

FORUM

The 'circle of reading'



Nigel Alston
Motivational Moments

"Don't confuse knowledge with wisdom. Don't confuse talking with conversation. Don't confuse feelings with truth. Don't confuse movement with progress."

— "Life's Little Instruction Calendar"

"Every book, if it is anything at all, is an argument: an articulate arrow of words, fledged and notched and newly anointed with sharpened stone, speeding through paragraphs to its shimmering target," according to Drs. Lewis, Amini and Lannon, authors of "A General Theory of Love," a book about the science of human emotion.

I agree. I used to be intimidated by books, especially those "big" books, with 700 to 1,000 pages or more. That changed a long time ago when a coworker encouraged me to read "Atlas Shrugged" by Ayn Rand. "No way," I told him, looking at 1,200 pages of small print.

"You must be kidding." He persisted: "I started reading it and couldn't stop. I am addicted to reading now, excited about engaging in a conversation through the pages of a book with

an author and following the arrow to its target: sometimes laughter, a challenging question, self-examination, insight or inspiration.

I read an interesting article in the May issue of Savoy magazine that featured Bernie Mac and decided to take a summer afternoon off to sit outside, smoke a cigar, and read "I Ain't Scared of You" by Mac with Darrell Dawsey. I laughed out loud reading through the evening, enjoying the comic relief. If you like Mac's comedy, you will love the book. A warning, though: the language is for mature audiences.

"The Monk and The Riddle" by Randy Komisar with Kent Lineback, a book given to me by another avid reader, presented an attention-grabbing question: "What would you be willing to do for the rest of your life...?" You can create a life and make a living.

"Let Your Life Speak," by Parker Palmer, helps you create a life by listening to the voice of vocation, a voice we miss sometimes, "because we don't pay attention to our own experience," according to Palmer. "Is the life I am living the same as the life that wants to live in me?" he asks himself. "If we can learn to read our own responses to our own experience — a text we are writing unconsciously every day we spend on earth — we will receive the guidance we need to

live more authentic lives."

"The Pact — Three Young Men Make a Promise and Fulfill Their dream," by Drs. Davis, Jenkins, and Hunt, meets other needs: encouragement, inspiration, and realizing your dream. It is a great book to share with teens too. (Read "The power of friendship," Chronicle, June 6). I have passed it on to several young men to read.

"Sittin' in the Front Pew," by Parry "EbonySatin" Brown, is an absolutely entertaining and infectious read. I enjoyed it so much that I repeatedly attempted to read it to my wife, who refused to listen to me and later read it herself. She laughed out loud too. It is about the true colors that start to show during the planning of the funeral of the father of four sisters. Strange emotions emerge and a bombshell of a secret is revealed about the father that the sisters didn't know. It's a page-turner.

I turn the page daily in "A Calendar of Wisdom — Daily Thoughts to Nourish the Soul" by Leo Tolstoy, "a wise thought for every day of the year, from the greatest philosophers of all times and all people." Tolstoy created what he described as "a circle of reading" for himself.

"The Paradoxical Commandments — Finding Personal Meaning in a Crazy World," by Kent Keith, has been added to my "circle of reading." The book is about the "grace, wis-

dom, and happiness that come from facing the worst in our world with the best in ourselves," a paradox. "Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth," writes Keith. "Give the world the best you have anyway."

It's the end of another day. I am flipping through the pages of "The Right Words at the Right Time — Marlo Thomas and Friends," an inspiring collection of personal revelations from more than 100 remarkable men and women who share moments when words changed their lives. Tonight I'll read about the words that changed Venus Williams, advice from her kid sister, Serena.

I am listening to my voice now, and it is telling me to take a break and chill, relax, go away for a few days, recharge the batteries and smoke a few more cigars. That's why I am taking a few weeks off from this space. I have another "big" book to read, a novel by Stephen Carter: "The Emperor of Ocean Park." It's about ambition, murder and justice gone wrong.

I hope you read something good this summer. Find some time to laugh too; both are good for the soul.

Nigel Alston is a radio talk-show host, columnist and motivational speaker. Visit his Web site at www.motivationalmoments.com.

Will we miss J.C. Watts Jr. in Congress?



Ron Walters
Guest Columnist

J.C. Watts Jr. recently announced his planned departure from his seat in the U.S. House of Representatives serving the Fourth District of Oklahoma and although I would like to bid him a hasty farewell, I also have a few reservations based on a few little-known facts.

But first, the real reasons for his leaving bore out my earlier observation that he was an affirmative action hire when he was elevated to the chair of the House Republican Conference in 1998 as a two-term member of the House. As such, he had little juice inside the party. It is unlikely that Watts would be leaving had he the internal clout of people like Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-Texas) or House Majority Whip Tom DeLay (R-Texas). Watts often claimed that he was excluded from many of the crucial decisions on Republican policy although his role was to help sell it to the American people and to keep his troops on board. But some of his colleagues in the party leadership bid him good riddance for "whining."

By withholding real influence, the plan appears to have been to use Watts as a poster boy to shield the party's racism and to attempt to attract a marginal number of blacks into its ranks. So in 1996, he was given a keynote speech at the Republican Convention, in '97 he gave the Republican response to the State of the Union Address, and in the 2000 election and afterward, he was the lead person for the Southern strategy of creaming off 15 percent of the black vote to enable Republicans to win the White House and local seats as well.

If Watts had the power of an Armey or DeLay or Newt Gingrich, in his role as Republican conference chair, he would have had serious influence with a Republican president as a member of the team that moved his agenda through the House. But George Bush obviously did not depend upon Watts. In fact, Watts was angry that Bush did not communicate with him about his administration's plan to kill the \$11 billion Crusader artillery system, which would have brought many jobs to his district. Also, he could have parlayed his notoriety



Retiring Congressman J.C. Watts poses with House Speaker Dennis Hastert.

into millions of dollars in book deals and under-the-table contributions to his business and political interests, which, in turn, would have protected his family's economic status. This fact would have made moot his decision to leave Congress in order to "be with my family" in order to help raise five children and, not incidentally, to make more money to finance their educations and other needs. But for all of his initial press attention, there has been little recently, as the oxygen of political visibility and resources have been sucked up by other leaders in the Republican Party.

In any case, he will be missed. Although Watts was not a member of the Congressional Black Caucus, he has been a major point of contact since Republicans took the House in 1994. For example, he worked with them on legislation to develop a memorial for slave laborers who built the Capitol; lobbied for a Presidential Medal of Freedom for Rosa Parks and a resolution stating Congress' opposition to all forms of racism and bigotry (which failed); led passage of the African Growth and Opportunity Act and the Renewal Communities Act. More recently, we found him going to Alabama to campaign for Democrat Earl Hilliard in a re-election campaign that ended in Hilliard's defeat.

Most important, Watts has been the sole

member of the Republican leadership with his finger in the dike of opposition to affirmative action, holding back bills from being passed in the House. His position was that since Republicans didn't have a good alternative, they should be cautious about this issue because of the potential to contribute to a racist image of the party and thereby block blacks from considering it as an alternative. A major question is whether DeLay and others will now feel free to go ahead with their plan to eliminate affirmative action when he is gone, or wait for the U.S. Supreme Court to do it for them.

Nevertheless, I won't miss the conservative side of J.C. Watts: the bombs thrown toward black leaders such as Jesse Jackson, for instance, when he called Jackson a "race hustling poverty pimp"; nor his alliance with the gun lobby, the religious right, the Heritage Foundation; or his fronting for Clarence Thomas and any number of organizations and politicians who have done considerable damage to black interests.

In this sense, the fact that there will be no black Republicans in Congress shouldn't mean a thing to black Americans.

Ron Walters is Distinguished Leadership Scholar, professor of government and politics at the University of Maryland and author of "African America and Leadership."

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