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How Proust Can Change Your Life

Not a Novel

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Personal Development / Change Your Attitude

Workplace Skills / Time Management

Society

Take-Aways

- Marcel Proust wrote *In Search of Lost Time*, a seven-part classic novel also known as *Remembrance of Things Past*.
- Proust's father, Dr. Adrien Proust, a world-famous physician, wrote 34 books on health and fitness topics. He was a pioneer of the self-help manual.
- Proust was a recluse in ill health who spent a great deal of his time in bed.
- He believed that people could best learn about life through pain and loss.
- Proust was a remarkably sensitive individual. When he asked a palm reader to predict his future, she told him that he should tell her fortune instead.
- Proust believed in taking his time and fully experiencing everything in life.
- He hated clichés and conventional rhetoric. He sought the most definitive words to describe things, and he saw beauty in even mundane things.
- Proust felt that friendship was an illusory waste of time, but he was a good friend.
- He thought that books illuminate people's feelings and teach them about life.
- But in the end, he said, you have to think things through for yourself.

Recommendation

Are you tired of self-help manuals? Is that because the authors often seem to need help themselves? Or they all spout the same buzzwords and clichés? Or they are banal and boring? It sounds as if you are all self-help-manualed-out. Perhaps you need something different. Try Marcel Proust, revered master of exquisite expression and luminous prose. *In Search of Lost Time*, also called *Remembrance of Things Past*, Proust's one-and-a-quarter-million-word magnum opus, does not contain a trite sentence or conventional thought. You can learn much about living from such a profound genius, including how to spend your time, how to see and feel things, and why, sometimes, it is best just to stay in bed. Alain de Botton is your witty, often hilarious guide, providing valuable life lessons from Proust's writings and thoughts. *getAbstract* finds this ingenious, utterly original treatment thoroughly enjoyable. Wishing you the same.

Summary

“How to Love Life Today”

In 1922, *L'Intransigeant*, a Parisian newspaper famous for gossip, posed this hypothetical question to its contributors: A scientist in America announces that a huge cataclysm will soon strike the world, causing hundreds of millions of people to die. What affect would this dramatic event have on people? How would it change your life? Berthe Bovy, a well-known actress, replied that men would suddenly do whatever they wanted since their actions would no longer carry any extended consequences. Madame Fraya, a popular Parisian psychic, predicted that people would try to capitalize quickly on as many earthly pleasures as possible. The writer Henri Robert stated that he would spend his last few hours playing golf, tennis and bridge.

“An advantage of not going too fast is that the world has a chance of becoming more interesting in the process.”

Marcel Proust, the famous French novelist, responded that people would suddenly do all the things they had been too lazy to do previously, such as visiting the Louvre, going to India and “throwing ourselves at the feet of Miss X.” Oddly, Proust himself seldom went to the Louvre, showed no special interest in traveling to India (or even in getting out of bed), and preferred a nice cold beer to lovemaking (and men to misses). He died on November 18, 1922, at age 51, struck down by fever and lung complications. Ironically, at the time, he was writing a book, *In Search of Lost Time* (also translated as *Remembrance of Things Past*), which has to do with using time wisely and appreciating life.

“How to Read for Yourself”

Books have the magical ability to transport you instantaneously to other worlds, where you can become fully immersed until something interrupts you or you purposely put the book down, the spell broken. Like painting and other art forms, books also can make you more sensitive to the rich tapestry of life. Proust once commented that the elderly gentleman depicted by Domenico Ghirlandaio, a Renaissance painter, in his *Old Man and Boy* looked remarkably like one of Proust's contemporaries, the Marquis de Lau, a Parisian social lion. Indeed, there was a marked similarity. Proust believed that there are only a few “human types.”

Thus, painting and literature routinely present you with a cast of characters you quickly recognize because of their close resemblance to people you know. This might be called “the Marquis de Lau phenomenon.” It makes the exotic familiar and, thus, understandable. Additionally, literature reminds people of the essential conventionality of human life, enabling readers to identify with a book’s characters, no matter how foreign they may initially appear. Literature teaches you about the vagaries – and the intricacies – of the human heart. It enables you to understand people, their actions and their attitudes, as well as your emotional reactions to them, and what they think and do. Inevitably, through reading books, you become wiser, smarter and savvier.

“How to Take Your Time”

Proust’s literary masterpiece is gigantic. Even its sentences are incredibly lengthy. The longest, if formatted into one line of standard-sized text, would extend more than 13 feet (about four meters). Proust’s initial group of readers criticized him for extreme verbosity. As a result, he had to publish the novel himself to eventual acclaim. He always used a lot of words when he wrote because he saw entire worlds in the most mundane of activities. He would read the newspaper with extreme care, always looking between the lines of each story to discover universal truths.

“In Proust’s view, we don’t really learn anything properly until there is a problem, until we are in pain, until something fails to go as we had hoped.”

When Proust’s acquaintance, Henri van Blarenberghe, killed his own mother, the local newspaper treated the story in a few short paragraphs. Proust expanded this into a five-page, elegiac article that elevated the incident to something akin to Greek tragedy. As an artist, Proust understood that all human experience, no matter how seemingly trite, is infinitely rich in its universal implications. Conversely, his ability to see beyond the immediate reveals what people lose when they pin down or abbreviate human experience to its most obvious, boring, details. Proust believed that great works of art are great because of the artists’ treatment, not their subject matter. For him, there could be as much significance in an advertisement for toilet soap as in Blaise Pascal’s immortal *Pensées*, but this significance is only apparent if you take time to look for it.

“Madame Proust loved her son with an intensity that would have put an ardent lover to shame, an affection that created, or at the very least dramatically aggravated, her eldest son’s disposition toward helplessness.”

Spend the time you need to understand your experiences. See a four-inch newspaper story as “the tip of a tragic or comic novel.” Proust derided the “self-satisfaction felt by ‘busy’ men – however idiotic their business – at ‘not having time’ to do what you are doing.” Avoid common, boneheaded mistakes. Never rush. Take time to comprehend and appreciate life.

“How to Suffer Successfully”

Proust believed people learn about life only through trouble, suffering and distress. He would have known. Proust lived a life of misery, turmoil and immense suffering, both physical and mental. “I have little

happiness,” he wrote at age 30. He was always frail and ill. His mother, Jeanne Clémence Weil, “dear little *Maman*,” babied him well into adulthood, which didn’t do him any good. He was a frustrated, unhappy homosexual when homosexuality was forbidden.

*“The sad thing is that people have to be very ill or have broken a leg in order to have the opportunity to read *In Search of Lost Time*.” [– Robert Proust, Marcel Proust’s brother]*

A severe asthmatic, Proust seldom ventured out of his room, where he kept his windows tightly sealed. He suffered from digestive problems as well as aches and pains, coughed incessantly, always felt cold, usually felt dizzy, and had terrible eyesight and remarkably sensitive skin. A normal wash required 20 towels. For these and similar reasons, Proust spent most of his time in bed, his beloved refuge from a vexatious, ornery world. Was Proust a hypochondriac? Who knows? What feels like a small scratch to one person may feel like a saber cut to another. Nothing escaped the remarkably sensitive Proust. He was acutely, even painfully, aware of everything around him. Perhaps he was on to something. Many great intellectuals and artists lived miserable lives. Wisdom often comes at a steep price: physical and psychological pain, betrayals, social gaffes, and a penurious, troubled existence. Maybe that is how you earn your stripes.

“How to Express Your Emotions”

Is adopting a traditional approach to speaking and writing the ideal? Or is true originality better? In the early 20th century, French writer Louis Ganderax championed the first choice. A self-proclaimed “Defender of the French Language,” Ganderax believed strongly in precedent. He became enraged at grammatical errors or outlandish words. Proust, the patron of unfettered expression, disagreed. He loved extraordinary words. So did his cherished mother, who referred to her son as “*mon petit nigaud*” (my little oaf) or “*mon petit benêt*” (my little clod). Proust found conventional language boring and bourgeois. He insisted on using the exact noun or verb (or 1,000-word sentences) to describe something perfectly. To do otherwise, he said, meant being “on the outside of our impressions,” superficial and false. Proust became annoyed at people who spoke in clichés or used the latest chic expressions. He believed his trite-talking friends were “flattening” themselves to fit a prescribed social envelope. Proust saw life as a complex, exotic mystery. Thus, when you describe some aspect of your life as “nice,” such poverty of expression indicates a failing to understand life. “Every writer is obliged to create his own language,” said Proust. For him, life was not a mundane cliché. Nor should it be for you.

“How to Be a Good Friend”

Proust’s friends considered him the greatest friend imaginable. They described him as generous, munificent and modest. They noted that he always selflessly exhibited an intense interest in others and was a brilliant conversationalist. After Proust’s death, some of his friends wrote books about their friendship, including *My Friend Marcel Proust* (by Maurice Duplay) and *My Friendship with Marcel Proust* (by Fernand Gregh). It seems odd, then, that for Proust, time spent with a friend was lost, conversation was a digression that “gives us nothing worth acquiring,” and friendship was shallow and superficial. He saw friendship as an artificially contrived construct. Indeed, for this insightful, astute man, apparently it had to be that way. He saw people too realistically, and all men and women, even the best, are deeply flawed. A kind, generous woman may also be shallow and untalented. A brave, hardy man may also be petty, mean and dirty. No friendship can

survive withering honesty, so Proust censored himself and his brilliant wit when he was around others. He so effusively complimented his friends that they created among themselves the verb “to proustify,” connoting an overly conscious style of geniality.

“Those who love and those who are happy are not the same.” [– Marcel Proust]

But there was more to Proust’s actions than a desire not to hurt people’s feelings. He had an extremely poor opinion of himself, so always tried to endear himself to others. The best way to do this, he believed, was to focus the conversation on others – on their ideas, accomplishments and interests. He never failed to do so, always with stunning success. Honored this way, Proust’s friends loved him with abandon, despite his own views on friendship. He always worked hard to make himself the greatest of all possible friends – not a bad strategy.

“How to Open Your Eyes”

What accounts for a lack of appreciation of beauty? Perhaps it has to do with stereotypical, force-fed notions of what is beautiful and what is ordinary. For many, beauty requires regal settings, rich appointments, plush tapestries and luxurious possessions. But don’t the simple things in life have beauty? Consider the paintings of Jean-Baptiste Chardin, whose art depicted ordinary people doing routine things: a woman returning from the market, a mother instructing her daughter, a boy playing cards. They also showed mundane items: fruit, bread, meat, coffeepots, jugs and kitchen utensils. Yet, Chardin’s paintings are evocative, beguiling and beautiful. That is why the Louvre administrators hung his paintings. Chardin discovered the beauty of simple things. Proust called his paintings “this great art of nature.” For these two great artists, beauty exists everywhere and in everything. It is there, waiting for you. All you need to do is open your eyes.

“How to Be Happy in Love”

Is it possible to remain contented with anything that is always present? Proust said it is not easy. The telephone was invented in 1876; by 1900, 30,000 people in France had telephones, including Proust. He called the phone a “supernatural instrument” and was perturbed that in less than 30 years, people already took it for granted. “We are children who play with divine forces without shuddering before their mystery,” Proust wrote.

“Having surrendered the customary belief in our own immortality, we would then be reminded of a host of untried possibilities lurking beneath the surface of an apparently undesirable, apparently eternal existence.”

So how long does it take for typical people to wear out their welcome? For Proust’s main character, about 15 minutes. In a short quarter hour the novel’s narrator already becomes bored with the lovely Gilberte, someone he had longed to become close to as a boy. As “creatures of habit” people quickly get tired of the overly familiar, but what seems familiar often is not. For example, how well do you truly know your partner? His or her constant physical presence may lull you into assuming a “fake sense of familiarity.” Maybe it’s time to take a closer look. What you will see could surprise you. Along this line, Proust believed that the best way to bring passion back into any long-term relationship is with the threat of infidelity. Never discount the power of jealousy.

“How to Put Books Down”

Proust loved great books. In particular, he loved the writing of John Ruskin, a noted art critic. After reading Ruskin as a young man, Proust became much more sensitized to the beauty of the world, both natural and man-made. Thanks to Ruskin, Proust became aware of valuable experiences that, through inattention, he previously had neglected. He became so enamored of the English art critic that he stopped working on his novel to study Ruskin with such energy and purpose that his mother hoped he would give up novel writing for good. She wanted him to become Professor Proust. But it was not to be.

“There are no certainties, even grammatical ones.” [– Marcel Proust]

While at home with books, Proust was also acutely aware of their limitations. He acknowledged that authors open new worlds of experience for readers, which he felt ultimately lead to valuable new self-awareness. Books, he wrote, provide the best way of “coming to be aware of what one feels oneself.” But books only open doors that authors choose to open. And therein lies the problem. An author can help you understand the world and your feelings about it. But since the author is not you, he or she cannot define everything you consider important. This is your task alone. For Proust, reading provides “magic keys [that open] those dwelling places deep within us.” But these are places you must navigate “only by the intimate progress of [your] own thought.” At some point, you must be willing to set aside even the most illuminating of books, and think about things yourself.

About the Author

Alain de Botton writes books of essays detailing his ideas and experiences, as well as those of great thinkers, artists and philosophers. A native of Zurich, he lives in London.



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