



GREAT BOOKS, GREAT BATTLES

◆ Part 2 ◆

IN THE EARLY 1960s the foundation began its Junior Great Books program with readings down to the elementary school level. It also got into the software side—the coaching and training in how to use the books—in a big way.



The program with the strange name (how could a Great Book be junior?) has grown steadily since 1963, having surpassed the adult program in sales by the mid-'60s. Our decade's educational crisis launched the foundation from relative obscurity into a much larger, numbers-crunching, conservative business operation, although it remains a nonprofit. The Junior Great Books program has broadened its scope far beyond the discussion of Great Books: The program is now developing what President Alice Letvin calls "thought-provoking activities and teaching practices in addition to discussion?" These activities and practices bear more similarity to traditional educational texts than to anything the great authors themselves ever wrote.

Meanwhile, promotional staff size at the foundation has more than tripled in the past two years; promoters pore over computer lists, stick colored pins on maps of "target" cities, speak the jargon of reading specialist and remedial consultant. The schools now drive the program with their needs for curriculum guides, enrichment activities, and read-aloud stories. The professional audience for the program is narrow, however, and exclusionary; it results from the very fragmentation Hutchins and Adler fought so hard to overcome.

In this process, the Junior Great Books collections have fallen away from the original Great Books ideal in at least one important respect: The notion of a single body of wisdom, to which all students should be introduced, has been lost.

"Our lists were never intended to establish a canon of children's literature or anything of the sort," acknowledges Letvin. The lists of readings, which are revised every eight or nine years, now include modern short stories and fairy tales, as well as well-known children's classics; the works are typically brief and ambiguous,

chosen with discussion in mind. In effect, the Junior Great Books do not claim to be great; the text need simply be thought-provoking for its particular reading level. (The emphasis on “discussability” leads some customers of the Junior Great Books to complain of the number of senseless tragedies per slender volume.)

Over the course of time, ambitious early selections have been dropped for shorter, simpler works. In the junior high books, for instance, Xenophon, Boccaccio, and Thackeray were canned while Kurt Vonnegut, Alice Munro, and Graham Greene were added. To some, it seems that the junior Great Books program has compromised the Great Books ideal in order to meet the schools’ needs for materials that will be easy to read. A few customers complained (Great Books Director Raissa Landor at New Trier abandoned foundation selections as too lowbrow), but most schools prefer the newer junior collections.

Letvin denies that commercialism inspired the program to fall away from a high ideal. She argues instead that, over time, the foundation sought selections that were “more likely to speak to the experience of the age group reading a particular series.” Undeniably, the audience now dictated the material to a far greater extent than the old Great Books ideal would have allowed.

Finally a founding father lashed back. In the 1980s Adler jumped into the fray again, accusing the Great Books Foundation of having become intellectually “flabby.”



His critique focused on the discussion method employed. The current Great Books philosophy espouses that discussion leaders are no more than the first among equals; they are told never to correct a student outright, but rather to “ask for evidence” for incorrect answers—part of the theory being that, if an adult imposes his or her views on the children, they will not learn to think for themselves.

This Adler termed “phony tolerance” “part of the *malaise* that pervades the whole academic world.” It misunderstood the traditional role of the Socratic discussion leader, he said. Adler then launched a more comprehensive proposal for the schools called Paideia.

Also based in Chicago until last year, the Paideia Proposal has been outlined in three books and numerous newsletters and seminars overseen from Adler’s Institute for Philosophical Research on Ontario Street. Funded at first partly by federal desegregation grants, Paideia reached out in particular to the Chicago inner city schools—with an old Chicago ideal, plenty of news coverage, and some bracing early success.

The details of the program remain vague. As of this date it provides a reading list but no definitive training program. “Paideia’s suggestions are tailored to each school,” says Acting Director Patricia Weiss.

The energy behind the program seems, at this point, to be primarily that missionary fervor that has propelled the Great Books ideal for so long. Adler’s speech on September 21, 1988, to inaugurate Paideia’s new national center at Chapel Hill, N.C., delivers plenty of the old Hutchins rhetoric along with, ironically, old antagonist John Dewey—whose words today adorn the Paideia logo. (Adler now admits to having misread the scholar.)

“Our political institutions... may not even survive, if we do not produce a larger... number of thinking citizens,” Adler said of his vision of an educational system that abolishes letter grades and includes discussions of science experiments as well as the classics. Today this ambitious endeavor still has fewer than a half-dozen full-time employees. “We don’t expect the Paideia reform to sweep the United States until the middle of the next century:” Adler says.

I ONCE CONDUCTED a Junior Great Books demonstration discussion for the public with Santa Monica sixth graders. The Junior Great Books leader begins with a main question and asks the children to write answers. As I waited, nervously, for the children to finish

writing, I felt a tapping on my arm. A little girl in a jeans jacket showed me her response: “What,” she had written, “is the point?” From the schools to the public and back to the schools again, what is the point? What does this history carry forward into the ‘90s, and next century? What happens in a typical Great Books discussion anyway?

There is no typical discussion. The experience varies with leaders, groups, texts—and like religious revelation, there is no way to capture it. Discussion at its best is cubist chamber music, more fun to play than watch. Ideas slowly take shape or happen all at once. Some leaders provide a goal and road map, others are more like Sunday drivers on country roads (Should we turn? Stop?)—never sure where they will end.

Mainly leaders ask questions of the group, in mutual desire to learn. People sit in a circle, as in pioneer wagon trains, and try to approach the selection like a pioneer, with no preconceptions or critical ideologies or trademark performances. Good talks develop a main theme, with motifs and movements and codas, as participants speak directly to one another, referring often to textual passages. The key, according to medical sales manager Joanne Gersten, who participated as a child in Winnetka: “You feel important when the whole group discusses *your* ideas.”

The concept is so simple it’s a wonder no one else does it. There are plenty of round-table formats, and plenty of reading and new critical thinking programs, but none with the intellectual heritage and success of the Great Books. Other “thinking” programs emphasize a series of skills, as if reflection were like tennis-serve, volley, backhand. But the Great Books ideal avoids any such rote approach. It encompasses an excitement of thinking that today is unusual and refreshing. It is almost a lost art, and Great Books leaders learn a host of precise, effective techniques to motivate groups. Until you have tried it, you cannot imagine the impact.



We are discussing Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* with the Oak Park adult group. Two or three people point to Weber’s prediction for the children of capitalism: “mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self importance.” Is the line important? I had not noticed it. Someone

mentions current American fiction. I listen now. Flip pages. Think back to graduate school. Weber's words reverberate—teen suicide, chic conversation, high-school escapades, current fashion. His words describe an attitude that does not know this experience, disconnected from a sense that, after all, most of our current problems have been faced before. Good discussion touches, echoes, redeems.

The whole notion of Great Books feels naive in the age of leveling, when deconstructionists apply the same technique to “Batman” episodes or Sophocles, or when movies like “River’s Edge” strike so deep. Even school children today grow cynical about the old Chicago ideal. A third grader in Elmhurst asked me once, “Is this what we do? Sit around and talk and never answer your questions?”

If so, then why do people keep coming? The Oak Park adult group under leader Michael O’Kiersey has met biweekly for 35 years, the Fat Men met for more than 40. On Saturday mornings at DePaul University’s STEP program, inner city high-school students showed up month after month for our Great Books discussions, for no credit. “It helps me understand myself better,” a student wrote. “It’s fun,” says Oak Park participant Bernice Steinholtz. “You get so much more than when you read the books alone.” A free-lancer friend recently wanted to start a discussion group because we so rarely talk about ideas any more—just contracts and money and the latest good restaurants. “It’s the most human thing you can do,” says Roy Amatore, the young student who was in the Fat Men’s group, who persuaded his brother Jim, a Chicago cop, to join a group. We learn to listen, take risks, and take each other seriously despite disagreement.



On Chicago’s West Side sits Goldblatt Elementary School. Pulaski Avenue runs nearby, with its crumbling sidewalks, broken Pussycat White Port bottles, and abandoned buildings. But Goldblatt is on a street where kids cram lawns and door-steps, guarded by a Neighborhood Watch group. The neighborhood is coming back, and in an overcrowded library one muggy afternoon, surrounded by video cameras, parents, administrators, teachers, mayoral representatives, and about 20 hardworking junior-high-school students—Mortimer Adler assists. Here is one of our most arrogant intellects exploring *Hamlet* with students who might otherwise never know Laertes or Ophelia.

The question is, Does *Hamlet* love Ophelia? “Are you bothered by this as much as I am, Tywon?” Adler steamrolls. “Get bothered, Tywon!”

Adler corrects the students, but the children respond in kind. “Dr. Adler, you’re wrong!” a young girl says at one point. There is humor in that; it’s endearing, something I didn’t observe in Adler’s discussions with adults.



Three hours the participants work in the steamy room, scolded, inspired, and at times infuriated by the little giant in the red bow tie. Shakespeare is tough going for college students, for me, but they seem to enjoy it thoroughly. Afterward then school principal Phedonia Johnson, who works for Paideia, says: “When Alderman Tim Evans talked to these children, he couldn’t believe the hard questions they asked. He wanted to know how we taught them.”

In fact the only people to critique Adler’s steamrolling style are adults. “What about their self-concept?” a teacher asks in the question period following the discussion.

“If the student is wrong on the facts you must tell them they’re wrong,” Adler insists.

At the session’s end, Adler hobbles down a long corridor on his expensive wooden cane. The imposing persona with the Bowery accent looks suddenly tiny, frail, all of his 86 years. Outside, a limousine attracts more attention on the block than he, a Chicago institution. He and the stretch limo pose some of the contradictions of this half-century-old national movement—high—and low-brow, democratic and elitist, founded in wealth and now embarked on an inner city crusade. Ask him about the critics of his tireless traveling and his salesmanship and he replies, “Persuasion is salesmanship. When you have an idea, a good idea, you try to sell it!” But what has been accomplished? Is the ideal achieving its goals? Are they still worthwhile?

CHICAGO’S GREAT BOOKS founders had a definite mission. They really believed they had “the means of revitalizing Western Civilization” in their publications and, more important, in their discussion method. They fit in neither with the academicians—for

whom they were too commercial and dictatorial—nor with businesspeople—who, when it came down to it, had less interest in “right purposes” than in good publicity. Yet for a brief time they joined marketing and culture in a singular movement with no agenda but to raise our horizons, with a messianic fervor that held these books as a kind of secular catechism.

Today the Great Books debate sinks more and more into ideology. William Bennett hawked the classics the same way he hawked the pledge of allegiance. Feminists and minority critics denounce the book lists. It is disheartening to see not one woman or minority author in the Great Books Foundation’s 75 adult selections. But to counter with a demand for lists directly proportional to the percentages of each minority in a school district is power politics, not education.



The Great Books ideology is subtler than the ideologues can discern. The vision sprang from a supreme ideology of the text, of the author as a lone arbiter of genius. It is New Criticism with doses of Socrates and Jefferson and the prophets. Discussion is not regarded as a luxury, but a need and a duty for enlightened citizens in the world’s leading democracy, (Did anyone truly buy

Hutchins’ prediction that “the fate of our country and hence the world” depends on reading these books?) The Great Books ideal is beset by inherent contradiction; its goal is a singular wisdom, but its method is the pluralistic activity of open discussion.

It is easy to critique such optimism and hard sell and reverence for authors who, after all, were living people working with the words, ideas, and prejudices of their time. It is harder to reconstruct the impact of the Chicago ideal in the 1940s. “On the eve of World War II the high-brow public was indeed very small,” wrote Saul Bellow, himself a reader for the *Great Books of the Western World*. Most of these books were expensive, hard to read, difficult to find. The foundation’s fervor and paperback collections transformed books from the venerated to the pocket-size and cheap. For many, Aristotle and Milton joined daily life: “Shop, pay insurance, and read *Areopagitica*.”

I hold in my hand now one of the black and pink Chicago paperbacks, copyright 1955, that stood on my parents’ credenza. In its odd cardboard holder, the book and its set seem to draw as much

inspiration from Paepcke's Container Corporation as from high art. The selections are wildly eclectic—from St. Matthew to Friedrich Engels; they signal an openness rare in our specialized world. I see my father's penciled notes on how to pronounce *Areopagitica*, from his discussion meeting in a high-school library some 30 years ago. To Americans like my father, an immigrant son raised in Harlem whose formal education went only up to a high school of industrial design, this program provided the only higher education they ever had.

Today the Chicago vision survives, though it has splintered and succumbed to practicality. By drastically reducing its intended audience and focusing on professional educators, the Junior Great Books and Paideia Proposal keep alive the Chicago method of discussion. They stress the practical results their narrow audience demands.


But for adult Great Books today, the discussions evoke nostalgia for lost ideals. Once it bites, it never lets you go, Alcibiades said.

IN THE BEGINNING there was an ideal—adults gather for nothing but the joy of learning. Most amazing is that it succeeded at all, let alone with hundreds of thousands.

In retrospect the arguments that have enveloped the Great Books ideal seem moonstruck, almost rabid. Little of substance separated the classicists from the social scientists like Dewey and his successors; in practice they have accommodated one another almost from the beginning, and continue to do so.

The key to the success of the Chicago ideal lies not so much with the books themselves—with that search for an elusive Wisdom—as with the method of thinking together. With a sense of camaraderie and history and equality, we sit around a table and discuss and possibly work solutions to the age-old issues like mortality, success, evil, love. Anyone can join, anyone can be important. In a time when class division seems to be increasing in our country as higher education becomes more and more the province of the wealthy, we may need the ideal more than we know.

Some people ask, Why do we need to know *Hamlet*? The answer is we need to know how to know *Hamlet*. The Goldblatt students may forget Laertes' motivations years from now, but they will never forget the experience of intellectual battle and cooperation with Mortimer Adler.

One night in our Oak Park group, we tried to put together the definitions of love. “A longing for immortality:’ says the sorceress Diotima in Plato’s Symposium. “The seed of the most fruitful discourse.” We paused on that one, and kept coming back to it. “Maybe that’s what Socrates means,” said Josephine Arciuolo in our group that night. “Discussion, what we’re doing here, is the highest end of love. People come and go, but the discussion should never end.” 



Ted Anton is an assistant professor in the English Department at DePaul University. He has published fiction and poetry in addition to nonfiction. The first chapter of his book *Barrio Numbers*, which will be published this fall, recently won the National Teachers As Writers Award.

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