Over the entrance to Waseda University Library is inscribed that famous Latin saying of Marcus Porcius Cato (234-149 B.C.), the Roman statesman, general, and writer: Learn by reading what wisdom is. His words show both the end of life and the means to achieve it. They do not, however, teach us what to read or how to read. Of course, we know how to read the written words, i.e., the actual series of letters. This very maxim of the Elder Cato would not have been conveyed to us beyond time and space without letters.

In order to learn “what wisdom is,” which books among the innumerable books in the library should the young choose, and how should they read them? In a famous address delivered in 1959 and entitled “What Is Liberal Education?” the political scientist Leo Strauss said the following: “Liberal education [consists] in studying with the proper care the great books which the greatest minds have left behind—a study in which the more experienced pupils [i.e., teachers] assist the less experienced pupils, including the beginners.”

What is, then, the relation between “wisdom” and liberal education? According to Leo Strauss, liberal education qua education leading to perfect gentlemanship, education leading to human excellence, consists in reminding oneself of human excellence, of human greatness. In what way and by what means does liberal education remind us of human greatness? Leo Strauss listens to the following suggestion by Plato: Education in the highest sense is philosophy. Philosophy is the quest for wisdom or quest for knowledge regarding the most important, the highest, or the most comprehensive
things. What Plato suggests as such knowledge is virtue and happiness. But wisdom is inaccessible to man, and hence virtue and happiness will always be imperfect. In spite of this (as indicated in Plato's political philosophy, the culmination of which is the rule in the best city of the philosopher-king), the philosopher, although he himself is not simply wise, is declared to be the only true king; he is declared to possess all the excellent attributes of which man's mind is capable, to the highest degree. From this, Strauss argues, we must draw the conclusion that we cannot be philosophers—that we cannot acquire the highest form of education. Strauss draws such a conclusion probably because the politics of philosopher-kings can only exist in “the book.”

Nevertheless, Strauss continues as follows: We cannot be philosophers, but we can love philosophy; we can try to philosophize. This philosophizing consists “in listening to the conversation between the great philosophers or, more generally and more cautiously, between the greatest minds, and therefore in studying the great books.”

After the natural cataclysms of the unprecedented mega-earthquake and mega-tsunami which hit the northern part of Japan on March 11th, 2011, and the catastrophic level 7 plight of the nuclear plants in Fukushima, not only Japan but the world at large as well appear to fall all too readily into a state of panic. Undistracted, however, by noises such as these, many young students today open books in the library and “learn by reading what wisdom is.” They believe strongly that today's reading will be invaluable for themselves, for their motherland or fatherland, and for the world as a whole in the future. For the purpose of assisting the silent conversation between youth and the greatest minds of the world, the library will be forever at “the heart of the university.”