Written By Fr. Dennis Gallagher, A.A.

A book in hand



Undoubtedly, there are advantages to reading from a tablet or an iPad. Cost, convenience while traveling, storage capacity, font flexibility all favor the electronic device over the traditional book, to say nothing of environmental concerns and the elimination of all that paper. Clearly, electronic is the reasonable way to go.

But sometimes rationality is not all that it’s cracked up to be. Or, better, a rationality reduced to considerations of cost and convenience. Consider all the pleasures of the book, starting with the

tactile ones: holding the book in hand, turning the pages, even tearing open the Amazon-delivered box. Then there's the underlining, the highlighting and notes in the margins. Yes, those last three can be done on the tablet, but not with my peculiar script and idiosyncratic notations. Altogether, there is a presence to a book that makes it an extension of myself. I used to say when I was teaching a course that it felt like a companion for the duration of the semester. A book in hand can feel something the same.

A word also about the aesthetic pleasure of the book. Here you have the shape and the color and the cover design, as well as the handsomeness of a shelf full of books. It's a furnishing. That's the impression you had about all those Encyclopedia Brittanicas in the old days, prominently displayed on living room bookshelves. In one way they were a symbol of the common man's intellectual reach. In another, for all that they were consulted, their principal purpose was to fill out our living space.

But let's not leave it at that. There's a comfort in those books, arranged as we see fit, in our homes and offices. They evoke a history of good reading and each one stands ready to be taken from the shelf for our instruction or renewed pleasure. They can spell the difference between loneliness and solitude. How many have found solace in quiet evenings spent in their study surrounded by their books?

If I keep on in this vein, I'll have to light up my pipe.

Photo by Lisa Fotios