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FACING THE READING CRISIS

Will American Catholics Take the Lead?

An Interview with Dana Gioia

National Endowment for the Arts

Raymond A. Schroth, S.J.

Introduction. Three things led Conversations to Dana Gioia, chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, as we prepared this issue on what is often termed the "crisis" in reading in American education. First, the report itself, Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America (2004), with its findings that less than half of the adult American population now reads literature and also that there is a correlation between reading literature and one's active involvement in volunteer and charity work, as well as various art events, in one's community. Second, articles in the New York Times (September 7, 2004) and Commonweal magazine (November 21, 2003) depicting Mr. Gioia as someone who, though not a Jesuit student, embodied ideas which Jesuit colleges and universities strive to communicate. Born on Christmas eve in 1950, in Hawthorne, California, of a Sicilian cabdriver father and a Mexican and Native American mother, he had 12 years of Catholic education in grammar school and a Marianist boys' high. Then to Stanford and Harvard. He gave up the vice presidency of General Foods to become a full-time poet, published poems in the *New Yorker* and the *Hudson Review*, and a much talked-about article in the *Atlantic* in 1991, "Can Poetry Matter?" in which he charged that American poetry was controlled by a coterie and failed to speak to the public.

At the 2000 Pew conference he said, that, "The U. S. Church has never quite known what to do with the human hunger for beauty," but that the "arts have always been a vital part of the Catholic identity and that Beethoven and Mozart, Michelangelo and El Greco, Dante and Saint John of the Cross, Bernanos and Mauriac, the anonymous architects of Chartres and Notre Dame, have awakened more souls to the divine than all the papal encyclicals."

We recorded this conversation in March.

RAS sj

Ray Schroth: What has been the response to your reading report?

Dana Gioia: The response to our *Reading At Risk* report was overwhelming. We had over 1,000 articles here right away commenting on it, and the report is cited virtually every day by someone in the United States or abroad. So I think that the report has been successful in alerting the nation to the enormity of the problem with readers. It has also been successful in stirring up interest among many parties in how we might solve the issue.

RS: Any particularly brilliant programs that have been suggested?

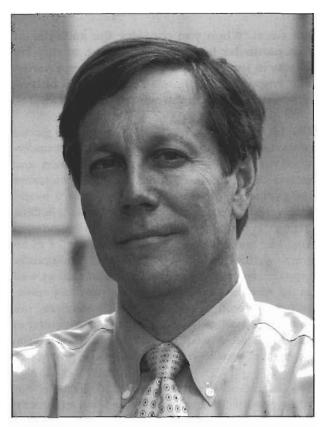
DG: We are right now in the process of creating the largest literary reading program in American history. The program will be called The Big Read. It takes a grass roots idea, the notion that a community gathers together to read a single book, and it develops that idea into a multi-media campaign that no single community could afford to execute alone. So we are developing programming and materials for classic American books and providing them to communities across the nation. It will involve television, radio and print programming that will reach everyone in the community from viewers at home, to school kids, from people shopping in bookstores to the patrons of libraries.

RS: How will this affect colleges?

DG: We would love to have colleges participate, but what we are focusing on is all members of a community from basically adolescence through to senior citizens, and so it includes academic institutions but does not focus on them single-mindedly. We are, for example, putting together special materials, CDs, posters, websites, teaching material just for high school teachers, but we are also going to provide them to libraries and bookstores and things like that.

RS: Now who will pick the books?

DG: Eventually the communities will choose their own books, but what we are doing right now is developing some material, and the communities will choose from the books that we are offering. We hope every month to add materials for new books. With our first books, we are just testing this now in ten cities. Let me tell you the four titles and why we chose them.



Dana Gioia

The books we are using right now are, Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451, Harper Lee's To Kill A Mockingbird, F.Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby, and Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God. We picked Bradbury and Lee because they are the most widely used books in these grass roots programs. Then we added Fitzgerald and Hurston to offer two widely acceptable American classics. We will add books like My Antonia, Grapes of Wrath, A Farewell to Arms and Joy Luck Club and we are also creating a panel of distinguished Americans that range from literature to public life to help us chose the next sets of books. We try to do everything as much as possible at the NEA by creating outside panels of experts to make the decisions on our grants so that we can free up the political system.

RS: This next question may stretch you a little. I know you didn't go to a Jesuit university. You're deprived I guess!

DG: But I had 12 years of Catholic education. I gave the Jesuits my oldest son. He's at Gonzaga High right now. It has been tremendous.

Facing the Reading Crisis

RS: Great. When you consider the audience of this particular interview, which are mostly lay faculty in Jesuit institutions, can you see a particular response that these 28 colleges and universities could make that would be special to us?

DG: Let me say this. Traditionally one of the glories of the Catholic Church has been how well it understood culture. The greatest artists, composers and writers of the age used their gifts to *ad maiorum dei gloriam*, to the greater glory of God. I would love to see American Catholics take the lead in illustrating the necessary links between artistic and spiritual life, and The Big Read could be one of those ways. Jesuit institutions have also traditionally played a very important part in the cultural as well as the spiritual lives of the communities they serve, and so it would be terrific if Jesuit institutions, not simply universities but high schools, participated in The Big Read. It would be a way of increasing the impact and broadening the reach of the program.

One of the scariest things we discovered in our study *Reading At Risk* was that the younger generations of Americans are reading significantly less than they used to. In the past 20 years the younger Americans have gone from the people who read the most in society to people who read the least.

RS: Do you think that's attributable at all in any sense to their teachers and schooling?

DG: I think there is something not happening in school. One of the scariest things is that we are producing a generation of college graduates that reads less than they used to. So to a degree that the Jesuit universities could show leadership by becoming involved in this program as parts of the communities they serve, I think that would have a tremendous symbolic as well as practical value.

RS: Let's imagine that you are on a faculty and teaching an English class and it's both fiction and non-fiction. How big a demand would you make on your students? How many books would you have them read in a semester?

DG: I don't know. When I went to college, if it were a humanities or social science course you were expected to read one book per class per week. I took mostly humanities and social science classes and maybe a language class on top of that, so to

read 35-40 books per semester was considered normal. I don't know what it's like now, but my sense is that it has dropped catastrophically. The kids don't read the books they are assigned. They are being assigned less and I don't know how one becomes educated in those fields unless one reads and rereads.

What we have to do, I think, is reconfirm two things about reading. First the pleasure of reading and secondly the spiritual necessity of reading. Reading awakens things inside us that make our lives more vivid and active. One of the things we discovered, and this is research you haven't yet seen, is that people who are readers are 100 percent, that's three times more likely, to do volunteer or charity work. They are more likely to exercise. They are more likely to take part in every aspect of civic life and to do all kinds of more positive individual social behaviors than non-readers.

RS: In your preface you describe reading as an irreplaceable form of focused attention and contemplation that makes complex communication and insights possible. Now, does that apply to reading online?

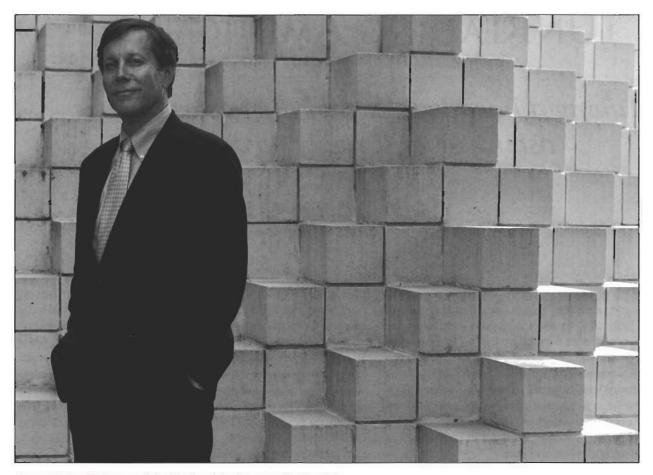
DG: Well I don't think so. We've talked to a number of experts. First of all I have nothing against the internet, except when it stops people from reacting to one another in person.

RS: That's true of all online courses.

DG: Everything that we have learned at the NEA about how people read online indicates that they do not read in a sustained linear way. They jump around a lot. So the internet is a very powerful information tool. It is not a very powerful reading tool.

RS: What about this connection between reading books and moral development?

DG: It's huge. I've always felt that the development of western democracy was inseparable from the rise of the book and especially the rise of the novel. The sustained daily meditation of other people's lives from the inside, which is what a novel does, was one of the major contributing factors to insisting on a just society, because people saw the lives of unfortunate people from the inside and the dailyness of their existence. I do believe that every-



Dana Gioia, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts.

thing we have seen statistically indicates that reading awakens something that enlarges and refines your humanity.

RS: If you had to pick three books — and not necessarily American books like A Farewell To Arms or To Kill A Mockingbird, and other than the Bible that everybody should have read by the time they get out of college — what books would you recommend?

DG: Well one would probably be St. Augustine's *City of God.* That's one of the most important books that I have every read in my own development. Another would be Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov.*

RS: Thank God you said that. I was afraid no one would say Dostoevsky.

DG: The third, let me think. We've chosen a book of theology and a novel, so the third would be a couple of Shakespeare's comedies, especially *As You Like It* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. So if you want to say Shakespeare's comedies then that covers poetry and drama. You get the tragedy from Dostoevsky and the comedy from Shakespeare.

RS: Terrific. What are you reading now?

DG: I'm reading Garry Wills' book on Saint Augustine and I am rereading *A Farewell To Arms* because we are using that for one of our programs.

RS: It holds up. I've taught it about five times.