your reading, and a few "chasms of time not otherwise appropriated." (Contemporary critics of university education might add that a Ph.D. doesn't necessarily train and fill the mind in any case; this, sniffs Harold Bloom, is a "largely forgotten function of a university education," since universities now "disdain to fulfill" our yearning for the classics.)²

Young Randolph was able to build on the foundation of a privileged education. But his home course in self-improvement was followed by many Americans who were less well schooled—including thousands of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women, who were usually given much less classroom education than their male counterparts. Limited to the learning they could acquire for themselves once a brief period of formal education had ended, American women of the last two centuries kept journals and commonplace books chronicling their reading, met with each other, and took responsibility for developing their own minds. The etiquette author Eliza Farrar advised her young female readers not only on manners and dress, but also on intellectual cultivation: "Self-education begins where school education ends," she wrote sternly.³

Many, many women took this advice seriously. Mary Wilson Gilchrist, a Civil War-era Ohioan who lived at home until her sudden death at the age of 24, could boast only of a single year at Ohio Female College, where she briefly studied trigonometry, English literature, French, music, logic, rhetoric, and theology—hardly time enough to gain even an elementary understanding of this laundry list of subjects, let alone mastery of their principles. But Gilchrist's education didn't cease when she returned home. She kept in her diary a list of the books she read: Charlotte Brontë, William Makepeace Thackeray, Henry Fielding, William Wordsworth, Virgil, Sophocles, and David Hume ("Difficult," she wrote of Hume, hoping that she would "retain some of it"). To keep herself motivated, she set up a reading club with a neighbor. "Mary Carpenter called," one diary entry reads, "and we made arrangements for reading Shakespeare together."⁴ Southern teenager Hope Summerell

a Future Son-in-Law," and is archived online at <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/JefLett.html>.

²Harold Bloom, *How to Read and Why* (New York: Scribner, 2000), p. 24.

³Eliza W. R. Farrar, *The Young Lady's Friend, by a Lady* (Boston: American Stationer's Company, 1836), p. 4.

⁴Mary Gilchrist's diary is quoted in Claudia Lynn Lady, "Five Tri-State Women During

Chamberlain wrote in her own journal of reading Humboldt's *Kosmos*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Madame de Staël's *Corinne*, and Guizot's *History of Civilization*, among other difficult books; the reading club she helped to organize was, in her own words, "a peace offering to a hungry mind."⁵

What if your mind is hungry, but you feel unprepared, under-educated, intimidated by all those books you know you *should* have read?

"Acquaint yourself with your own ignorance," Isaac Watts advised his readers, in his self-education treatise *Improvement of the Mind* (originally published in 1741). "Impress your mind with a deep and painful sense of the low and imperfect degrees of your present knowledge." This cheerful admonition was intended as a reassurance, not a condemnation: A well-trained mind is the result of application, not inborn genius. Deep thinkers, Watts assures us, are not those born with "bright genius, a ready wit, and good parts" (a relief for most of us). No matter how ignorant and "low" a mind might be, "studious thought . . . the exercise of your own reason and judgment upon all you read . . . gives good sense . . . and affords your understanding the truest improvement."

Today, as in Watts's own time, many intelligent and ambitious adults feel inadequate to tackle any course of serious reading. They struggle to overcome an indifferent education that didn't teach the basic skills needed for mature reading and writing. But Watts's admonition is still true: No matter how incomplete your education, you can learn how to read intelligently, think about your reading, and talk to a friend about what you've discovered. You can educate yourself.

Sustained, serious reading is at the center of this self-education project. Observation, reading, conversation, and attendance at lectures are all ways of self-teaching, as Isaac Watts goes on to tell us. But he concludes that reading is the most important method of self-improvement. Observation limits our learning to our immediate surroundings; conversation and attendance at lectures are valuable, but expose us only to the views of a few nearby persons. Reading alone allows us to reach out beyond the restrictions of time and space, to take part in what Mortimer Adler has called the "Great Conversation" of ideas that began in ancient times and has continued unbroken to the present. Reading

the Civil War: Day-to-Day Life," *West Virginia History*, vol. 43, no. 3 (Spring 1982): 189–226. Gilchrist's diary is excerpted on pp. 212–14.

⁵"What's Done and Past," unpublished autobiography, William R. Perkins Library, Duke University.

makes us part of this Great Conversation, no matter where and when we pursue it.

But sustained and serious reading has always been a difficult project—even before the advent of television. Much has been written about our present move away from texts, toward an image-based, visual culture: Schools no longer teach reading and writing properly. Television, movies, and now the Web have decreased the importance of the written word. We are moving into a postliterate age. Print culture is doomed. Alas.

I dislike these sorts of apocalyptic reflections. Streamed entertainment may be pernicious, but reading is no harder (or easier) than it has ever been. “Our post-revolutionary youth,” complained Thomas Jefferson in an 1814 letter to John Adams, “are born under happier stars than you and I were. They acquire all learning in their mother’s womb, and bring it into the world ready-made. The information of books is no longer necessary; and all knowledge which is not innate, is in contempt, or neglect at least.” Jefferson’s moan over the stage of modern intellectual culture laments the rise of a philosophy that exalts self-expression over reading. Even before the advent of television, reading that required concentration was a difficult and neglected activity.

In fact, reading is a discipline: like running regularly, or meditating, or taking voice lessons. Any able adult can run across the backyard, but this ability to put one foot in front of another shouldn’t make him think that he can tackle a marathon without serious, time-consuming training. Most of us can manage to sing “Happy Birthday” or the Doxology when called for, but this doesn’t incline us to march down to the local performing arts center and try out for the lead in *Aida*.

Yet because we can read the newspaper or *Time* or Stephen King without difficulty, we tend to think that we should be able to go directly into Homer or Henry James without any further preparation. And when we stumble, grow confused or weary, we take this as proof of our mental inadequacy: We’ll never be able to read the Great Books.

The truth is that the study of literature requires different *skills* than reading for pleasure. The inability to tackle, unaided, a list of Great Books and stick to the project doesn’t demonstrate mental inadequacy—just a lack of preparation. As Richard J. Foster eloquently argues in *Celebration of Discipline*, we tend to think (erroneously) that anyone who can read ought to be able to study ideas. “To convince people that they must learn to study is the major obstacle,” Foster writes. “Most people assume that because they know how to read words they know how to study.” But the opposite is true:

Studying a book is an extremely complex matter, especially for the novice. As with tennis or typing, when we are first learning it seems that there are a thousand details to master and we wonder how on earth we will keep everything in mind at the same time. Once we reach proficiency, however, the mechanics become second nature, and we are able to concentrate on our tennis game or the material to be typed. The same is true with studying a book. Study is an exacting art involving a labyrinth of details.⁶

Secondary schools don't typically train us how to read seriously, how to *study*. Their task is to produce students who are reading at the so-called tenth-grade level, a fluency that allows readers to absorb newspapers and Stephen King with ease. A university education ought to follow up on this basic literacy by teaching its freshmen how to read seriously, but many college seniors aren't much further along than their high school counterparts. Often, they graduate with a nagging sense of their own deficiencies; as adults, they come back to the task of serious reading and discover that it has not magically become simpler. Homer is still long-winded, Plato still impenetrable, Stoppard still bewilderingly random. Too often, these readers give up, convinced that serious books are beyond them.

But all that's missing is training in the art of reading. If you didn't learn how to read properly in school, you can do it now. The methods of classical education are at your disposal.

The world is full of self-improvement methods. What's distinctive about classical education?

"Some books are to be tasted," wrote the sixteenth-century philosopher Francis Bacon, "others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested." Bacon, who had a knack for the quotable (he is also responsible for "The remedy is worse than the disease" and "Knowledge is power"), was suggesting that not every book is worthy of serious attention. But the three levels of understanding he describes—tasting, swallowing, and digesting—reflect his familiarity with classical education. In the classical school, learning is a three-part process. First, taste: Gain basic knowledge of your subject. Second, swallow: Take the knowledge into your own understanding by evaluating it. Is it valid? Is it true? Why? Third, digest: Fold the subject into your own understanding. Let it change the way you think—or reject it as unworthy. Taste, swallow, digest; find out the facts, evaluate them, form your own opinion.

⁶Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper, 1978), p. 67.

Like Bacon, the classical schoolmaster divides learning into three stages, generally known as the *trivium*. The first stage of education is called the *grammar* stage (in this case, “grammar” means the building blocks, the foundational knowledge of each academic subject). In elementary school, children are asked to absorb information—not to evaluate it, but simply to learn it. Memorization and repetition are the primary methods of teaching; children are expected to become familiar with a certain body of knowledge, but they aren’t yet asked to analyze it. Critical thinking comes into play during the second stage of education, the *logic* (or “dialectic”) stage. Once a foundation of information is laid, students begin to exercise their analytical skills; they decide whether information is correct or incorrect, and make connections between cause and effect, historical events, scientific phenomena, words and their meanings. In the final stage of secondary education, the *rhetoric* stage, students learn to express their own opinions about the facts they have accumulated and evaluated. So the final years of education focus on elegant, articulate expression of opinion in speech and writing—the study of rhetoric.⁷

Classically educated students know that this pattern (learn facts; analyze them; express your opinions about them) applies to all later learning. But if you haven’t been classically educated, you may not recognize that these three separate steps also apply to reading. It is impossible to analyze on a first reading; you have to grasp a book’s central ideas *before* you can evaluate them. And after you’ve evaluated—asking, “Are the ideas presented accurately? Are the conclusions valid?”—you can ask the final set of questions: What do you think about these ideas? Do you agree or disagree? Why?

Classrooms too often skip the first two steps and progress directly to the third, which is why so many elementary texts insist on asking six-year-olds how they feel about what they’re learning, long before they’ve properly had a chance to learn it. This mental short cut has become a habit for many adults, who are ready to give their opinions long before they’ve had a chance to understand the topic under study. (Listen to any call-in radio show.) And the habit of leaping directly to the rhetoric stage can prevent even mature minds from learning how to read properly. The density of ideas in Plato or Shakespeare or Thomas Hardy frustrates the mind that comes to them ready to draw conclusions. To tackle a course of reading successfully, we have to retrain our minds to grasp new ideas by

⁷A proposal for K–12 education following this pattern is described in detail in Jessie Wise and Susan Wise Bauer, *The Well-Trained Mind: A Guide to Classical Education at Home*, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009).

first understanding them, then evaluating them, and finally forming our own opinions.

Like badly taught six-year-olds, we are too quick to go straight to opinion making without the intermediate steps of understanding and evaluation. The British mystery writer Dorothy L. Sayers, proposing a return to classical education for the twentieth century, lamented the loss of the classical “tools of learning” in a speech at Oxford:

Has it ever struck you as odd, or unfortunate, that today, when the proportion of literacy is higher than it has ever been, people should have become susceptible to the influence of advertisement and mass propaganda to an extent hitherto unheard of and unimagined? . . . Have you ever, in listening to a debate among adult and presumably responsible people, been fretted by the extraordinary inability of the average debater to speak to the question, or to meet and refute the arguments of speakers on the other side? . . . And when you think of this, and think that most of our public affairs are settled by debates and committees, have you ever felt a certain sinking of the heart? . . . Is not the great defect of our education today—a defect traceable through all the disquieting symptoms of trouble that I have mentioned—that although we often succeed in teaching our pupils “subjects,” we fail lamentably on the whole in teaching them how to think: they learn everything, except the art of learning?⁸

Grammar, logic, and rhetoric train the mind in the art of learning. But if you never learned how to grasp knowledge quickly and well, to evaluate the validity of arguments, and to present your own opinions with grace and clarity, it isn’t too late. You can still learn how to understand, evaluate, and argue with ideas. Like a medieval tutor with a single promising pupil, this book will walk you through each stage of classical education, so that you will have the tools to find the serious contemplation of books a delight rather than a frustration.

How to begin?

Self-educated men and women of the past offer us a few general principles as we start on the project of training our own minds. “Engage not the mind in the intense pursuit of too many things at once,” Isaac Watts advises, “especially such as have no relation to one another. This will be

⁸Dorothy L. Sayers, “The Lost Tools of Learning,” a speech presented at Oxford University in 1947, reprinted by the *National Review*, 215 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10016.

ready to distract the understanding, and hinder it from attaining perfection in any one subject of study.” It may seem slow, but study one subject at a time. Begin with this book, which will guide you through the necessary skills of reading and analysis; make this study your sole subject until you’ve completed it. Once you have learned how to progress through the steps of understanding (grammar), evaluating (logic), and expressing an opinion (rhetoric), *then* turn to the reading lists in Part II. These lists are organized by subject; if you read the books in order, limiting yourself to one field of inquiry (fiction, autobiography, history) at a time, you will find that your earlier reading will set a framework for the books that come later, while your later reading will reinforce and clarify what has come before.

Stick to one list at a time. During this self-study time, avoid the kind of reading that German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher indulged in during his early years: a wide-ranging and impressive, but unsystematic, devouring of books that left his mind, as he put it in later years, “like Chaos, before the world was created.”

Jefferson (always full of advice on every subject) counseled his young nephew to organize this systematic reading around chronology: “Having laid down your plan [of reading],” he tells young Randolph, “the order of time will be your sufficient guide.”⁹ In other words, read books in the order in which they were written. The nineteenth-century educator Lydia Sigourney agreed; in her *Letters to Young Ladies*, she recommended that reading always be done with the help of a “table of chronology . . . It is a good practice to fix in the memory some important eras—the subversion of an empire, for instance—and then ascertain what events were taking place in all other nations, at the same period of time. A few of these parallels, running through the History of the World, will collect rich clusters of knowledge, and arrange them in the conservatory of the mind.”¹⁰ The book lists I include are arranged in chronological order for this very reason; it is easier to understand a subject if you begin with its foundational works, and then read systematically through those books that build, one layer at a time, on this foundation.

When to read?

Lydia Sigourney warned her “young ladies” that systematic reading is “peculiarly necessary” to women “because, dwelling much on the contemplation of little things, [we] are in danger of losing the intellectual

⁹Jefferson, “Education of a Future Son-in-Law.”

¹⁰Lydia Sigourney, *Letters to Young Ladies*, 5th ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1839), p. 138.

appetite.”¹¹ Let’s be egalitarian: This is equally true of men. We all juggle multiple jobs, housework, bill paying, paperwork, children and family, and dozens of smaller distractions: meals, groceries, email, the ever-present lure of late-night television. The struggle to keep to a self-imposed schedule of reading is often lost in those moments after dinner when the children are in bed, the dishes done, and we think: *I’ve been working all day. I just need to vegetate for a few minutes before I try to use my brain.* And three hours later we’ve watched an hour of TV, signed on to check what emails might have come in since lunch, glanced at a couple of favorite Web sites, put in a load of laundry, and wiped off the kitchen sink.

While avoiding apocalyptic pronouncements on the decadence of modern society, I would still suggest that the biggest difference between modern media and the long-enduring book is the way in which TV and the Internet manage to infiltrate themselves into spare moments and promptly swallow up those “chasms of time.” I can’t say that I’ve ever lost myself in Plato and looked up an hour and half later to find that the time I intended to devote to answering my email has suddenly disappeared, but I have often spent the time that I meant to dedicate to reading sorting through email spam, checking out links, and (even worse) playing Spider Solitaire on my computer. (“Just one game,” I’ll think, “to warm up my brain.”)

High language about the life of the mind has to yield, at some point, to practical plans for self-cultivation. The mastery of grammar, writing, logic, analysis, and argumentation—all of which I’ll cover in chapters to come—depends on the single uncomplicated act of carving out a space within which they can exist. The first task of self-education is not the reading of Plato, but the finding of thirty minutes in which you can devote yourself to thought, rather than to activity.

THE FIRST STEP: SCHEDULE REGULAR READING AND SELF-STUDY TIME

Your first task in self-education is simple: *Set a time for self-education.*

Remember these principles:

Morning is better than evening. “There are portions of the day too when the mind should be eased,” Thomas Jefferson wrote to his nephew Thomas Mann Randolph, Jr. “Particularly after dinner it should be applied to lighter occupations.” Late evening is far from ideal for the project of reading seriously. It is usually far better to spend thirty minutes reading before

¹¹Ibid., p. 133.

breakfast than to devote two hours to it in the evening. As the autodidact Benjamin Franklin famously suggested, early to bed and early to rise is the most effective path to wisdom. (The jury remains out on health and wealth.)

Start short. The brain is an organ, and mental exercise, like physical exercise, has to be introduced gradually. Don't leap ambitiously into a schedule that has you rising at five to spend two hours in reading; you're likely to skip it altogether. Start with half an hour of reading first thing in the morning, and develop the habit of sticking to this shorter time of concentration and thought before extending it. And even if you never extend it, you're still doing more reading than you were before you began the project of self-cultivation.

Don't schedule yourself for study every day of the week. The body begins to drag if exercised every day without a break. Aim for four days per week; this makes it possible to establish a habit of reading while giving yourself the weekend "off" and a "flex morning" for the days when you're still catching up with the previous week's paperwork, the plumber arrives at daybreak, the car battery dies, and the toddler develops stomach flu.

Never check your email right before you start reading. I thought this was a personal problem until I ran across several essays in a row—from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, our local newspaper, and several other equally varied publications—about the distracting qualities of email. There is something in the format of email (its terseness? the sheer volume of messages? its tendency to reward skimming over deep reading?) that pulls the mind away from the contemplative, relaxed frame so important for good reading. If you get good news, you're distracted by it; if someone writes you a nasty note, you'll spend the next forty-five minutes mentally formulating blistering replies rather than concentrating on your book. If no one writes at all, you'll be depressed because you've suddenly become invisible in cyberspace.

Guard your reading time. We do those things which are rewarding to us, and immediate gratification always seems more rewarding than slow progress toward a long-term goal. We live in a world that applauds visible achievement; it will almost always be more satisfying to *do* something (cleaning the garage, clearing out your email box, checking tasks off your to-do list) than to *think*. The clean garage, the empty email box, the completed list: all of these testify to your productiveness, while reading yields no apparent gain. (All you've done is sit still for half an hour and move your eyes, after all.)

The project of self-education will bring your own sense of what is truly worthwhile into sharp relief. Forced to choose between a chapter of

Uncle Tom's Cabin and some more immediately rewarding task, you will come face to face with your deepest values: What do you prize more, a temporary visible accomplishment or the beginnings of a deeper understanding of racial tensions in the United States? A finished to-do list, or a teaspoonful of wisdom?

This is not a small question. The world that applauds visible achievement is giving you a very strong message about why *you* are worthwhile. When you choose to think, rather than do, you are rejecting production in favor of reflection; you are pushing back against a system that wants to locate your worth as a human being in your ability to turn out a commodity. Reading, rather than working, is a small but meaningful dissent.

So resist other satisfactions or duties that encroach on your reading time.

Take the first step now. On your calendar or day timer, schedule four weekly reading periods of half an hour each now. Next week, use this time period to read Chapter 2 and complete the *Second Step* assignment.