



WHAT EVERY SCHOOLBOY DOESN'T KNOW

Mortimer J. Adler

What every schoolboy doesn't know is that he doesn't know very much. This is precisely what every intelligent adult does know—that he did not get an education in school.

The day we leave high school or college, we feel a natural, and pardonable sense of achievement which deceives us. No one can tell us then how little we know, how much we have to learn. But five or ten years later no one need bother to tell us that we are not educated; we have found that out for ourselves. Life undeceives us where the commencement orators failed. The diplomas on the wall, be they one or many, no longer console us. There may be a few old grads who cling to the illusions of their graduation day, but most of us battered and confused, know one thing well if we know anything—that we don't know very much.

Socrates got the reputation of being a wise man by going around trying to persuade people how little they knew. There is, of course, some truth in the ancient insight that awareness of ignorance is the beginning of wisdom. But it is just the beginning. We have to do something about it. And to do something about it intelligently, we have to know the causes and the cures. We have to know why adults need education, and what, if anything, they can do about it.

When he realizes how little he learned in school, the old grad usually supposes that there was something wrong with the school he went to or with the way he spent his time there. However frequently that may be the case, the fact is that *the best conceivable graduate of the best conceivable school needs adult education as badly as the worst*. As far as genuine education is concerned, there are no finishing schools.

But the man or woman who makes the discovery that his education only began in school usually tells himself, as the sinner was told who tried to enter Paradise, “Too late, too late—ye cannot enter now.” And he sighs and says, “If only I could start all over again.” He spends the rest of his life salting his wounds, wishing on what he supposes to be impossible. But this just isn’t so: it is neither too late nor impossible. Let me explain.

Neither the school nor the individual himself is primarily responsible for his failure to get an education in his youth. It is characteristic of us adults to forget what being young was like. The man who generously blames himself and the man who passes the buck to his teachers have both forgotten that the manifold distractions of youth are insurmountable obstacles to the pursuit of learning, as much so as all the later distractions of business and domestic and civic responsibilities. They are equally wrong in supposing that those dear old golden schooldays were a time when there was nothing they had to do but study, or that youth is the ideal age for devotion to intellectual pursuits.

The fact is that at the age at which boys and girls go to school and college, they are simply too young to get a real education. Anyone who does not recognize this fact labors under the delusion that education is the exclusive occupation of children and adolescents—that it is something which belongs to the time of our immaturity, that it can be done then and be done with! But the truth, I have gradually learned as I have grown older, is quite the contrary. Education is the business of adults. It is a major vocation of men and women; not a minor avocation. It is not a hobby or pastime, a fifth wheel on the cart of education. It is the most important phase of education when education is considered (as it should be) the occupation, not of childhood, but of a whole life. In compari-

son, infantile and adolescent education are at best beginnings, and they are only at their best when they pretend to be nothing else. For, although infants and adolescents *need* education more than adults, adults *deserve* it more. The full substance of education can be acquired only in adult life, when mature men and women, stable in character and serious in purpose, bring varied experience and real perplexities to the process of learning.

I say I have gradually learned this truth. I know now how feeble was my grip on all the ideas I pretended to possess the day I left college. No one could have convinced me then that I was too young really to understand one-tenth of what I could glibly verbalize. In fact, I could not have understood the very point I am now making—that youth is an insurmountable obstacle to learning. I know this for a fact because two of the greatest teachers I ever had, tried to make this point and I laughed at them.

One was Plato, the other Aristotle. I read Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Ethics* in college. In the *Republic*, Plato outlines an ideal system of education. Here is its time schedule: up until the age of twenty, music and gymnastics, for the development of a useful body and sharpened sensibilities; between twenty and thirty, the liberal arts, especially the mathematical disciplines, for the training of a disciplined mind, a mind skilled in the operations of learning and thinking; between thirty and forty, a period devoted to the world's work, engagement in the various activities of public life, suffering the pains and frustrations of genuine practical problems that have to be solved; and then finally, at the age of forty, return to the academy to study philosophy. Anyone who lacked all this prior training, who had not become mature and responsible through the ordeals of practical life, was not fit for the contemplation of ideas—*according to Plato*.

According to Plato, but not, according to me at the age of twenty! Was I not reading Plato and mastering all the ideas he gave me to contemplate? All? Obviously not even this one about education, for with the unwarranted confidence of youth I thought Plato's time schedule just about as silly as some of his other utopian schemes about marriage and property.

No one has ever accused Aristotle of being utopian about anything. In a vague way I must have recognized what a hardheaded realist he was, yet I was not impressed by the fact that, in the opening chapters of his *Ethics*, he says that there is no use trying to teach moral truths to young men. They are simply too young to understand them. They have not had enough actual experience with great moral problems; they have not borne the pains of making responsible judgments in all the crises of friendship, marriage, and parent-

hood, of professional or artistic work; they have not experienced the frustrations of vice and the rewards of virtue. And, in addition, they are so continually being swept off their feet, this way and that, by currents of coltish emotion, that they cannot listen to the voice of reason. The very essence of immaturity is instability of character due to emotional paroxysms. The immature, therefore, have neither the patience nor the experience necessary for understanding moral problems, much less their solutions.

I mention these views of Plato and Aristotle not merely to show how ancient is the insight that real education belongs to the years of our maturity, but to prove the point itself by the very fact that this insight, like every other genuinely profound idea, is something only an adult can really possess. I couldn't grasp this truth, or any other, when I was in college. And the biggest joke of all on youth is that youth itself prevents the young from understanding their own limitations. I now know that my understanding of all the other ideas which the great books contain was, at the time of my reading them in college, just about as superficial, wrong, or non-existent, as my appreciation of the truth about education in the *Republic* and the *Ethics*.

What are the implications of this basic fact about education? There are two major implications I should like to discuss briefly. The first concerns the responsibilities of our schools and colleges; the second, each adult's responsibility for his self-education.

What should our schools and colleges be doing if they cannot succeed in giving their charges a *complete* education? The answer is not, as some might suppose, an *incomplete* education. The point is not that the schools should give a part, if they cannot give the whole, for that is not the proper relation between education in school and adult education. When I said before that even the best student at the best school could not achieve a complete education, I did not mean that schools could not succeed at all or in any way. The schools can succeed, but only if they set up a different standard of success than the one they now espouse. By the standard I have in mind, the schools today are a dismal failure. They do not discharge the one educational obligation they are capable of meeting. For, in the first place, they are dominated by the notion that education should serve the purpose of earning a living rather than of being able to use and enjoy the living that all of us must earn; and, in the second place, the educators wrongly suppose that it is the business of the schools to give young people the fruits of learning when such fruits are entirely beyond the grasp of those who haven't yet a firm foothold on the ground or the strength to climb the tree. Let me explain.

There are two ways in which we can view what goes on in school. One way (the generally prevalent view) is to suppose that the child is getting there the knowledge which he is going to use in adult life. This might be called the *growing burden* theory of education. It presents the picture of a little shaver with a big empty sack slung over his shoulders. He goes the rounds from classroom to classroom, and in each class the teacher drops into the bag a little packet of learning, all neatly done up in tissue and ribbons. After a certain number of these units have accumulated in haphazard fashion, a principal stamps the bag *quarter-filled*, and the student is graduated to another level of education, where he repeats the same process. The packets may now be larger and heavier, but they are still all neatly done up, and each is dropped separately into the bag which the student struggles to carry. In fact, that is his major struggle—an effort of memory, not understanding. Again, a principal stamps the bag, this time *half-filled*; and again the process is repeated until finally the bag is filled and sealed up tightly with a college degree.

It might just as well be tightly sealed, for the burden of learning the student has acquired is entirely external—in a bag he carries, not in his soul transformed. The college graduate soon realizes how useless the bag is for all its weight upon his memory, and so, fortunately for most of us, we drop the bag in a dark corner soon after graduation, in order to free our memory for the use of our mind upon problems which really engage it at last.

The other view holds that what should go on in school, and unfortunately seldom does, is the acquirement of skill rather than knowledge. I call this view the *vital discipline* theory of education. It regards education not as something which can be externally added to a person, as the clothes he wears are added to his back, but rather as a transformation in his very nature, a cultivation of his mind and character. It recognizes that children and adolescents are by their very youth barred from the real possession of ideas, or, to put it more truly, that the young lack the experience, stability, and seriousness to be possessed by ideas, to be inwardly and deeply altered by the major insights which have enriched human understanding. Hence, this view holds that it is not learning, but the ability to learn which the schools should try to transmit.

The young have a natural agility which can be trained, We should train them, then, to climb the tree of learning in the hope that when they are mature they will be able to get some nourishment from the fruits on the upper branches. If they have developed all the skills of learning in youth, there is some hope that they will use these skills when maturity offers them the occasions for learning itself. But

there is little hope for adults who lack such skills; and no hope at all that learning can be acquired by either young or old who sit at the bottom of the tree waiting for the fruit to be shaken into their laps.

In short, the inward transformations which constitute real education are of two worths: for the young while they are at school, the development of the skills of learning; for the mature, throughout the rest of life, the deepening of mind and spirit through testing actual everyday experience by the ideas of truth and beauty. The latter is learning itself, the fullness of education, and it cannot be accomplished in school.

But even if the schools realized that their proper function was to train the young in the basic skills of reading and listening, writing and speaking—for these are the skills of learning, the arts of being taught—the adult who was fortunate enough to leave school or college able to read would still have to exercise such skill in order to become an educated man. If I am right that only mature men and women can really understand all the books and subject-matters which college boys and girls play with, then it must also be true that every adult who wants to become educated, must work in the fields where, as a youth, he played.

The ideal situation, of course, would be one in which the schools did their part, and adults did theirs. The situation as it exists today is far from ideal. The schools do not do their part, because they are trying to do almost everything else. Missing the main point—that children and adolescents are too young to acquire the inwardness of learning—they either follow the growing-burden scheme and fill his memory with a jumble of information; or, if they are “progressive” schools, they realize the futility of the growing burden scheme, but then suppose that children can be inoculated with maturity by imitations of experience through the project method, whereby they will discover the problems of real life as it is lived outside the classroom. As if anything could make a child old except years, as if, short of age, human problems can be genuinely understood and the ideas relevant to them become significant! In either case, however, the schools are devoted to a program which pays attention to almost everything except the discipline of the mind itself. In either case, the product of our schools and colleges is turned out unskilled in the arts an adult needs to carry on his own education under the only auspices which make learning genuinely possible—the experiences, the stability, the seriousness of mature life.

And most adults do not do their part, because they wrongly suppose that an education is something one should have got somehow

in school and college. If, for whatever reason, they did not get it there, it is now too late to get it. But as we have seen, the fallacy here consists in failing to see the one reason why education could not be got in school. When we see through that error, we also see why adult life is the time to get the education no young person can ever obtain. Any adult who achieves this vision is at last on the highroad of learning. It is not a royal road. It is steep and rocky, but is the highroad—in fact, the only road. It is open to anyone who has some skill in learning, and must be taken by anyone who has the goal of learning in view—understanding the nature of things and man's place in the total scheme.

When an adult's responsibility for his own education is conceived in this way, it has very little to do with all the programs of adult education which are offered as spare-time-fillers for whoever has time to spare from business and pleasure. For the most part, the adult education courses—the lectures and forums, the dancing and modeling classes—which abound in every American community, and are now being adapted for broadcasting, are about as ineffective for adults as the schools are for children. The same false notions prevail. It is supposed that adults can learn even if they have no skill in learning. It is supposed that learning can take place without pain and effort, that the invitation to learning, as to the dance, must be accomplished with guile, seductively. But worst of all it is supposed that adults have already been well educated in the schools and colleges and that adult education should consist in giving them the trimmings or hobbies or vocational assistance. Such programs of adult education leave men and women precisely as it found them after they finished school—uneducated.

What do I propose in place of all this? My proposal is simple as to plan. The plan involves two parts. First, the adult who, because of bad or insufficient schooling, lacks the discipline of learning must acquire these for himself. He acquires them the way every school-boy acquires them—by habituating himself to the formal process of asking and answering the question "Why" with respect to every phenomenon he confronts. Second, having the requisite skills, the adult must pursue for the rest of his life the same curriculum of studies which, for centuries, have been regarded as the content of liberal education.

By the content of liberal education I mean the basic subject-matters of history, philosophy, science, and humane letters—and all the great books which constitute the tradition of our common culture in these fields. For even if these subject-matters were studied in college, even if all the great books had been "read," they remain the materials of adult education because college boys and girls are

too young to master them, If they are worth studying in college, as a condition of gaining skill in intellectual pursuits, they are certainly worth studying for the rest of one's life, not only to increase that skill, or, perhaps, to gain it where the schools have failed, but for the sake of transforming one's self slowly, painfully, but rewardingly, into an educated person.

An educated person is, after all, one who, through the travail of his own life, has assimilated the ideas which make him representative of his culture, which make him a bearer of its traditions, and which enable him to contribute to the improvement of that culture. Clearly no college boy or girl can be educated in this sense, any more than can be a man or woman before the hour of maturity has struck.

The plan, I say, is simple. Its successful execution is something else. But it is ostrich-like to pretend there is an easier way to become educated. It is childish to think that getting an education in adult life should be just as easy as going through college, for whoever thinks this is saying that he wants to remain forever a child. By taking thought alone we cannot add a cubit to our stature, nor can all the teachers and schools make a young man wise. But if we are willing to take thought, and make the effort to use our minds, after the years have enlarged our capacity to grow, then, perhaps, the cubits can be added by which we take on spiritual weight.

When I was very young I read a poem—you read it, too, when you were young—the first three lines of which seemed silly. They seemed worse than silly; they seemed to be a delusion concocted for the purpose of convincing the aged and the old that life was still worth living. I know now that it was I—and not the poet—who was silly. I know now why—being young—I could not understand, what the poet meant. The poet was Robert Browning, and the poem the immortal *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, and its opening words were:

*“Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made:”*

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Mr. Weismann,

I am most grateful for accepting me as student member of the Centre for the Study of The Great Ideas.

By this, I wish to inform you of my interest to setting up The Great Ideas student's club/movement on my University campus (University of Ghana), and throughout some selected secondary schools and colleges in Ghana.

It is of great interest to know that, there are young men and women who possess great visionary ideas, but do not know how to put them into practise.

It is my belief that, by having great ideas students club in Ghana would help nurture these young men and women who are full of positive ideas to improve and materialise on their ideas so as to find solutions to some pertinent issues confronting the young African.

I know that, by having constant touch with you would help us shape our minds to become productive and responsible youth to be able to solve mankind's problem.

I together with some students reading philosophy and psychology came up with this idea of setting up great ideas students club on campus.

In fact, we were introduced to you're the Centre by an American friend who visited us in Ghana some months ago.

When you have accepted our request to set up students club of your centre, we would conform to your missions and your ideals and vision.

We are prepared to accept any direction and advice from you.

It is our fervent hope that our request to set up the Centre for Great Ideas students club in Ghana would be given the needed attention.

Thank You.

Yours Faithfully,

Charles Aggrey

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WELCOME NEW MEMBER

Barry Sell

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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