

## Editorial Preface by Jeffrey A. Tucker

THE DEPTH OF WISDOM possessed and shared by Leonard Read (1898–1983) took many years to strike me as fully as it does today.

When I first began to look at his work, most of what he wrote came across to me as common sense, which I then confused with simple and perhaps not very deep. As the years have gone by, I've come to realize just how wrong my first impression truly was.

Leonard Read's depth of wisdom consists in his capacity to write about what is essential in economic, social, and political affairs. It is to his credit that his work seems like "common sense." That is by design. He had an uncanny knack for finding and bringing to the fore that insight that is missing in discussion of these topics, and presenting it in a fresh and highly communicative way. His goal was to reach people with a radical message, especially given the times, but present it in a way that taps into our everyday intuitions. His one message: social and economic progress is only possible through freedom; all attempts to force change or progress through government are immoral and destined to fail.

That's the insight and the central point. Why is it radical? It contradicts a century of policy. It contradicts all attempts in the history of humankind to do the exact opposite. If you believe that he is right, you also have to believe that almost all policies of almost all states in most of human history are wrong and counterproductive. We need to appreciate what Read saw. He recognized that there is a reason for the rarity of freedom.

That reason is that freedom itself is implausible. It makes no guarantees. It leaves social order and its future to the decisions of individual actors. It doesn't seek any particular social end. It posits the whole project of political, economic, and social thinking to begin and end with the goal of seeing individual rights respected. After that, society should be permitted to rule itself, embrace entrepreneurial trial and error, welcome the surprise element in life, observe the flourishing of the human imagination when it is free of constraints, and trust freedom to achieve a right ordering of human affairs through the coordination of individual plans.

That is the message of Leonard Read. He never tired of relating it and convincing others of it. Every book, monograph, and article was dedicated to that idea. The more I know the literature of the libertarian tradition, the more I appreciate his expansive vision. He saw things that others have missed. He saw that the great challenge of life is to welcome the uncertainty that comes with human freedom and embrace it as a creative and progressive force in the world. He knew that believing in human freedom requires something of a leap of faith, one that can be urged on by rational argumentation. His writings were devoted to providing that argumentation.

A measure of his faith in freedom can be seen by his publishing strategies. He wrote and published at a time when the Western world was obsessed with restrictive copyright. It was widely believed to be the key to profit in publishing. No one even considered not using it. (The modern revolt against restrictive copyright was nowhere in sight in that analog age.)

Read had a secret weapon that he put together based on a single insight. He saw that ideas are more powerful than governments because ideas are immortal, reproducible, and infinitely malleable. He would illustrate this in lectures by shutting off the lights, striking one match, and lighting a candle. Then he would pass out other candles and have people light them. Pretty soon the entire room was bright again. That original flame, he said, was a single idea originating with one person. The lit room came about only because of that one flame. But it was the essential thing that led to the end result. Perhaps his point came from Thomas Jefferson, who said something similar — but the point stuck. Ideas are like fire: capable of spreading in a way that other physical entities are not.

Therefore, he published all his books and all the vast work of his Foundation for Economic Education into the commons. He encouraged its reproduction. The more people who came across FEE's writings, the more people who wanted them. I believe that this publishing strategy was the key to FEE's vast influence from the 1950s onward. He used that power of reproducibility to his institution's advantage. I can only imagine how aghast others must have been at the time when he instituted this policy, but it ended up working.

In other words, Read practiced what he preached in every way possible. He was a true believer, not just in the theory but in the real-world practice of freedom.

I'm personally thrilled by Gary Galles's study and presentation of the ideas of Leonard Read. It is the first book that goes beyond biography to grapple with the core of his teachings. It is long past due. It is striking that Galles himself is a well-trained and very prominent academic economist who discovered Read late in his career. He too found profound insight here, more than you can get from whole shelves of economics books focused on empirical work and modeling techniques. This book represents a significant step toward giving the man and his ideas new prominence in our times. It is a fitting tribute to a genius.