

November 2015

## WHY READ?

When we do something over and over again, the force of habit takes over and we often lose sight of why we are doing it in the first place. Take reading, for example. Many people spend countless hours reading, whether in books or magazines or online. They probably don't ever pause to ask why they read; they just do it. To ask why a person reads is like asking why one breathes. Who would ask such a question? Only a simpleton—or maybe a philosopher.

Four hundred years ago the philosopher Francis Bacon asked that very same question. Since Theosophists love to read, it may be useful for us to consider Bacon's analysis. In a short, but pithy, essay entitled "On Studies," Bacon gave three reasons for reading: *delight*, *ornament*, and *ability*. Let's take each one in turn. Theosophical study offers the sublime enjoyment and satisfaction that comes from gaining a deeper understanding of life and the world we live in. By ornamentation, Bacon meant the ability to converse about what we have read. Anyone who has been to a Theosophical convention has witnessed this in spades, for Theosophists love to talk about the books they have read. The third reason—ability—is the capacity to apply what one has learned. Bacon also noted that there can be drawbacks to each of these three motivations: reading only for enjoyment leads to laziness; reading only to acquire knowledge leads to ostentation; reading only to decide how to make decisions leads to an academic literal-mindedness. As in so many things in life, it comes down to a matter of balance and moderation.

But of the three—delight, ornament, and ability—the third is most relevant to Theosophists, because it facilitates the process of self-transformation. If my reading is not making me a better person, then better not to read and find some other means of self-improvement. As the Roman statesman Cicero said in his oration *Pro Archia Poeta*, "Character without learning has made for excellence and ability more often than learning without character." Or as H. P. Blavatsky said so poetically in *The Voice of the Silence*, "Even ignorance is better than head-learning with no Soul-Wisdom to illuminate and guide it."

An instance of "character without learning" was given by the British explorer Wilfred Thesiger in his book *Arabian Sands*. Thesiger was the first European to cross the Empty Quarter of the southern Arabian Peninsula on foot, a dangerous and desolate region which contains the largest sand desert in the world. Although he was well educated, Thesiger had this to say about the nomadic desert people whom he came to respect and love: "I shall always remember how often I was humbled by those illiterate herdsmen who possessed, in so much greater measure than I, generosity and courage, endurance, patience, and lighthearted gallantry. Among no other people have I ever felt the same sense of personal inferiority."

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