A deeper connection

Social networks are fine to a point, but they will never change your life or teach you the wonders of the world.

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We all ask each other a lot of questions. But we should all ask one question a lot more often: “What are you reading?” It’s a simple question but a powerful one, and it can change lives, creating a shared universe for people who are otherwise separated by culture and age and by time and space.

I remember a woman who told me that she was delighted to be a grandmother but was feeling sadly out of touch with her grandson. She lived in Florida. He and his parents lived elsewhere. She would call him and ask him about school or about his day. He would respond in one-word answers: Fine. Nothing. Nope. And then one day, she asked him what he was reading. He had just started The Hunger Games, a series of dystopian young-adult novels by Suzanne Collins. The grandmother decided to read the first volume so that she could talk about it with her grandson the next time they chatted on the phone. She didn’t know what to expect, but she found herself hooked from the first pages, in which Katniss Everdeen...
The book helped this grandmother cut through the superficialities of phone chat and engage her grandson on the most important questions that humans face about survival and destruction and loyalty and betrayal and good and evil, and about politics as well. Now her grandson couldn’t wait to talk to her when she called – to tell her where he was, to find out where she was and to speculate about what would happen next. Other than belonging to the same family, they had never had much in common. Now they did. The conduit was reading.

When we ask one another “what are you reading?” sometimes we discover the ways that we are similar; sometimes the ways we are different. Sometimes we discover things we never knew we shared; other times we open ourselves to exploring new worlds and ideas. “What are you reading?” isn’t a simple question when asked with genuine curiosity. It’s really a way of asking who you are now and who you are becoming.

**Facebook v real books: who wins?**

We need to read and to be readers now more than ever. We overschedule our days and complain constantly about being too busy. We shop endlessly for stuff we don’t need and then feel oppressed by the clutter that surrounds us. We rarely sleep well or enough. We compare our bodies to the artificial ones we see in magazines and our lives to the exaggerated ones we see on television. We watch cooking shows and then eat fast food. We worry ourselves sick and join gyms we don’t visit. We keep up with hundreds of acquaintances but rarely see our best friends. We bombard ourselves with video clips and emails and instant messages. We even interrupt our interruptions.
Connectivity is one of the great blessings of the internet era, and it makes extraordinary things possible. But constant connectivity can be a curse, encouraging the lesser angels of our nature. Books are uniquely suited to helping us change our relationship to the rhythms and habits of daily life in this world of endless connectivity. We can’t interrupt books; we can only interrupt ourselves while reading them. They are the expression of an individual or a group of individuals, not of a hive mind or collective consciousness. They speak to us, thoughtfully, one at a time. They demand our attention. And they demand that we briefly put aside our own beliefs and prejudices and listen to someone else’s. You can rant against a book, scribble in the margin or even chuck it out the window. Still, you won’t change the words on the page.

At the trial in which he would be sentenced to death, Socrates (as quoted by Plato) said that the unexamined life isn’t worth living. Reading is the best way I know to learn how to examine your life. By comparing what you’ve done to what others have done, and your thoughts and theories and feelings to those of others, you learn about yourself and the world around you. Perhaps that is why reading is one of the few things you do alone that can make you feel less alone. It is a solitary activity that connects you to others.

So I’m on a search – and have been all my life – to find books to help me make sense of the world, to help me become a better person, to help me get my head around the big questions that I have and answer some of the small ones while I’m at it. I know I’m not alone in my hunger for books to help me find the right questions to ask, and find answers to the ones that I have. I am now in my mid-50s, a classic time for introspection. But any age is a good age for examining your life.

People have always received life-guiding wisdom from certain types of nonfiction, often from “self-help” books. But all sorts of books can carry this kind of wisdom; a random sentence in a thriller will give me unexpected insight. Novels and works of narrative nonfiction can do something extraordinary that most self-help books can’t: they can increase our capacity for empathy by engaging our imagination as they introduce us to new perspectives.

I don’t give a great deal of thought to the books I choose – I’ll read anything that catches my eye. Most of the time, when I choose what I’m going to read, it has nothing to do with improving myself. Especially when I’m at my happiest, I’m unlikely to search for a book to make me happier.
But it’s often during these periods of non-seeking that I’ve stumbled across a book that has changed my life.

There is no book I turn to more often than *The Importance of Living* by a scholar named Lin Yutang. It is a book that makes a case for loafing, for enjoying food and drink, for not striving too much. Lin wanted an antidote to the raw competitiveness and frenetic activity that he saw all around him in the early 1930s — not just in China, where he grew up, but also in France and Germany, where he had worked and studied, and in the US, where he had attended college as a young man and where he was living when he wrote this book. It quickly became a success of epic proportions. Every few pages there is a sentence that keeps me thinking for hours or intermittently throughout the day.

Sometimes books have changed me in trivial ways at first, but in more significant ways later. When I was five years old, my parents read to me E.B. White’s 1945 classic *Stuart Little*, the story of a remarkable mouse born to a human family. The immediate effect was to make me feel that the thing in life I most desperately wanted was a pet mouse. Now I realise this extraordinary tale taught me some powerful lessons. One of them is this: Stuart’s human family doesn’t care a whit that he is a mouse. It’s a tale of radical acceptance — you can be whatever or whoever you are born to be and not risk losing your family. Every child is in some ways different from her or his parents — even if not so different as Stuart is from his.

While my parents gave me some of my earliest favourites, teachers guided me to many of the books that would shape my life. In middle school, we read Julius Caesar’s *The Gallic War*. This was the start of my learning a great truth: history is long, and I was short. There was no chance I would possibly leave a mark on the globe that measured up to Caesar’s. Not a bad lesson in humility for a seventh-grader. College introduced me to some of the most astonishing books I’ve ever read, as it should. The experience of reading and studying and revisiting a contemporary masterpiece like Nobel laureate Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* reminds me how thrilling true greatness is, whether in literature or other aspects of life. At the heart of this novel is the migration of a character named Milkman Dead from north to south, the opposite of the 20th century’s “Great Migration” of African-Americans from the rural south to the cities of the north and west. I will never forget the images of flight — as escape from peril and as a symbol of freedom; by foot and through the air.

Entering the workforce brought me to a different kind of book. A wise mentor gave me Anne Morrow Lindbergh’s *Gift From the Sea*. This is a book about priorities. Unlike recent books that focus on decluttering your home, Lindbergh, who had a busy life as an adventurer, pilot, best-selling author and wife of the famous aviator, shows you how to declutter your brain and your life. “The world today does not understand, in either man or woman, the need to be alone,” she wrote in 1955.
Books have also helped me through the worst times in my life, and no book more so than Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield*. My need to figure out a way to cope with my sadness after finishing this novel was a trial run, of sorts, for dealing with the deaths of friends. Recently, I read a book that is helping me be a better friend: Hanya Yanagihara’s devastating novel *A Little Life*. The story follows the intertwined lives of four men from right after college until middle age. Along the way, we learn about their childhoods and discover that one of them has been the victim of horrific abuse. I don’t think I’ve ever read a novel that had so much to say about friendship, or about the ways we can and can’t help one another, or about the importance of staying present in our friends’ lives.

I also turn to books to help remind me of things I know but constantly forget. *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio is a novel about a boy with a facial deformity who is going to school for the first time. It has a powerful message delivered by the school’s principal. He exhorts his students to “choose kindness”. Quoting J.M. Barrie, he tells them, “Shall we make a new rule of life… always to try to be a little kinder than is necessary?

And then there is *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, by Azar Nafisi. It is the story of a study group for women that the author led in Tehran in 1995, and it reinforced for me the power of books and literature. Nafisi writes, “In all great works of fiction, regardless of the grim reality they present, there is an affirmation of life against the transience of that life, an essential defiance. This affirmation lies in the way the author takes control of reality by retelling it in his own way, thus creating a new world. Every great work of art, I would declare pompously, is a celebration, an act of insubordination against the betrayals, horrors and infidelities of life.

Rereading this book and others, I’m reminded that reading isn’t just a respite from the relentlessness of technology. It isn’t just how I reset and recharge. It isn’t just how I escape. It’s how I engage. And reading should spur further engagement.

Books remain one of the strongest bulwarks we have against tyranny – but only as long as people are free to read all different kinds of books, and only as long as they actually do so. The right to read whatever you want whenever you want is one of the fundamental rights that helps preserve all the other rights. It’s a right we need to guard with unwavering diligence. But it’s also a right we can guard with pleasure. Reading isn’t just a strike against narrowness, mind control and domination – it’s one of the world’s great joys.

*Edited extract from Books for Living by Will Schwalbe (Hachette Australia, $35), out now*
Head for the hills
MICHELLE SINGER

Enter stage right
JAMIE WALKER

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