Have you read any great books lately?

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Agnes Meunier is the wife of Hilton F. Meunier, principal in the New Orleans Office.
In the public accounting profession, a man is constantly challenged to meet and identify with a diversity of clients. Almost from the completion of school, he is called upon to cope with situations and problems vastly different from those with which he is familiar. This is doubly true of the Haskins & Sells accountant, because of the size and variety of the Firm’s clientele, ranging from personal income accounts to huge international corporations with far-flung activities. In this work a public accountant needs to broaden his horizons through reading as well as through his contact with life.

I believe there is no better way to increase knowledge, develop self-expression, and communicate effectively with people from other walks of life than through the Great Books Reading and Discussion Program.

I have participated in the Great Books Program over the past six years and have been a co-leader of both adult and junior discussion groups. My husband has helped in the organization and finance work of the program. As a means of continuing self-education and community involvement under the most enjoyable circumstances, we can recommend the program with enthusiasm to other members of the H&S

The Great Books Program is sponsored by the Great Books Foundation, which was established in 1947 as a non-profit educational organization. It encourages people of all ages and from many occupations to read and come together to discuss great books in an enjoyable, stimulating way. In a typical program, about fifteen people who have read the same book meet and, under the guidance of two trained co-leaders, explore the ideas expressed in the book.

The foundation publishes its own set of paperback books, carefully chosen for their discussion value. These are classic books that have withstood the test of time. Some are complete works, others are excerpts. They are grouped into sets of sixteen books to be covered in one continuous course of discussions. Subject matter includes fiction, politics, history, science, philosophy and religion. The list of authors includes such great names as Tolstoy, Shakespeare, Descartes, Thomas Aquinas and Kant.

In exploring the ideas expressed in a book, we find ourselves asking such questions as these: What is the author saying? What does he mean? What does this mean to me? What problems does the author present? What solutions does he offer? Do we have comparable problems in our lives today? Would the ideas expressed by the author be acceptable to us today?

I think that what I found most interesting in this discussion program is the similarity between man, his thoughts and actions, as recorded in the works of Plato and Sophocles 300 and 400 years B.C., and man as he is today. Do you suppose that because human beings will always be human beings, they will continue to paint themselves into the same corners generation after generation? If you look at this one way, the situation seems rather hopeless. On the other hand, what could be more delightful than the realization that human beings through the ages the world over, with all their differences, have much in common after all? If it is possible for us to identify with the ancient Greek philosophers, it should not be so very difficult to find something in common with the man next door today, or the family across the country, or, for that matter, the steel worker in Germany or the fisherman in Japan.

Although all members of a Great Books discussion group have read the same work before a given meeting, the diversity of opinion and the variety of backgrounds represented in the room make for a fascinating exchange of ideas. It is not unusual to find attorneys, doctors, accountants, housewives and teachers in the same group. If the group stays together over a period of months, not only will its members recognize the vocabulary peculiar to each occupation, but they will also realize that the laws governing one are similar to the laws governing others.

One night during a discussion of Aristotle’s Physics, the question was asked: “If a thing is moved from point A to point B, does the place the thing has occupied move with it?” Seems simple, doesn’t it? But not when half the group thought the place moved with the thing, and the other half thought it remained behind. We began to demonstrate what we thought with a pack of cigarettes which was on the table. Well, that pack of cigarettes moved around the table for over an hour, with the group looking at the problem from every angle. (By the way, we didn’t have a physicist in the group.) The pack of cigarettes was obvious, but the place it had occupied became more and more elusive as time went on. I can’t remember if we ever decided what Aristotle’s thoughts were, much less if we agreed with him. But I do know that we all had a two-hour mental workout that will be long remembered. Most of us had not thought seriously on this kind of subject for years.

Another time, in a discussion of justice and power as expressed in Pascal’s Thoughts, the group returned to the Declaration of Independence, which we had read previously, and related the situation described in that document of 1776 to the integration issue confronting America today. We considered Pascal’s words: “And thus being unable to make what is just strong, we have made what is strong just.” At the end of two hours the question remained unresolved, but we had discussed in terms of the thought of great men of the past the moral and social principles behind this current issue.

This is what continues to fascinate us about the Great Books Program. This is why we find ourselves returning year after year to these discussions. I can think of no more meaningful contribution to society than the sincere expression of opinion, based on reason, to build on the opinions of others in a combined effort to search for truth.

If I appear to say that the thoughts expressed in these books, along with the ideas expressed by other members of the discussion group, have changed some of my previous ideas of the world around me, especially the hows and whys, I assure you this is true. If I were to repeat the same year of reading, it is possible that my conclusions would again be different. You may have an entirely different opinion at the end of the same year’s course in Great Books. If there is to be growth, there must be change.

In addition to the adult Great Books Program, the foundation also offers a
Junior Great Books Discussion Program which has been especially designed for elementary and secondary school youngsters. At present 100,000 children in 6,000 groups are involved in the junior program. They are led by certified co-leaders who have completed a Junior Leadership Training Course which the foundation offers.

Here is an ideal opportunity for Haskins & Sells families to become involved in community life. Both parents are welcome to co-lead junior groups, and many groups meet on Saturday mornings in libraries so that couples can make this a joint venture. Since most groups meet during or immediately after school hours, the wives will be more available for this phase of the program. Housework alone is insufficient challenge to the thinking ability of many wives, and for them the Junior Great Books Program offers an outlet that is both stimulating and fulfilling.

For a parent to know that even one child in the group has learned to think independently because of his participation is very rewarding. We must remember that our children are growing up in surroundings more sophisticated than those of our day, and have absorbed lessons that we were never taught.

After co-leading a junior group for a year, I knew that I had learned a great deal. To ask more questions and make fewer statements when speaking with children was one of the lessons I learned. For example, the following incident occurred recently in our living room. From the stereo the voice of a well-known soprano (who shall remain nameless) could be heard singing a famous operatic aria.

Father (to ten-year old son): "Do you recognize that aria?"
Son: "No."
Father: "What does the music suggest to you?"
Son: "Hmmmm. Could be a dog howling. I think I can hear someone blowing an automobile horn to get the dog to move. Then the dog howls when the auto hits him."

At this point, I couldn't resist a peek at the libretto. Would you believe it? At the very moment our son heard "a dog howling," the singer was proclaiming the agony inflicted by an arrow shot from the bow of a reckless Cupid when it scored a direct hit on her less-than-prudent heart. I'm not sure the Great Books Foundation would consider the questions to be good, basic interpretive questions, but the answer certainly provided material for reflection. If we had simply told our son the words the soprano was singing, we would never have known how similar two totally different situations can be until they were translated from sound into the words of a ten-year old boy.

On another occasion, I remember the soundness of the reply to a question given by a child who at the start of the Junior Group program had been only a silent member. Toward the end of the year the group read Lessing's fable about the shepherd to whom the wolf proposed a bargain—that it would guard the flock at the price of one sheep a day for it to eat. Should the shepherd accept such an agreement with the hungry wolf? — the group leader asked the children.

"It all depends on whose shoes you're standing in," this youngster re-