

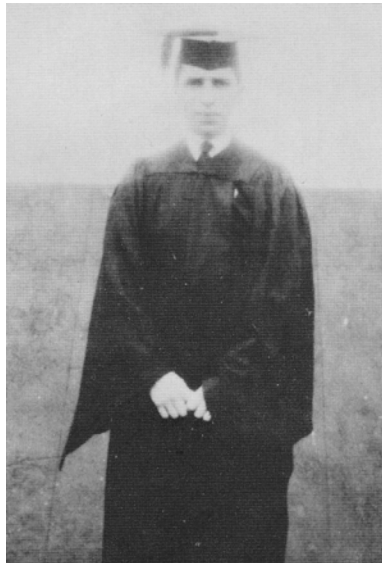
THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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“. . . and if I say again that the greatest good of man is daily to converse about virtue, and all that concerning which you hear me examining myself and others, and that the life which is unexamined is not worth living - that you are still less likely to believe. And yet what I say is true, although a thing of which it is hard for me to persuade you.”

—Plato's Socrates



WHY I WENT TO COLLEGE

Mortimer J. Adler

Next year [c.1944] I will complete my 20th year as a college teacher. In that time I have gone from one extreme to the other and back again on the question whether more or fewer boys and girls should go to college.

Every teacher, I am sure, has sometimes felt that his failure as a teacher could be excused by the fact that so many of the students who didn't make the grade shouldn't have been in college in the first place. That is one way of getting over the depression one suf-

fers after reading a batch of examination papers. But it takes very little self-examination to make a swing toward the opposite extreme of thinking that if the teachers were equal to the task, every normal boy and girl could profit from a college education.

The question can certainly be argued both ways. If you believe in democracy, you agree that everyone should be given as much education as he can take. But it is still possible to say that a college education is more than many can take. If there are many who deserve a college education who don't get it for economic reasons, and many who go to college for reasons that are as irrelevant—to please their parents or because it's the thing to do.

Recently during an argument of this sort, I remembered my own case. I realize that none of the usual reasons for going or not going applied. My parents couldn't afford to send me, what's more, I didn't want to go anyway. As I remembered the series of accidents which reversed this picture, I wondered whether a collection of similar case histories would be more instructive than all the arguments pro and con.

One thing is clear. Not the theoretical reasons why a boy *should* go to college, but the reasons why in fact he does go, help to explain what happens to them after he gets there. I think I got more out of college than many of my classmates because of the accidents that caused me to go.

If I am right about this, then maybe it would be a good idea to make such accidents happen more frequently. I have thought about how I would do this in the case of my own children. I want them to go to college, of course, but the problem is how to get them to want to go for some better reason than that. Can I find a way of making what was accidental in my own case develop as a normal course for them to follow? If for them, why not for adolescents generally?

Let me tell my story briefly, and then see whether I can draw the moral it seems to imply.

I graduated from a New York public school and went on to a city high school as a matter of course. As early as my freshman year in high school I had decided I wanted to be a journalist. My friends in the Fourth Estate will forgive my youthful folly if I add that decision made it seem useless to go to college. I couldn't see what getting more education had to do was becoming a good newspaper man. I tried to get on the staff of the high school weekly. That was

a way to become a journalist. I got the job, and worked up from cub reporter to editor-in-chief. I was so intent on this work in preparation for my career that I paid almost no attention to schoolwork. I cut classes and neglected studies. What went on in the office of the *Clinton News* was more important than all the rest of the DeWitt Clinton High School.

I probably would have been dropped from the roles for non-attendance at classes or for not making passing grades, but before that could happen I was fired out of high school for telling the principal a whopper of a lie. The fact that I told the lie because I thought the principal was unduly interfering with my prerogatives as editor has no bearing. What does have a bearing is the fact that I was now free to get a job, and my parent's straitened circumstances gave the additional impetus, or otherwise they might have sent me to another school.

With good luck, I got a job as a copy boy on the old New York Sun. Again it was luck that assigned me to the editorial offices rather than to the city room. I ran copy for the editorial writers and became a sort of personal errand boy for Edward Page Mitchell, on whom the mantle of Charles A. Dana had fallen. But writing copy, not running it was my aim, so I started to submit daily pieces to Mr. Mitchell. After about a month, he accepted one of these pieces as filler on the editorial page.

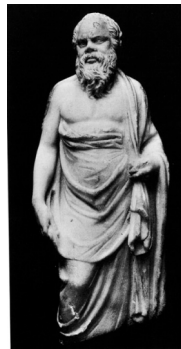
My career was launched. It was advanced by the fact the first world war was then going on, and the draft was taking its toll. Things opened up more quickly than they would have normally. Within a year I was correcting all the proof for the editorial page, and doing a daily stint of editorial paragraphs which were added at the end of the last editorial to fill up the page.

At the age of seventeen I had become a journalist without going to college, without even finishing high school. Like many adolescents I had to have my fling at writing verse. I thought that I could learn to write poetry better by reading more of it, so I decided to take a course in Victorian literature that was being offered in the evening by the Columbia Extension Department. Victorian literature, I discovered, included novels and essays, as well as Tennyson and Browning. One of the works assigned was John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography*. It was that that upset my well-planned life.

John Stuart Mill had been a prodigy. I had always thought well of my literacy until I saw a list of books he had read at the age of eight, before he was ten, or by the time he was fourteen. I had

never heard of these authors—Plato and Plutarch, Thucydides and Libby, Quintilian and Seneca. And if it hadn't been for one of them, I might have never come to know any of them. What Mill had to say about Socrates in the dialogues of Plato set me off in search of the book. I finally found a secondhand edition of the *Dialogues* and made the acquaintance of Socrates.

I should like to write about Socrates someday as the most unforgettable character I've ever met, but I'm now writing about him as a reason I went to college. It isn't clear to me now what it was that hit me hardest—the question Socrates asked that I never thought about before, or the search for knowledge which he made appear to be more important than anything else, or simply the intellectual excitement of the arguments in which Socrates proved himself able to twist the others around his little finger. I do know that that seemed like a good game to play. I tried to play Socrates with my friends and see if I could make his tricks work on them.



However it happened, Socrates made me feel that journalism was not the highest vocation of man. I wanted to be like my new hero. I wanted to be a philosopher. So I decided to try and get into college, on the supposition that that was a way to become a philosopher. That reason for going to college is, of course, as silly as my earlier reason for not going—because I wanted to become a journalist. The point of my story really is that I went to college because I wanted to study. Socrates had made me want to do that, and want it badly enough to pass all the entrance examinations on my own, get a scholarship, and do some part-time work to help pay my way.

As I look back at it now, it seems to me that I got a great deal out of college because of two things: first, because I went to Columbia in order to study, not for extracurricular activities, for fun or frolic; second, because my two years of employment on *The Sun* had made an eight hour day and a six-day week a normal occupation of my time. Too many of the students I have met in my career as a teacher have lacked the incentive to study and the right habits of

work. They drift into college from high school, as the inevitable next step in a program they never questioned. They study to pass examinations, and they try to pass examinations with as little studying as possible, because the 48 hour week seems to them and exorbitant demand upon their energies.

These students have all the intelligence that is needed to get much more than they do out of college. Even taking the curriculum as it is and the teachers as they are, these students could get more than they do. That they don't is explained primarily by what they want from college and how they use their time there. And that in turn is explained by the way in which they happen to go to college in the first place.

The way it happened accidentally in my own case can, I think, be made into a general rule. That is the moral of my story. Entrance examinations and intelligence tests are not enough to determine whether a boy should be in college. Even less so should it depend on whether his father can pay the fees. No one should be in college unless he really wants to learn what college can teach, and unless he is willing to devote the major part of his time to the labors of studying.


These are obvious prerequisites. They seem to me to be minimum conditions, but they have no practical significance, of course, unless they can be applied. If the high schools of the country could generally succeed in developing a desire to study and could inculcate habits of hard work, they would be doing the most important part of their job as preparatory institutions. But that may be too much to expect. Nor may it be readily practicable for the colleges to test prospective student to see if he satisfy the minimum conditions I have suggested. As I see it, the problem can be solved only by the individual parent, deciding with his own children whether or not they should go to college.

As college age approaches, a parent should be able to tell from a youngster's behavior in high school whether he is prepared to be a student. If he judges by marks or grades alone, he is likely to be deceived. He must observe the youngsters bent, his turn of mind, and how it applies himself to work. If the child has little or no interest in studying and if he is inclined to work as little and play as much as possible, the chances are slim that he will develop the interest and the inclination simply by going to college.

If that child were mine, I would help them to find a job when he graduated from high school. I wouldn't send him to college even if

I could afford it and he could get in. My hope would be that after a couple of years of honest work, the youngster would find out for himself whether he really wanted the advantages of a college education.

I wouldn't leave anything to chance I would do my best to keep the question open in his mind and to provide occasions for self-examination on his part. If with all this, nothing struck the spark in him, then it is highly probable that nothing was lost by his not going to college. Should the spark be struck, however, the boy will then go to college for what seems to me to be the best reason—because he really wants to learn something. In addition, his years of experience in a job, with regular hours of labor and with tasks that could not be shirked, will fortify him against the temptation to do no more work than the minimum required.

I know that this suggestion leaves many other aspects of the educational problem to be solved. I know that it cannot be applied in the same way in every case, and that there are many cases to which it cannot be applied at all. Nevertheless it seems to me that parents can help the educators to prevent college from being a barren waste for many boys and girls. The educators have much to do to improve the educational offering. The teachers have much to do to make the curriculum come alive. But their best efforts can accomplish nothing for the student who shouldn't be in college because he has not found out for himself a good enough reason for being there. 

EDITOR'S NOTE

Mortimer Adler did get a PhD from Columbia, with no Master or Bachelor's degree and no high school diploma.

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

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We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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