

**What to Read and Why**  
**A Sermon Inspired by John Dietrich**  
**By**  
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To begin with, here's a list of the titles recommended in this sermon:

- *Introduction to Logic* by Irvin M. Copi
- *Crimes Against Logic* by Jamie Whyte
- *Do You Think What You Think You Think?* by Julian Baggini and Jeremy Stangroom
- *The Moral Animal: Why We Are the Way We Are: The New Science of Evolutionary Psychology* by Robert Wright
- *How We Decide* by Jonah Lehrer
- *Emotional Intelligence: Why it Can Matter More than IQ* by Daniel Goleman
- *The Soul's Code* by James Hillman
- *Escape from Freedom* by Erich Fromm
- *The Sane Society* by Erich Fromm
- *Many for himself* by Erich Fromm
- *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* by Erich Fromm
- *The Philosophy of Moral Development* by Lawrence Kohlberg
- *Moral Development, Moral Education, and Kohlberg*, edited by Brenda Munsey
- *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* by Carol Gilligan
- *The Evolving Self* by Robert Kegan
- *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era—A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* by Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry
- *Microcosmos: The Four Billion Years of Evolution from our Microbial Ancestors* by Lynn Margulis and Dorian Sagan
- *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* by Yuval Harari
- *The Rational Optimist* by Matt Ridley
- *Factfulness* by Hans Rosling
- *The Better Angels of Our Nature* by Stephen Pinker
- *Enlightenment Now* by Stephen Pinker
- *The Singularity is Near* by Ray Kurzweil
- *The Singularity is Nearer* by Ray Kurzweil
- *Abundance: The Future is Better than You Think* by Peter Diamandis and Stephen Kotler

While recently exploring the writings of my famous predecessor, John H. Dietrich, I came upon his relatively brief 1922 essay entitled, "What to Read and Why." As a reminder, Dietrich was the minister of our Spokane congregation from 1911 to 1916 and later became known as the father of Religious Humanism. "This little leaflet," he begins, "is for the purpose of suggesting a short course of reading which ought to be the foundation and framework of

every intelligent person's thought.”<sup>1</sup> It's such a good idea that I immediately decided I'd give my own sermon on the topic.

In 1922, in addition to conversation, lectures, and the radio, most people received information by reading magazines, newspapers, and whatever books they might be fortunate enough to get their hands on. Reading was an especially popular pastime, but book availability was much more limited than it is today. Access to books was largely restricted to those living in or near major cities and to those with higher incomes, neither of which describes most people back then. In the US at the time, there were only around 4,000 thousand retailers that sold books, around 500 of which were actual bookstores, and there were far fewer public libraries. Given the difficulty of obtaining books, many people read whatever was available. Still, given the investment of time and money, many would also have been eager to hear which books someone of Dietrich's stature recommended.

Today, we have the opposite problem. Books are abundant! There are almost 70,000 brick and mortar bookstores in the US alone, which doesn't include all those sold by online businesses, nor digital books. We also have a lot more information mediums, with countless options available to us almost wherever and whenever we want, and, often, whether we want them or not. In addition to those ancient technologies like Radio and Television, our Alexas, computers, tablets, and mobile phones expose us to far more websites, blogs, podcasts, streaming platforms, YouTube videos, E-books, online magazines, and did I mention an ever-mounting pile of emails, than we can shake a proverbial stick at. Today, we almost need advice on *what NOT to read* or otherwise waste our precious time on. I hope that offering a few of my suggestions about reading can accomplish a little bit of both by enabling you to filter out some of the extraneous noise in our age of information overload. Like Dietrich, I'll focus on examples of the kinds of writing I consider essential for becoming good thinkers.

But first, I want to highlight a few of the introductory thoughts in Dietrich's "little leaflet" that are worth repeating. He begins by pointing out some reasons for reading, "One must have a key to the drift and tendency of things before [one] can understand which way they are moving and what it is all about," he says. "For this world is a world of growth. There is always a struggle going on between the lower and the higher, between the forces which try to arrest this growth and those which try to free it."<sup>2</sup> As liberals, we ought to pursue knowledge that fosters both freedom and progress. And, like professionals who must continually educate themselves about the changes and advancements in their fields, to be expert human beings we should continuously strive to recognize and understand the changes in the world and do our own best to adapt and grow. This means reading to keep up with new ideas, discoveries, science, technologies, current affairs, and so forth, and keeping an open mind about all of it. "Great questions are always up for settlement," Dietrich says, "social, economic, political, moral, religious questions—and how shall the unthinking and unread know in which way lies the hope of [mankind]?" By reading.

Another of my ideological mentors, social psychologist Erich Fromm—whom I know so much about only from reading—considers the urge to advance life (biophilous) our primary instinct, yet it can easily be substituted by the death (necrophilous) instinct. When this happens, instead of fostering freedom and growth, we foster control and destruction. But, as Socrates said, or so I've read, few of us “knowingly do evil.” Even when our behavior is destructive and against the forces of life, we are convinced that we are doing good and that we are “pro-life.” Dietrich says, “Thousands of people all the time and with the best possible intentions are conscientiously working against the best interests of humanity simply because they do not know better,” which is why we should read. “Thoughtful people ought to read just as a pilot studies his chart,” Dietrich says, “that they may know which way to steer.” That’s what reading is ultimately about, shaping our minds so that we can make more informed decisions.

Dietrich goes on to outline the areas he considered crucial for us to understand, including the solar system, the Earth and the beginnings of life, the origins of humanity, the development of society, the growth of morality, the development of religion, and a few topics of general interest. Each area is accompanied by a few book recommendations, many of which may still be worth reading but are also outdated, so I won't mention any of them here.

Instead, I will begin with a major point about reading that I think is more crucial for us today than it was for Dietrich's audience in 1922. I suggest that you not only read, but that you read books, be they physical, audible, or digital, especially nonfiction books. Magazines, journals, and newspapers, can also be reliable sources of information, but books especially stand out as provably trustworthy sources of information amidst the impossible amount of misinformation and disinformation coming at us from so many other mediums. This isn't to say that many books aren't also complete garbage, but it's easy to pick up a book, quickly look at its author's reputation and credentials, the contents of its bibliography, how well it's footnoted, and even dip into it a little before making a final decision to read it or not. Books are the calm in the storm of information coming at us from all directions. A reasonably trustworthy book, meaning one that is well argued and well substantiated, enables us to feel more confident that what it says is worthy of our consideration. So read books!

There are many great nonfiction books, some of which are among the best social commentaries ever written. John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and George Orwell's *1984* are among my favorites. But a lot of nonfiction books are just for entertainment. I like occasionally reading *Star Trek* novels. But fiction is not rare. So much of what's being communicated today is fiction, including a lot of information being taken as truth. So, if you prefer fictional escapes through reading rather than watching *Netflix* or *Fox News*, please continue to do so. But keep in mind that fiction abounds. Truth, on the other hand, remains a rare commodity that, like gold, takes some digging to uncover. Nonfiction books are written by authors wishing to directly convey something they believe is true. So, if your purpose is

to better understand how to navigate and promote life—knowing “which way to steer,” as Dietrich says—then read books that are nonfiction. Just watch out for fool’s gold.

I should also mention some of the shortcomings associated with reading. I once read a book about speed reading, for example, explaining that we retain very little of what we read—less than five percent—which is about all remember from that book. But reading isn’t for the purpose of filling our heads with facts. It isn’t about determining what we think but shaping *how* we think. Reading slowly shapes our worldview so that we come to respond to life in certain and, hopefully, intelligent ways. Reading is a means of shaping your own neurology and developing instincts that will best guide your decisions—so choose what you read with wisdom and intention. As is often said about the Internet, “garbage in, garbage out.” If the decisions we make don’t usually work out for us, or if we are generally unhappy, it could have something to do with the information we’ve shaped our minds, outlook, and instincts with. But human neurology can reconfigure itself at any age, so it’s never too late to pick up a worthwhile book and start changing our minds and our lives.

Here's two other quick precautions about reading you ought to keep in your evolving mind; First, *just because you read it in a book doesn't make it true*. Second, *just because you agree with a book doesn't make it true*. Reading requires us to be good thinkers so we can easily recognize if the information we’re consuming is sound or not. That catch 22 is that becoming good thinkers requires us to read. So, this leads to my first recommendation; you should read about thinking. You should read to become a sound thinker. It’s my first recommendation because thinking well is fundamental to validating the worth of everything else you read. Our society is extremely divided today because people haven’t been taught to reason well. So, we split into ideological tribes that are fearful of and hostile toward anyone with different ideas. But if we’ve learned to rely on reason for security in our uncertain world, rather than dogmatically clinging to our particular ideas about the world, we’re not afraid of new ideas. If they are true, they can only benefit us. If they are false, they are no threat because reason enables us to recognize them as such. Reason is a superpower that makes us fearless in a world of misinformation and disinformation.

To learn to think well, I recommend books on basic logic, as well as books on psychology and neurology. Logic teaches us about proper form and common fallacies. Logic, that is, teaches not *what* but *how* to think. Psychology and neurology, on the other hand, show *how* we are prone to think, making us more conscious of the irrational traps our untrained, unexamined, unconscious, instinctive, and biased minds set for us. I recommend you pick up a basic introduction to logic, preferably a college textbook, and slowly work your way through it and its exercises. My favorite is Irvin M. Copi’s *Introduction to Logic*. There are also some simpler books on logical fallacies like Jamie Whyte’s *Crimes Against Logic* and *Do You Think What You Think You Think?* by Julian Baggini and Jeremy Stangroom.

As for books on psychology and neurology, I recommend Robert Wright's excellent book, *The Moral Animal: Why We Are the Way We Are: The New Science of Evolutionary Psychology*, and Jonah Lehrer's, also excellent, book, *How We Decide*. I'd also throw in a book or two about Emotional Intelligence, especially Daniel Goleman's bestseller on the subject, *Emotional Intelligence: Why it Can Matter More than IQ*. Emotions are what make life worth living, but they can also destroy us if they are always in the driver's seat. You might also read something from philosophy about epistemology (the theory of knowledge) and metaphysics (the theory of reality). I won't give any specific recommendations for these, but keep in mind that all these fields of study lead us to question our own beliefs and the beliefs of others, which is precisely what makes us good thinkers—curiosity, wonder, doubt.

Dietrich's approach was to take the biggest subject, the origins of the Universe, and work inward to the origins of the Earth, then life, then human society, then human beliefs, and so on. While I agree that some of these subjects are important to read and learn about, I believe we must begin by learning to think well so that we aren't easily deceived by others and, more importantly, so that we don't deceive ourselves. Next on my list is *psychology*, understanding the human mind, emotions, drives, and needs is far more important than knowing about cosmology, or anything else about science. For if we are prone to instinctive and emotionally driven decisions and behaviors, then it doesn't matter what information we put into our heads because none of it will make a meaningful difference in our lives.

So, if you're in need of some inner work, I recommend studying psychologist Carl Jung, or Jungian psychologists in general. Having read most of Jung's collected works, I recommend Jung's *Dream Analysis* volume based on a seminar he gave between 1928 and 1930. It contains much of his thought in just one volume. I also recommend the writing of the Jungian psychologist James Hillman, especially his book, *The Soul's Code*, for unique insights about what makes us tick. Evolutionary psychology is also an important new field worth exploring, for which I again recommend Robert Wright's *The Moral Animal*.

Hopefully finding yourself by reading psychology will help you accept yourself well enough to move on with life despite your hangups. If so, I recommend you also begin reading social psychology, to better understand the unconscious forces shaping human society and behavior in general. For this, as you may have guessed, I recommend anything written by Erich Fromm, but suggest you begin with *Escape from Freedom*, *The Sane Society*, and *Man for Himself*. If you're open to something more scholastic and denser, but vitally important, I also recommend his 1973 book, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. Reading it will be a good launching point on the subject of ethics.

If Socrates was correct, that most of want to be good people, we need only to understand what it means to be good. But few of us have ever studied ethics or come to understand the difficulties in knowing the differences between right and wrong. In practice, there are almost always negative consequences associated with any moral choice, which is why I often say

that *every moral decision is accompanied by a moral dilemma*. So, to begin with, I recommend books about moral development, which blend a bit of the personal with the social. There are many books offering slightly different explanations of such development, but they are all rooted in Lawrence Kohlberg's theories, so I'd recommend his book, *The Philosophy of Moral Development*, or any reputable book on his theories, like the anthology, *Moral Development, Moral Education, and Kohlberg*, edited by Brenda Munsey. Carol Gilligan's book, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* and *The Evolving Self* by Harvard psychologist Robert Kegan, are also valuable reads on this subject.

All of these books, among others, help us understand the psychology behind human ethics and that our best decisions ought to be based on universal principles that apply to most situations, rather than basing them on whatever circumstances we're in and what we're feeling in the moment. Most books on pure ethics discuss various ethical approaches, but don't tell us which is best, so I don't recommend reading an entire book on the topic. You can learn the theory easily by reading a few online articles. Studying moral development, in particular, is what has helped me hone in on my personal ethical beliefs over time, leading me to settle, for the time being, on the Humanistic Ethic, defined by Fromm as the belief that the sole criterion of ethical value, as social psychologist Erich Fromm phrases it, "*must be human welfare*"<sup>3</sup> and that "the unfolding and growth of every person [should be] the aim of all social and political activities."<sup>4</sup>

At this point, having worked to become better thinkers, more aware of our own unconscious biases and fallacies, how to understand the root causes of social dysfunction, and developed a working theory about how best to approach moral decision making, we are finally in a position, as more well-rounded individuals, to understand our relationship with and, therefore, our responsibility to the world and others, including other living creatures and systems. Having looked inward, we can begin to gaze at the stars to wonder more about who we are and why we're here. So, like Dietrich, I recommend studying cosmology, the origins of the Universe. For this, I have two recommendations, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era—A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* by cosmologist Brian Swimme and eco-theologian Thomas Berry. To bring it down to Earth, read *Microcosmos: The Four Billion Years of Evolution from our Microbial Ancestors* by Lynn Margulis and Dorian Sagan. If you're interested in more on these subjects, please consult the bibliographies in these two books. I also recommend reading science in general, since I believe it offers the most truthful view of our reality and helps us remain honest with ourselves about the realities we face. As long as it is quality science, which your reasoning powers should let you know, read whatever science catches your attention.

My final category for becoming a well-rounded person is history, not for the purpose of understanding the past, but for better understanding ourselves by knowing how we got where we are so we can make sound decisions about the future. History is always about the future. And, if you think about it, most of what I've already recommended is about history.

Psychology is but anthropology that digs into the mind's past, be it that of the individual or society. Ethics is largely about learning from the mistakes of the past. Moral development is about building better ways of being upon the foundations of the past. Science examines natural history to discover new theories, like evolution, for example.

But no matter the field, it is always about what we can do in the present to make a better tomorrow for ourselves and others. By learning more about where we've been and where we're coming from, we better understand where we ought to go from here. I can't single out any history book that I consider a must read because, as I just said, almost all of it is history. Although I will recommend Yuval Harari's *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. The point here is to read what you must to understand the past so that you can better move forward with life.

I'll close with a few of the additional books I've personally found most transformative and important to me. They are books that have changed me from a pessimist into an optimist for, what I consider, sound reasons. They may not have the same impact on you, so I will not call them "must reads," for everyone. Still, I feel a few personal recommendations are a good way to end. Books that prove the world is getting better in almost all respects—despite the dismal way it's portrayed in almost all other mediums—include, *The Rational Optimist* by Matt Ridley, *Factfulness* by Hans Rosling, and *The Better Angels of Our Nature* by Stephen Pinker, whose more recent book, *Enlightenment Now*, I also recommend. The three books that I love most of all are Ray Kurzweil's, *The Singularity is Near* and *The Singularity is Nearer*, and *Abundance: The Future is Better than You Think* by Peter Diamandis and Stephen Kotler. These books have given me reason to have hope; and hope without reason is just wishful-thinking.

Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of Akido, the Way of Harmony, once said, "Life is growth. If we stop growing, technically and spiritually, we are as good as dead."<sup>5</sup> Erich Fromm said similarly, "We grow either stronger or weaker, wiser or more foolish, more courageous or more cowardly. Every second is a moment of decision, for the better or the worse ... The moment we stand still, we begin to decay."<sup>6</sup>

Reading is about moving and growing, which are the very definitions of life. So read, read books, read nonfiction books about things you never knew about, nor thought you'd ever want to know about, written by people you don't know nor ever thought you'd want to know. Read books that agree with you, but also some authors you disagree with. Reading things that you dislike or disagree with won't kill you, but not reading will. So, read. For, as one of my graduate professors, Professor Joseph Martos, used to say, "Diplomas cost money, but education is free."

## What to Read and Why

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich, John, "What to Read and Why," The Publication Committee, First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, MN, 1922.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, An Owl Book, Henry Holt & Co., New York, NY, 1947, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 229.

<sup>5</sup> Ueshiba, Morihei, & Stevens, John (translator & editor), *The Art of Peace*, Shambala Press, Boston, MA, 2005, p. 23

<sup>6</sup> Fromm, Erich. *The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanized Technology*. Open Road Media. Kindle Edition.