Nourishment for the counselor’s mind

Books shape our lives silently but strongly and substantially. A few days with a good book has often left me with an afterglow that has lasted for decades. That’s why the pages of bound volumes and those from electronic media are so important and crucial in life. They add to our well-being and overall health. At least that has been true in my experience.

I try to be choosy in what I select because I am a slow reader, and I realize time and effort are too valuable to waste on the tripe and trivial. My value system tells me the mind is to be nourished and cultivated just as my body is to be nourished and cultivated, so I avoid junk books like I avoid fast food. All of this is to say that a number of substantial and outstanding books have given me much food for thought and substantial nourishment over the years. In this column, however, I will elaborate on only five that I consider to be the crème de la crème of books I have read that have challenged and changed me personally, philosophically and professionally.

It seems as though I should begin with words that have influenced me related to my job and career. However, my development as a person came before I ever considered entering the world of work. Thus, I will highlight books of great significance to me in the order in which they came into my life.

Two books that shaped my life as an adolescent and have spilled over into my life as an adult are autobiographical in nature. They are also emotionally and cognitively moving. The first is Ralph McGill’s The South and the Southerner (1963). McGill was the editor of the Atlanta Constitution, a newspaper that I threw on Sunday mornings as a paperboy for four years. Myself a white Southerner growing up during segregation, McGill gave me a fresh and insightful view of the region and the culture into which I had been born and was being raised. He saw the South as a mosaic composed of many qualities, people and ideas — some better than others.

He praised the virtues of goodness, acceptance and social integration and those who embodied them, while standing fearlessly against bigotry, demagoguery and racism during the civil rights era. He made me think and, indeed, changed my perceptions and understandings of the place of which I was a part. My eyes were opened to the current of contemporary events and thoughts that were both flowing before me and unfolding within me.

The other book of my adolescence that has extended into my adulthood is Dag Hammarskjöld’s Markings (1965). I discovered it purely by accident, reading snippets of it in the Decatur High School (Georgiia) library during an abbreviated study hall. The content was brief, penetrating and inspirational. I checked the book out and methodologically read and reread the pages many times, frequently late into the night, sometimes using a flashlight to avoid waking my brother with whom I shared a bedroom.

I was struck that this second secretary-general of the United Nations was such a humane, spiritual and dedicated man. To this day, two of his passages actively reside in me:

■ “The more faithfully you listen to the voice within you, the better you will hear what is sounding outside.”

■ “You have not done enough, you have never done enough, so long as it is still possible that you have something of value to contribute.”
Thus, I find myself constantly asking to whom I am listening and whether I have done enough that is of value to others. I realize that Hammerskjöld continues to live in my heart.

The next text that influenced and helped shape my life was Robert Short's *The Gospel According to Peanuts* (1966). Growing up, I always loved humor, especially Charles M. Schulz’s Peanuts characters. I was also quite religious, even serving as president of the Baptist Student Union at Wake Forest University in the late 1960s when the campus was almost 40 percent Baptist. So, when Short came to speak at a symposium on religion and life, I was on the front row, soaking up the wit and wisdom of the man and his take on Charlie Brown and company. As was the case with the other works I have cited, Short’s book was one I could easily read and relate to. It even had pictures! While the cartoon strips drew me in, the words that followed on hope, love, friendship and ultimate concerns gave me fodder for reflection. I went from being a bit of a literalist in the way I saw life religiously and spiritually to being much more accepting of myself and others and realizing more deeply the mysteries and unexplainable aspects of life. It was funny how that happened.

By the time I entered a counselor education program at age 25, I was eight years from where I had been when I first started reading seriously as a 15-year-old. The books by McGill, Hammerskjöld and Short had encouraged me to become more of a critical thinker and an open-minded person who realized “change” was more than a six-letter word or something you got with your meal at McDonald's. Thus, the stage was set for my discovery of Viktor Frankl and *Man's Search for Meaning* (1959) during the first year of my graduate work in counseling.

From my studies at Yale Divinity School, which I had completed before pursuing a career in counseling, I knew something about existentialism. I had even taken a brief course on existentialism with Rollo May at the New School in New York. However, Frankl’s life history, especially his death camps experiences, caught me by surprise and held my focus in a tragic and yet triumphant way. I could not seem to put the book down. The cruelty of the time and Frankl’s response to what was happening to him and other human beings made me cringe. Yet I rejoiced in the author’s will to live and the heroes and heroines he described. Frankl’s ideas on the importance of meaning in life, formed before World War II, held my attention and nourished me. Here was a man who was starved and abused and yet came through a deadly ordeal to represent the best of people in the worst of environments.

Although I loved reading Carl Rogers’ *On Becoming a Person* (1961) and applauded his development of person-centered counseling, there was something even more impressive to me about Frankl. His words were more poetic than prosaic. His reflections on what he had experienced and the contrast between who humans are and who they could be was stirring.

Like Rogers, Frankl was accepting, and he thought answers to life were within the individual and his or her will to live. His emphasis on ways to find meaning in life — by doing a deed (that is, by achieving or accomplishing something), by experiencing a value (such as a work of nature, culture or love) and by suffering (that is, by finding a proper attitude toward unalterable fate) — resonated with me. Here was a theory — logotherapy — and a person concerned with the ultimate aspects of life and reality. It seemed to me that Frankl went way beyond self-actualization. Although I could wish for more structure in Frankl’s “how” of doing counseling, I knew his focus on spirituality and life beyond self-actualization struck a chord in me. After reading *Man’s Search for Meaning*, I would never be the same again.

Finally, the fifth book that has influenced me most as a person and as a professional is *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (1997) by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. I now assign this text in my counseling classes because of the valuable lessons it contains. Csikszentmihalyi is a perceptive qualitative researcher who has interviewed literally hundreds of accomplished, creative people in a variety of fields to discover the characteristics that make them innovative and successful in the domains they have chosen. The results are universally applicable and adaptable. Because counseling is a creative endeavor as well as an evidenced-based profession, I want my students to be aware of what they can do in their daily work.
personal and clinical lives if they absorb the innovative information Csikszentmihalyi has gleaned from others.

Interestingly, *Creativity* is the longest of the books I have cited in this column. The reason I am mentioning it last is probably due to how long it took me to read it — as well as when it entered my life chronologically. The book’s illustrations and insights make the page count secondary, however. My favorite quote within its pages is, “To have a good life, it is not enough to remove what is wrong from it. We also need a positive goal. … Creativity provides one of the most exciting models for living.”

The books I have read as an adolescent and an adult have transformed me. I have moved from avoiding longer works to diving into texts regardless of length if the material is exciting, enlightening and enriching. I think of McGill, Hammarskjöld, Short, Frankl and Csikszentmihalyi as distant yet intimate friends who have guided me as I have aged in ways that others did not or could not. I realize in reflecting on this selection that all of the authors I have listed are men (including three who are European), four of the five books were written in the 1960s or before, and only one of these works is directly related to counseling. However, I think these facts are due mostly to serendipity and to me being a product of the time I grew up in than to anything else. What is most important, I believe, is that I found the works of these authors speaking to me at particular times and places in my development as a human being, counselor and educator. I also found these writers to be enduring, and I continue to draw on their thoughts. Although beliefs — like people — evolve, good ideas — like virtuous individuals — never go out of style.

“Pages of Influence” is a new column in which counselors discuss the books that have shaped them professionally, personally and philosophically. Send suggestions of counselors to feature in this column to Counseling Today Editor-in-Chief Jonathan Rollins at jrollins@counseling.org.

Letters to the editor: ct@counseling.org

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