

FORUM

Reading opens a world of wonder



Nigel Alston
Motivational Moments

Values: Classic Moral Stories." In the story, Pickens rewrites arithmetic in this fable about the power of common sense.

"There should be four R's: Reading, 'Riting, 'Rithmetic, and Reason," Pickens writes. "In life, a person needs a solid foundation of common sense. Without it, book learning may be rendered useless."

The tale begins with two young black boys sitting on a fence testing their knowledge. One of the boys poses a problem to the other.

"If three birds are sitting on a limb and I take a gun and shoot one, how many will be left?"

"None," said the other boy. "You don't know nothing," the first boy says. "Don't you know what three minus one equals?"

"Yes, but I also have enough sense to know that if you shoot one of those birds with a gun, the other two won't be such fools as to keep sitting on that limb." Common sense at its finest.

A good story is a key to holding your interest. Knowing something about the author and reading with a purpose in mind can make a difference.

I did both when I read "Acres of Diamonds" by Russell H. Conwell. Conwell delivered this famous lecture more than 6,000 times during his life.

His message is simple: Begin where you are with what you have to make a difference.

Your "acres of diamonds" are in your own back yard.

Conwell was an avowed atheist who became a Christian after a young man died in battle trying to save his life. As the young soldier lay dying, he spoke of his Christian faith. Conwell later



Reading opens doors.

joined the ministry and eventually led Great Baptist Temple Church in Philadelphia.

From the church basement, he conducted a night school that later became Temple University. To raise money for the school, he became a prominent lecturer.

He started where he was with what he had. The rest is history.

James V. Schall, a professor at Georgetown University, knows the importance of reading.

"The important thing about a book is to know what it says; it is a living path to an author who is not here, who may, in fact, have lived centuries before you did but who can still teach you," Schall said.

Another book that teaches an important lesson is "Man's Search for Meaning."

Written by Victor Frankl in 1939, the book details Frankl's

experience in a Nazi concentration camp.

Frankl loved this quote by Nietzsche: "He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how."

Frankl survived the concentration camp experience because he had a "why" to live. What alone remains is "the last of human freedoms" - the ability to "choose one's attitude in a given set of circumstances," he wrote.

Books can touch an important part of your life and shape your attitude.

"The important thing is not to read," says Schall, "but to understand."

Nigel Alston is an executive with Integon Insurance and can be reached at PO Box 722, Winston-Salem, N.C. 27102 or e-mailed at nalston237@aol.com

A room without books is like a body without a soul.

-Cicero

"You are today the same you'll be five years from now, except for two things: the people you meet and the books you read."

These words written by Charles T. Jones in the forward of "Motivational Classics."

The small volume contains three works that could change your life - "Acres of Diamonds," "The Kingship of Self-Control" and "As A Man Thinketh."

"The people you meet can't always be with you," Jones writes, "but what you read in books can remain with you a lifetime."

I love to read, write and - my wife would add - surf the net.

But reading really is my favorite.

It is an intimate conversation between the reader and the author.

When I read, I reflect on what the author is saying to me. I take it personally. I keep a pen or marker in hand to underline and highlight things that impact me.

And sometimes, I laugh out loud. I laughed aloud when I read the story "Reason vs. 'Rithmetic" by William Pickens.

I couldn't help it.

The story is one of many in another of my favorite books, "The African American Book of

Should black leaders rethink school vouchers?

Earl Ofari Hutchinson
Guest Columnist

The instant it appeared that Florida Gov. Jeb Bush would succeed in pushing a school voucher program through the state legislature this term, the NAACP announced that it would file suit to stop it.

The NAACP ticked off the standard arguments that vouchers are a scheme by conservatives to obliterate public education, would leave the poorest of poor students behind in even poorer and more racially isolated schools, and would perpetuate the cycle of educational neglect. Yet in a national survey the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, a black Washington, D.C., think tank, found that a majority of black parents want vouchers. And a near whopping 90 percent of blacks aged 26 to 35, who are most likely to have children attending public schools, want them the most.

The gaping gulf among blacks on education is yet another example of how mainstream black leaders often march to a far different tune than poor and working-class blacks. These leaders are mostly liberal, middle-class business and professionals. Their kids are safely nestled in private schools and escape the ravages of bad

public schools.

Poor and working-class blacks have no such luxury.

So, when the mostly black Milwaukee public schools in 1990 became the first school district in the nation to authorize vouchers for private schools, the stampede by black parents to grab the money and dash their children into private or parochial schools was so great officials had to have a lottery to decide who received a voucher. To the shock of black leaders, many black activists, instead of denouncing vouchers as a right-wing threat to public schools, denounced black leaders for opposing them.

The activists saw vouchers as a weapon against an insensitive, stagnant, often racist educational bureaucracy that systematically victimizes black children, and as a steppingstone toward community empowerment.

The pro-voucher sentiment among many blacks is so strong that several black congressional Democrats have broken ranks with the NAACP, Urban League and their own Congressional Black Caucus to publicly support the Republican-backed national school voucher program.

But black parents don't snatch at vouchers because of the racially and politically stacked agendas of politicians and black militants. They are fed up with decaying, crime-ridden schools, terrible teachers and indifferent administrators. They are desperate to put their

children into schools that teach them how to read, write, spell, add and subtract. They want their sons and daughters to have a decent chance at a career or profession and not become prison fodder or candidates for early graves. The only thing they ask is whether vouchers will improve their children's education.

That answer is still pretty fuzzy.

Conservatives and black leaders trot out a handful of studies and experts to prove that vouchers are a smashing success or abject failure. But neither side has mustered a convincing case for or against them. Mostly because voucher programs are still not widespread enough in school districts nationally and there aren't enough children in the programs that do exist to tell whether they work or not. Even in Milwaukee, limited funds, accessibility and classroom space in private schools enable only a tiny percentage of the school district's low-income students to use vouchers to attend private schools. The best that the voucher combatants can do is fall back on such anecdotal homilies as "the parents love them" or "the schools are getting better."

Even the doomsday predictions that vouchers bankrupt public schools and further squash achievement standards have so far been false fears. Milwaukee public schools actually got a spending boost this year

and reading scores increased. Ironically that improvement almost certainly can be traced to the pressure, competition and the attention from the voucher controversy that forced teachers and administrators to do a better job in the classroom.

While the arguments of black leaders against vouchers seem sound on paper, many black parents will ignore them until public schools perform better.

This means they must have more funds, better texts, equipment, teacher training programs, huge increases in cultural diversity programs, an expansion of charter and magnet schools, far greater parental involvement in decision-making on curriculum, texts and staffing. And most importantly, local school districts must institute an equitable system that permits them of get rid of bad teachers and administrators.

It also means that many black leaders must face the hard fact that as long as many inner-city public schools disgracefully underperform, black parents must have the right to pick and choose the schools that offer the best deal in education for their children. And for now that choice for many means vouchers.

Earl Ofari Hutchinson is the author of "The Crisis in Black and Black." His e-mail address is: ehutchi344@aol.com

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