

ON READING AND RESPONSIBILITY

Go into a library or a bookstore. Or go into the pages of a book; this one will do. While you're there, seek out silence. Now listen, attentively.

You will hear a whisper at first, then perhaps a soft murmur. You are beginning to hear voices. They are speaking to each other. If you wish it and will it, they can speak to you. Attentively, with your *mind*, you are beginning to read.

Reading is not about preparing to take somebody else's test. Except trivially, reading is not about pulling out "facts," "information," that has been buried somewhere in a text.

Reading is not something done passively or reluctantly. If you are a habitually reluctant reader, you have now gone just about as far as you ever will go, in your education.

To read is *to listen*, hearing those voices speaking and responding to each other across chasms of time, place, and circumstance, and then *to reflect* on the conversations you are hearing and *to join in*, yourself. That is the only way truly to absorb, to understand. Reading is not a spectator sport.

Neither is responsibility. Consider what it might be, to be *responsible* in your life, in your academic world of the university, in the poor and tired old world beyond, where questions of *responsibility* far too seldom have even been asked.

We speak of responsibility as something one might *assume* --- for an accident, say, or for an idea. Like the assumptions in a discussion, a responsibility is something we *stand on* or *beside*, as we join in. I find it helpful to think of *responsibility* as *ability to respond*. It is something we *choose*, just as we *choose* to read. In both, we *choose* to join in.

-- Samuel D. Watson, PhD