



Justice Souter on Serious Reading

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Linda Greenhouse recently wrote a nice piece in the [New York Times](#) about Justice David Souter. It is easy to focus on his eccentricities, which have tended to draw more attention than his court opinions. He lives the life of an ascetic in the same New Hampshire farmhouse that was home to his parents and grandparents.

He stays out of public view, especially in Washington. Jeffrey Toobin tells a wonderful story in *The Nine* about one of his colleagues persuading Justice Souter to take a woman out to dinner. “[S]he reported back that she thought the evening had gone very well—until the end. Souter took her home, and told her what a good time he had, then added: ‘Let’s do this again next year.’”

I was struck by Justice Souter’s comment at a meeting of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences on the importance of studying the humanities. He said that at the beginning of each new Supreme Court term he prepared to undergo “sort of an intellectual lobotomy.” Souter’s point was “that the demands of the term tore him away from the serious reading he sees as essential to the



job.” Reading history helps him to understand facts and trends in different ways, which in turn shapes his jurisprudence.

It is important for all of us to read beyond what is narrowly required to do our job. How else do we develop new perspectives on our work? How else do we learn from people and situations we have never encountered? How else are we inspired to take on challenges that seem beyond our reach? I recently finished a book about FDR’s first 100 days, for example, which was a dose of reality about today’s economic challenges (no comparison) and a reminder on the importance of optimism in meeting them.

President Nan Keohane once said that one of her greatest challenges at Duke was finding the time “to sharpen the saw.” Making the time for general reading and reflection is one way to sharpen the saw. It is harder and harder to find the time, and I don’t do it as much as I should, but it is valuable and important for anyone who wants to avoid “an intellectual lobotomy.”