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Dr. White

How Proust Can Change Your Life Book Review

In *How Proust Can Change Your Life* by Alain de Botton, the author describes 9 key lessons that people can learn from Marcel Proust, a French novelist from the early 1900s. Proust was a sickly man who was living in a time that did not accept him as a person because he was gay, so he was deeply unhappy and frustrated. Despite this, his musings on life have allowed people to learn from him a century after his passing, and probably long after. He enjoyed writing and reading, and notably took his time with everything, allowing him to put a lot of thought into his work. The lessons de Botton explains seem simple and obvious, but when I thought more about it I realized I could use some work in the areas specified.

The first lesson is simply live in the present. This is brought on by a prediction that the world is going to end and the effect that it would have on people. Would you regret anything you did or didn't do? For me, I think I would regret not pursuing my passions as fiercely as I wished, but fortunately I am still young and have the ability to do it – after we get coronavirus under control, of course. This lesson made me want to really try and limit my time on my phone and get outside to do things more. I want to help people, see things, and try to really live in the moment.

The next lesson is something that I have done my whole life: reading books. I know many of my peers never enjoyed it, but I could get lost in a book for hours. Even today, once I pick one up I can't seem to put it down or do much of anything else until it is done. In contrast to that, another one of Proust's lessons is to know when to put a book down. It is important to form your own opinions separate from the author or from other readers, and you must know when to think for yourself. Honestly, this is something I still struggle with and it affects my life every day. I have my own opinions and thoughts, but sometimes they change when I am around other people. I am learning to keep my own opinions and allow them to change when presented with new evidence and ideas, but sitting and reflecting for myself is something I try to do as much as possible.

Another lesson I thought was very interesting was one that was also mentioned in *The Happiness Hypothesis*, a book we read earlier in the semester. Proust says that people often learn the most through distress and suffering, and that is okay. In *The Happiness Hypothesis* they talk about how people often thrive in the face of adversity. After giving it quite a bit of thought, I think it rings true. In high pressure and stressful situations I often do my best work (all the years of procrastinating in school) even if it takes a toll on my mental health for a moment. I have

learned how to deal with it in calm and rational ways, and because of that I feel like I can take on many different kinds of situations that are thrown my way.

The lesson that I feel is incredibly important and applies to everyone no matter what part of life they are in is simply to slow down and appreciate life. It ties in closely with the first lesson – living in the present – but it is different. Knowing how to dial back emotions and urges (whether it be career, relationship, or related to something else) is so important in life. We hear the saying all the time, “Stop and smell the roses,” but how often do we really apply it to our lives? I know everyone my age is racing to get to a finish line before everyone else, and for what? An early retirement? A successful career? These things all come in time, and we can still push for them while also taking a moment to ourselves, to enjoy the friendships we have made, to travel the world and experience new things.

Overall, I think Marcel Proust has a lot of things to teach us. It sounds like he lived a very frustrating, dull life, but there is truth in his ways. If we take the advice in moderation and learn how to apply it to our own lives, Proust just might change them.