

Should Americans over Fifty Try to Avoid Alzheimer's Disease? — A Positive View

By Robert Oliphant

Preface

Alzheimer's versus heart disease — A recent Harris poll notes that over half of us now fear the former more than the latter. Coming closer to home, everyone I've raised the issue with so far picks Alzheimer's right away and, even more impressive, quickly comes up with a couple of personal reasons to explain exactly why such a choice makes scientific and emotional sense.

Fear calls for hope, along with action. This is why I'm making the first two chapters of my anti-Alzheimer's tool kit available to readers who want some up front reassurance. As will be apparent later on, the book as a whole draws heavily upon articles I've written during the past three years for the online daily Education News. These can be handily click-accessed, incidentally via www.ednews.org/authors/129/oliphant

As also noted by the Harris Poll, 30% of us have already encountered Alzheimer's in our family. That includes me, and that is why I want for my friends and my children a take on this issue more positive than "mean gene" theories (deftly skewed in Michael Crichton's new novel "Next!") taking graphic shape like a Jackson Pollock painting on a meaningless video screen (as in the film "Iris") accompanied by a pompous voice telling Iris Murdoch's family, "IT will win."

Two chapters. . . . Six thousand words. . . . No charts, not many stats, and mostly plain talk like this short intro. . . . So take a quick look at what's here. . . . If it works for you.... or might for someone you care about.... that's marvelous. . . . If not, thanks for throwing the dice. . . . And best wishes, no matter how old you are, for our new year and those that will follow.

CHAPTER ONE. . . THE WHY AND HOW OF THIS BOOK

The driving force behind what's here can be summed up with three labels: Anxiety, Attitude, and Action. As recently as a year ago, those labels wouldn't have meant much. But they certainly do now, enough so to justify this book's claim upon a reader's time and attention.

Anxiety. . . A recent Harris poll for Metropolitan Life (2006) notes that (a) right now over 50% of us worry more about Alzheimer's disease than about heart disease, stroke, and diabetes; (b) 30% of us have family members with Alzheimer's, (b) and only 10% of us are actually taking steps to reduce the symptoms of mental deterioration as we grow older, e.g., going blank on proper names and ordinary words.

Important though physical health is, Robert N. Butler, director of the National Institute on Aging, pointed out some years ago that most of us can live on our own quite well with physical disabilities (walkers, visiting nurses, etc.). Alzheimer's, on the other hand, in the long run requires the physical restraint of locked wards — usually identified as “dementia care” in our retirement-living directories these days. Now that the Alzheimer's numbers are beginning to climb (15% in our 70s, 40% in our 80s) it's ourselves we're starting to worry about, not just our parents.

Attitude. . . Our growing personal concern with the prospect of Alzheimer's meshes perfectly with our national move toward personal-best achievement, as opposed to win-or-lose sports and consumer status seeking. Gym, golf course, rock climbing, or triathlon — many of us now compete “against ourselves” in hopes of a little improvement, as opposed to a bells-and-whistles victory by fair means or foul. Since Alzheimer's, like obesity, is a “personal worst” disaster, it certainly invites a personal-best effort by those who want to improve their chances of staying alert and living independently — especially those who are already comfortable with the idea of making a maximum effort on their own.

Action. . . Three or four years ago a diagnosis (or an accusation) of “Alzheimer's” would have represented an end-of-the-line cognitive death sentence for sufferers and their families. Today, though, the term is used more and more as a synonym for dementia, aphasia, and language loss in general, thereby opening the door to various non biochemical self-therapies: crossword puzzling, bridge, sudoku, etc.

Fear of Alzheimer's as a motivation, personal-best action as a remedy — the combination has clearly begun to take strong and visible shape in the American consciousness, enough so to justify what's in this book.

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OUR ACTION PERSPECTIVE. . . . A lot of what's here stems from the "reality-orientation" Alzheimer's therapies developed by the Veterans Administration, including my work with the VA Hospital in Sepulveda, California. Since language loss and language acquisition are in effect mirror-image problems, I went on to use the VA language-emphasis framework to encompass English-as-a-second-language problems (ESL) in two research grants (1986-1987 and 1988-89) from the U.S. Dept. of Education (Fund for the Advancement of Postsecondary Education). Since then I have researched and written a large number of Alzheimer's-relevant articles for Education News, an online journal.

Prescriptions, diet, and exercise. . . . Our personal best emphasis should not be taken as disparaging other routes to mental power and clarity of mind. Far from it. Right now many Americans are getting very rewarding results from cognitive-enhancement drugs like Adderal, Inderal, Provigil, Ritalin, and others currently being developed by firms like Memory Pharmaceuticals (Montvale, N.J.). Along the same lines, many experts today vigorously assert that physical-health factors play a crucial role in preserving cognitive effectiveness, enough so that I pay plenty of attention to the productive relationship between memory improvement and diet-exercise programs.

Credible confidence. . . . Drugs, diet, exercise, or memorizing poetry — they all require a certain amount of confidence at the outset: a leap of the imagination, if you will. For me, that leap came when I read about the UCLA experiment in which Norman Cousins (a distinguished journalist and holistic medicine advocate) was hooked up to an electroencephalograph and asked to "concentrate," which he did by, as he put it later on, "matching up the words of the Gettysburg Address with the tune of "Battle Hymn of the Republic."

At first glance, this feat struck me as incredible, one reason being that I had never learned the Gettysburg Address by heart. Then it struck me that the process certainly made sense as far as the first few words went rhythmically, e.g., Four SCORE and SE-ven YEARS a-GO our FA-thers BROUHT-uh FORTH. That realization was enough to make me believe I myself could replicate the Cousins feat if I was willing to make the effort (including memorizing Gettysburg). Hence the desirability, I feel, of many, many illustrative examples and suggested activities — all in the hopes that one of them, like my Gettysburg experience, will strike a responsive spark in an individual reader.

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WHAT LIES AHEAD. . . . As a tool kit this book offers the personal best reader four major sections, each of which offers a wide range of activities and tools to work with. Here's a brief sketch of each.

Poetry memorization and the control of out-of-control consciousness. . . . As indicated by the Norman Cousins anecdote, memorization has always been a respected concentration-exercise

for human beings, not just actors and politicians. No doubt about it, memorization is challenging. But the results can be used to reduce boredom and strengthen the counting-accuracy of exercise programs — just like chanting and marching in basic training or boot camp (as noted by William McNeil in “Keeping Together in Time”). Best of all, poetry memorization offers all of us a clear- as-crystal national standard of measurable achievement, along with a potentially high level of approval — personally and socially — that’s ideal for personal-best Americans.

Vocabulary growth and the challenge of Latinate English. . . . The striking feature of this section is its use of a current unabridged dictionary (Random House, 2000) as a learning tool for both multiple-meaning “ordinary words” (crossword style) and specialized technical terms (spelling bee style). Overall what’s in this section comes across as money-in-the-bank knowledge for younger learners in our vocabulary-emphasis society.

Our learning system, just like the Steadman Medical Dictionary (107,000 terms) offers multiple-mnemonic clues: pronunciation, multiple-meaning logic, etymological connectedness, and basic-element cross referencing. Even more important, it offers simple and practical do-it-yourself testing techniques. . . . Ideal for personal best Americans with ambitious career goals.

Proper-Name Literacy and Reader-Friendly Self-Testing. . . . As the saying goes, it’s who you know, not what you know. Hence, even though going blank on proper names is a minor “senior moment” symptom, it often comes across as indicating a relatively low level of education or “cultural literacy.” This section therefore focuses upon nonfiction reading, proper names that appear in nonfiction, and the development of high speed recreational reading skills (including content retentiveness).

Overall it’s fair to say this section calls for larger amounts of time and lower levels of concentration at our recommended reading speed of 400-600 words per minute. . . . Ideal for personal best Americans who want to read faster and still do well on challenges like Jeopardy.

Personal Best Learning, Worldwide American English, and the Role of Computers in Sensory and Cognitive Empowerment. . . . My mentor, the lexicographer Herbert Dean Meritt, once shocked me by saying, “Oliphant, I find these so-called Great Ideas pall after a while, but people are always interested in a good etymology.” Although I’ve tended more and more to feel he was absolutely right, I still feel that ideas, good ones and bad ones, are what hold us together as a society and motivate much of what we believe and do. Consequently, since motivation is a key factor in personal best learning, I’ve included a number of articles from Education News that deal with language-related topics and issues: standardized testing, dictionaries, quality control, standard pronunciation, the growth of worldwide American English, etc.

Just as important, this section gives plenty of attention to computers and computer-related technology, e.g., online resources and C.D. ROM dictionaries. When it comes to strengthening

vocabulary, for example, eliminating the small print/ thin pages problems can cut memorization time by as much as a third for many learners, especially those over fifty.

Time, as Thoreau might well have put it, is the “stream personal-best learners go fishing in.” As with studying for a state bar exam, our personal best learners have no inspiring teachers; nor do they have expensive equipment to work with, any more than they have stimulating classmates to compete against for big-budget prizes and public recognition. A few books (like Chaucer’s Clerk of Oxenford), a few hours here and there of solitary effort, and plenty of Temptations urging us to give up and “sport with Amaryllis in the Shade or in the tangles of Neaera’s hair” (as Milton put it) — that’s the world of Personal Best-ism, as we might call it. And a grand one it is, many will agree, I’m sure.

Here’s hoping those who spend some of their precious time with what’s in this book feel their investment was worthwhile — measurably so.

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CHAPTER TWO. . . PROMISES, THEMES, TOPICS, NOVELTIES, AND ACRONYMS

PROMISES. . . . Oscar Collier, my editor at Prentice-Hall some years back, had a beautifully elegant theory regarding the titles of books that used or implied the phrase “how to.” Such books, he pointed out, usually make their potential readers an attractive promise coupled with an equally attractive means for making good on that promise, e.g., Dale Carnegie’s “How to Win Friends [the means] and Influence People” [the promise], Norman Vincent Peale’s “The Power [promise] of Positive Thinking” [means], Napoleon Hill’s “Think [means] and Grow Rich” [promise].

By way of illustrating the lasting power of Oscar’s theory, here are two current spin offs: “The 4-Hour Work Week [means]: Live Anywhere and Join the New Rich [Promise]; and “Blink”: The Power [promise] of Thinking without Thinking” [means] — both from the first page of the Amazon self-help web page for <http://www.amazon.com/dp/0060732616>, 1-6-2008,

Our optimistic title. . . . This book’s title, “How to Improve Your Memory [means] and Avoid Alzheimer’s Disease” [promise] clearly follows the Collier pattern, enough so to raise common-sense questions right away regarding its extravagant optimism. By way of supporting its promise, we should remember that the term Alzheimer’s is today used interchangeably with “dementia” (madness) “senile dementia,” and “senile psychosis” — none of which involve the physically observable symptoms (plaques and tangles) classically associated with Alzheimer’s.

Even more important, the diagnosis itself (including legal proceedings) is today based upon verbal-behavior symptoms, e.g., questions like “Who’s the President?” “What day is it?” “Where

are you?” “What does the expression Two Heads Are Better Than One mean to you?” etc.

Practically considered, then, if we take Alzheimer’s in the sense of a diagnosis of Alzheimer’s, not the mysterious disease itself, our title represents a practical promise to help the reader achieve measurable improvement in his or her memory, enough so to resist the diagnosis in a clinical, legal, or social setting. It might be noted here that Ben Weingart, a wealthy California philanthropist, was diagnosed some years back as suffering from senile dementia on the basis of an informal lunch with business associates.

A longer title. . . . From a diagnostic perspective, a more accurate, though cumbersome, title for what’s here would be “How to Improve Your Memory and Avoid the Risk of Being Diagnosed by Others as Suffering from Alzheimer’s Disease.” Unfortunately, for titles as well as public speeches, a perennial requirement, even at the risk of slight inaccuracies, is “Be brisk, be brief, be gone!”

Even as rephrased, our promise raises questions regarding the credentials of the person making it. So to come right out with it, I’m neither a neurologist nor a psychiatrist. My professional contact with Alzheimer’s goes back to the early 60s and my work with Leonard Jerden at the Veteran’s Administration Hospital in Sepulveda, California and later on with Arthur Cherkin, who did a lot of research on WWI veterans regarding the very low (.6) correlation via autopsy between senile-dementia behavior and observable in-the-brain symptoms.

Indeed, I still remember Dr. Cherkin’s coming back from a trip to China and excitedly announcing, “There is no Alzheimer’s in China.” As set forth in “A Piano for Mrs. Cimino” (which Oscar edited), I have been a strong supporter of behavior modification (“reality-orientation”) programs in nursing homes and retirement living facilities.

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THEMES. . . . C. Wright Mills has a splendid chapter on Intellectual Craftsmanship in his “The Sociological Imagination” that I really can’t do justice to here, except to point out that I’ve never forgotten his distinction between “theme” and “topic.” As he put it in his curt Midwestern way, a “topic” is what one writes about and gives a title to, e.g., a book, a chapter, section of a book, etc. A “theme,” on the other hand, is something that can spill over from section to section and from chapter to chapter: popping up here and lying low there as needed.

Anyone who reads a self-help book deserves plenty of assistance and clarity, especially one with an optimistic promise like avoiding Alzheimer’s Disease. Consequently, following Mills’ distinction, I would like to begin by identifying the six major themes that thread through the chapters that follow, almost like characters playing major roles in a movie or TV drama and therefore announced in advance as though to say, “Watch for this one — you’re going to encounter him (or her) again and again all the way through this thing.” In keeping with the

character-idea link, each theme is followed by a specific proper name in parentheses.

System-awareness (Adam Smith). . . . For most of the 1900s many college lecturers tended to sum up our recent intellectual history with three Great Names, each linked to a specific Great Idea, namely, Darwin (evolution), Marx (historical “laws”), and Freud (the “structure” of both personality and society). Since 1980, though, the name of Adam Smith has found its way in both lecture halls along with the Great Idea of “system,” as in “economic system,” “cardiovascular system,” “system analyst,” etc. Generally considered, the idea of “system” includes the notion of moving parts, be they blood corpuscles or citizens, that function together as a whole, not simply individual atoms whirling about.

As far as language and linguistic memory are concerned, the idea of “system” broadens our awareness of learning to encompass forgetting, for example, along with statistics regarding “learning-friendliness” and “learning difficulty.” Even more important, the spin off idea of what we might call “systematic mnemonics” opens the door to distinguishing between levels of efficiency in various memory improvement activities, especially those involving learners in their early fifties and over.

To put it another way, system awareness is relatively unimportant for nine-year-olds, nearly all of whom can learn very quick through sheer rote repetition. But it’s crucially important for anyone over seventy with a choir director who insists that all parts be perfectly memorized letter in time for next week’s performance.

Concentration (Tiger Woods). . . . Apart from Rodin’s statue “The Thinker,” the idea of concentration is familiar to most us from sports, ranking from the screams of Little League coaches to the hushed silence that accompanies the lengthy and private calculations that precede the sinking of a putt by Tiger Woods and other great golfers. Intellectually considered, Bertram Russell in his Autobiography describes watching the great mathematician Alfred North Whitehead seated beneath a tree for over two hours, scribbling in a notebook and never looking up.

As far as frequency of usage goes, most of our talk about education and cognition is filled with words like TALENT, INTELLIGENCE, CREATIVITY, ACHIEVEMENT, etc. Practically considered, however, “concentration” is far and away the most measurable of our cognitive virtues. If researchers, for instance, attach us to an electroencephalograph, they can distinguish high-energy concentration activity taking place in our brains from relatively low concentration activity. Just as important, each of us knows what it feels like to concentrate for just three or four minutes on a challenging task, usually accompanied with squinting and jaw clenching as we try to thread a needle or make sense out of a manufacturer’s assembly instruction.

Accuracy (Ludwig Wittgenstein). . . . In “Time of Turbulence” (2007) Alan Greenspan lists Wittgenstein as an important influence in his personal growth as a young economist and

statistician in New York back in the early fifties when hopes were high that a respect for factually verifiable statements would reduce the role of irrationality and personal prejudice in human affairs. To Greenspan, “discretion,” like Power in Lord Acton’s classic formulation, tends to corrupt, and absolute discretion corrupts absolutely. Certainly the evaluation of a piece of writing, depending as it does upon the discretion of the evaluator, is far open to favoritism and personal whim than the correct-incorrect dictionary-based evaluation of a word’s spelling in a spelling bee.

As noted earlier, the central promise of this book is to help the reader avoid Alzheimer’s disease, especially as represented by the kinds of factually based questions used in clinical diagnoses, formal and informal, of it and other forms of senile dementia. In “A Piano for Mrs. Cimino,” for example, Esther Cimino (played by Bette Davis) compliments Mrs. Polanski (played by Penny Fuller) on the appearance of her “hotel,” to which Mrs. Polanski replied, “This is NOT a hotel, Mrs. Cimino, this is a convalescent hospital, a convalescent hospital; and you’re here to get well.”

By way of tribute to the VA “reality orientation” programs and their emphasis upon the correct-incorrect accuracy theme, I might point out that most retirement living facilities still post large signs announcing the date, the name of the day, and (very often) the next holiday — all factual information items emphasized by both the VA and by current diagnostic examinations.

Measurement (W. Edwards Deming). . . . Factually verifiable information has opened up many attractive possibilities in the market place, including the concept of “statistical control” first introduced by the statistician W. Edwards Deming to the Japanese immediately after WWII. Simply put, at least according to my understanding of Deming’s “Out of the Crisis,” statistical control entails keeping factual track of what is going on in an enterprise in terms of consistent standards of measurement — all with the goal of reducing waste and pouring the savings into the overall improvement of quality, as opposed to a temporary increase in profits.

In Deming-esque terms, an American health club like 24-Hour Fitness can fairly be described as offering offers individual clients many statistical-control activities to choose from. The bikes and treadmills, for example, explicitly measure speed, distance, time spent, calories consumed, and pulse rate, along with stating national standards regarding pulse-rates appropriate for various age groups. Still revered in Japan, Deming’s legacy (including an attempt to make the Star Spangled Banner more singable) is still a vital force, deservedly so, in American management.

Along the same lines, our program offers statistical-control profiles regarding various anti-Alzheimer’s activities. We employ national standards, for example, for measuring the comparative difficulty and importance of specific poems and even the spelling difficulty of specific words. As well, also paralleling health clubs and diet programs, we also encourage participants to keep performance logs and set long-term goals — promises to ourselves, we might call them.

Personal Best (Henry David Thoreau). . . . The best indication of a cultural revolution is usually a complaint from on high regarding its social undesirability. From a 24-Hour Fitness perspective, spending a solitary hour or so at a driving range or a bowling alley would make perfect sense. But to Robert Putnam, as expressed in “Bowling Alone,” such concern with personal improvement — paralleling solitary participation in marathons and triathlons — comes across as antisocial, narcissistic, and downright unpatriotic. Traditionally a nation of joiners and sports fans, Americans have always thought of themselves in groups, social terms: as residents of a teeming, bustling “city on a hill,” not solitary creatures like Rodin’s statue who think for themselves by themselves — about themselves if need be.

Contrary to Putnam, though, the American tradition also embraces personal-best individualists like Henry Thoreau, who most certainly did not travel to Walden Pond in search of a swimming meet, or a seminar experience, or even the prospect of a steamy love affair. Even more important, it’s Thoreau and what he stands for that the rest of our planet respects, judging from translations and from the American books offered for sale in Canada by the W.H. Smith bookstore chain. . . . Call it Know Thyself or Keep Your Own Head on Straight — the personal-best goal of self-improvement is still a major theme for Americans and well deserves pride of place in this book. Justifiably so, I hope the reader will agree.

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TOPICS. . . . Themes aside, this book comprises four major sections, each of which has a number of individual chapters, along with a multi-word, somewhat magisterial title, e.g., “Memorization and the Control of Out-of-Control Consciousness, along with a number of individual chapters. By way of a preliminary snapshot, here are four short words or phrases, each of which might serve as a short label for the section which it described.

Complete Works. . . . This section give the reader a practical do-it-yourself tour of traditional memory targets, namely, poems, song lyrics, prose targets translated in memory-friendly form, and non-verbal targets (e.g., music). It also includes chapters on the use of a target, once memorized, as a springboard for original creative work, especially that which can be done in the head late at night when the Black Dogs (Churchill’s term) of depression and anger are beginning to howl.

Lists. . . . This section uses nationally acceptable measures of familiarity and question difficulty to make word lists more memory friendly than they currently are, including appropriate do-it-yourself question formats. It deals with pronunciation targets, multiple-meaning word targets, meaning-in-context (reading comprehension), and technical-term targets (medicine, music, geography, etc.). Its principal innovation is its efficient use of an unabridged dictionary (online or CD ROM) as a source of both subject lists and full memory-friendly entry-information to speed up the mastery of specific question targets, e.g., spelling bees and crossword-style questions. Upscale vocabulary achievement at a minimum cost of space and time — that’s an

accurate description of this section, I feel.

Individual reading. . . . If names make news (and history), it's not surprising that our "famous name" memory is taken very seriously as a symptom of our cognitive health, e.g., Jeopardy and crossword puzzles. Since lists of names are far more difficult to handle than lists of words, this section focuses upon the mnemonic value of high-speed individual-choice reading, especially nonfiction. It includes techniques for "famous name" screening, e.g., index checking and authorial-status checking.

Best of all, it includes a simple technique for constructing do-it-yourself reader-friendly tests that actually encourage high speed reading, as opposed to factual-memory tests that slow readers down to an anxiety-driven snail's pace of less than 200 words a minute. Our goal here is at least 400 words a minute for a general interest book like "American Creation" (247 pp., excluding notes), by the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Joseph J. Ellis.

Computers. . . . This closing section opens the door to many different kinds of personal-best learners. It recognizes, for example, that some learners have poorer vision than others, enough so that the role of computers demands serious consideration in connection with their goals. It also recognizes the role of computers in the growth of Worldwide American English as an official or quasi-official language for over three billion world citizens today, according to Time Almanac 2007. Even more important, it demonstrates how the use of online and CD ROM learning tools can today actually reduce memorization time spent without sacrificing memorization effectiveness. As opposed to our first three nuts-and-bolts section, this section may well come across as a high tech pep talk, but justifiably so, I hope readers will agree.

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NOVELTIES. . . . Memory — its loss and its improvement — is this book's primary concern. By way of underscoring its relevance, my 1-10-2008 check turned up 497 million hits for "memory," as opposed to 414 million for "learning." Inevitably, then, most of what's here draws upon an impressive and venerable tradition that goes back to the Greek poet Simonides of Ceos. For what it's worth, though, I feel there are a few ideas in this book that may come across as somewhat new. Here are four of them.

Queen-of-Hearts Testing. . . . All readers of Alice in Wonderland certainly remember the Queen of Hearts rushing about shouting, "Execution first, then the trial." My translation of her slogan reads, "Testing first, then the learning." It's worth noting here that Benjamin Bloom in "A Taxonomy of Education Objectives" stressed the classroom importance of designing each course around two hundred or so questions suitable for testing use. Our personal-best framework, though, takes Bloom's classroom suggestion several steps further. One step involves linking each question to a specific estimate of study time for the "average" student. A second involves linking each question to a practically available answer-source, thereby opening the door to do-it-yourself

testing and measurable personal growth — just like tracking calories and pulse rates in a health club.

Authority. . . . If money is the mother's milk of politics, factually verifiable authority certainly provides a self-help book with its sustaining power. By way of comparison, our notion of "proper name" literacy clearly draws upon E.D. Hirsch's concept of "cultural literacy" (sometimes called "core knowledge). But where Hirsch simply lists the names, we use the current Merriam-Webster Biographical Dictionary as our name-source and rank the names according to the number of lines they, thereby placing Frederick the Great much higher on the Proper-Name Literacy Scale than, say, Fred Astaire.

Along the same lines, John Hollander's "Poems to Memorize" presents the favorites of a small group of consultants, as opposed to our lists, which are based upon their current anthology status, as tabulated by the Columbia Granger's® Index to Poetry®, Ninth Edition. Hence our authority for including Blake's "The Tiger" (ranked 1st in Granger's) rather than Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" (ranked 178). This recourse to outside authority should not be interpreted as limiting personal choice. Far from it. I've learned "Casey at the Bat," using the Hollander book, and I've made an attempt at Francis Thompson, "The Hound of Heaven (ranked 497 by Granger's). Given the concentration and time called for, any choice that generates plenty of personal-best learning energy deserves our respect, especially if it produces a measurable improvement in overall cognitive power.

Reader-Friendly Testing. . . . I'm very proud of reader-friendly testing as a tool for encouraging high speed personal-best reading. The idea itself comes from a New York Review of Books article by Jerome Bruner, in which he described asking his Harvard students to "read three books a week" in the field of psychology. What I did was to use his high-volume reading concept in connection with two grants from the U.S. Dept. of Education, both of which attempted to measurably increase the proper-name literacy of English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students in two remedial reading classes at California State University, Northridge. The book-based tests I developed attempted to measure only compliance, i.e., whether or not "each page had been turned and given a reasonable amount of attention."

I well recall, incidentally, my dismayed students (Korean, Hispanic, Iranian, Israeli, Japanese, Vietnamese, Chinese) asking me in effect, "Do you really expect us to understand this stuff?" (Peter Drucker, Samuel Huntington, Jonathan Schell, etc.) And I hope they still remember my answer, which was, "I do NOT expect you to understand what these books are talking about, whatever that means." In fact, I feel I've already forgotten most of what's in them myself. . . . All I expect is that you give a reasonable amount of attention to each page, no more than a minute or two, and that is all our book-based tests will measure. Overall, though, I promise you that you'll see plenty of improvement, measurably so, in your knowledge of American English and American culture. And that's more than enough, isn't it?"

Since I chose the 18 books to be read on the basis of their prizewinning status (readability) and mainstream proper names (via index checks), it's not surprising that the students via their high-speed immersion produced better proper-name literacy scores than students in upper-division English courses and even a graduate seminar. What was surprising was their improvement in writing skills, as measured by a program-wide writing-skills test. Here again the door is open for plenty of personal best choice and do-it-yourself testing (I myself still check the index FIRST before starting to read a book — just like looking at the dramatis personae on a playbill).

Tortoise-Friendly Learning. . . . The basic assumption in American education has always been expressed in the equation $MxTxI=A$ (motivation times Time Spent times Intelligence equals Achievement. Most of us know from experience that low ability students who take fewer courses and spend proportionately more study time on each course will earn higher grades than high ability students who take a larger number of courses and spend proportionately less study time on a larger number of courses. Indeed, this assumption, going back to the GI Bill, lies behind our two longstanding definitions of “full time load”: (a) 12 semester units for recipients of government aid, and 15 units as the traditional university pace leading to a 4-year baccalaureate degree.

My extension of this assumption is simply that of emphasizing personal best time-on-task as the great achievement equalizer, especially when it comes to achieving personal best goals. One way of maintaining the emphasis is to make the testing element crystal clear and personally accessible; the second is to make sure the study task itself is understandable and doable. Ninety minutes for a sonnet, four hours for the Gettysburg Address — average-time estimates like these, if doubled, give low-ability learners (especially those over 70) very practical goals to shoot for. And always have in our traditional “Carnegie-unit” system of educational accounting, including its emphasis upon “grading on the curve.”

ACRONYMS. . . . This book emphasizes conventional target memorization (texts, vocabulary, and proper names), as opposed to personal-needs memorization challenges like phone numbers, addresses, and other concerns covered very effectively by Harry Lorayne and other authors. By way of illustrating, and recommending, this kind of specific-challenge learning, I have expressed the gist of this entire chapter acronymically, which is to say that the initial letters of our five themes spell the word S-C-A-M-P, the initial letters of our four topics spell the nonce-word C-L-I-C, and the initial letters of our four novelties spell the word QU-A-R-T.

Crossword-Style Clues. . . . We can strengthen the suggestive power of these acronyms by accompanying each with a crossword-style clue that identifies the number of omitted letters in each word (or phrase) via asterisks and also identifies some of the letters in it. For SCAMP we offer the following five clues. . . . S- = sys***-aw***ness. . . . C- = concen***tion. . . . A- = acc***cy. . . . M- = meas***ment. . . . P- = per***al-be***. . . .

For CLIC we offer four clues. . . . C=- com**ete- w**ks. . . . L=- li**s. . . .
 I=-indi**ual-r**ding. . . . C=- comp**rs. For QUART we offer four clues. . . . QU=-
 qu**-*f-he**s. . . . A=- auth** R=- re**er-fi**dly-t**ting. . . . T=-
 tor**ise-fi**ly-le**ing. . . .

A couple of passes back and forth between each acronym and its crossword style clues is usually enough to link them together in one's memory, after which they can later be retrieved as a basis for answering the perennial question, "What on earth are you reading?"

Associational Clues. . . . Another mnemonic device calls for connecting separate targets, e.g., SCAMP, CLIC, and QUART in a complete sentence, however forced and improbable their association may be. My candidate for this sentence is "Italian scampiclicks best with a quart of German beer." The device is still used to identify on-the-line treble clef notes E-G-B-D-F via the sentence, "Every Good Boy Does Fine."

Practical Applications. . . . I'm not at all sure that these devices produce long term cognitive growth or rehabilitation. But they can be very helpful in attacking specific memory problems, e.g., my use of then alliterative trio: Anxiety, Attitude, and Action. As for acronymy, I can honestly report that it was a life saver for me some years back when my publisher arranged speaking engagements for me regarding the mental alertness, a major theme in "A Piano for Mrs. Cimino."

Since these speaking engagements were bound to vary in length, and since I tend to ramble and be overly verbose (an occupational hazard for most teachers), I felt I needed to put my little act together in a more workmanlike fashion. So I devised remember five key statements about my subject (topic sentences, if you will), each of which I could expand upon and also restate at the end of my little talk as a final summary, i.e., "Mental alertness is. . . . (1) Present-centered, (2) Oriented toward reality, (3) Worth holding on to, (4) Easy to lose, and (5) Renewable — all five of which as a group spell P-O-W-E-R."

I must admit here that associational tricks like these are a bit simple-minded. . . . It's hard for me to imagine, say, Abraham Lincoln ending a speech with "Put them together and they spell U-N-I-O-N, and that's what we're fighting for." But for those of us trying to keep our footing before an audience, even on friendly ground, simple-mindedness has at least the advantage of clarity, which is certainly essential in a book that offers the reader a range of practical activities to choose from in deciding where to invest his or her personal time and energy.

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TO CONCLUDE. . . . I like to think of what lies ahead as like a preliminary tour of a health club like 24 Hour Fitness, Bally's, or Gold's Gym. . . . Each chapter, very much like a rowing machine or a stationary bicycle, stands pretty much on its own as a potential candidate for

inclusion in whatever personal best program the client designs for himself or herself, with or without the direct assistance of a trainer. Consequently, each chapter is designed to be read as a separate reading experience, very much like a separate article in a magazine (most of them in fact started out as articles for the online publication Education News).

Carrying the health club analogy a bit further, I think that the time element deserves some attention. A stationary bicycle, we can certainly agree, is a ruthlessly honest exercise companion who tells us how fast we're going, what our pulse rate is, how many calories we've burned, and — most important — how much time we've spent in achieving our final results, printout or no printout. Consequently, the unspoken question raised by each machine (or chapter) — almost like a frisky puppy in a pet store — comes across as “Wouldn't you like to spend some time with me?”

Solitary Seat Time. . . . We usually keep our exercise-time count honest by linking it to the number of calories burnt up. Six vigorous hours during a week at 600 calories an hour will burn up an impressive 3600 calories (ask any trainer). On the other hand, the traditional goal of four miles of walking each day at a modest pace of 20 minutes per mile will achieve the same result, assuming we have the stick-to-it gumption of sturdy folk like Franklin and John Quincy Adams. Practically considered, then, the basic decision facing each reader is simply that of deciding how many hours of solitary seat time to spend each week on memory improvement and where to spend it. . . . I vote for nine hours of honest personal best effort each week, no more.

Nine hours of solitary seat time each week does not include, of course, the ancillary efforts which those nine hours will set in motion late at night, for example. Nor will these hours exclude reciting a poem sotto voce while walking (how long will it be before the reader on his or her own returns to reconstructing once more the significance of SCAMP, CLIC, and QUART?). But nine hours of solitary seat time certainly makes sense as a serious personal commitment to personal best memory improvement, along with the expectation of achieving measurable results after the first five weeks (45 hours).

A Specific Seat-Time Target. . . . As far as traditional poetry goes, I think we're talking about a recitation-level mastery of 2,000 words (50 words per hour, and roughly equivalent to 20 of Shakespeare's memory-friendly sonnets). That may not sound like much, but speaking from personal experience I think it's plenty — more than enough to turn many lives around in the self-esteem department.

Here's hoping these first two chapters have put you individually in a productive frame of mind regarding what you can get from this book. . . . including the promise made by its title.

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