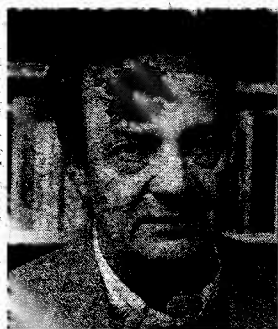


Did you hear about the Maori storyteller who, upon first hearing a radio, cut his daily storytelling time in half and then, upon first seeing TV, dried up entirely? Within 1 year he collapsed 20,000 years of "out-loud culture" into technological silence....This thinksheet is about what we've done to ourselves and are doing to others--and what we might do to begin to reverse the damage. It's NEWWEEK's 15Apr85 'My Turn' essay.



In 1941, Thorndike, a co-inventor of the IQ, used an optical tachometer to multiply 5x my reading-speed. It took years to recover, to slow down my eyes and brain to body-speed, the speed at which one can FEEL what one is reading. "Meaning" is more than 1/2 feeling (Ac.8.30).

Bring Back the Out-Loud Culture

MY TURN/DONALD HALL

As a boy in the 1940s, I stood in the tie-up watching my New Hampshire grandfather milk eight Holsteins while he recited poems for my entertainment. His hands stripped milk to the poem's beat. He threw back his head, rolled his eyes in high drama and pounded out: "But there is no joy in Mudville—mighty Casey has struck out."

Often—for he was a cheerful man—he followed with the ballad set years later when a local team, far behind late in the game, lost a player to injury and called for help from the stands. Of course the portly, gray-headed volunteer hit a home run with two out in the ninth to win the game. **Begged to reveal his identity, the old fellow sobbed forth—and my grandfather in his**

ters from Scott and Dickens. At school we recited in chorus multiplication tables, state capitals and Latin declensions. We studied spelling, Shakespeare and history by committing them to memory.

Technology replaces memory. We invented the alphabet so that we needed no longer to commit Homer to memory; Gutenberg took us another mile. With radio we stopped singing for each other; Bing Crosby took over. We listened no more to comic recitations about "Darius Green and His Flying Machine." Jack Benny and Fred Allen told new jokes every week.

When we put away childish things we tend to despise what we leave behind. Among educators it has been progressive or forward-looking to deplore learning by rote and to oppose it to thinking. Maybe this is true for mathematics. But when we stopped memorizing and reciting literature, our ability to read started its famous decline. It was the loss of recitation—not its replacements (radio, film, television)—that diminished our literacy.

Inner Voice: My grandfather who recited poems spent only a few years in school, but he was a better reader than most college graduates I meet today. Good readers hear what they read even though they read in silence. speed reading is barbaric. When

blue cap and worn overalls sobbed also—"I'm mighty Casey who struck out just 20 years ago!"

My grandfather's memorized anthology was not the greatest poetry. Its vigorous rhythms featured models of perseverance and satires of vanity and hypocrisy. In his youth he had learned these verses to speak as pieces, in a rural culture that entertained and edified itself by communal showing-off.

Public Readings: His gigs took place in Danbury, N.H. In his old house, where I live, I recently found records of the South Danbury Oratorical and Debating Society, which met biweekly in the 1890s for programs that included piano solos, recita-

we read well, in silence, we imagine how the words would sound if they were said aloud. Hearing print words in the inward ear, we understand their tone. If we see the sentence "Mr. Armstrong shook his head," the inner voice needs to understand whether Mr. Armstrong disapproved or was outraged—before the inner voice knows how to speak the words.

If when we read silently we do not hear a

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text, we slide past words passively, without making decisions, without knowing or caring about Mr. Armstrong's mood. We might as well be watching haircuts or "Conan the Barbarian." In the old Out-Loud Culture, print was always potential speech; even silent readers, too shy to read aloud, inwardly heard the sound of words. Their culture identified print and voice.

tions and debates on foreign policy—"Shall the United States undertake further territorial expansion?" Danbury was not unusual then, for public readings and performances lived at the center of American culture—city, town and countryside. Every school scheduled Prize Speaking Day, with its impassioned recitations of Whittier, Longfellow, Lincoln and William Jennings Bryan.

Before the late 1920s and 1930s, American culture was *out loud*. We continually turned print into sound. Mother read or recited to infant. (Memorization allowed entertainment even while **both hands made bread**.) Grandfather read from **Prophet and Gospel**; his grandson performed chap-

Everyone's ability to read was enhanced by recitation. Then we read aggressively; then we demanded sense.

We have become a nation of **passive** readers, and passive reading makes for diminished literacy. To solve our problem, it will not do to blame TV. Blaming serves no purpose except self-praise, and television for that matter can encourage active reading, itself lending a voice to texts, as "Reading Rainbow," a children's literature program, has done on PBS. Television can do much more—if we want it to.

Pleasure: Fathers and mothers, teachers, Boy Scout leaders, babysitters, librarians, uncles and aunts, we must read aloud to children. But first we must learn again to perform the text, out-ham our ancestors, take pleasure in word and story and hand this pleasure on. We must encourage our children to memorize and recite. As children speak poems and stories aloud, by the pitch and muscle of their voices they will discover drama, humor, passion and intelligence in print. In order to become a nation of readers, we need again to become a nation of reciters.

Hall is a poet and critic; his most recent book is "The Oxford Book of Children's Verse in America."