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DROPOUT

Mortimer Adler

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“The child is father of the man,” wrote Wordsworth. True, but the child, like any father, propagates blindly, with no foreknowledge of the ultimate issue. When, in a lecture at the University of Denver in 1972, I first advocated two or four years of compulsory non-attendance at school as a break before going on to the university, I could not resist the temptation of referring to my years of work on the *Sun*, as if my thesis had grown out of that experience. It could

have been cited as a slight bit of evidence in support of the thesis, but hardly more than that. The idea of interrupted schooling was born out of thinking about the student turmoil of the sixties. It was conceived in the context of other educational ideas which may have had some roots in my own experiences as a student and teacher; but these related ideas did not coalesce into a coherent educational theory until some years after I had retired from teaching.

Of the many years that I have spent since 1930 in theorizing and arguing about education, it is only since the early fifties, when I prepared an elaborate series of papers for a three-day conference held under the auspices of the Ford Foundation, that I have fully appreciated how novel and difficult is the problem of educating a whole people, not just an upper crust of ten percent. Yet this is the task which confronts our society and which has confronted no other before this century. The recognition of it is even more recent than that.

As late as 1941 I had no hesitation in talking about education in terms that would have been congenial to Aristotle in the fourth century B.C. I mention that year because I can vividly remember a debate that I had in Chicago that January with Bertrand Russell (who had just become Lord Russell). The subject in dispute was stated as follows: Resolved that the objectives of education are always and everywhere the same. I took the affirmative side, arguing that since human beings are always and everywhere the same in the specific properties they all possess as members of the same species, it must follow that the goal to be achieved by the educational process should be the same for all.

How Aristotelian and repugnant to Lord Russell my argument must have sounded! I summarized it in the following words: “*If* education must aim at the betterment of men by forming good habits in them, and *if* the virtues, or good habits, are the same for all men because their natural capacities are the same and tend naturally toward the same developments, *then* it follows that the virtues, or good habits, as the ends of education, are absolute and universal principles on which education should be founded.”

The conclusion follows logically, I conceded, only if the premises—the two ifs—are true, but I immediately went on to assert that they were. “If my premises are in fact true, and if my reasoning is valid,” I told Lord Russell and the audience, “then the conclusion is inescapable.”

I will never forget Bertrand Russell's opening rejoinder. We had been asked to wear dinner jackets, I suppose to ensure the formality of the proceedings. It was to be a formal debate—in dress if not in thought. Respecting Lord Russell as my senior by many years, and also as immeasurably more eminent, I had carefully prepared my initial presentation of the affirmative position. It was all written out. Lord Russell came to the platform without a shred of paper and, I suspect, without a jot or tittle of preparatory thought on the subject. But he did have a clean stiff white cuff on his boiled shirt, and on it, I observed as I looked back at him from the podium in the course of reading my speech, he jotted down notes from time to time. When he arose to present the negative position, his opening sally was "I greatly admire Dr. Adler's rugged simplicity."

From that point on, with one off-the-cuff remark after another, Lord Russell provoked outbursts of laughter. At the end, the applause, won easily by his witticisms, appeared to indicate that he had triumphed. I felt that I should have been adjudged the victor at the bar of reason, though not in the court of laughter. But I now know that Lord Russell had the better side of the question, though not for any reason he gave at the time.

In the summers of 1973 and 1974, the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies held conferences on the changing concept of the educated person. It was generally agreed that traditional ideas of what it means to be educated, in the fullest sense of that term, can no longer be applied in the contemporary world, especially not in the technologically advanced industrial societies which are committed to political democracy and, consequently, to equality of educational opportunity. When such a society undertakes to educate its whole population, it must acknowledge the principle that every human being, with the possible exception of those in asylums, should aspire to become an educated person.

In view of individual differences in talent, aptitude, and temperament, the way in which the educational ideal is realized cannot be the same for everyone. On that score, Russell was right. However, if we conceive the educated person as any human being who, having acquired the tools of learning in school, goes on in the rest of life to use them for the fullest possible development of his or her capacities, then the ideal is realizable, at least to some degree, by every member of the population.

If this is accepted, we must consider how everyone should be schooled to fulfill such aspirations; and, beyond compulsory schooling, what educational facilities should be provided. Should

the schooling of all children who are destined to become citizens and to have free time for the pursuits of leisure be differentiated or undifferentiated? Should some be liberally schooled and the rest vocationally trained? My answer to these questions, in favor of undifferentiated schooling, involves a number of points, none of which I would have understood or agreed to when I decided to go to college, or for that matter many years thereafter.

Beginning as early as possible, in order to take advantage of the child's capacity for early learning, all normal human beings should have the same basic schooling for twelve years. That basic schooling should be the same in its general direction, aiming to make all the children competent as learners, with the hope that they will become learned after they leave school, aiming to acquaint them superficially with the world of learning, and aiming to motivate them to go on learning for the rest of their lives. The schools are certainly not doing these three things for all the children, and probably they are not doing them very effectively even for a few.

If formal, compulsory schooling were to begin at age four, its twelve years could be terminated with the award at age sixteen of the bachelor's degree, signifying competence in the liberal arts or skills of learning—the ability to read and write, speak and listen, observe, measure, and calculate. Such competence defines the end result of the schooling that an industrial democracy owes all its children.

That, however, is only the beginning of education. In order that continued learning for all, and more formal schooling for some, should take place under the most auspicious circumstances, no one should be allowed to continue in school immediately after basic schooling has been completed at age sixteen. There should be a hiatus of at least two years—I would prefer four—during which time the young become mature by engaging in the world's work, either in the public or the private sector of the economy. They certainly cannot become mature as long as they remain in school; on the contrary, they suffer from prolonged adolescence. That is a pathological condition which can be prevented only by getting the young out of school as soon after the onset of puberty as possible.

After the academic hiatus, the skills of learning can be applied in studies at advanced schools (however they be named—college or university) which should be open only to those who have demonstrated both competence and inclination for specialized learning of a scholarly or professional kind. Those who do not seek advanced degrees should be provided with informal educational facilities for

the continued learning in which all adults should engage for a lifetime if they are to become educated men and women. No one can become an educated person in school, even in the best of schools or with the most complete schooling. Schooling is only the first phase in the process of becoming educated, not the termination of it. Of course, that is a truth which no schoolboy is ever likely to understand or acknowledge. I certainly did not understand it when I decided to give up being a workingman on the *Sun* and become a schoolboy again; and I would have agreed to it even less when I had completed my undergraduate studies in the college at Columbia University. At that moment I was probably more firmly convinced than I have ever felt since that I had become an educated person.

But I have got ahead of myself, or at least of where I was that early spring of 1920, when I left the *Sun* with some regrets. For some time after, I missed the excitement of working on a daily newspaper, especially during the years of America's involvement in the First World War and the political turbulence that followed in its wake. I can still remember the sequence of events on the false armistice day—November 7, 1918. Fairly early that morning, I happened to go down to the composing room and saw the front page of the first edition of the *Evening Sun* locked up and ready to be matted, with the banner headline in the largest possible type announcing the war's end. The news that an armistice was about to be signed had leaked from France, but confirmation of it was not yet forthcoming from Washington. From 9:30 that morning until well past eleven, long-distance telephones buzzed back and forth, but the minutes passed without a green light to the pressroom to rush out an "extra." Suddenly, we heard one of the *Evening Sun's* competitors—I think it was the *Telegraph*—hawking an "extra" on the street outside our building. At that moment the green light flashed; editorial restraint had been overcome, even though there had been no official confirmation of the news. Five of the six evening newspapers came out with an "extra." Only the old *New York Globe* kept on publishing a denial that an armistice had been or was about to be signed, and it sold as many copies as all the other papers combined. Everyone bought the cautiously negative *Globe* along with one or another of the wildly enthusiastic affirmative sheets. The excitement on the streets of New York exploded in wave after wave all afternoon and evening, exceeding the jubilation and hysteria that celebrated the genuine Armistice Day four days later.

In the interval between my leaving the *Sun* and entering Columbia College in September 1920, I had to grapple with two necessities.

One was the necessity of finding a job that would enable me to support myself, and the other was the necessity of preparing myself to take the New York State Regents examinations for college entrance. How I managed both things at once I cannot now fully recall or clearly understand, but some of the incidents of that interval still remain vivid in my memory.

I remember the dislike I felt for job-hunting. I would leave home in the morning with a copy of the want ads, but instead of going through the painful process of knocking on doors and applying for jobs, I would go to the public library and spend the day, returning home in the late afternoon with the tale that I had searched all day and found nothing. Every now and then I would vary this procedure and line up with other applicants to be interviewed by a prospective employer, but I seldom did this more than once in any day. However, I did it frequently enough to have lightning strike once. I found a job with a small advertising agency. Weighing my experience on the *Sun* against my all too-apparent youthfulness (I was just sixteen), they hired me as a copywriter. My first assignment was to write an advertisement for a chain of nut and candy stores.

My lack of aptitude for this task should have been enough to get me fired right off the bat; but I gave my employers additional grounds. At that time I was still taking evening courses at Columbia University. Among them was one in the literature of the Romantic period, given by Prof. Frank Allen Patterson, under whom I had previously studied the literature of the Victorian period and became acquainted with Mill's *Autobiography*. Professor Patterson cared little about philosophy; lyric poetry was his main interest. He countered my fledgling aspirations to become a philosopher by encouraging me to write poetry. I must have had a strong imitative bent, for just as reading the dialogues of Plato had sent me off trying to imitate Socrates, so reading Tennyson and Browning, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats set me to imitating them. I wrote reams of verse. Professor Patterson, who should have known better, smiled upon these efforts and misled me into thinking that maybe it was the poet in me, not the philosopher, that I should try to develop.

During my brief employment as an advertising copywriter, I happened to be struggling with a poem for Professor Patterson's special approval. Being of an ultraconservative temper, he favored Wordsworth, especially the Wordsworth of the "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," "Tintern Abbey," and the "Ode to Duty," and he shied away from the rebellious Shelley. To please him, I undertook

to write a longish “poem” imitating Wordsworth’s later style, entitled “On Placing Shelley next to Wordsworth on the Bookshelf.” The bookshelf, it seemed to my bookish mind, was exactly the spot where that confrontation of antagonistic spirits should take place. Under Professor Patterson’s direction, the poem went through many drafts. I became so caught up in the effort that, instead of writing copy for Cash’s Meatee Nuts, I occupied my time revising my masterpiece. When this was observed, I was given my walking papers.

If that verse cost me my job, it also gained me entrance to college and a full-tuition scholarship to boot. Professor Patterson happened to be the director of the Extension Division at Columbia. His recommending me to the director of admissions probably turned the scales in my favor on both counts; but, as I recall from one long conversation, he had some misgivings about helping me. He had the feeling, he said, that I might turn out to be a better poet if I didn’t go to college. Studying might turn me in other directions—toward philosophy or science. The budding Socrates might bloom, the budding Wordsworth wilt and die.

At the time I could not understand his premonition, nor for that matter did the resolution of this conflict occur until the very end of my three years in college. I can remember another longish piece of verse that I wrote, during my junior year, in the style of Browning’s dramatic monologues, in which I had Skelton, a little-known pre-Elizabethan poet, soliloquize about the comparative merits of being a poet and a philosopher, with the issue left unresolved. I can also remember being a member of the Boar’s Head Society, the members of which brought their literary efforts to be criticized by Prof. John Erskine. On one occasion I submitted a poem with the title “Lines Written toward the End of Winter,” and Erskine’s only comment was to ask why I had not called it “Ode to Spring.” That and similar slaps by Erskine, who was much more discerning than Patterson, should have stopped me from further versifying, but it was other circumstances that put an end to it.


After losing my job with the advertising agency, I walked the streets in halfhearted pursuit of another. After a few weeks of this, an uncle of mine who worked for the Worthington Pump and Machinery Corporation came to my rescue. On his recommendation, I was hired as an office boy at four dollars a week. Carfare on the subway from upper Manhattan, where I lived, down to 115 Broadway came to sixty cents a week; and lunches at the Exchange Buffet or the Automat—one sandwich, a glass of milk, and a piece of pie—came to ninety cents a week more. That left little for book

purchases or anything else. Nevertheless, it turned out to be a job that served my particular needs at the time, for shortly after I started at Worthington, I was assigned to the outer office of the president of the corporation. Since he sent me on errands only infrequently, most of the time I sat in a very comfortable office at a large receptionist's desk preparing for the New York State Regents examinations, which I had to take to make up for my lack of high school credits.

In addition to boning up for these exams, I even had time for a little extracurricular reading. Someone had suggested Hart's *Psychology of Insanity*, and the reading of that extraordinary little book—extraordinary in 1920—served as my introduction to the study of the mind and its quirks. Another book picked up at Brentano's was in the Modern Library, *Evolution in Modern Thought*, a collection of essays by Weismann, Bateson, Morgan, Driesch, and Bergson. I can remember how puzzled I was by the conflicting points of view. Try as I might, I simply could not figure out how evolution was supposed to work. I spent hours writing notes to myself and making diagrams in an effort to put down the steps by which a new species came into being. That puzzlement remained with me for many years—until I read Darwin's *Origin of Species* for the third time and found the clue in what he had to say about the extinction of intermediate varieties.

The third book I remember reading during those months at Worthington caught my attention by its title. The elder brother of my friend Malcolm Sanger was a junior in Columbia College. He had taken a philosophy course in which he had been assigned William James's lectures on pragmatism. I found the book on his desk, had never seen the word *pragmatism* before, became curious about its meaning, looked it up in a dictionary, and, still unsatisfied, went to Brentano's and bought the book. I read it very, very slowly, becoming more and more fascinated by the theory of truth, of knowledge, and of experience that William James had propounded in his lectures at Columbia University in 1907. I did not realize that the controversy about the pragmatic theory of truth was still raging in 1920; nor had I ever heard of the pragmatic school of philosophy, or of John Dewey, C. S. Peirce, or F. C. S. Schiller. But one thing did ring a bell with me at once—the inscription on the dedication page of the book. It read: “To John Stuart Mill who would have been our leader had he been alive.”

Mill had sent me to Plato and to Socrates, and now here was William James reminding me of Mill. It took me many years to understand the affinity between the American pragmatism of James and

Dewey and the English utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill, but the reading of *Pragmatism* inducted me at once into the twists and turns of epistemologizing. That became one of the main preoccupations of my college years. I still have a term essay I wrote—this time in imitation of Immanuel Kant—entitled “Prolegomena to Any Future Epistemology.” Luckily, while at Worthington, my early ponderings about truth and knowledge did not interfere with my efforts to pass the Regents examinations; if they had, I might never have gotten into college. 

Chapter 1 from his autobiography, *Philosopher At Large*.

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