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| **Build a 'Fortress of Habits' Around Reading** |

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| Mark Zuckerberg does it once a fortnight.  Bill Gates does it once a week. Elon Musk used to do it twice a day. Unfortunately, according to recent statistics, one out of five first year uni students has never done it at all. Not even once. |

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| I’m referring to reading a serious book on their own. Compared to past generations, reading trends seem to be on the decline. In a recent [*Washington Post* article](http://chc.us9.list-manage1.com/track/click?u=4a4efa4bc545c3fd5baac2fd5&id=072055e82b&e=3d603952fd), Philip Yancey laments, “I am reading many fewer books these days, and even fewer of the kinds of books that require hard work.” One simple reason for this is *distraction*—a seemingly ever-present temptation that comes with owning a social media device. As Yancey explains,The Internet and social media have trained my brain to read a paragraph or two, and then start looking around. When I read an online article … after a few paragraphs I glance over at the slide bar to judge the article’s length. My mind strays, and I find myself clicking on the sidebars and the underlined links. Soon I’m over at CNN.com reading Donald Trump’s latest tweets and details of the latest terrorist attack, or perhaps checking tomorrow’s weather.Sound familiar?The problem isn’t simply that we lack time to read. The problem, rather, is that we lack the time to read *deeply*. The numerous hours we spend consuming television and social media leaves little time for serious books. Nicholas Carr, author of *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, says, “Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.” We seem to do a lot of “cruising” online, but less and less “deep reading”—i.e., reading which requires intense concentration and thus a slower pace. |

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| This phenomenon has no doubt contributed to disturbing findings in [a report](http://chc.us9.list-manage.com/track/click?u=4a4efa4bc545c3fd5baac2fd5&id=d0e0d67832&e=3d603952fd) about incoming American university students. According to the National Association of Scholars, about 4 million of them—almost 20% of first-year uni students—have rarely if ever read an adult book on their own. When universities recommend books for their students to read prior to arriving on campus, selection committeeschoose low-grade ‘accessible’ works that are presumed to appeal to ‘book virgins’ who will flee actual college-level reading … [S]uch ‘book virgins’ have to be wooed with simple, unchallenging works.Sadly, these students are forestalling growth in not only the kind of quiet meditation that aids the Christian life but also the human understanding that will help them [in the job market](http://chc.us9.list-manage.com/track/click?u=4a4efa4bc545c3fd5baac2fd5&id=8111b68e7e&e=3d603952fd). This is true whether they go on to become English teachers or economists. In their book *Cents and Sensibility*, Gary Morson and Morton Schapiro argue that wise economists are able to empathise with people and treat them as real human beings rather than as mere abstractions. How can economists train these sensibilities? Morson and Schapiro suggest reading good literature:economists could gain wisdom from reading great novelists … Stories, after all, steep us in characters’ lives, forcing us to see the world as other people do. … although many fields of study tell their practitioners to empathize, only literature offers practice in doing it.And deep reading is actually easier than we think ... once we get started. According to Yancey, neuroscience shows that “it actually takes less energy to focus intently than to zip from task to task. After an hour of contemplation, or deep reading, a person ends up less tired and less neurochemically depleted, thus more able to tackle mental challenges.” |

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| “Here’s the simple truth behind reading a lot of books,” says [Quartz Media](http://chc.us9.list-manage.com/track/click?u=4a4efa4bc545c3fd5baac2fd5&id=7d86c40a67&e=3d603952fd): “It’s not that hard. We have all the time we need. The scary part—the part we all ignore—is that we are too addicted, too weak, and too distracted to do what we all know is important.” |

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| To recover the practice of serious reading, Quartz and Yancey offer a few tips to consider: 1) Physically remove all distractions. (That means setting your smart phone or social media device in another room or turning off the e-mail and text alert “dings”.) 2) Make books as easy to access as possible. (Keep them on your nightstand, in the boot of your car, or wherever you may find yourself with some down “down time.”) 3) When it comes to reading, be a jack of all trades, not a specialist. 4) Yancey suggests trying poetry. (“You can’t zoom through poetry; it forces you to slow down, think, concentrate, relish words and phrases.”) 5) Build a "fortress of habits." This is key. If we are to overcome distraction and engage serious books, we can’t rely on willpower alone. Reading needs to become a protected habit, plain and simple. My wife and my kids are joining me in an effort to make a habit out of reading together as a family. The five of us and the cat cuddle into bean bags and read together for 30 minutes each night (although our track record isn’t perfect). According to Quartz’s calculations, even doing this six nights a week would allow each family member to read roughly 75 books a year. I invite you to take up the challenge and build your own fortress of habits around deep reading. |

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| **Rich Coffee and Discussion Flowed at First "Café Conversation"**On July 19th the [Millis Institute](http://chc.us9.list-manage.com/track/click?u=4a4efa4bc545c3fd5baac2fd5&id=d42dd5b5c8&e=3d603952fd) hosted our first "Café Conversation." 70 attendees gathered in Rivers Cafe to discuss "C.S. Lewis and Moral Relativism." Due to the positive feedback, we're already planning a similar event for later this year.If you're thirsty for more deep conversation, stay tuned to *The Pillar,* where we will announce the details in a month or two. |
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| **Welcome to Semester 2!**Last week Millis Institute students returned to class and engaged in the deep reading of authors like Aristotle, Dante, Augustine, and Lesslie Newbigin. But their noses have not only been inside of great books. In their astronomy class they are casting their eyes to the stars; in music they're learning to sing rounds; and in geometry they're constructing shapes and angles. Pictured below are members of the Geometry unit laying out Euclid's proof of his complex Proposition 2. What a privilege to work with these students as they build a "fortress of habits" around liberal arts learning! |

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