

Newsletter 08-04 Dec.

Need an idea for gift giving during this holiday season? Buy books, yes for your children, but also for yourself. As important however, buy some time in your hectic schedule to read for pleasure. National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Chairman, Dana Gioia, recently released *To Read or Not To Read*, ([www.nea.gov](http://www.nea.gov)) a comprehensive report on the reading trends in the U.S. and the consequences of such trends.

Some of what the NEA report finds will not be surprising. “Americans are spending less time reading and reading comprehension skills are eroding. What is new from this report is that these declines have serious civic, social, cultural, and economic implications.”

Data in the report show that over half (52%) of our 18-24 year-olds read no books for pleasure and less than one-third of 13 year-olds are daily readers; both represent a decline from 20 years ago. What are they doing? We know that 15-24 year-olds spend 2 to 2 ½ hours per day watching TV and home internet use has grown by 53% among 18-24 year-olds.

Parents, if you are thinking this is just a youth issue, oops. Ignoring the work week, the amount of time Americans 35-44 years-old spend reading on weekends and holidays is 16 minutes, 45-54 year-olds are able to carve out 24 minutes, and 55-64 year-olds are reading, on average, 39 minutes.

Let me confess, my own personal data are not much better. I'm not proud of this and I'm not happy about it. I don't watch TV, except for an occasional baseball or football game, and I still struggle to make time to read for pleasure. My life is probably a lot like yours; given what I have to read for work, the time spent at work and at meetings and trying to be present for my family, make time to sit and read for fun the trade off.

So what should we do? The good news is our youngest children still are reading for pleasure. The percentage of 9 year-olds who read for fun almost every day has virtually been unchanged (54%) over the past 20 years. Maybe this is because their lives have not gotten so hectic, that demands to read for purely academic reasons where tests or reports are in the balance are not all consuming, or that the reading assigned as part of school is seen as pleasure reading.

It appears that late middle school and beyond, including college and young adults, is where reading-for-pleasure declines significantly and the implications of this rise. I do not have a magic bullet for this issue but leading by example seems an effective start and connecting pleasure reading to our daily lives may help stem the tide. Turning off the TV and limiting time on the net and cell will help, but this alone will not make reading the replacement activity. Many of you are part of a book club and read (sometimes skim or cram) a good book because you know the discussion is coming. Might there be value in a family book club?

In some ways this year, we will all be able to participate in a community book club. From February through April, Longfellow's Wayside Inn is sponsoring, with NEA underwriting, a community-wide read of the works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. There will be book discussions, lectures and community events throughout the community. SPS will be an active participant in this endeavor. This program is part of the NEA's national Big Read program that is designed to bring together American

communities in the reading and celebration of great literature. Sudbury is one of nearly 200 towns and cities in the U.S. to participate. Making this even more special is the participation of Dana Gioia, NEA Chairman, in the kick-off event on February 27 (Longfellow's birthday.) I hope you will consider acquiring one or more of the books by, or about, Longfellow, and have your family participate, even if it is in the comfort of your own home or at the family dinner table.

There are no easy answers to this dilemma with its national, economic, personal and social implications. Like in *To Read or Not To Read*, I raise this issue "not as an elegy for the bygone days of print culture, but instead as a call to action." My wife Ann and I acknowledge we reflect the national data and want to be part of the solution, not the problem. We hope you might be as well. So in planning for future gift giving, give the joy of reading and the time to experience that joy.