

An Education in 404 Pages

A recommended reading list for all Americans.

By JAMES BACCHUS, BA'71

MORE THAN 30 years ago, as an undergraduate at Vanderbilt, I first learned the value of a good liberal arts education. In all the years since, I have tried my best to keep learning—and living—the liberal arts.

If asked what America needs most today, I would reply that America needs a good liberal-arts education. But a good education is getting ever harder to find. Not everyone is fortunate enough to spend four years at Vanderbilt. And not everyone can find the time to get a good education by reading all the “great books.”

With this in mind, I suggest the following list for the consideration of all who feel in need of a good liberal-arts education. This list can provide an education, not by reading a few hundred books, but by reading only a few hundred pages.

My recommended reading list for all Americans is:

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance.” We must be true to ourselves. Only by being true to ourselves as individuals will we be able to build a true society of individuals that will be worth sharing. We must never be afraid to stand alone in the crowd. (36 pages)

Alexis de Tocqueville, “The Principle of Interest Rightly Understood,” from *Democracy in America*. Our real self-interest, as individuals and as a society of individuals, is in our broader as well as our narrower needs, and in our needs tomorrow as well as our needs

today. We need others, and we have obligations to others. (4 pages)

Thucydides, “The Melian Dialogue,” from *History of the Peloponnesian War*. “The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.” We may be stronger than others, but that does not make us right. All of history is an effort to prove that might does not make right. (6 pages)

James Madison, Number 10 and Number 51, *The Federalist Papers*. For government to help make right into might for all of us, government must be founded on an understanding of the reality of human nature. “If men were angels, no government would be necessary.” We are capable of both good and evil. We can always make progress. We can never achieve perfection. (11 pages)

Adam Smith, “Of the Division of Labor,” from *The Wealth of Nations*. Like government, all economics must begin with an awareness of our unchanging human nature. We tend toward exchange, trade, and an ever-expanding and ever-deepening division of labor. It is in our nature. (21 pages)

Voltaire, Letter 15, “On the System of Gravitation,” from *Letters on England*. Unique to human nature is human reason. Reason made science. Science made the modern world. Science can help us make an even better world. (9 pages)

Richard Feynman, “The Uncertainty of Science,” from *The Meaning of It All*. Science gives us our technology. Science does not give us our values. And science does not give us certainty. Science is a way of living with uncertainty and also with doubt. (26 pages)



Plato, “The Cave,” from *The Republic*. We must doubt. The world may not be as it seems. We live in shadows, and we must search for the light of the truth. (9 pages)

Michel de Montaigne, “Of Cannibals,” from *The Essays*. Local custom is not necessarily eternal truth. There are other ways to live and think. There are other ways to search. We Americans do not have a monopoly on wisdom, virtue or truth. (15 pages)

John Stuart Mill, “Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion,” from *On Liberty*. Truth emerges from free and open discussion among free individuals in a society that cherishes the freedom of thought. Truth welcomes debate. Truth welcomes criticism. (44 pages)

Karl Popper, Chapter 10, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. In the “closed society,” there is no freedom of thought. In the “open society,” the individual is free to think and to choose. The freest society is the “open society” where the individual is free to make the most possible personal decisions about how to live. (32 pages)

continued on page 84

VJournal continued from page 11

Fyodor Dostoevsky, "The Grand Inquisitor," from *The Brothers Karamazov*. In deciding how to live, we have a choice as individuals. We can choose to let others think for us, and be slaves. Or we can choose to think for ourselves, and be free. Choose. (24 pages)

Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail." We all must be free to choose. Freedom belongs to everyone. Lest we forget. (6 pages)

Virginia Woolf, Chapter 6, *A Room of One's Own*. And "everyone" includes women. Again, lest we forget. (20 pages)

Abraham Lincoln, "The Gettysburg Address." A lot of good people have died so that we can be free to choose. A lot. Never forget. (1 page)

Suetonius, "Augustus, Afterward Deified," Sections 61-96, from *The Twelve Caesars*. Be skeptical of those you choose to entrust with your freedom. They, too, are human. Even Caesar Augustus, to seem taller, wore lifts in his sandals. (20 pages)

George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language." Some of our leaders will lie to us.

They will use words without meanings. They will hide behind empty phrases. Make them accountable. (12 pages)

Edmund Burke, "Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol." The best leaders will help keep us free by telling us what we truly need to hear—and not just what we want to hear. We need their judgment, and not just their echo. (35 pages)

Samuel Johnson, Number 21, *The Rambler*. We are none of us immune to the frailties of human nature. We each imagine that we are superior in some way to others. We are not. Be humble. (5 pages)

Immanuel Kant, "On Perpetual Peace." Despite our nature, despite our frailties, we can be better than we are. Thus, the world can be better than it is. Keep trying. (33 pages)

Henry David Thoreau, "On Seeing," from his *Journal*. Try to see. Seeing is understanding. "We cannot see anything until we are possessed with the idea of it, and then we can hardly see anything else." Keep looking. (3 pages)

Plutarch, "On Contentment." Look not for fame or fortune. Fame is hollow. Fortune is

fickle. We must find contentment in life no matter what blows life deals us. Keep living. (28 pages)

Soren Kierkegaard, "The Story of Abraham," from *Fear and Trembling*. Reason alone does not suffice for living. Reason can only take us just so far toward understanding. Beyond that, we must make the "leap to faith." Keep believing. (8 pages)

William Hazlitt, "On the Feeling of Immortality in Youth." But believe in this world as well as the next. When we are young, we all think we will never die. We will. Life is short. Life is meant to be lived. So seize the day. (6 pages)

This is my list.

Total: 404 pages.

Of course, much is missing here. Poetry. Fiction. Song. Scripture. Shakespeare. The Bill of Rights. The Sermon on the Mount. And a whole library filled with a whole lot more.

My list could go on, and your list would surely be different. But try starting here. Starting with this list will give you—and every American—an education in 404 pages. ▼

In Class continued from page 30

with good-natured intellectual energy. He tends to speak swiftly and passionately, sometimes giving the impression that the ideas are accumulating in his head more quickly than they can get out of his mouth.

Business ethics has long been a part of business school curricula, but its importance has been underscored recently by the wave of corporate scandals that has rocked Wall Street. Firms like HealthSouth, WorldCom and Enron that not so long ago drew praise and investor dollars are now seen as synonymous with moral and—ultimately—financial bankruptcy.

But the trap in teaching ethics case studies of companies like these or Bausch & Lomb, says Victor, is that it's all too easy for such striking examples of corporate irresponsibility to look like a rare and spectacular event. "When we make it into these big headlines, the students look at it, and it's like watching an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie: 'Wow! Whoa! Hope I don't ever have to do that.'"

What Victor tries to do in his ethics classes is to show students that ethics is an every-

day issue for everyone who works. "There aren't many people who wake up in the morning and look in the mirror and see a bank robber," he says. "Most people wake up in the morning and see a pretty good person. But how do they bring that to action? How do they bring that to life? That's where I get focused in my teaching. I think business ethics is all about recognizing that, in fact, our work matters to others."

To help business students recognize ethical dilemmas buried in mundane day-to-day decisions, Victor combines three key ingredients. First, he presents classic case studies of ethical crucibles, such as the case of Ford's dangerously designed Pinto gas tanks or Union Carbide's reaction to the 1984 chemical disaster in Bhopal, India. Then he questions the students and gets them talking about where the ethical issues lie and how they come up against business goals. Finally, he shares basic principles of moral reasoning that have been pondered by philosophers and theologians since the dawn of civilization.

"It is a class in which their opinions, their thinking is central," he says. "That's the sub-

stance of the course. Their way of thinking and understanding—not mine—is essential to the course. I am catalyst, facilitator and critic, but I am not the source in a class like that.

"I can't tell them what the right choices are. Yesterday in class I went through the Cook's Tour of moral reasoning," he says with a chuckle. "And the problem is that it's a cacophony of prescription: Think about this and you'll come to the right answer. Whether utilitarianism or deontology or social contract or virtues or moral rights—or any of these things. All of them have these strong and compelling prescriptions for making moral choices. All of them mutually exclusive. And all of them full of bloody holes. And so: What do I do? First we recognize that yes, I do have a choice. Now what? And that's where moral courage gets called upon and where moral leadership really begins."

In even a brief conversation about business ethics, Bart Victor can range far and wide, touching on the first 100 days of JFK's presidency, the moral philosophy of Andrew Carnegie ("first we will do well, and then we will do good"), the business credos of John-