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Great Books Discussion Leaders E-Newsletter

September 17, 2021

Introduction to the Discussion Leaders E- Newsletter



The goal of this twice-a-year newsletter is to bring useful information to Great Books discussion leaders, especially

local group discussion leaders. If there is anyone else in your group who you think might be interested in what we cover, please pass this along to them. If you send us their email address by reply to this newsletter, we'll add them to our list and be sure they receive future newsletters.

What topics interest you? For what problems do you need answers? Here are the topics in this newsletter:

- How Discussion Groups Thrive or Fail
- Great Books Anthology Review
- Sticking to the Text
- Los Altos Great Books Discussion Group
- Share Your Reading Adventures With Friends
- Introducing New Leader/Reader Training Videos
- Some Useful Links

So that's it. We hope this newsletter fills a need for you. We would appreciate your feedback, positive or negative. Send us your thoughts to greatbooksnca.newsletter@gmail.com.

Brian Cunningham

Assistant E-Newsletter Editor

**How Discussion Groups
Thrive or Fail**
A Conversation with Clifford Louie

"I love my Great Books discussion



group. But lately fewer and fewer people are attending. Some who used to attend have died or are just too old to get to the meetings regularly, Others say they are too busy to do the reading. What can we do to increase attendance?"

This is a common refrain heard often from discussion groups. But not all

discussion groups decline. Some grow and flourish. Some remain stable for many years. Why do some decline and others grow? What's the secret of success? There is no one answer for all discussion groups. Their participants are different. Their situations are different.

Clifford Louie, both individually and in partnership with Jim Hall, has started several discussion groups in San Francisco over the past 12 years. Some are continuing. But one has ceased to meet. His experience sheds light on some of the things that have worked for him.

Cliff led a discussion group at the Richmond Branch Library for many years, but it has now disbanded. It dwindled in size to just three or four participants. The meetings were held on Tuesday evenings at 6:30 pm. Participants considered the Richmond area as an area where personal safety was a concern even though it and the nearby Park area had the lowest absolute number of incidents of robbery and assault in San Francisco over the past four years (2017 – 2020) and a declining rate of those crimes during that period, according to San Francisco police statistics. Ideally, a strong group should have six to twelve regular participants in Cliff's view. Such is the case with Cliff's Anza Branch Library group which meets on Saturday afternoons, also in Richmond but with a slightly lower reported crime rate than in the Richmond Branch Library's neighborhood.

Several of the groups Cliff and Jim founded in San Francisco have moved on to new discussion leaders. Elena Schmid leads the Noe Valley group, Albert Eng leads the group at the Sunset Branch Library, and I lead a group at the San Francisco Main Library, although all are meeting by Zoom currently.

Cliff doesn't use the Great Books anthologies. He prefers to choose individual readings himself with a preference for short stories and essays. For example, at Halloween Cliff likes short stories by Edgar Allen Poe. On Shakespeare's birthday he likes to read one of his plays. Other favorites include E.M. Forster and Ralph Waldo Emerson. At the end of the day, he says the discussion group owns the discussion.

Cliff also dislikes Zoom for GB discussions. He is a very hands-on leader who highly values the socialization that GB discussions can afford. He likes to go to dinner or for drinks after a meeting. He believes those kinds of interactions are important to building a strong group.

So how can we sum up Cliff's experience? Perhaps it's the right location, at the right time, with the right literature and a personal touch. That seems simple enough. But when Cliff and I tried to start a new group in Oakland a couple of years ago, he found two public libraries with suitable rooms which they were willing to make available. One had no parking and at the other one you had to go outside to find a toilet. We gave up at that point.

Cliff intends to start yet another new group in San Francisco. He hasn't decided where yet, but he has a couple of locations in mind.

Brian Cunningham
Assistant E-Newsletter Editor

Great Books Anthology Review

Great Conversations 6

Noe Valley Reading Group
Based on comments of Elena Schmid and
Parki Hoeschler

At the time of the interviews for this review the
Noe Valley Group was working its way through



The Anthology contains 15 selections of 30 to 50 pages plus two short “discussion guides” for *Confessions of a Fallen Standard-Bearer* by Andre Makine and *The Age of Innocence* by Edith Wharton. Authors of the included readings are Seneca, Francis Bacon, John Locke, Joshua Reynolds, Edward FitzGerald, Robert Browning, George Eliot, Mark Twain, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jane Addams, H. G. Wells, Thomas Mann, Katherine Mansfield, Karel Čapek, Mary McCarthy and Deborah Eisenberg – spanning a period from the year 6 CE to the current day. Some of the readings were previously known to the group; some were completely unknown; all were, in their way, challenging.

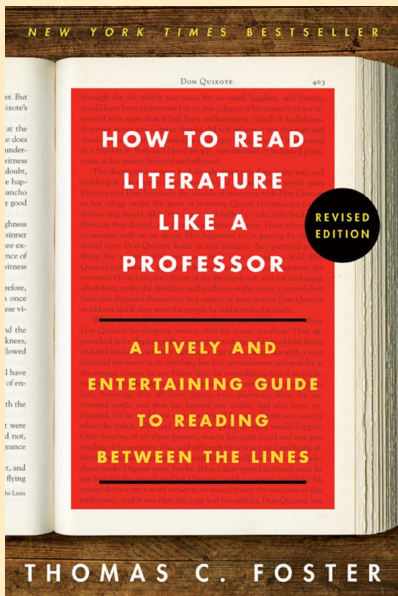
This group tends to ignore the questions provided in the Anthology. Preparing their own questions often required significant time and effort. But since the group has been together for a while, everyone jumps into the discussion with their thoughts and

questions. For that reason, leading the discussions was not difficult.

The Edward Fitzgerald poem, *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, and Robert Browning’s poem, *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, are presented as a single reading in the Anthology. However, the group decided to divide the two poems into two meetings because of the length of the Fitzgerald poem. They think these poems are a challenging combination.

Karel Capek’s play, *R.U.R. (Rossum’s Universal Robots)*, engaged a couple of the participants to a surprising degree. They treated it almost like a mystery puzzle working out all the details. Some thought discussing the reading on Zoom made it hard to capture its humor.

The group felt that the Seneca, Bacon, Locke, and Nietzsche readings are what people join Great Books to discuss. They commented that without the group and the Shared Inquiry method, it would be very hard to have the motivation to read and the success in understanding these works. The selections are suitable for those who want to take on more challenging works.



Sticking to the Text

If you’ve ever led book discussions using Shared Inquiry, then you know this scenario — someone tries to “enhance” the discussion by offering details about the author or the era in which the text was written. Or they might start relating a personal anecdote, referencing another publication, or bringing up a contemporary issue. This is understandable; we’ve all been tempted to do this when we have a bit of outside information that we feel helps to understand the text. But there are good reasons for limiting this input to the final stages of the discussion, if at all.

Thomas C. Foster addresses this issue in his book *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*:

"I know I have said this before and will say it again, but it bears repeating: if it's not in the text it doesn't exist. We can only read what is present in a novel, play, or film. If something informed the

author's creation of the text but the evidence is not present in the text, that's a matter for scholars concerned with motives, not for readers wrestling with meaning. Think of it this way: a vast majority of readers will have no access to that nontextual evidence. How, then, can we expect it to have any bearing on the way we read?"

But then how can we be sure that we're interpreting the reading the way the author would want us to? Foster replies as follows:

"The wise guy in me wants to say, we can't, so get over it. If I could wave a wand and get rid of everyone's sense of obligation to the writer, I would do it in a heartbeat. A reader's only obligation . . . is to the text. We can't interrogate the writer as to intentions, so the only basis of authority must reside in the text itself. Trust the words and the words only. You can never find the motivation behind them. Even if the writer told you his intent, as a group they're notorious liars and not to be trusted. Plus, writers do things sometimes because they "just feel right"; that is, not every choice is made consciously, although that doesn't mean there's no reason behind it."

In Great Books a leader's job is to keep everyone focused on the reading. So if someone strays, ask them to hold back outside references until near the end. Don't be shy about insisting that interpretations be supported with evidence from the text. Use words or phrases taken directly from the text when forming your interpretive questions. And do have someone read a passage or two during the discussion to keep everyone anchored in the text.

Louise Morgan
Leader/Reader Chair



Los Altos Great Books Discussion Group

The Los Altos Great Books Discussion Group began in 2000 in the Los Altos Public Library, reading the Great Books anthology, *Introduction to Great Books*. They've met continuously since then until the Covid-19 pandemic began at which point they moved out of the Library and began meeting via Zoom to continue their unbroken 21-year series of meetings.

Jean Packard, now deceased, founded the group, aided by Great Books representatives Brent and Erma Browning who were then living nearby in the Santa Cruz Mountains. The Brownings assisted Jean to launch the group, including conducting discussion leader workshops.

Norman Roth, currently the only male participant, told me that although Zoom has made meeting attendance easier, it has limited their opportunities for socialization. In years past the group enjoyed a December holiday party together, first at a restaurant and then as a potluck dinner at a member's home. But they haven't had their holiday party for the last two years.

This group of ten or so mostly retired sexagenarians, septuagenarians and octogenarians is a cohesive group who enjoy Shared Inquiry discussions in meetings free of acrimony. There are no personal anecdotes and very little discussion of politics, even before and after meetings. But that didn't occur by accident. Once during the Iraq war some of these bookies were engaging in a pre-meeting dispute about the war, resulting in one of them becoming very angry. Since then, they have agreed to eliminate all political discussions even though everyone has probably evolved by now to similar political points of view.

The GB Los Altos group enjoys reading Great Books anthologies. Their pattern is to read *Great Conversations* for one month, then *Imperfect Ideal: Utopian and Dystopian Visions* for one month and *Modern American Poetry* twice a year. They rotate discussion leadership each month. All of them have attended discussion leader training. Norman reads Reading Matters and finds it helpful.

They meet at 7:00 pm on the third Tuesday of each month. It's fortunate the group enjoys meeting via Zoom because the Library has so far not invited them back. They send out Zoom invitations on the day of the meeting. The last half hour of their two-hour meeting is open for anything anyone wants to talk about.

Although attendance is relatively constant, the size of the group is slowly diminishing due to aging. They advertise their meetings in a brief notice in the Los Altos Town Crier. In addition, the Library posts a notice announcing their meeting times. New people attend from time to time but generally don't continue. In the past a medical student or two from Stanford (near Los Altos) have attended a couple of meetings but didn't continue. Norman thinks they could benefit from some additional new member recruiting support from GB San Francisco. Specifically, they need help with publicity. maybe a colorful poster for the Library or a post card with blanks to fill in with their phone numbers, as well as suggestions as to where to distribute them.

Several of the Los Altos bookies have participated in GB San Francisco weekend events, including

the McConnell Asilomar Weekend and the San Francisco Mini-Retreat. When events such as the Long Novel or Poetry weekends were held in Menlo Park, attendance was particularly convenient for them. They've also participated in the New England GB Harlem Renaissance weekend and have looked favorably at GB Midwestern (Chicago) film discussion.

Brian Cunningham
August 27, 2021

SHARE YOUR READING ADVENTURES WITH FRIENDS

“The greatest gift is the passion for reading.

It is cheap, it consoles, it distracts, it excites,

it gives you knowledge of the world and experience of a wide kind.

It is a moral illumination.”

— Elizabeth Hardwick (1916-2007)



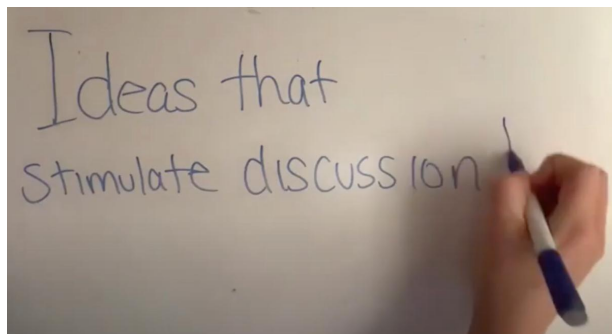
One of the reasons we belong to Great Books is that we love reading and discussing books with like-minded friends and peers at our local book group discussion meetings. I don't know about you, but I often find it difficult to stop sharing my latest reading adventures with my other friends who may not belong to a book group. I find it especially powerful to tell them about the *Shared Inquiry Method* and how it shapes meaningful and productive discussions. Sometimes it is not their cup of tea but other times they get caught up in the ideas and end up coming along to a local book group meeting to try it out for themselves.

Play It Forward: Share your Great Books experience with a friend. Share your love of reading and discussing books with your wider network and invite them to join your group or maybe join another local book group to experience it for themselves.

Many of the Great Books groups are hosting their discussions via Zoom, so there's no need to worry about directions or finding parking! Some groups specialize in particular types of writing e.g. non-fiction, fiction, or poetry, and other groups offer a smorgasbord of works.

Here's an online list of the local groups in Northern California with contact info and when/where they meet: <https://www.greatbooksnca.org/find-a-group>

Discussion Group Questions? If you would like to chat with one of the Great Books group leaders about which group might be best for you or your friend, reach out by email to: greatbooksnca.president@gmail.com



Introducing New Leader/Reader Videos

Looking for advice on leading Shared Inquiry discussions? We're working on some video content to help you out. Check out [this YouTube video](#) about fact questions vs. interpretive questions. You may also click on the screenshot at the left to access the video. This is the first video we have produced with more to come. You, GB Discussion Leaders,

are the first to view this. Let us know what you think, make suggestions, or criticize by replying to this E-Newsletter.

Many thanks to Lydia Osborn and her grandmother, Louise Morgan.

Useful Quick Links

[GBSF Events](#)

[Gold Country Mini-Retreat
Spring 2022](#)

[Banned Books Mini-Retreat](#)
[October 2021](#) **This event is full.**

[Poetry Weekend](#)
[November 13, 14, 2021](#)

[San Francisco Mini-Retreat](#)
February 2022

[Leader-Reader Workshop](#)
[March 13, 2022](#)

[Barbara McConnell Asilomar](#)
[Great Books Weekend](#)
[April 2022](#)

[Annual Meeting and Book Discussion](#)
[Summer 2022](#)

[Long Novel Weekend](#)
[August 2022](#)

Other Quick Links

Our Website
<https://www.greatbooksncal.org>

Reading Matters, published and edited by
Rick White, is our premier publication. To
read the Spring-Winter 2021 edition
just [CLICK HERE](#).
