

Binge reader: Read widely and see deeply

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [February 24, 2009](#) issue

“How do you develop such rich metaphors for your speaking and writing?” I asked my colleague, a stylist whose images stick with listeners and readers. “I read as widely and talk to as many diverse people as I can,” my friend replied. I was disappointed in the reply, for I was hoping I would discover a clever technique that would help me write and speak with greater eloquence.

As for reading widely—doesn’t everyone read? Well, no. Too many people don’t read much at all. This is surprisingly true of many pastors, given the importance of discovering ideas and cultivating imagination for sermons that need to be preached week after week.

Many of the people I admire most read a lot, and they read widely. This is especially true of pastors and other church leaders, or laypeople who exercise leadership in such disparate vocations as business, law, education and community organizing. Some of the best readers I know are also some of the busiest people I know. But they are alive in their imaginations, and their leadership reflects it.

A friend describes himself as a “binge reader” because of his schedule. And so am I, the Christmas break offering a time for me to go on a bender. My disparate Christmas-break reading list was compiled largely from suggestions: Malcolm Gladwell’s *Outliers*, Marc W. Kirschner and John C. Gerhart’s *The Plausibility of Life*, David Ford’s *Christian Wisdom* (and a re-reading of *The Shape of Living*), Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*, Daniel Pink’s *A Whole New Mind*, Robert J. Sternberg’s *Wisdom, Intelligence, and Creativity Synthesized* and Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland*. It’s interesting that while no one person recommended more than one book, convergent themes began to appear in my reading: psychologist Sternberg and theologian Ford both focus on the centrality of wisdom; business writer Pink and psychologist Sternberg address the importance of creativity as a sign of intelligence; biologists Kirschner and Gerhart and journalist Gladwell explore the adaptive

realities in anomalous cases; fiction writers Lahiri and O’Neill focus on problems of identity, exile and disappointment.

My mind was stretched by my reading. I was taken into immigrant lives as well as into rich biblical and theological interpretation. I was reminded of how difficult I find the study of biology and psychology and challenged to think not “outside the box” but “without a box” as I contemplated the phenomena of outliers on the one hand and changing cultural dynamics on the other. It was a rich, if bewildering, feast.

My colleague also said that he engages as many diverse people as he can. He reads lives as well as books. When I am at my best, I am engaged in conversations with homeless people as well as CEOs, young children as well as wise seniors, highly educated colleagues and simple farmers, sixth-generation North Carolinians and newly arrived immigrants. Their stories and histories, their joys and griefs, hopes and fears broaden my perspectives and illumine places I otherwise would not acknowledge.

By contrast, I am at my worst when I presume to speak for any of these people, when I use a busy schedule as an excuse to not listen to them frame and tell their stories and describe their convictions.

Engaging the ideas of others, in literature as well as person to person, stirs our imagination and challenges our narcissism; it sharpens our perspectives and deepens our understanding. Others may or may not change our minds; one of the false presumptions of some is that when we engage others we will give up our own convictions. Sometimes that is the case, but sometimes the encounter helps us clarify why we believe what we believe.

Although I was challenged by O’Neill’s insight into the fragmentation that marks much of contemporary life, for example, I did not give up my conviction about the narrative coherence in our lives.

Ford describes a “community of the heart,” referring to the people whose lives are at the center of who we are and how we love. I have begun to imagine a “community of my imagination”—key texts and people who shape my understanding of the world; they include classical texts to which I return, such as the Psalms, Luke’s Gospel and Galatians, and texts and people whose ideas, lives, traumas, questions and dreams inform thinking about my own life, convictions and leadership. I live with some members of that community and treasure their intimate friendship.

We forge our imagination when we read both texts and lives and when we see more deeply into what we already know. I rediscovered this gift at Christmas: Read widely and see deeply!