Back during my younger years, I wasn't much of a reader. In fact, I only read four books when I was a kid. I always thought reading was passive. I had places to go and things to do. Even in school, I was always smart enough to get by without reading the texts. This helped develop a motto: “If you can’t dazzle them with your brilliance, baffle them with your baloney.”

My crowning under-achievement in this area came in college when a friend and I embarked upon writing papers for a Shakespeare class we were taking. My friend, who we will call Peter (because that is his name), chose to write about the mystical elements in the forests of several of Shakespeare’s comedies. He worked diligently on this paper for weeks. I remember standing with him in an office supply store for thirty minutes as he looked for the perfect report cover for his paper. He finally selected something in a pale green with slanted vertical lines that he said depicted an abstract view of the forests he had written about. His report was done at least a week before the due date, allowing for numerous revisions and improvements before it would be turned in with much pomp and fanfare.

I took a slightly different approach.

My topic was a compare and contrast of three motion picture depictions of the character of Hamlet. The day before the paper was due, I watched the videos and after a short nap, I pulled an all-nighter, finished the paper during the time that the class was meeting. After printing it on a dot-matrix printer with an extremely faded ribbon (that's like low ink for the younger crowd), I slammed a staple into the top left corner of the document, popped a baseball cap on my head and got to class five minutes before it ended but four minutes and fifty-nine seconds before the paper was due.

About seven days later, Peter and I had the opportunity to travel with this professor and a group of people to the Stratford Festival in Ontario, Canada to watch a Shakespearean play. As we got into a car, the professor returned our papers. Peter nearly ripped his beautiful cover off to get to his comments and the grade. He paused for a moment as he read each point offered by the professor and felt a tinge of disappointment when he saw the letter “B” at the bottom. I can’t put into words what he felt when he looked at me with my paper flipped back on the staple and a large letter “A” staring him in the face.

He is bitter to this day but has made great strides in therapy.

I tell you this to highlight the importance of watching movies. Once Peter learned this, we got along swimmingly. In fact, one of our favorites was the 1989 Peter Weir film, Dead Poets Society. It’s the inspiring story of Mr. John Keating, a teacher played by Robin Williams. In the movie, Mr. Keating brings his unconventional methods of teaching English to a New England boarding school. He is not a good fit for the institution, but he manages to make a connection with several students who learn to seize the days of their lives through the Latin phrase, “Carpe Diem.” I had used a few clips of the film to highlight effective and ineffective teaching in a Foundations of Education course I used to teach, but I hadn’t seen the entire film since sitting in Peter’s dorm room over twenty years ago. But recently I recorded the movie to watch with my teenage son who reads much more than me but still likes a good film. That’s when I stumbled back upon one of my all-time favorite movie lines.
“We don’t read and write poetry because it’s cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion. And medicine, law, business, engineering, these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for. To quote from Whitman, “O me! O life!... of the questions of these recurring; of the endless trains of the faithless... of cities filled with the foolish; what good amid these, O me, O life?” Answer. That you are here – that life exists, and identity; that the powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse. That the powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse. What will your verse be?”

Or for those of you who’d rather hear the dramatic delivery, or who share my “love” of reading, here’s a YouTube link to the movie clip.

https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=R_zsMwCOoEs

I love it when script writers preach the Gospel without realizing it. That’s because God places His love throughout creation – even in the pages of a movie script. Keating’s statement begins by searching for the reasons we read and write poetry. He concludes with the basic human connection to love. The Scriptures are not only filled with verses that explain the source of love is God, but they also tell us clearly that God IS love. We read and write poetry to express in our own meager ways those things God has done and continues to do for us daily.

Keating next quotes Whitman to demonstrate the lost nature of a life without poetry – without love. A life among the faithless and foolish is unfulfilling. Thus established, Keating offers an answer for the students to consider.

“That the powerful play goes on and you might contribute a verse.”

This sounds impressive and to some it might be daunting, but consider it within the proper perspective. The story of life in the heavens and on the earth is not ours to write. We are neither the author nor the owner of our lives. Ephesians 2:10 reminds us that “...we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” My choices don’t simply affect me and nobody else. The things I have said and done over the course of my life have left an indelible impression on the lives of thousands, many of whom I will never know. That’s because God takes the imperfect verse I contribute and uses it to create something more beautiful than any poem ever penned.

What will your verse be?