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Dear Colleague:

"Which single book has had the most influence on your life?" A colleague on campus sent this question to a random sample of faculty and I was among those who received it. Well, I can easily name three works that have had an influence. In chronological order, they are Oscar Wilde's short story "The Happy Prince," which I must have read in Chinese when I was a child in wartime Chung-ch'ing, Dostoevsky's The Brothers Karamazov, which I read as a teenager in London, and Simone Weil's Gravity and Grace, which I read as a new grad in California. All of them assuaged somewhat my youthful yearning for an intimation of the Good--something that has the familiarity of warm toast and the inaccessible beauty of the night sky.

But what does "influence" mean? In what ways am I different as a consequence of exposure to these works? Have I become a better person as a result? Why does Liberal Education insist that students be exposed to the great works of art and literature? Just how are the students expected to benefit? Raymond Carver's rather gloomy experience is one with which we can all sympathize because it is close to our own. "I remember in my twenties reading plays by Strindberg, a novel by Max Frisch, Rilke's poetry, listening all night to music by Bartók, watching a TV special on the Sistine Chapel and Michelangelo and feeling in each case that my life had to change after these experiences, it couldn't help but be affected by these experiences and changed. There was simply no way I would not become a different person. But then I found out soon enough my life was not going to change after all. Not in any way that I could see, perceptible or otherwise (Writers at Work: The Paris Interviews, 1986, p. 326)."

When you think of all the research done in the country's Schools of Education, there must be an answer somewhere. Next time I go to the University Book Store I'll browse among the shelves under Education. The young take to drugs because they can experience the change, momentarily for the better but, of course, in the long run for the worse. An optimistic way to look at what I have said is this. If we are resistant to the influence of good art, we are perhaps also resistant to the influence of trash: the young can be exposed to heavy doses of trash and remain ordinary decent human beings.

Best wishes,

*J-Z*