

IN MEMORIAM



Mortimer J. Adler

December 28, 1902 - June 28, 2001

In Memoriam for the third anniversary of Dr. Adler's demise, we are presenting the transcription of Dick Cavett's delightful television interview with Dr. Adler. [1978]



THE DICK CAVETT SHOW
WITH
MORTIMER ADLER

Part 1 of 2:

DICK CAVETT: I can always see one face that looks disappointed when I walk out. I don't know what it is. Good evening, and philosophy today—don't touch the dial—is generally a pretty technical and academic matter. And philosophy is a pretty remote figure, as I would say, to most of us, including me.

My guest tonight and tomorrow night, Mortimer Adler, believes that is all wrong. He thinks philosophy should be for everybody, that it should be a part of ordinary, daily life, that a philosopher belongs in the marketplace. And in a long career of writing and teaching, he has not been above a little salesmanship of a bestseller here and there. He is Chairman of the Board of Editors for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Director of the Institute for Philosophical Research in Chicago, and he has turned out a

long line of almost, let's say, evangelical works that actually try to bring great books, great ideas to the people. You have seen him over the years in the advertisement—pipe. He is a familiar face. And he was an editor, for example, of the famous 102-volume set called *Great Books of the Western World*. His latest work is something called *Great Treasury of Western Thought*.

He'll be here for two nights. I'll bring that out tomorrow night. I forgot to bring it with me tonight. There are some people who do feel that in his zeal, Mr. Adler goes to far in boiling down, packaging, and selling the classics. But as you are about to see, he has no trouble dealing with that criticism or with anything else that is tossed his way. Will you welcome, please, then a fascinating man, Mortimer Adler?

You upset some people somewhere once by saying that you had only been educated in the last twenty-five years. I think that is a quote from an address you gave somewhere.

MORTIMER ADLER: But indeed.

CAVETT: This, of course, because of your age being—is it seventy-five?

ADLER: Seventy-six.

CAVETT: Seventy-six, left out your—there is always an appreciative moan from the audience when someone like you or Bob Hope, who is that age, appears to be fifty. That left out, of course, the years of your formal education and—

ADLER: I call that schooling, not education.

CAVETT: Oh, please tell us the difference.

ADLER: Well, schooling is what goes on in institutions. It is only a preparation for education. No one ever gets educated in school. One of the troubles with the educational system is the wrong supposition that school is a place where you get an education, so that when you get a degree, that certifies you are an educated man or woman. That is far from the truth.

CAVETT: So now, yes, there is the phrase, “My son just completed his education.”

ADLER: Utterly crazy. Utterly crazy.

CAVETT: Whereas, in fact, you wouldn’t even assume that he had begun it?

ADLER: No, he hadn’t begun it. But schools are not at their best, I assure you. And they aren’t doing what they should be doing. But if they were doing what they should be doing, if they were at their best, the best they could do would be to prepare the young to become educated in their adult life by their own means—by reading, by discussion, by travel, by thought. And when I say that I have ever been educated or become educated in the last twenty-five years, I mean that quite seriously. Only a really mature person has enough depth of soul to have ideas to take root and understand things. And the joke of that is that though I now think I am educated, I have forgotten most of the things I have learned in school.

CAVETT: Is that bad?

ADLER: No, good.

CAVETT: Uh, huh? Okay.

ADLER: Because most of the things you learn in school, you only learn to pass examinations with. And they aren’t worth—they aren’t very important.

CAVETT: That depends on the school, doesn't it? I mean, there are schools where you simply learn the dates of the Dred Scott Decision and the Hanseatic League, and memorize them for the test, and then throw them out happily forever. But if you are asked to write on the following quotation everything you know about the phrase, "the poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling," or something, isn't that a little different?

ADLER: The most important things that you learn in school that you don't forget are the skills you acquire—the skills of writing and reading, of good speech, even of good behavior in some sense—

CAVETT: Yes. . . and typing I would add.

ADLER: Well, typing is a very fun skill. I learned that before I went to school.

CAVETT: Typing is the best thing I ever had. It saved my life a few times. Ten dollars a day.

ADLER: It's very important.

CAVETT: You were quite a kid. I think I would like to have known you as a kid, but I am not entirely sure.

ADLER: You would have liked to have known me if you hadn't been one of my teachers.

CAVETT: If what?

ADLER: If you had not been one of my teachers. My teachers didn't like to know me because I was a nuisance to them.

CAVETT: Apparently you drove them up the black-boarded wall occasionally.

ADLER: I did indeed. I had a very kindly professor at Columbia. He was a professor of psychology. I was very fond of Professor Poffenberger. But I would walk into his office about fifty minutes before class. There was a list of twenty-five questions for him to answer.

CAVETT: For him to answer?

ADLER: Yes.

CAVETT: And if he hadn't prepared, did you grade him?

ADLER: And John Dewey, who I had studied at Columbia in the early 1920s—

CAVETT: The John Dewey?

ADLER: The John Dewey. He was, again, a kindly gentleman, who lectured very slowly so that I could take his lectures down in longhand. I would go home to my study and type the lecture out. I collected these lectures that I wrote about. And I noticed that what he said on Tuesday was inconsistent with what he said the previous Thursday. So I would write him a letter, and say, "Dear Professor Dewey, last Thursday you said . . ." and I would quote. "But this Tuesday you said . . . and that does not seem quite consistent to me. Would you please explain?"

Well, he came to class and said, "A student in class wrote me a letter." He read the letter and then tried to explain. I wrote the answer down. And the answer didn't solve the problem. So I wrote him another letter. And this went on for three weeks. And he finally had his assistant come to me, and say, "Dr. Dewey wishes you would stop writing him letters."

CAVETT: Does that show the proper attitude on the part of an educator?

ADLER: No, I was a nuisance. I admit I was a nuisance. I was a very persistent student.

CAVETT: Uh huh, you admit that.

ADLER: In fact, one teacher I had a Columbia that you probably know the name of—Irwin Edman, he wrote a book called *Philosopher's Holiday*, I would argue with him so vigorously in class that one day I came to class at two-thirty. He was standing outside the door, and said, “Mortimer, I think you had better take the afternoon off. You get too excited in class.”



CAVETT: Yes, I read about that. And he actually thought you were in some danger of getting hyper or whatever. Well, when I say is that the proper educational attitude, I wonder what should be the limit of a teacher's involvement with a student who is rigorously questioning him?

ADLER: I think the teacher should be complete. But that depends upon the students—the teacher's having enough time for an individual student.

CAVETT: Yes, uh huh.

ADLER: And my, I think, my failure was to recognize the limits of the teacher's time.

CAVETT: Yeah.

ADLER: I was more of a burden than I should have been.

CAVETT: So somewhere between you and the student who falls asleep in class is the ideal.

ADLER: I think that many of my teachers did not resent my pertinacity in pursuing the question.

CAVETT: Uh huh, you never had the poor taste to correct the teacher's spelling in fourth grade as I did once?

ADLER: No.

CAVETT: Good. I barely survived that, even with my alleged friends. There was a man once named John Stuart Mill who couldn't remember a time when he couldn't read Greek.

ADLER: Well, he couldn't read Greek before the age of three.

CAVETT: Oh, is that it?

ADLER: You know, his father, who is James Mill, was a great English philosopher. And his father's friend was Jeremy Bentham, an even greater English philosopher. And Mill had other children. He must have had maybe half a dozen children that he sent to ordinary schools. But when John Stuart was born, he decided that he and Jeremy Bentham would bring this child up according to their own ideas of schooling. So they taught John Stuart Greek in the cradle. And as John Stuart reports in his autobiography, he could speak and read Greek at the age of three. He had read *The Dialogues of Plato* in Greek at

the age of five, “And could distinguish,” he said, “between the Socratic method and the substances of Platonic philosophy.” Between five and eleven, he had read most of the books that I really came to know as the Great Books. At eleven he edited his father’s *History of India*. At twelve, he edited Bentham’s *Rationale of Judicial Proof*. And at eighteen, he had a nervous breakdown.

CAVETT: Well, I am certainly glad to hear it. Now, could you imagine what W. C. Fields would have done with that?

ADLER: I read John Stuart Mill’s autobiography when I was fifteen. And, my God, I said, “I’m fifteen. I don’t know Greek. I never read any Plato.” In fact, I didn’t even know who Socrates was at fifteen.

CAVETT: So you were five years behind on Aristotle probably, and then how many on Virgil?

ADLER: Well, at that time I was working on the editorial page of *The New York Sun*. And I took an advance on my week’s salary, which was four dollars—I got four dollars a week—

CAVETT: Wow!

ADLER: I got four dollars a week, which was a large salary in those days, and I went down to a secondhand bookstore on John Street and bought a secondhand set of Plato and started to read the Dialogues of Plato. And that is what ruined me.

CAVETT: Ruined you?

ADLER: I stopped—I decided that up to that point I had planned to become a journalist. But I decided I wanted to become a philosopher. And I went back to college as a result of reading John Stuart Mill and Plato.

CAVETT: Did your parents think this was a little peculiar, that this was a phase, and pretty soon he'll start playing baseball and noticing girls and forget all this junk?

ADLER: I had a German father who took study rather seriously. My mother had been a schoolteacher. So they were a little less inclined to say that kind of thing.

CAVETT: Yeah.

ADLER: But, you see, I had left high school—no, I shouldn't say that. I had been expelled from high school.

CAVETT: Leaving a grade.

ADLER: No, I had a disagreement with the principal. And he won the argument. But he did suspend me from all—I was editor of the school paper, and he suspended me from all activities. And I decided to leave school, I guess. So I went to work on The New York Sun, and I had only finished two years of high school. So going to college wasn't easy. I had two years of high school preparation to make up. So while I was working as an office boy to the president of the Worthington Pump and Machinery Corporation down at 115th and Broadway, I did all the studying I had to do, take the regent's examinations, and entered Columbia. So I went to Columbia.

CAVETT: Yes, aren't you one of those rare birds who has a Ph.D. but not a B.A.?

ADLER: I have a Ph.D. but no M.A., no B.A., and no high school diploma.

CAVETT: Has the statute of limitations run out on this? Is it all right to admit this?

ADLER: I have been given by the University of Seattle an honorary B.A. I have been given by St. Mary's College

an honorary M.A. But no one has given me a high school diploma.

CAVETT: I hate to ask such a square question, but isn't it a requirement in getting a Ph.D. in every school to have had an—

ADLER: No, no.

CAVETT: I didn't realize that.

ADLER: I had more than enough credits to graduate from Columbia. In fact, I think you needed 130 points of credit, and I had a 145. They were all As.

CAVETT: Yeah, so you were—

ADLER: I had no problem with that at all. The reason why I didn't get the diploma was that not only did I not swim, I refused to go to—

CAVETT: You did say swim?

ADLER: Swim, I didn't take the swimming test.

CAVETT: Had you failed to study for it or what?

ADLER: Well, worse than that. At Columbia in my day, maybe it is still true, physical education was required for all four years. And I cut all four years. I cut physical education. I never went to gym. And my reason for not going to gym was that I hated to dress and undress in the middle of the day. You see—

CAVETT: Once day is enough, yes.

ADLER: And it was just before graduation, just after I had gotten my Phi Beta Kappa key, the dean called me, and said, "Mortimer, I have looked at your record, and you haven't been to gym for four years. Is that true?" I said,

“Yes.” He said, “Well, you can’t get your diploma.” So I marched in the procession at Columbia but didn’t get my diploma.

CAVETT: Dressed, I assume.

ADLER: Yes, of course, I paid twenty dollars, which I never got back by the way.



CAVETT: Now, what do you think about that? In retrospect do you still hold that you were within your rights? What about the Greek idea of the trained body and the trained mind?

ADLER: No, I was not within my rights. He was within his rights to withhold my diploma because physical education was a requirement, and I didn’t do it.

CAVETT: Yeah, eventually did you miss something valuable? Are you still against physical education?

ADLER: Well, you know that I share Mr. Hutchins’s view about physical education or exercise in general.

CAVETT: Uh huh.

ADLER: Hutchins used to say, “Whenever I feel the impulse to exercise, I lie down until it passes away.”

CAVETT: Yes, Dr. Jonathan Miller, on this show, put running and jogging where some people think it should be put, although I am a practitioner of it, and I think he is wrong. But not to dwell on this too much, but, you know, there is, along with an intellectual tradition in some societies, a parallel physical tradition of—seriously, I think there is perhaps some link between a well-tuned body and an alert mind.

ADLER: Well, yes, I don’t look with contempt upon a well-tuned body. But I don’t enjoy tuning it.

CAVETT: You can get people to do that. You’ve had the temerity, I think—oh, let’s go back a bit to your—I am still fascinated with you as a kid. You were not only, from what I read about you, content simply to study avidly but began to educate your own sister, I think, at a very tender age.

ADLER: Yes, I had become an avid student of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* and the theory of evolution. So I gave her lectures on evolution and the origin of the human species when she was about ten.

CAVETT: And you were older?

ADLER: Yes, I was fourteen.

CAVETT: Were you ever chosen for the baseball team as a kid?

ADLER: No, no. I did start writing very early. One of the reasons why I was able to get that job on *The New York Sun*, though I was only fifteen years old, was that because when I was ten years old or eleven in public

school, I won an essay contest and a silver medal from *The New York Sun* for writing an essay on Napoleon. So I marched down—I wanted a job and marched down and showed them my silver medal. And I got the job.

CAVETT: You had the right credentials. You wrote—some of the things I want to get to with you—you wrote a book called *How to Read a Book*.

ADLER: In 1940.

CAVETT: Of course, presumably, people who need know how to read a book couldn't read it, could they?

ADLER: No.

CAVETT: So is there a previous book that should be written?

ADLER: No. You are right. People have said, “How do I learn how to read a book?” But the book teaches you how to read as you read it. And say, that if you begin with real little skill, as most people will begin with little skill, since most people have acquired the skill of reading up to the fourth grade and not beyond—I mean most Americans have fourth grade reading abilities. Even when they graduate from college, they are not much better than fourth grade reading abilities. The book is an attempt to show what the art of reading, the skill of reading should become as one develops beyond that elementary level.

CAVETT: Yes, uh huh.

ADLER: They obviously—most Americans are functionally literate. They can read the newspaper, *Time Magazine*, the advertisements, directions on signs.

CAVETT: Yeah.

ADLER: But give them a difficult book—a lot of reading consists in taking a book that is over your head—if it isn't over your head, if there is nothing in the book that you can't understand as soon as you see the words, you don't need any skill in reading, obviously, except the ordinary elementary school, fourth-grade level. But if a book that is over your head, and no books—none of your heads can possibly lift your head up, can they? If a book that is over your head puzzles you, the art of reading—and if you don't fully understand it as you read the words, the art of reading consists in the skill of being able to—without any help from outside—find out what that book is saying and to state it better. I almost say that it is the skill of being able to lift your own mind up from understanding less to understanding more.

CAVETT: And in your book you tell how to do that?

ADLER: Yes, another important thing to say about it is that I once had to write a slogan for an ad, I think, about the book, but it was a bestseller. And I what I suggested with it was that the art of reading consists—the art of staying awake while reading. Most people don't stay awake.

CAVETT: As many people say, “Oh, that is a wonderful book for going to sleep.”

ADLER: And those books, I don't call that reading. I mean, the books you read to go to sleep with, the books you read on airplanes, the books you read while waiting to pass the time are like movies. They are the time killers, the enjoyment. I am talking about serious reading, which is profitable to the mind because it improves your understanding. And here I would guess, Dick, that I don't read more than five books a year. I read a great many to go to sleep with. I must scan hundreds that come into my office that I put on shelves and classify or make notes about if I want to go back to them.

CAVETT: Someone saw you on a plane reading a thriller, *The Vicar of Christ*, was it?

ADLER: Yes, it is. That is right. I went to Australia with *The Vicar of Christ*.

CAVETT: That is escapist reading for you?

ADLER: It occupied two long flights to Auckland and back from Sydney.

CAVETT: Yes.

ADLER: But that is not reading.

CAVETT: But when you consider books, do you only read five a year?

ADLER: I seldom read a book except at my desk or at a table with a pencil and pad, marking the book, writing notes. That is what I mean by reading.

CAVETT: Librarians just fainted all over the country when you said that.

ADLER: Yes, but I only mark my own books, not library books.

CAVETT: Okay, yeah.

ADLER: And unless reading is a very intense activity, unless it is sufficiently fatiguing so that you get tired after you do an hour or two of it, you aren't doing it. And most people, I think, do not have the experience of reading this way.

CAVETT: My wife reads at least a book a day, which gives me a terrible inferiority complex.

ADLER: Do you know what Thomas Hobbes said about that? You might tell your wife.

CAVETT: I will.

ADLER: He said, “If I read as many books as most men do, I would be as dull-witted as they are.”

CAVETT: I think maybe you had better tell her that. And here she is now. She is quite sharp-witted. And it is amazing that she has managed—she can go into Foyles’s Bookstore in London and not find anything she hasn’t read in whole sections of the store. And it just gives me the—

ADLER: Are we talking about reading for pleasure or reading for profit now?

CAVETT: Both, but see, she has also made the mistake of trying to read to go to sleep and once finished the entire *Memoirs of Cardinal Wolsey* without falling asleep.

ADLER: Oh, no.

CAVETT: That was the price of making that mistake. Some people might see your book, *How to Read a Book*, and say, “Oh, good, a book on speed-reading.”

ADLER: Oh, no.

CAVETT: Perish the thought.

ADLER: Perish the thought. In the revised edition, which came out in 1974, we made the point that the theory of speed-reading is entirely wrong. One should not be able to read quickly. We should be able to read at variable speeds. Some things we want to look at and be able to scan very quickly. And some things they are opposite. We want you to be able to read as slowly as possible. In fact, as the book becomes more difficult and more im-

portant, I would say ten pages an hour is the maximum. It depends on what you are working at. If the book becomes something that is inconsiderable, insubstantial, you can scan it in fifty minutes or thirty minutes.

CAVETT: Yes, there was a friend of mine who stomped out of the famous lady's speed-reading course, when they said, "When you are just reading for fun like a novel," but he said, "But I take novels quite seriously. I consider those important reading."

ADLER: I think the claim, the famous Evelyn Wood's claim is quite wrong. I think you can increase a person's speed in scanning a book. I don't think you can increase the speed of comprehension.

CAVETT: Yes, I taught a speed-reading course on cassette one time. I mean, that some companies use. And it is based on a sound principle that our muscles can be trained to move infinitely faster. It is not literal, of course. Never is it faster than we think it can. And so for people who just have to quickly digest a lot of stuff, you can do it at lightning speed with a little practice.

One of the things that you get a kind of grudging respect from your colleagues on is what I guess you might call your utter faith in learning and self-improvement. And some people question whether this is the right way to educate anybody, to ask them to just sit down, as you say, at your desk with a book alone and have a dialogue with, say, Plato, in the sense that there are not that many people—and I am not afraid of including myself in this—who at first glance are not just going to be able to take Plato alone. I would like to have—and would you deny I should have this? I would like to have Bernard Knox talk to me a bit about what Greece and the setting and the philosophy and the history and so on is? Or Aristotle, is Aristotle for everybody? Or don't they need some help?

ADLER: You read the book to the effect that Aristotle is for everybody, as the Great Books are for everybody. But I agree with you. Though I think one should do a certain amount of work alone, I also think it is a great help to have someone else read the same book you are reading and have someone to talk to about it, whether it be your elders, your colleagues, or a teacher in discussion. One of the reasons why we set up the Great Books Discussion Program, one of the reasons for the Aspen Program, as I have been teaching the Great Books since 1923, is that to read them entirely by yourself is not nearly as fruitful or enjoyable. It is always better to read them with somebody else and have a discussion. the Great Books Program is a program in which, whether it is at St. John's College, or whether I do it at Aspen, or I've got a Great Books Seminar for adults in Chicago that has been going since 1943. We read a book every month, and we meet on a Wednesday evening for two hours and talk about the book.

CAVETT: Uh huh.

ADLER: As a moderator, I ask questions about the book. But when the discussion gets generated in this cross-table conversation, that is what makes it enjoyable. And you learn more. And I don't think you can learn entirely by yourself. I agree with you.

CAVETT: We sometimes get labeled as the man who says, "Get rid of schools, get rid of teachers, get rid of written exams, get rid of classes," and this misunderstands you to a degree. You have said things along those lines.

ADLER: I can be very precise about that, Dick.

CAVETT: Yeah.

ADLER: I think schools and teachers are dispensable.

CAVETT: By that you mean—

ADLER: They are not absolutely necessary. People have become educated without schools and without teachers.

CAVETT: Sure.

ADLER: But they are very helpful.

CAVETT: Yeah.

ADLER: And if they were better, it would be even better. They would be even more helpful.

CAVETT: Uh huh, now Groucho Marx, to pick an odd example, was one of the best-read men I had ever met. He hardly ever went to school. He had a tiny amount of schooling. Are you willing to say that had he gone to school, he would have been less educated in your sense of the word than if he had—

ADLER: If he had gone to a good school where they had taught him how to read and write and speak and given him, shall I say, a superficial introduction in his youth to the world of learning, he might have profited by that and gotten further in his own education. See, I think the school is a help, an aid, toward the process of becoming educated.

CAVETT: Uh huh.

ADLER: It functions best when it functions most effectively in that direction. When it tries to educate the person in school, it fails, because that can't be done. That is because immaturity is not just a difficulty; it is an impossible obstacle to becoming educated.

CAVETT: You can't over leak material. It has to come upon—

ADLER: You cannot become educated while young.

CAVETT: You would, I think, favor having so-called formal education end earlier in a person's life.

ADLER: Yes, that is very important. That is my most serious criticism in the American school system.

CAVETT: And you mean more by it than just every one of us who has ever looked out on a beautiful spring day and thought, "Why am I sitting in this stuffy classroom?"

ADLER: In all the great European systems of schooling, not education, but schooling, the basic undergraduate schooling is twelve years. There are two, six forms, elementary and the secondary, primary and the secondary. And after that there is university.

CAVETT: Ending at about eighteen. Eighteen, yes.

ADLER: I would like to move—we have, unfortunately, sixteen years, starting at six and ending at twenty-two, so that young people are in school and the undergraduate college between eighteen and twenty-two, which is much too late. And one of the reasons for the decline, serious decline of our colleges is increase of specialization, increase of vocational training, the dwindling and decline of liberal schooling and general schooling is that is too late. It is not realistic to ask young people, boys and girls between eighteen and twenty-two not to think about their future careers, not to think of specialization, not to ask for some vocational preparation. You could up to sixteen. So I would like to suggest that schooling start at age four. The sooner we get the young out of the home, the better I think. Starting at four, by the way, we know everything about early learning that children at age three can begin all the Montessori experience supports that.

CAVETT: Kids are hungry to read, some of them at three.

ADLER: That's right. You really are wasting two years by starting at six. Start at four, run two periods of six years each, primary and secondary.

CAVETT: Yeah.

ADLER: Give the Bachelor of Arts degree at age sixteen. That completes undergraduate education. Have that twelve years of schooling completely general, completely required, no electives, no specialization, no vocational preparation. And then at sixteen, have four years of compulsory non-schooling.

CAVETT: Meaning what?

ADLER: Everyone out of school. School is closed.

CAVETT: The one thing you can't do is go to school. The one thing you can't do.

ADLER: That's right.

CAVETT: Oh, I wish this had been true years ago.

ADLER: Between sixteen and twenty, and during that time either work in the public or private sector, the Army or the Navy, travel, anything to grow up so that when those who come back to the university, they come back and are mature as they are not now.

CAVETT: In ways I envied the guys who came to college from the war because they said, "I never realized what it was like until I got away from it and realized how much I wanted it at an earlier age."

ADLER: I was teaching at the University of Chicago right after the Korean War. So I had in my classes two kinds of students—those who came through the ordinary way, and G. I. Bill students, students of the G. I. Bill of Rights.

And though they are far closer to the same age, they are utterly different.

CAVETT: You could tell who the ardent student was.

ADLER: That is right.

CAVETT: I have to cut you for the moment, but tomorrow at the same time, we will return. Adler, thank you. And you will be with us tomorrow.

ADLER: Thank you.

CAVETT: We will see you tomorrow, and good night.

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

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