Reading engages us to the realities of the world

By Judith Ramaley

Now that another academic year has come to a close, I find myself thinking about what I personally have learned this year. The question sits in the middle of my thinking and tends to wake up whenever I pick up a good book.

It usually isn’t very long before the world opening up in that book connects to something else I have read or a conversation I have had recently. Pretty soon, the voices are interacting with each other in my imagination. If only I could assemble the authors around a table, offer them a cup of coffee and sit back to listen to their talk. Since I cannot do that, I convene them in my imagination instead.

The May 6 issue of the “Chronicle of Higher Education” carried an essay by William Deresiewicz entitled, “Jane Austen Education.” The essay was a delightful rumination on the very different way the author, then a graduate student, reread “Northanger Abbey” as he began to prepare to write his dissertation. Deresiewicz wrote about how his interactions with an especially beloved professor and the lessons he was now able to see in the book eventually came together to inform his own approach to teaching.

Possessed (yes, I meant a double entendre here) of a Kindle e-book reader, I immediately downloaded the entire works of Jane Austen and opened up the text of what I, too, recalled as a light and pleasant book that I had skimmed through quickly in a college course when I was about the same age as the heroine of the novel.

With Deresiewicz as a companion, commenting quietly in my mind as I reread the novel, I took a very different lesson from the book that heretofore was just a dim memory. What I learned was that habits and social conventions can shield us from the richness of what we might learn if we could just open ourselves to the realities of the world around us.

Today, we would call this problem a lack of mindfulness. As Deresiewicz puts it, “Learning to read means learning to live. Keeping your eyes open when you’re looking at a book is just a way of teaching yourself to keep them open all of the time.”

Back in college, I read a lot but I must admit that often my eyes and my mind were not really open. Until fairly late in my college career, I thought a college education consisted of acquiring knowledge and answering questions posed by my professors, not exploring the world and asking questions. It was a great relief when I untangled myself from my unquestioned assumptions and began to explore the world and to see what was all around me.

I am older now and an inveterate questioner. As usually happens for any devoted and avid reader, one thing led to another after I reread “Northanger Abbey.” Things began to come together for me around the question that was hovering in my mind. As I thought more about what I have learned this year, every conversation and every book I picked up seemed to have something to teach me.

Together, these extraordinary companions form a pattern of stories and voices, each adding some new insights into what it means to pay attention, to listen, to learn from others, to be mindful and open to discovery.

One after another, the authors weigh, each with his or her own thoughts about what it means to lead a responsible and meaningful life. What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope? Some of these thoughts come across in powerful stories or carefully crafted poetry or serious scholarly treatises. Some are presented playfully and with a rich sense of respect for the characters whose stories are being told. Some of my recent companions — some familiar and some new — have been Chaucer regaling me on the road to Canterbury or the never-ending stories of the “Arabian Nights” or Huck Finn’s journey down the Mississippi or James Joyce’s characters in “Dubliners” or the adventures of the teenage hero in “The Giver,” one of the fantasy novels that my grandchildren love so much.

I freely confess that I like those stories, too, and read them with the same zest with which I might consume a fresh bowl of popcorn. Most of the other material is more like a nutritious meal. Both kinds of reading have their place in my life. If you are a voracious reader, you will have a much richer repertoire, a deeper and more interesting way to read the world around you, and you will enjoy what we can learn by keeping our eyes open all of the time. That is the lesson I learned this year.

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