

17th January 2022

Books

“Books think for me.”

Charles Lamb, Last Essays of Elia, ‘Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading’

Listening to a sermon recently, I heard these words: “I got four books as Christmas presents. I’m old-fashioned, because I still prefer turning pages to just reading text on my tablet.” I was sitting with my back to the congregation, but I suspect there were knowing nods from those present. I’m with the preacher. I still prefer turning the pages of a real book.

When I began writing, I didn’t have much confidence. I thought I had some useful things to say, but I didn’t know how they would be received. Was my writing self-indulgent, an ego-trip? Was it a delusion that what I thought was helpful would be useful to someone else? It was only when I began to get feedback that my confidence grew. What I was writing about *did* resonate with other people, and they were kind enough to say so.

In one of my early books on grief and loss, I concluded a chapter with a prayer, in poetic form, entitled, “Oh God, how I hate weekends.” I was trying to encapsulate what many people had shared with me in their bereavements, about how long and empty a weekend could be without a loved one. Shortly after the book was published, a lady asked me: “How did you know?” “How did I know what?” I responded. “About weekends,” she replied. “How did you know how hellish my weekends are since John died?” I didn’t, of course, but reflecting what others had said, and putting their anxieties in the form of a prayer, had obviously meant a lot to her. It was heart-warming to know that my words had articulated her deepest and loneliest thoughts about her loss. I’d helped make her feel she was quite normal – painful though her weekends continued to be.

I was pleased and moved recently when I heard that one of my reflections had been used in an act of worship. I got in touch with the person who’d used my piece to offer my thanks. “No need to say thank you,” she said. “Your words did my thinking for me.” Did she know, I wonder, that her complement was close to Charles Lamb’s affirmation about books from 1833: “Books think for me”? How wonderful it is that a humble offering in any of my books could be included in that number.

A prayer for today

And your books of wisdom, Lord? All the thinking I need is right there. Thank you. Amen

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