

First person

Reading ritual opens new chapter of enlightenment

By Ellen Blum Barish

SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

I think of myself as a ravenous reader, but I rarely finish what I start. Most of the time, where words are concerned, I'm getting them in bits and pieces, like parts of a chopped salad, and then leaving much of it uneaten, to decompose on my bedside table.

I skim the pastel-colored paper announcements that my kids bring home from school for key details like date, time and how much. I breeze over the monthly newsletters that arrive in my mailbox. I search only for that boldfaced number on the bottom line of bills. I scan the headlines of my subscription magazines, and once in a rare while, I'll actually read an entire article in the Sunday paper, word for word.

As for books—well, I'm ultra particular and, like everyone else I know, really busy. If I am reading, it is usually two to three books at the same time, one nonfiction relating to my work or family life, and maybe two novels simultaneously (skimming the nonfiction, taking the other two in a few pages a night).

So you can understand why it was a monumental achievement for me when, last year, I finished reading a 50-chapter book—granted, they were short chapters—and I read it along with several others. But I read every sentence, every punctuation mark in that book and discussed topics raised from each chapter. Sometimes, we would grapple over the opening line of a chapter for an hour and a half. It took me three years, but I read every word of the book of Genesis.

It was, as anyone who has cracked open the binding of the Old Testament knows, one of the most thought-provoking books ever published. It may not be the easiest, but for me, it has been very gratifying. Great characters. Fabulous dramas. Interesting plot twists. Excellent cinematic possibilities. Great jumping-off points for further discussion.

How did I—a bits and pieces reader—land in a Bible class?

It all started after a conversation I had with an old friend

about how fast-paced and crazy our lives seemed. She recommended that I read a book about a Los Angeles couple who wanted to simplify their life. It was the story of how they traded their fast shiny cars and super-highway commutes for a slower, less thing-filled life of tractors and acres of land dotted with fruit trees. I was about halfway through the book when I put it down, disappointed, I had actually given this book one of my best shots. I read half! And while it was written engagingly enough, it read like a regurgitation of old ideas. It was watered

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down. Unoriginal. Derivative.

Then I recalled where I'd heard these ideas before: "Walden." That classic narrative published by Henry David Thoreau in 1854 in which Thoreau voluntarily left his comfortable life in Concord, Mass., and discovered peace and serenity by moving to Walden Pond. I'd never read the book but the ideas had always compelled me.

So I bought "Walden," plunged in, and found out something very interesting. It wasn't the easy-to-digest version that my "contemporary simple living" book was, but this older and dustier tome was far more gratifying. I had to rely heavily on the annotated version, and desperately craved a discussion group, but it was written so that its meaning could be unraveled and thought about in layers. A little like poetry. And uniquely timeless.

"Walden" gave me something to think about precisely because it made me work for it. Experiencing "Walden" motivated me to crack open another old vol-

ume, another book I had never read but had loads of opinions about: I decided to sit down with the Old Testament.

Turns out, around the same time, just a few miles from my home, a group of women were having a similar experience. They wanted, like me, to go right to the source, to read something with value, in slow motion, to untangle its meaning for themselves.

After three years, I celebrated our feat with my fellow readers in a Jewish ceremony called a *siyum*—the Hebrew word for end. It's an ancient ritual that marks the end of reading one of the books of the Bible. We gathered for a service in a beautiful sanctuary and invited guests. We read Hebrew prayers, chanting some, reciting some in unison.

After the service, we gathered in the library for a delicious luncheon. It was unbelievably satisfying.

So much so that it got me to thinking about the role of ritual in my patchwork reading habits. Perhaps this was what I had been missing all along.

I started small. Since this experience, I've been entering every book name and author into a hardbound notebook. (I later amended this to every good book.) In fact, my book selection process has changed: I don't read many books, but I try to make sure that what I do read has some merit. And I steer clear of anything that smacks of having been done before.

I'd like to build on this ritual—perhaps I'll enter book names to my notebook in calligraphy. Add a celebratory cup of tea and a few moments to let the pages sink in. Concentrate on how lucky I am to be able to read at all—to have a selection of things to read that stretch, educate or entertain me—even if it's in bits and snatches.

What's on my bedside nightstand now?

A first novel by Laurel Doud called "This Body," Chaim Potok's "The Promise," a non-fiction book by Hope Edelman called "Mother of My Mother," and of course, Exodus.

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