

## **MY FAVORITE BOOKS**

Since I entered my eighties, I have spent some time ruminating on what I have learned during the course of my life (I concur with Socrates when he said, “The unexamined life is not worth living”<sup>1</sup>). My life’s lessons have come from two main sources: experience and reading.

- The experience category has not been unusual: I experienced a generally happy childhood, good schooling, a stint in the U.S. Marine Corps, sound professional training, immersion in a series of surprisingly different jobs,<sup>2</sup> sharing my life with my beautiful and hilarious wife of almost 60 years, trying to be a good parent to our two lovely daughters and a good grandparent to our four grandchildren, struggling with my share of health problems, enjoying a few successes, and confronting some significant failures.
- The reading category has been somewhat unusual. I have read books constantly throughout my life, buying over ten thousand of them and reading both them and thousands more.<sup>3</sup>

Here I want to focus on the reading. Before I comment on reading in general and introduce you to my favorite books, however, I want to pay tribute to the person who instilled in me the love of reading.

### **A Tribute**

“I had a mother who read to me...” By constantly reading to me and my brothers and sister, my mother introduced us to the marvelous world that lies between the covers of books. Initially she read imaginative tales for children that stimulated in me – and probably them as well - an appreciation of adventure, beauty, chivalry, comradery, courage, curiosity, dependability, duty, honesty, honor, loyalty, mystery, perseverance, and romance. Eventually she read more factual material that induced in me a thirst for knowledge for its own sake, which remains unquenched to this day. Strickland Gillian might have written his poem, *The Reading Mother*, about her.

I had a Mother who read to me  
Sagas of pirates who scoured the sea,  
Cutlasses clenched in their yellow teeth,  
"Blackbirds" stowed in the hold beneath.

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<sup>1</sup> Plato’s Apology 38a5-6.

<sup>2</sup> From practicing architecture to architectural and business consulting to farming to financial and organizational planning.

<sup>3</sup> The motivations for wanting a large library are complicated. I like being surrounded by books; they are a warm, colorful, and stimulating presence. I like underling significant passages and making notes in the margins for future reference, which I only do in books that I own and intend to keep. If I forget something, I know where to look for it.

I had a Mother who read me lays  
Of ancient and gallant and golden days;  
Stories of Marmion and Ivanhoe,  
Which every boy has a right to know.

I had a Mother who read me tales  
Of Gelert the hound of the hill of Wales,  
True to his trust till his tragic death,  
Faithfulness blent with his final breath.

I had a Mother who read me the things  
That wholesome life to the boy heart brings -  
Stories that stir with an upward touch,  
Oh, that each mother of boys were such!

You may have tangible wealth untold;  
Caskets of jewels and coffers of gold.  
Richer than I you can never be -  
I had a Mother who read to me.

### **Comments on Reading**

#### *Positive Aspects*

The positive aspects of reading are obvious and well known.

1. Reading teaches you to think, particularly if you bother to jot down the major characters, events, ideas, etc. and their apparent import to the story or dissertation for later thought..
2. Reading increases your vocabulary and ability to be precise in both your speaking and writing.
3. Reading stimulates your imagination, particularly when you are young. (Listening to the radio can do so as well. Having been born in 1937, I was a boy in the 1940s when the late afternoon and early evening airwaves were filled with juvenile adventure stories like Hop Harrigan, the Lone Ranger, Mr. Keen - Tracer of Lost Persons, the Shadow, Tarzan, Topper, etc. and comedies like Abbot and Costello. There was also more adult fare like the Jack Benny Program and the Bob Hope Show, to which entire families listened together - the shows got parents laughing as loud as their children. Alas, television provides a poor substitute today because it requires so little imagination and the sets in many of its juvenile programs are obviously fake.)

4. Reading increases your knowledge of (a) the world and how it works and (b) other people and how they think, speak, and behave - often differently from the way you do.
5. Reading enables you to better empathize with other people, such as members of the opposite sex, people gifted or limited in different ways than you are, people with markedly greater or lesser resources than you have, etc.
6. Reading also relaxes you and readies you for bed.
7. Moreover, so I have been told, reading also slows your rate of cognitive decline, which means something to me now that I have reached my middle eighties.

### *Negative Aspects*

The negative aspects of reading are less obvious and often unknown, and consequently most people don't think about them.

1. Solomon made the comment, "...of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh."<sup>4</sup> Serious reading is hard and tiring work.
2. Much reading can develop in one pride in the fact that one knows more about a subject than most people do, and pride is the deadliest of the seven deadly sins.
3. Reading can develop in one a hunger to know everything about everything - to be omniscient, an attribute that only God possesses.<sup>5</sup> We *must not* aspire to possess it and we *must* be forever content to know the truth about anything only in part.
4. Owning a large library can be a burden. Books cost a lot. They require shelving and space in one's home for the shelving. Thus, they affect others beyond oneself. Then, come moving day, they cost a lot to pack up, carry out of the home and into the moving van, transport, carry out of the van and into the new home, and unpack, after which one faces weeks of work bringing order out of chaos. Finally, at the end of one's days, one is faced with disposing of one's library, which, I am discovering, is also costly. Most library owners soon discover that the Zen saying, "You don't possess your possessions, they possess you," applies to their libraries. Moreover, to some extent a large library is the physical manifestation of the unhealthy desire to know everything about everything, to which I refer in point 3 above.

Now, I want to introduce you to my three favorite books, each of which influenced my life in significant ways.

### **My Second Favorite Book**

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<sup>4</sup> KJ21 Ecclesiastes 12:12.

<sup>5</sup> KJ21 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13:9.

My second favorite book is The Lily of Life, which was published by Hodder & Stoughton in London in 1913. It is a simple fairytale, in which a beautiful young Princess named Corona undertakes a harrowing quest to obtain an elixir that will save the life of a dying prince, whom she loves, so that he can regain his health and marry her twin sister, who loves him and whom he loves. It was written by Marie, the Crown Princess of Roumania (1875-1938), who was beloved by her subjects and became their queen in 1917.<sup>6</sup> It was illustrated by Helen Stratton, whose autumnal colors nicely capture the aura of the story, which occurs after the summer of Corona's life is only a memory.



*The Recovery, by Helen Stratton*

My mother first read this book to me when I was a small child, and I have reread it many times since then. It has been a touchstone for me, a continual reminder that life – even my life - is not all about me (a lesson not easily learned, particularly in this age of *me,...Me,...ME!*).

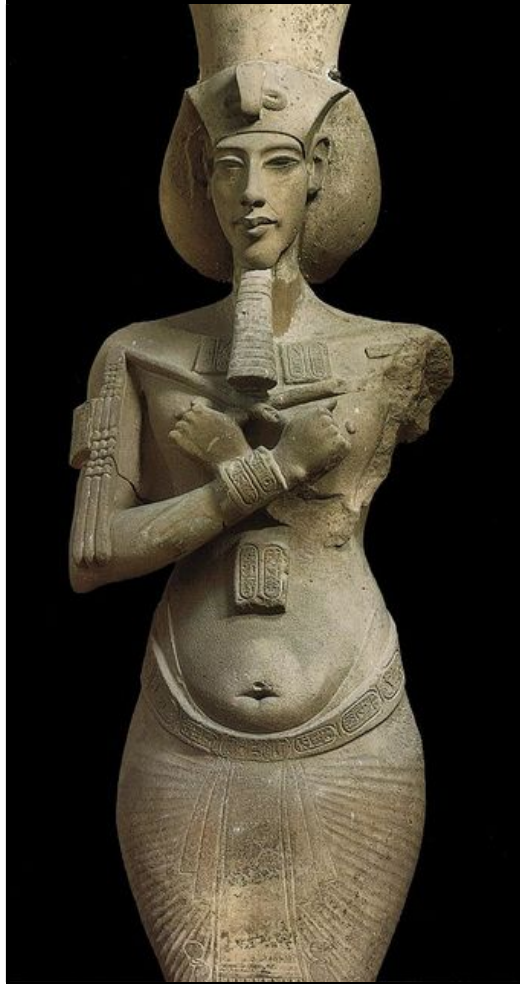
### **My Third Favorite Book**

My third favorite book is Oedipus and Akhnaton, which was published by Doubleday & Company in Garden City NY in 1960. It is a detective story - a genre which I have always loved - about two of the most famous figures of the ancient world. It was written by Dr. Immanuel Velikovsky, an Israeli psychiatrist who took a sabbatical in 1939 with the intention of spending a year in New York City writing about Sigmund Freud and his three heroes, Oedipus, Akhnaton, and Moses. The brief sabbatical turned into a life-long stay in the United States, during which he wrote many books and papers.

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<sup>6</sup> I have often wondered how much of Marie's tale is autobiographical.

Velikovsky's first four books deal primarily with the period c.1450-830 BC: Worlds in Collision (1950), which proposes that a series of close encounters among Venus, Mars, the moon, and the earth devastated the latter on a regular basis; Age in Chaos (1952), which rearranges the history of the ancient Middle East; Earth in Upheaval (1956), which argues that the geologic history of the earth was catastrophic, not uniform, as most geologists maintain; and Oedipus and Akhnaton, which argues that the Greek legends of the Oedipus cycle derived from real events in Egypt at the time of the pharaohs Akhnaton (Oedipus) and his sons Smenkhare (Polynices) and Tutankhamen (Eteocles).



*Akhnaton, aka Oedipus, Cairo Museum*



*Smenkhare, aka Polyneices*



*Tutankhamen, aka Eteocles*

I read Velikovsky's fourth book first, which then led me to the other three. They – and the research that I was prompted to by them - turned me into a full-blown skeptic of “accepted” science and scholarship. I now question everything that I read – with one major exception.

### **My Favorite Book**

My favorite book is The Bible - particularly the King James Version with its poetic cadence and elegant language - which was produced by the Holy Spirit using many human authors over a period of four millennia – a period that ended in 66 AD.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> I am certain that the biblical canon was closed in 66 AD, four years before the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by the Roman army under Titus in 70 AD.





*Christ Enthroned, The Book of Kells*

It identifies itself as the Word of God<sup>8</sup> and is often called the Holy Scriptures. I believe that it speaks God's truth from *Alpha* to *Omega* – i.e. from beginning to end – and, as you will learn, I no longer question it. It contains many stories, two of which God used to change my life forever. I will call one the biblical story; the other, the biblical drama.

### *The Biblical Story*

In response to an observation by C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*, I started reading the New Testament in January 1980, and by early March I had reached the biblical story that in my Bible is titled, "A Woman Is Caught in Adultery" (John 8:3-11). It starts with Jesus teaching in the temple. The scribes and Pharisees bring an adulteress to Him and ask: "...Moses in the law commanded that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou?" They hope to trap Him into repudiating either the God-given laws of Moses or His own teaching of compassion and forgiveness. But Jesus replies: "He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone at her." One by one they are convicted by His words and leave. Then Jesus asks the adulteress: "Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee?" She answers: "No man, Lord." At which point Jesus says to her: "Neither do I condemn thee: go and sin no more."

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<sup>8</sup> See KJ21 2 Tim 3:16-17, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly equipped for all good works." Also see KJ21 2 Peter 1:20-21, "...knowing this first: that no prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in olden time by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke *as they were moved* by the Holy Spirit."



*The woman caught in adultery, from Mel Gibson's The Passion*

I put the Bible down on my lap and thought, What a shrewd response to a very complicated situation. In (a) confronting the scribes and Pharisees with the requirement of the law that an accuser of another be blameless of the sin of which he is accusing the other and (b) identifying the woman's behavior as sin, Jesus upholds the law. In (a) calling upon the woman to repent and (b) then forgiving her, He demonstrates compassion. I wouldn't have thought of that in a thousand years!

Suddenly, I realized that God exists, that everything which I had been reading since January was true. Sensing his presence in the room, I fell to my knees. I acknowledged that I am a sinner, that Jesus is the Son of God, and that He died on the cross to atone for my sins, and I repented of my sins. Then I said: "I give you all that I am and all that I will be. I give you all that I have and all that I will have. I will serve you for the rest of my life." In the language of the Scriptures, I was "born again." Now I praise God daily for his "Amazing grace...that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see."

Later that same year, I asked God why he used the above story to reveal himself to me. I quickly realized the answer. Learning had been my idol. Now, even after I had turned my life over to Him, I was picking and choosing what I would believe in the Bible. If something there conflicted with what I had learned from scientists and scholars, I tended to stick with the latter. I was guilty of intellectual adultery. Soon thereafter, I realized that the entire Bible is true, that it contains the very Words of God, and I began treating it with proper respect.

*The Biblical Drama*



As I continued reading, I also realized that the entire Bible comprises a cosmic drama involving three central characters: the protagonist, the antagonist, and a fair maiden for whom the foregoing contend.

The protagonist of the drama is the Son of God, the Promised Messiah (or the Christ) of Israel. He is the personification of *logos*, which is the Greek word for truth, order, logic, etc. He appeared regularly in theonomies during the Old Testament period, in which he was usually identified as the Angel of the Lord, and then in 2 BC, He became incarnate in the person of Yeshua (or Jesus) of Nazareth, who lived a sinless life, was brutally scourged, was crucified on a cross at Golgotha to atone for the sins of His followers, rose from the grave as the first fruits of the general Resurrection, and ascended into Heaven, where He currently sits at the right hand of God and wields the awesome power of the celestial Throne.

The antagonist of the drama is the Devil (or Satan). He is the personification of *anti-logos*, which is a word for the antitheses of truth, order, and logic – i.e. falsehood, disorder, and illogic. He seeks to thwart God's plans for his creation.

The fair maiden of the drama is Messiah's Bride, for whose allegiance the protagonist and the antagonist vie. She comprises all the people whose names God the Father wrote in the Book of Life before the foundations of the world were laid, thereby ordaining that they would become Messiah's faithful followers, whether they lived before, during, or after the time that He walked on earth (2 BC to 33 AD). She suffers much during the long betrothal which God is using to prepare her for her marriage to his Son, for she must fully understand and appreciate what He has endured for her. Also, she must learn compassion and empathy for others so that she can serve them in the manner that her future husband does.

As I continued reading the Bible, to which I devoted more and more of my time, I decided that it is undoubtedly the most informative, interesting, and profound book ever written. Moreover, it is ever ready to impart its inexhaustible riches to anyone who diligently seeks them. Unfortunately, most people never look into it.

Imagine a home with a large steamer trunk in the parlor, both of which have been passed down through several generations of the family that owns them. The steamer trunk is an attractive piece of furniture. Its wood stays and leather panels are regularly oiled and its brass hinges and locks are regularly polished so that it gleams in the sunlight that pours through a nearby window. It bears a plate of glass that protects it from inadvertent spills. It has always been used as a side table to the current heir's favorite chair. It has often been the subject of conversation regarding its beauty and provenance, but it has not been opened in recent years. Nor has it been moved, because it is very heavy, and no one in the family has been prompted to discover why. There it sits, full to the brim of gold coins and precious stones which were accumulated by some ancestor in the dim past and now are silently waiting for some heir to discover them and have his or her life transformed forever. Such is the fate of most family Bibles - often bound with fine leather and gold

gilding - which are sitting on the shelves of tens of thousands of living rooms across the nation. That Bible sits there in plain sight, valued for its decorative contribution to the room, but not for its contents, because our coarse and Godless culture disparages its historical accounts as fables, its miracles as impossible, and its timeless truths about ourselves as dangerous.

### *Annus Mirabilis*

As you can see, 1980 was an *annus mirabilis* for me. As it began, I was a 42-year old Secular<sup>9</sup> Humanist, living with my wife and two daughters on a beautiful, 300-acre farm in Grafton VT. There, I was focused on enjoying my family and our sylvan setting, practicing architecture, working on the farm in all seasons, making modest contributions to my local community, and pursuing my life-long interest in ancient history, natural history, and the history of science. As it ended, however, I was a born-again,<sup>10</sup> Bible-believing<sup>11</sup> Christian seeking “to know Christ and to make Him known.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Afterwards**

Since 1980, I have come to see a connection between Marie’s fairytale and the biblical drama. The fairytale now strikes me as an allegory that is based on the biblical drama, with the Lily of Life representing the Son of God and the golden-haired Princess Corona representing His Bride.

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<sup>9</sup> Atheistic.

<sup>10</sup> This term reflects what the Bible says about the awakening of the human spirit. At a person’s physical birth, his (or her) spirit is stillborn, thus rendering him blind and deaf to spiritual reality and spiritual truths. When a person accepts Jesus as his Savior and Lord, however, the Holy Spirit quickens his spirit, thereby opening his eyes and ears to spiritual reality and spiritual truth – i.e. he experiences spiritual birth. As John Newton wrote in his famous hymn, “Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound That saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, Was blind but now I see.”

<sup>11</sup> This term is meant to convey recognition of the Bible’s complete trustworthiness – i.e. its inerrancy in all particulars, whether sacred or secular.

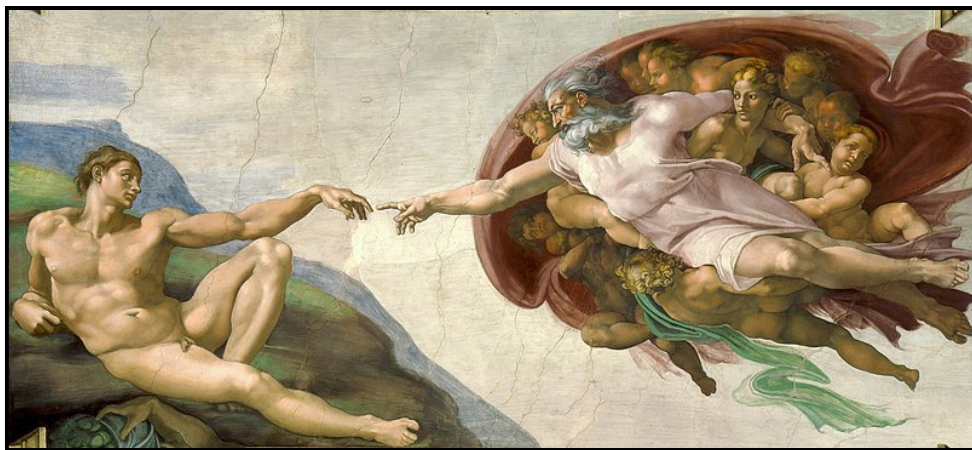
<sup>12</sup> The mission statement of Saint Paul’s Episcopal Church in Darien, CT, which I have always admired for its terse focus on the essentials of Christian life.



*Corona and the Lily of Life*

I have also come to see something about the nature of creation. God has set things up in Universe in such a way that we are always facing a choice between (a) accepting and obeying or (b) rejecting and disobeying what he has said – a decision which we must reach by faith. He never gives us proof. He always tells us to look, to listen, to smell, to taste, and to feel, then to think about what we experience, and, above all, to love those whom he puts in our way.

The Bible describes how God created the heavens and the earth, all the earth's flora and fauna, and then Adam,



*God's creation of Adam, by Michelangelo*

whom he placed in the Garden of Eden and to whom he gave permission to eat anything in the garden excepting the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Concerning the latter, he said, "...thou shall not eat of it. For in the day that you eatest

thereof, thou shalt surely die.”<sup>13</sup> Soon thereafter, God created Eve and gave her to Adam to be his wife.

The Bible then describes how the serpent, which was possessed by Satan, tempted Eve to eat the forbidden fruit by saying, “Yea, hath God said, ‘Ye shall not eat of every tree in the garden?’”<sup>14</sup> The quote is not what God said, but the more important point here is the question preceding it, “Yea, hath God said...?” Satan wanted Eve first to question what God had said and then to decide that she didn’t have to take it seriously. She did both and then persuaded Adam to do likewise.



*Adam taking the forbidden fruit from Eve*

That is the same temptation which each of us faces every day of our lives. Will we accept or reject what God has said? In Adam and Eve’s case, they had only one sentence to consider. Did God mean what he said about the penalty for eating the forbidden fruit? In our case, however, we have an entire book to consider, which contains many prescriptions<sup>15</sup> and proscriptions,<sup>16</sup> as well as many rewards for observing the prescriptions and many penalties for disobeying the proscriptions. Does God mean everything that he says there?

I think he does.

(Slightly edited on January 14, 2021)

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<sup>13</sup> KJ21 Genesis 2:17.

<sup>14</sup> KJ21 Genesis 3:1.

<sup>15</sup> They include the three imperatives of Jesus: (1) Deuteronomy 6:5 and Mark 12:30, (2) Leviticus 19:18 and Mark 12:31, and (3) Matthew 28:19-20.

<sup>16</sup> They include the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20: 2-17).