

IN MEMORIAM



Mortimer J. Adler

December 28, 1902 - June 28, 2001

Nancy Olson Remembers Mortimer Adler

Nancy Olson was Mortimer Adler's personal secretary from about 1951 to 1955. They remained friends for many years. Below are some anecdotes which Ms. Olson recalls from her time spent with Dr. Adler. We thank her for sharing them with us.

I was deeply grieved when I heard of Mortimer's death. But writing these anecdotes over the next few days helped me to grieve him. Sort of like an Irish Wake where one sits around telling stories about the deceased, often sad, and often funny.

I shall miss him always, but he is with me still. With me in so many happy memories (and some sad ones, too); in the education he gave me; in all the good things he taught me, like to always be truthful, to always value friendships, and how to laugh—especially at myself.

I started working for Mortimer Adler in the early 1950s in Chicago. At that time he was finishing up the work on the Syntopicon. At the time his staff consisted of just two assistants and a secretary. I was about 21, and had recently moved to Chicago to join my young soldier husband.

Bored one day trying to be the perfect housewife, I called an employment agent and said I was looking for a job as a secretary. Normally, one had to go to the agency, take typing and shorthand tests, and then be sent out on interviews. But not this time.

The employment agent said: “How fast can you type? How fast can you take shorthand? Go immediately to this address and ask for Dr. Bernick.”

“Don’t you want me to come in for testing?” I asked.

“No, no! No time for that. How soon can you get there?”

So off I went to what I thought would be an interview with a medical doctor. On the door was a sign saying “Index House.” I rang the bell and a little, balding, Jewish man came to the door. It was Herman Bernick, one of Mortimer’s two assistants (the other was Peter Wolff). He took me upstairs and interviewed me. Then he said he was not looking for a secretary for himself, but for Dr. Adler. He then took me down the hall to meet Dr. Adler. Had I a clue who he was, I probably would have been nervous and made a bad impression.

“Can you start tomorrow?” Dr. Adler asked. I could, and did, although he explained that he could not start my salary until the beginning of the month because his former secretary had moved to New York and he was paying her through the end of the month.

Dr. Adler later me told that the University of Chicago had been sending him secretaries to interview and he didn’t like any of them.

Finally, he met an employment agent at a cocktail party and told her he was having trouble finding a secretary.

Apparently she didn't have anyone on her books at the time who seemed suitable. But she was so excited at the thought of supplying a secretary for this famous man that when I telephoned she sent me right off for the interview without bothering to test my skills.

My typing and shorthand skills were fine, but my education was sorely lacking. I came from an uneducated laboring class family, and had only a high school education. I had never heard of Mortimer Adler, nor the Great Books.

Mortimer said years later: "Nancy, when you first came to work for me you drove me crazy. You were clearly SO intelligent, but SO ignorant."

One day when I was having lunch with him, Mortimer asked me my opinion of something—I forget what. "Aristotle would agree with you," he shouted excitedly.

When we returned to the office he pulled a book off the shelf and said: "Here, I want you to read this chapter. You will see that Aristotle agrees with you. Read it tonight and we will discuss it tomorrow."

That was Mortimer. He just couldn't stand to see a bright woman so uneducated.

It's a little strange that Mortimer was willing to loan me the book. He was very fussy about his books. When I had worked for him just a few weeks he went out of town on a lecture tour. I had nothing to do during his absence except answer the phone and read his mail to him when he called in. There I sat, surrounded by walls of books. So I spent some time reading.

When Mortimer returned he came bounding up the steps. He didn't say "hello, how are you, good to be back." Instead, he started shouting in a high pitched voice: "My BOOKS, my BOOKS, someone has been at my BOOKS."

Trembling, I answered: "I'm terribly sorry, Dr. Adler. I had nothing to do while you were gone so I read some of your books."

He paused for a long minute, then he said: “Oh, that’s all right. But be sure that you always put them back in exactly the same place, and that they are lined up evenly with the edge of the shelf.”

I had placed the books back in the same slots, but I had not aligned them perfectly at the edge of the shelf. So I was caught red handed.



One day Mortimer, Herman Bernick, Peter Wolff and I were having lunch at a coffee shop. *Time* magazine had just done a cover story on Mortimer and the Great Books. As we sat in the window of the coffee shop, a mailman passed with a bag full of *Time* magazines with MJA’s picture on the front.

“Look, look” I shouted.

But Herman Bernick said: “Yes, and next week at this time they will be in every outhouse in the country.”



At the University of Chicago there was a joke that there was no God but Adler and Hutchins was his prophet.

One day I went to the University book store to buy some supplies for the office. There was a long line of students waiting to pay for their purchases, so I took my place in line.

But Mortimer had little patience. Suddenly he came running into the store.

“Where have you been? What’s taking you so long?”

Then he dragged me up to the cash register and said “This is my secretary and when she comes in wait on her right away.”

After that I was a little embarrassed to go into the book store. I was always greeted with: “Here comes God’s secretary. We have to wait on her right away.”

Mortimer was a great story teller. One of the stories he told me was of traveling with Robert Hutchins to the University of Upsalla in Sweden where Hutchins was to give a lecture.

Mortimer played no formal role on the occasion, he just went with Hutchins because he wanted to see Sweden and have some time with his friend. “Pianists have people to turn the pages, so I went along to turn the pages for Bob.”

In an elevator in Sweden, Hutchins was puzzled by a young man who was making a great fuss over Mortimer and totally ignoring him. It was “Mr. Adler this, and Mr. Adler that.”

So Hutchins said “You seem to know my friend Mr. Adler.”

“Oh,” replied the young man, “who doesn’t know the greatest harmonica player in the world.”

Obviously he thought Mortimer was Larry Adler.



Mortimer had co-authored two books, *The Capitalist Manifesto* and *The New Capitalists*, with Louis O. Kelso, a San Francisco lawyer. I also knew Kelso very well, and at one time worked for him. These are some stories Kelso told me.

During the war, he was stationed for a time in Panama. During this period he wrote a manuscript containing some of his economic theories. He decided that after the war he would read it and, if it still made sense, try to publish it. He put away it in a trunk. It wasn't until 1956 or 1957 that he was to pull the manuscript out of the trunk.

He was invited by Harold McKinnon, a lawyer who served on the Board of the Institute for Philosophical Research, to spend a weekend, at which the Adlers would also be house guests.

Kelso excitedly pulled out the manuscript and took it with him. He very tentatively asked Mortimer if he would read "just this one chapter."

Mortimer became excited by it and urged Kelso to have it published. When Kelso expressed doubt that he could get it published, Mortimer said "If I coauthor it with you it will be published."

And so Kelso's career took off.

Kelso also told me of a cocktail party he attended with Mortimer at which some woman gushed: "Oh, Dr. Adler, I loved your book. But how do two people coauthor a book?"

Mortimer's mischievous reply: "Well, Mr. Kelso and I flipped a coin. And Mr. Kelso, who won the toss, wrote the even words. I, who lost, wrote the odd words."

It is probably never easy to be the son of a famous man, and I felt sorry for Mike and Mark [sons of Dr. Adler].

In 1952 Mortimer asked me to move with him to San Francisco where he would establish the Institute for Philosophical Research, for which Bob Hutchins had helped him get a grant from the Ford Foundation. By that time my marriage had ended and I was free to do so.

When we arrived in San Francisco, the *San Francisco Chronicle* ran a banner headline reading something like: Mortimer Adler Moves to San Francisco. In a city that treasured its eccentrics, Mortimer became its favorite eccentric. Herb Caen wrote constant columns about him in the *Chronicle*. Mort Saul, a comedian appearing at The Hungry Eye, frequently had jokes about Mortimer in his routine.

Soon, S.I. Hayakawa, then at the University of California, Berkeley, and Mortimer were in public disagreement, played up heavily by the press.

A local TV station started broadcasting a series of lectures by Mortimer on the Great Ideas, patterned after the popular TV show by Bishop Fulton Sheen.

Mike and Mark were both enrolled in the San Francisco public school system.

On the first day of school, Mark burst into my office: "I want to see my dad right away." I explained that Mortimer was tied up with someone, and asked him what was wrong.

"I'm not going back to that dumb school and that dumb teacher. She called the roll and when she came to my name she said 'Oh, you are Mortimer Adler's son. I will expect you to lead the class academically.' I wanted to tell her that in the first place that kind of thing isn't inherited, and even if it were I'M ADOPTED."

Mark was very interested in cars, but not old enough to have a driver's license. But he persuaded Mortimer to buy an antique car which needed much work. The agreement was that Mark could work on the car, rebuild it, etc. But under no circumstances was he to drive it.

Mortimer told me that one day he and Helen left the house to go to a movie. He discovered that he had forgotten his wallet and they returned to the house to get it, only to see Mark and some friends driving down the street in the antique car.

Mortimer was furious. Mark had broken his word.

On further reflection, Mortimer said, "You know, Nancy, it was my own fault. It was as if I were to give Mark a gun and say 'you may take it apart and put it back together again. You may clean and

oil it. You may practice loading and unloading it. But under no conditions may you fire it.' You know damn well that kid isn't going to be able to resist firing that gun."

So Mark was forgiven.

Later Mortimer told me that a friend had been visiting him and asked to see the car Mark was working on. The friend told Mortimer. "That boy is a genius. There are many kinds of genius and that boy is a mechanical genius."

Mortimer's chest swelled with pride.

Mortimer once told me that Father John Cavanaugh, then the President of Notre Dame, blamed him for the sad state of the world. "If all the nuns who were praying for Mortimer Adler's conversion were praying for world peace instead, we would have world peace!"



His friend Clare Booth Luce tried to convert him. Mortimer told me she came up to him at a party and said "Mortimer, I won't rest easy until I meet you at the altar." Mortimer joked that he thought she was proposing.

As early as 1952, Mortimer told me that he intellectually accepted ALL of the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.

I, an agnostic at the time, was very surprised. "You mean the Immaculate Conception and all that nonsense?"

“Every bit of it,” he replied.

So I asked the obvious question. Why was he not a Catholic? “I haven’t received the gift of grace,” was his response.

I interpreted that to mean that he didn’t want to change his life style. I asked him the question directly. His reply: “Nancy, I would rather not be a Christian at all than to be a bad one.”

In 1979 Bill Moyers did a show with Mortimer called “Adler on Aristotle.” Toward the end of the show Moyers asked Mortimer what he believed. Mortimer went into a long answer about the difference between belief and knowledge, pointing out that he could not prove the existence of God, though he was going to try in his next book.

But finally he admitted that although he could not prove the existence of God, he DID believe in God.

Moyers went on to say that Mortimer had taught Aquinas so successfully that many of his students became Roman Catholics. Why had he not done so?

Mortimer’s answer was that when one voluntarily accepts a religion he must be prepared to live the life the religion commends. “To become a Christian one must be resolutely determined to walk the path of Jesus Christ. I just don’t know that I have that will, and short of having this firm will, I do not want to become a Christian at all. I may be wrong. I am troubled by that.”

Moyers, a tremendously fine interviewer, would not let Mortimer off the hook. “Are you afraid of the price you might pay? Are you afraid of having to give up what you enjoy?”

Mortimer admitted that might be the case, but added that he didn’t want to probe that too far as he might discover things in himself he didn’t like very much.

In 1979, I made a commitment to Christ and became a Roman Catholic. At the time I traced the beginning of my conversion to August of 1977 when, in the midst of a nervous breakdown, I had a rather dramatic spiritual experience. Today I believe that the beginnings of my conversion were in the long talks I had with Mortimer, and the exposure to people like Jacques Maritain.

At the time I entered the church, I was in therapy with a psychiatrist who was also a Jesuit priest. Dr. D'Agostino asked: "Would you like Mortimer to know?" I answered that I would because (1) I thought he would be happy for me, and (2) I'd like to see him do the same. Dr. D'Agostino responded that God had his own plans for Mortimer.

Eventually Mortimer did accept Christianity and was baptized as an Episcopalian. I suspect that he chose the Episcopal Church because his wife and all four of his sons were Episcopalians.

I am deeply indebted to Mortimer for many things, not the least of which is my deep faith. I shall miss him always.

About 1971 when I was working for Mortimer in Chicago, he received a letter from his old high school, inviting him to come and receive an award as their most outstanding graduate.

Mortimer dictated a letter saying that he could not accept such an award because he had never graduated. He then explained to me the reasons for not receiving either a high school diploma or his BA.

"I didn't graduate from high school because I had a disagreement with the principal about who was running the school. I didn't receive my BA because I couldn't pass the swimming test. I refused to take my clothes off in the middle of the day."

In *Philosopher at Large* he tells the stories in much more detail, but his explanation to me was a pretty good summary.

Great men have great faults.

To my mind, Mortimer's biggest fault when I worked for him was that he would frequently shout and scream at his staff. I think it was when he couldn't make them understand his reasoning on an issue.

I never saw him do it outside of the office, and he never shouted at me or the other women on the staff, perhaps because he didn't expect as much from us. We were only secretaries or bookkeepers.

But the men, especially Herman Bernick and Peter Wolff, were often subjected to much shouting and screaming. They never shouted back, perhaps they should have.



I was often in his office when this would happen. I found it very distressing and my reaction to it was to break into a nervous giggle. One day Herman Bernick turned to me and said “what the hell are you laughing at?”

I went to his office later and apologized and told him it was just a nervous reaction. Herman was very gracious about it.

Despite this, Mortimer really did care for the men who worked for him and with him.

When the first year of the Institute’s operation in San Francisco was drawing to a close, he and Bill Gorman, the deputy director of the Institute, were of the opinion that several of the young men they had hired were not living up to expectations and should be let go.

Mortimer agonized over this for weeks, but finally gave them their notice.

Then one of them pointed out to Mortimer that he had promised to notify them of terminations early enough that they could apply for positions at universities for the next academic year. It was now too late for them to do this.

Mortimer was beside himself with guilt. He told me that it was his responsibility not only to offer them their jobs back, but to do it in such a manner that they would be sure to accept. So he started calling them in, one by one, to persuade them to stay.

Then Bob Dewey—whose name was NOT on the list of those to be terminated—stuck his head in my office and asked me to have a cup of coffee with him. We went down to the basement to have coffee and Bob, in some distress, told me that Bill Gorman was talking to each of the men and telling them that Mortimer was going to offer them their jobs back but that they should refuse.

I told Bob that Mortimer told me he had to persuade them to stay. Then I suggested that Bob go home. “You are too upset,” I told him, “if you stick around here you may say something to Gorman you will regret later. You go home and I will go straight to Dr. Adler and tell him what you told me.”

I did so. Mortimer charged out of his office and up to the second floor. At first I started following him, but when I heard what was happening I returned to my office. It was Bill Gorman who got screamed at that day, and I didn’t want to start giggling.

My memory is that most, perhaps all, of the men stayed, at least for another year.

Mortimer loved musical theatre and movies.

When he learned of my desire to become an actress he started arriving at the office with arm loads of second hand books. I remember the complete works of Shaw, Shakespeare, O’Neill. He bought me books by and about Stanislavski. He helped me to get admitted to the Pasadena Playhouse, asking Hollywood friends to write letters recommending me, and his own letter of recommendation said in part: “She is well read in the literature of the theatre.” Yes, I was. Thanks to him.



When he saw a pre-Broadway opening of “My Fair Lady,” he was distressed to see in the program that it was an adaptation of a work by Shaw. “Whenever they try to do anything with Shaw they screw it up.” Nonetheless, he loved “My Fair Lady.”

Frequently he would tell me about movies he’d seen and INSIST that I see them. “Trouble With Harry,” Shirley McLaine’s first movie, was one I remember him demanding I see. He was crazy about McLaine.

When I appeared in plays at the Pasadena Playhouse, he always flew down to see me in them.

Well, no wonder Mortimer loved the theatre. He was a bit of an actor himself!

People often express surprise at Mortimer’s productivity. Fifty or more books, twenty after the age of 70, etc.

I have at least a partial explanation for that: Mortimer took NAPS.

When we moved to San Francisco he hired a woman to decorate our new offices in a Pacific Heights mansion which had been occupied before the war by the German Consulate.

In Mortimer’s large office she placed two reclining chairs by the fireplace. Such chairs I believe we new at the time.

Mortimer frequently closed the door between his office and mine, giving me instructions not to let anyone disturb him for 15 minutes.

He would stretch out on one of the reclining chairs, close his eyes and go sound asleep for 15 minutes, waking up completely refreshed.

That is a talent that I, alas, sadly lack. I think he helps explain his productivity.

When I was studying acting in London, I went to Harrods tobacconist shop and said to the clerk that I wanted “a very special gift for a very special friend who happens to be a pipe smoker.”

He responded, “I have just the thing,” and showed me a straight grain briar. I know nothing of pipes, but the salesman assured me that it was a very special pipe.

“But will my friend KNOW it is a very special pipe?” I asked.

“Oh, if he is a pipe smoker, he will know.”

Mortimer had dozens of pipes and I didn’t want to add just any old pipe to his collection.



Well, Mortimer was thrilled with the pipe, and wrote me right away saying “Did you KNOW it was a straight grained briar?”

And when I returned from London all he could talk about was the pipe. Again he asked if I had known it was a straight grain briar, and told he of meeting with a friend who exclaimed: "Mortimer, that's a straight grain briar, Where did you get it?"

Mortimer sometimes smoked cigarettes, but didn't inhale. He said they were less trouble when he was working than a pipe. I have recently heard from a young woman who worked for him a few years later. She tells me he used to have her fill his pipes for him when he was in the middle of a meeting.

He never asked me to do that for him, perhaps he knew I would object.

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