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Marks in the Margin

*Whenever in my reading, occurs concerning this our fellow creature,
I do never fail to set it down by way of commonplace.*

Jonathan Swift

*Time was when readers kept commonplace books. Whenever they
came across a pithy passage, they copied it into a notebook under an
appropriate heading...Reading and writing were therefore
inseparable activities. They belonged to a continuous effort to make
sense of things.*

Robert Darnton

About twenty years ago I started to keep a record of some of the thoughts and ideas in the books that I had been reading. By then I had already turned 50 and while I had always been a reader, I don't know why I hadn't started before. I may have copied a few passages over the years, but I wrote slowly, often illegibly, and none of those written pages remain. What I do have, however, are over 300 pages of various extracts copied from the books and periodicals that I have read and then collected in what has become a rather huge spiral bound notebook. Following a long established tradition it is known as my Commonplace Book.

When I come across something notable that I have read, I put a little mark by it in the margin or enclose the relevant passage in parentheses. I invariably stop to think about it for a moment before adding the page number on which it appears to a list I keep on the inside back cover of the book or last page of whatever periodical I am reading. Once I've finished the material, I copy each of the passages that I've marked in a word document on my computer.

I know some people feel differently about this, that the meaning of a passage can only be fully grasped by copying them by hand. But because I write so poorly the computer has made it possible for me to record these passages in a readable form with ease. I can't imagine having a volume of such length, or of any length for that matter, were it not for my laptop, nor that I would continue the practice so avidly without giving it a second thought.

Some of the books I read have a great many marked passages, others very few. I used to judge the quality of a book by the number of passages that I've marked. Eventually I realized that was a mistake, since occasionally I come across a really worthwhile book in which I don't mark any passages. At the end of each year, I make a copy of the collected passages and add them to my ever-growing Commonplace Book.

Recently a friend wrote to me that she also keeps such a book, one that is not so much a record of her reading but rather of certain ideas that come up in the enormous number of books she reads. She believed the passages fell into some kind of pattern that she was trying to understand. My hunch is that she will spend a lifetime at this thankless task. She also said she would kill herself if she lost it. Well, it must be quite a treasure.

In the beginning my Commonplace Book was largely composed of quotations that struck me as worth recording for one reason or another. The first entry is from Samuel Coleridge: *Advice is like snow; the softer it falls...the deeper it sinks into the mind.* The idea has considerable appeal to me now, although I'm not sure why it did at the time I made note of it. Soon after there is one from William James: *Wisdom is learning what to overlook.* Again the notion has grown in meaning over the years.

Eventually the entries became longer. *When they ask me, as of late they frequently do, how I have for so many years continued an equal interest in medicine and the poem, I reply that they amount for me to nearly the same thing.* —William Carlos Williams. *At the breakfast table I always open the newspaper to the sports page first. The sports page records people's accomplishments. The front page has nothing but men's failures.* —George Plimpton.

Then I began to split apart the quotations from a miscellaneous collection of phrases and short extracts that I called Briefs. These could be anything from an amusing phrase or word, a short phrase from the *New York Times*, a periodical, or something I read on the web: *Eat! You need strength to worry.* — Jewish Fortune Cookie message. *The whole world seemed to have changed into a Robert Altman movie. Jarring and sour and crazy and colored in a palette that I believe drove my entire generation mildly insane.* —Michael Chabon.

Soon I begin to separate the Quotes and Briefs from the Passages that comprised the longer sections I began to copy from the books and periodicals that I was reading. For example, I copied several memorable passages from Ian McEwan's *Atonement*:

...the strangeness of the here and now, of what passed between people, the ordinary people that she knew, and what power one could have over the other, and how easy it was to get everything wrong, completely wrong.

...nothing was ever as one imagined it.

...truth was strange and deceptive, it had to be struggled for, against the flow of the everyday.

The age of clear answers was over.

Whatever humble nursing she did, and however well or hard she did it, whatever illumination in tutorial she had relinquished, or lifetime moment on a college law, she would never undo the damage. She was unforgivable.

Each year my Commonplace Book consists of entries in each of these groups with the Passages by far the largest of the three sections. In 2004 I added thirty-seven pages of Passages and four pages of Briefs and since I entered only a few new quotations I did not print a new Quotes section that year. By way of comparison, in 1996, the first year that I began to distinguish the three types of entries, there were eleven pages of Passages, four of Briefs, and two of Quotes. This difference can be attributed to the fact I now have far more time for reading than I did in the nineties when I was still actively engaged in teaching and research. Beginning in 2002 the number of Passages increased almost twofold compared to previous years. I have no idea why this occurred. There was also a further doubling during the next four years so that last year, 2005, I recorded fifty-five pages of Passages. I think these changes are due largely to the improving quality of the books I am reading now. After all, one can only read so many romance novels.

Reading serious literature takes time. To make the most of it a reader should be able to linger over the text for a while, pause to give it some thought, stop to mark a memorable passage, and perhaps revisit it before moving on. Ideally a reader should be free of the distractions of pressing work deadlines, household chores, or other responsibilities and be able to disengage from the onslaught of the media, telephone, and the Internet. These are the conditions of my life now. It is also true that I've taken a liking to the practice of commonplacing; it has become a habit as well as a commitment to maintain a record of the noteworthy ideas that I have found on the pages of the literary works that I've been fortunate enough to be able to read.

In a recent interview at Salon.com¹ James Salter asserted: "Sentences should not cause you to stop and admire them. They should be in the service of the page." That brought me to a halt and I proceeded to do the very thing Salter said I shouldn't. After pondering his claim for a bit, I began to wonder if I should give up the practice required to maintain my Commonplace Book. Am I missing the sheer power of the page by stopping to admire a sentence or make note of one from time to time? Have I lost sight of why I began copying extracts in the first place and the inherent benefits of the practice? These questions more or less answered themselves, for in stopping to consider Salter's claim I was thoroughly in the "service of the page." It was not the sentence *per se* that caused me to stop. Rather, I stopped because of the effect the sentence had on me and the way it led me to want to make special note of its meaning and consider, for a moment, the several questions it raised.

Recently I've begun to wonder what it would be like if I stopped my commonplacing activity. Could I do that? Would my reading experience be any different? The questions are not unlike those a person might ask who wishes to change a very strong habit. In a word, it wouldn't be easy. Marking and then recording the memorable passages in the books I read has become central to my reading experience. I usually stop reading a book when it doesn't engage me in this fashion. And so to discontinue the practice of commonplacing would make reading a far less absorbing experience than it has become for me.

I suspect many readers make little marks in the books they read. It seems a natural thing to do. Yet only a few readers that I know keep a record of these passages. A few years ago I learned that the practice began in antiquity and that it achieved considerable prominence during the Renaissance. Yet I was completely unaware

¹ <http://www.salon.com/books/int/2005/06/17/salter.html>

of the tradition at the time I started my own collection. The fact that I, along with other readers, keep a commonplace book without knowing about this centuries old practice suggests it reflects a rather fundamental feature of the reading experience.

Frankly, I am not at all sure why I began the practice in the first place. The passages must have stood out for one reason or another and I may have wanted to make a record of them in order to reread them sometime in the future. I think I also had dreams of doing some writing. I know I admired a great many writers and often wondered how they were able to write so well. In my naïve way, I must have imagined that if I studied their works carefully and copied portions of them often enough, I might one day be able to write like they did.

In thinking back to the origins of my Commonplace Book, I realize now I must have found something in the literature I was reading that was not only different but was also somehow more truthful, more discerning about what truly mattered in my life than what I was reading in psychology. I don't recall collecting passages in the academic books and journals I was reading. Yes, I took notes but those were for my lectures and classroom presentations and were never added to my Commonplace Book or preserved in special notebooks. I may have placed them in a file for the next time I taught the class but not because I found them memorable or otherwise worth saving because they were especially significant.

I also know that the reasons that led me to begin my Commonplace Book have been largely replaced by others now. Transcribing memorable passages from the books I read is how I become truly engaged with the book, engaged with the issues that are important to me at the time of my reading. The issues change over time, but there is always the great pleasure of making contact with them on the page and then recording those passages I have marked in order to read them once again as often and whenever I wish

Lately, I have begun to think of my Commonplace Book as a form of collecting; in my case, collecting ideas as well as clever or provocative expressions that stand apart from ordinary discourse and are, for that reason, worth preserving. In some cases they serve as a standard against which to judge my own attempts to write with some degree of clarity. Collecting ideas also has a number of distinct advantages compared to collecting most other objects—they cost next to nothing, they are easy to find, do not clutter up your closet, and don't require periodic repair or maintenance.

Overview

When I began this project I was hoping only to look more analytically at my own Commonplace Book. I thought of it as an exercise, a novel approach to gaining some insights about myself. I soon realized, however, that I was far from alone in keeping a collection of notable quotations. This brought me in contact with the tradition of commonplace books stretching back to antiquity, as well as the works of other authors who have either published their commonplace books or carried out historical research on the topic. Indeed, when I first started to think about the practice of keeping commonplace books, I had no idea of its origins or of those philosophers, scholars, and theologians who copied their favorite quotations, poems, or sections of the manuscripts they read.² Nor did I have any idea why these individuals spent so much time at this task or how they intended to use the material once they had so diligently transcribed it. I've briefly reviewed this

² Since I had never intended to publish the material in my Commonplace Book, I neglected to record the author and source of each selection. This was especially true for the Briefs. In addition, the Passages were not properly referenced with page numbers, and in the case of periodicals, the year of publication and volume number. It is too late now to try to remedy this situation with specific citations for the hundreds of the passages in my Commonplace Book. More importantly, where the passage appears matters far less to me than the idea it conveys or the way it is written. I apologize to those readers who might wish to know the exact source of a certain passage(s) that I refer to in this volume. However, I believe it should be possible to obtain this information for the majority of Passages, where at least the author and book title are noted and for most of the Quotes by well-known authors.

historical background in Chapter 2. It is not a well-known literature or very extensive one either.

I also decided to try to find out how widespread the practice of keeping commonplace books is today by surveying others who keep one. The results, some of which surprised me, are discussed in Chapter 3. The recent appearance of commonplace books on the Web was a totally unexpected outcome of my inquiry and Chapter 4 presents an overview of this phenomenon, one that may foreshadow the future direction that commonplace books will take. In Chapter 5, I describe the results of the qualitative analysis of my own Commonplace Book and in the concluding chapter I discuss some of the implications of my findings.