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Norma Kidd Green

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COOPERATIVE EXTENSION WORK

IN AGRICULTURE AND HOME ECONOMICS

1934

U. of N. Agr. College & U. S. Dept. of Agr. Cooperating
W. H. Brokaw, Director, LincolnExtension
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BOOKS ARE FRIENDS

Norma Kidd Green

I shall begin this more or less rambling discourse somewhat after the manner of a sermon. (Not that I would infer that sermons are rambling.) I shall, however, borrow from the manner of a sermon to the extent that I shall take a text. It is after all the way most dissertations on life begin. From finding a terse, penetrating comment which brings us up short with its impressive statement of some truth, we go on to muse upon it and to think over the various ways in which we feel it is true.

So my text, although not from chapter this or verse that, is from a bit of poetry, in fact only a motto, called "Books". It is by Emilie Poulson who chiefly wrote for children but who said many things that adults may well consider.

"Books are keys to wisdom's treasure,
Books are gates to lands of pleasure,
Books are paths that upward lead,
Books are friends--come, let us read."

So, ---Books are friends!

Now as in everything else we cannot make our statements too general, for we know that all books are not friends to even the most bookish people and that maybe no books are friends to some people. But nevertheless, I maintain that books, some books--many books can be friends to anybody if that person will put forth a little effort and cultivate those friends.

Become Acquainted

You do not become friends with another woman without ever speaking to her, without visiting her and finding out what she is like, what she enjoys and what she thinks. No more will you make friends with books so long as you feel that they belong only in book shops, on library shelves or placed decoratively on your parlor table. With people we think that the other person should come half way in making friends and often our pride holds us back from making even fifty-one per cent of the advances. But with books the author has gone all of his "halfway," or really about three-fourths of the way, for a book will quickly bring you all the changes of mood, the finest thoughts and the deepest philosophies that it takes you years of companionship to find out in your human friends.

Now, the next thing, of course, that everyone will say is, "But I haven't time to read." Well, to be sure the person who is always looking forward to when he will have time to read will never be a great reader, because if books have not been necessary enough to fill in the little moments of time they will not be the things which will occupy the hours when he has them at his disposal. I know you are busy, for I keep house myself, and for a fair sized family. There were a number of years when about all the reading I did was while I nursed the baby.

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I believe that because lately I have been talking about books and can discuss a few of the newer publications, most of my friends visualize me as spending a full eight hours a day with my nose in a book, while I hardly ever read longer than thirty minutes at a time and often it is only five or ten minutes.

It is beyond a doubt an advantage to read quickly, which may partly be a matter of practice, but may be something in the method. Walter Pitkin, who is writing a good deal now as to the way in which we can make the most of our abilities and energies, has written a book on "The Art of Rapid Reading". It contains some very practical suggestions as to speedily covering the printed page.

But making use of little moments can be of advantage to the busy housewife. I find you can read some while you iron or even while you mend. Prop an open book or your magazine beside you--read a paragraph or a sentence or so, and think it over while you set the patch in the overall knee. This assumes, of course, that your reading is something which is worth thinking over.

After all, that is probably the secret of whether or not we read--is it worth thinking over? Which brings us to the consideration of what shall be the fundamental attitude toward books. Are books just something to help us pass away the time which is not pressingly filled with other duties or are books something to help us find our way through life? Few of us would consider that our friends are only to keep us from being bored, but would admit that friends are worth while because we share with them our greatest moments as well as our more trivial ones.

You enjoy receiving a tiny note from a friend; often seeing someone drive by and wave to you will brighten the day. Just such little refreshing glimpses can be gained from books without the expenditure of more than a minute or two.

Occasionally it is confusing to try to select the books we would most enjoy. To be suddenly set down in a library or book shop would be like happening in on a big church dinner made up almost entirely of strangers. But libraries and book shops, as should all well regulated social affairs, have what we might call assisting hostesses, who see that people are properly introduced to one another. So out of the crowd comes a kindly person who says, "Do come over here, I want you to meet Mrs. Smith. She has just finished a quilt of that pattern you showed me last week. She says it is called the 'Rocky Glen'", or "Here is Mrs. Jones with whom I know you will enjoy visiting, because she has the most beautiful variety of perennials of any one in this neighborhood. I have always remembered your beautiful delphiniums last summer." Now it is just as possible for some one to say, "Have you read Ruth Finley's book 'Patchwork Quilts'? It has diagrams of over one hundred quilt patterns and the most fascinating stories of how some of the old patterns received their names." Or, "Wouldn't you be interested in Orloff's little book 'Perennial Gardens'? It is so practical and has charts of garden plans and many good pointers on the care of different perennials."

But you may not often get to a library or a book shop, --so then the review columns of your magazines will serve as the steering committee. So many magazines give some discussion of books and others probably would if their readers demanded it. Then the Library Commission will help you, the workers in the Agricultural Extension Service, and I would be only too happy to send you lists and comments on different books. A lending list in one's own neighborhood might be fun, for with six women each buying one book you could pass them around and everyone have the fun of reading all six during the winter.

So you can be introduced to these friends formally and informally and if you will but go beyond the introduction, you will find much joy and satisfaction. You may not discover very close friends right at first, or you may find that when first introduced you do not feel drawn to that book. Haven't you sometimes found that people improve on acquaintance and that those are usually the ones best worth knowing? When my children start on some of the older books, the ones that are not written to catch one's attention with the first sentence, but to carefully lay a background for the action even though it takes one-sixth of the book, I always say, "Well, read ten chapters and then if you aren't interested, put it aside." But the new friend usually improves on acquaintance and they finish the book.

You no doubt have friends who differ very greatly from you in many of their points of view, who have certain interests for which you do not care at all, but then in other ways you are most companionable. You wouldn't think of insisting that they make themselves over just to suit you, but you enjoy the things that you do have in common. So don't demand that everything about a book should appeal to you or that you should agree with everything in it. I have been reading "Out of My Life and Thought" by Albert Schweitzer. Schweitzer is an Alsatian who has plunged deeply into a variety of fields. He is a teacher, a philosopher, a preacher, a writer of religious books, a musician and a medical missionary. I do not know enough of music to appreciate his long discussions of just how one should lift the fingers from the keyboard to obtain just the right effect; but, I have greatly enjoyed his comments on life in general, his ideas as to what place religion should have in our lives and have stood amazed at his ideal of self-sacrifice.

Just so we do not wish to cast a book aside because we do not agree with the first chapters. John Ruskin said that the easy thing to say, the thing we want to say about a book is, "How good this is," or "That's exactly what I think." Of course this is natural, for we all like to have people agree with us. It is particularly flattering to find that the great or the near great hold the same opinions as ourselves. I'm sure that is why I enjoy Gamaliel Bradford's Journal, because he feels as I do about reforms and about moving pictures." Ruskin went on to say, however, "But the right feeling is, 'How strange that is! I never thought of that before and yet I see it is true, or if I do not now, I hope I shall some day'--at least be sure that you go to the author to get at his meaning, not to find yours. Judge it afterwards if you think yourself qualified to do so; but ascertain it first."

And so further with Bradford, I have not yet been able to entirely put into practice some of his ideas as to how one should read fiction but I shall keep trying and maybe sometime I shall come to it.

I would not suggest that you always seek the books which are different and contrary to your thinking. The friend who stirs you up and stimulates you to different lines of thought is only one of the kinds of friends you need.

We would all, no doubt, first think of our old friends, those who are tried and true, whose memories go back to our own girlhood memories, who can with us, as Bradford says, "cover the barren places with the soft snowflakes of 'Do you remember so-and-so?'"

I like to look around on peoples' book shelves and I nearly always find a corner of rather well worn books, of the old friends, probably, Little Women, Hiawatha, David Copperfield, Alice in Wonderland, Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, or The Count of Monte Cristo. Their owners probably seldom read them now, parts of them may be almost memorized, but it is like having photographs around, just the sight of the book recalls the friend. The old friends aren't entirely children's

books; they are the great ones of the ages, the ones that are still worth printing and worth reading over and over again. How much more valuable to hold to such friends than to those who are here today and gone tomorrow and are noticed because they are new. Some months ago a certain review was announced in Lincoln of a book which had been published twenty years or more. A woman said to me, "Why is anyone reviewing that now?" Well, why not?

One of my old friends is a copy of Stevenson's poetry, its olive green leather cover is well rubbed and scarred from having been often packed in trunks and traveling bags. It is almost like taking certain trips again when I think of some of the times and the places it has been with me. I like in the evening to read --- "Evensong".

The embers of the day are red
Beyond the murky hill.
The kitchen smokes; the bed
In the darkling house is spread,
The great sky darkens overhead,
And the great woods are shrill.
So far I have been led,
Lord, by Thy will;
So far I have followed, Lord, and wondered still.

The breeze from the embalmed land
Blows sudden toward the shore
And claps my cottage door.
I hear the signal, Lord--I understand.
The night at Thy command
Comes. I will eat and sleep
And will not question more.

Whether they be old friends or new friends we enjoy those with a sense of humor, who see the happy things of life even when they be from the point of view of amused indulgence of "What fools we mortals be!" It does us good to laugh even though sometimes it may be at our own expense. I would recommend to you, Wodehouse, O. Henry, A. A. Milne and at some times J. B. Priestley, for example; a bit from O. Henry's "Sociology in Serge and Straw."

Christopher Morley reminds us that there are two things we forget about, the things we never see and the ones that we see all the time. If this be so it may be that the women living in the open country may occasionally need to be reminded of the beauties of nature as much as the women who live on a crowded city street. Some people bring us a fresh breath of out door air and so do some books. One woman wrote to the publisher after reading Gladys Hastly Carroll's "As the Earth Turns" and said that she had had to lay the book down and go out of doors to look around her to appreciate the beautiful things which she had been taking too much for granted. Might I also call your attention to the "Nature Lover's Knapsack," a collection of out-of-door poetry, which can be tucked into a pocket for a walk or tucked up on the kitchen window sill where it will be right at hand.

While we are glad to grow in appreciation of the things close at hand many of us still turn our thoughts a bit longingly to the far distant places. How many would love to travel and see the strange wonders of the world! In all probability only a few of us will ever venture very far from our native land yet we can

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go through the experiences of others. I know of a woman who is becoming an authority on small ocean shell fish yet much of the time she is too ill to even go down to the shore. The ocean is brought to her a bucket full at a time by the other members of the family. But with her microscopes and her patient study she knows much more about the ocean than many a traveler who has sailed many miles and miles on its surface. Many people know more of distant lands than the traveler who dropping in at a sea coast town only tries to find American food or a souvenir to take home. There is a host of books to serve such purposes. For instance, "The House of Exile," by Nora Waln, which gives one an intimate picture of Chinese family life. "The Daughter of a Samurai" is the biography of Madame Sugimoto who tells delightfully of her early education and childhood memories in old Japan. "Pageant," by G. E. Lancastr takes one to Tasmania to follow the fortunes of one family for some generations; "Dr. Luke of the Labrador" introduces one to a courageous neighbor to the north; or one may follow Dr. Dickey to the head waters of the Orinoco in his "My Jungle Book."

More important than gaining different points of view, than learning of things far away, or even of enjoying things near at hand is the adjusting of our own thinking and philosophy as to our own particular job and our own particular corner in the world. Some people never seem to have much trouble doing this and others struggle and fume, do a lot of wondering and a lot of worrying before they come to see just how they can best make the most of their own bit of living.

Of all the friends that are good friends the best are those who can help us in this adjustment. I think usually it is a friend that is a little older than we are, someone who has done about the same things and gone a little further on the road where they can look back and see the forest and not the trees. For the younger homemaker there is nothing equal to the friendship of an older woman whose family is grown around her and yet who can remember some of the perplexities and the problems of her earlier days. Truly the counsel of such women can be precious words of wisdom. I am over and over thankful for one woman to whom I often turn when I can't see quite how to handle some situation. Yet one of the most illuminating things that has ever come to me in the matter of my job of homemaking came from a book. And that book--in fact that paragraph or so, has been a friendly hand many a time. Dorothy Canfield Fisher has thought deeply and written much on family affairs, but I was surprised one day to find in one paragraph all she had said in a half dozen novels. That paragraph reilluminated the message of the novels and clarified a lot of the things I had tried to think out about my own family.

In the chapter called "Moral Sunshine" in her book "Mothers and Children", Mrs. Fisher says that doctors and nurses have educated us to see that the tiny baby needs only clean milk, sterile nursing bottles and warm feet. That it is for our own satisfaction only that we add embroidered petticoats and beribboned bonnets. But, she feels that no one has been quite so clear or so insistent in teaching us just what are the really essential elements for the proper growth of older children. So, Mrs. Fisher goes on to list these essentials, which she says, "Can be secured in a little five room house, in any moderate sized American town or village, or in the country, as easily as in a millionaire's mansion." I would like to add that some of them are more easily secured in the small town or country than in the city. Here are those essentials: "Peace and harmony among the adults of the family; an atmosphere of purposeful, cheerful industry and clear-sightedness towards the children; and for them (the children) a life of intellectual freedom and physical activity." I do feel that the "physical activity" is much more easily secured out

of the city and the "purposeful industry" can be much more apparent to the children on the farm, for in the city father's activities are often so remote as to be very vague to the child and there is the constant temptation for mother to buzz a great deal with a certain pseudo-industriousness that she must admit to herself and the children soon come to feel is not very purposeful.

But don't you see how this paragraph out of a friendly book can come to be a sort of measuring stick to use for family plans? You can say, "Will doing, buying or thinking this way, add to or detract from the peace and harmony that must abide between me and mine?" "In doing this am I really maintaining a cheerful and purposeful industry?" "By planning this way am I really being clear-sighted toward my children, is this going to help them to grow up to be independent and self-reliant or am I acting thus because I like to feel that I am important to them?" "Will this new house or this new piece of furniture add to the children's chances for physical activity or will it be so important to me that I shall always be saying 'Don't, Don't, Don't?'" "Am I urging my children to spend much time on this or that because they like it or because I do?" And so you can go on having friendly counsel at hand in all your planning.

Re-reading

I have said little about re-reading and yet we can't have friends whom we have met but once so it stands to reason that if books are to be friends we read them again and again. Charles Bray says, "Books, to me, are ever new; the books may be the same but I am changed. Every seven years gives me a different, often a higher appreciation of those I like. Every good book is worth reading three times at least."

Let me tell you of one book that I read over and over, in which every seven years or so I see something different because I am different myself. It is Dorothy Canfield Fisher's "The Bent Twig." It is a novel showing a home which has all the essentials which Mrs. Fisher outlines, although to the rest of the community it seems "queer." But the twig, the elder daughter of the family, was bent in the right direction, although the parents did not always feel sure of their work, just as you and I do not always feel sure of ours. As a contrast to this bending there runs the story of a boy, a distant connection of the family who had wealth and travel and "advantages" but who lived in an atmosphere of laziness and adult anger and intrigue, and she depicts the pitiful result of that bending.

When I first read the book I saw only the college days and the girl's desire for a home "like other people's," later her attitude toward her suitors and her struggle to decide between wealth and character. And of recent years I can read it over and over to catch the picture of the mother and why she had that kind of a home and how courageously she puts forth high ideals and then stepped aside to let the children feel their own way until they measured up to those ideals, not because they had been told to, but because they know from experience, influenced of course by their training that those ideals were the best.

Yes, books can be friends!