

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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REFLECTIONS ABOUT MY LIFE TEACHING AND LEARNING

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In an earlier chapter I reported my lifetime engagement with educational reform in our colleges and public schools; and in the preceding chapter I stressed how much I have learned as a result of conducting seminars at Aspen. Here in a relatively brief chapter, I wish to say a few things more about my own education and how one becomes a generally educated human being in the mature years of one's life.

At the end of Chapter 4, I confessed how weary I had become with being involved in educational reform and how tired I was of thinking about the problems of education, but my zest for teaching and learning is as strong as ever.

Professional educators—in fact the whole educational establishment, especially its schools of education—are preoccupied with a

host of practical problems (administrative, economic, and sociological problems, problems of testing and grading). They give cursory and peripheral attention to what lies at the heart of the educational process—teaching and learning. That is why Bob Hutchins used to say that education was a dull subject, but he never lost interest in teaching and learning. So, too, my colleague Jacques Barzun recently wrote a book entitled *Begin Here*. It is a book mainly about teaching and learning, but one that pays critical attention to some of the agitated educational problems that occupy the attention of most people, especially the educational profession.

I have said again and again that no one becomes a generally educated human being in school and college, or even in the graduate schools of our universities. There are two reasons why that is so. One is that youth is an insuperable obstacle to becoming a generally educated person. Schools and colleges would be at their very best, as they seldom are, if they were to prepare the young for a lifetime of learning after they have completed their stay in educational institutions, fully realizing that the diplomas and degrees they have acquired do not signify that they have completed their education.

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The second reason is that, with the elective system regnant in most of our colleges, they have become places devoted largely to special education, serving the professional or occupational aims of their students. There are very few colleges in this country devoted solely or even largely to general education—the kind of study that anticipates the need for a lifetime of further study if anyone is ever to become generally educated. Specialized education prevails in the graduate schools of the university, whether they are directed to training for one of the learned professions or to training and research in the humanities, the arts and sciences.

Some years ago I wrote a book entitled *A Guidebook to Learning*. In its closing chapters, I argued that the three fields of subject-matter that constituted the realm of general education were poetry (by which I meant not just lyrics, but the whole of imaginative, narrative literature in prose or verse), history, and philosophy. I omitted the special sciences because they did not have the transcendental character of history and philosophy. There can be a history of history and a philosophy of history; a history of philosophy and a philosophy of history; and, of course, a history and philosophy of science; but there is no science of philosophy, no science of history, and no science of science.

When we use phrases such as “the science of physics,” “the science of chemistry” or “the science of mathematics,” the meaning of the word “of” has changed. In the phrase “philosophy of history,” the “of” means that history is the object being studied philosophically; whereas in the phrase “science of physics” it means that physics is the name of a particular, specialized body of scientific knowledge; in other words the phrase “the science of physics” translates into “the science which is physics.”

The particular, highly specialized branches of scientific knowledge belong in one’s pursuit of general learning only when they are approached historically and philosophically; which is to say, from the standpoint of the generalist, not the specialist. The same general themes that philosophy treats abstractly and intellectually, poetry deals with concretely and imaginatively. While history deals with every aspect of our human experience in terms of what has actually happened to the human race on earth, poetry enriches our insight into that experience by going beyond the actual to the possible, telling likely stories about what might or could have happened in the lives that human beings live.

After they leave their formal or institutional schooling far behind, the chief leisure pursuit of mature human beings should be the study of poetry, history, and philosophy, year after year. Such continuing study on the part of adult men and women should be interminable. It does not come to an end; it is not completed by the award of a diploma or a degree. The only certification of its completion in this life is a death certificate.

Thus understood, it is quite different from what is usually called “adult education” or “continuing education,” in the extension divisions of our universities. For the most part, the courses that adults take there, sometimes for credit, sometimes not, are efforts toward their special, not their general, education, compensating for or supplementing instruction they did not receive in earlier years of their lives. What I mean by adult education or continued learning that aims at becoming generally educated does not involve taking courses of any kind. Getting credit is no part of its motivation. That arises from the joy of learning for its own sake; never for any pragmatic reason or practically useful result. It is, in short, the learning of the autodidact—the person who learns without intervention or help on the part of others who are professional teachers.

How should the autodidact proceed? First of all, that word “autodidact” is a misnomer; for autodidacts do not teach themselves—

no one can do that. But the learning of the autodidact does not exclude teaching, for one learns a great deal by one's self in the process of teaching others. I have experienced this in the course of conducting seminars. Teaching others, I have found, is one of the most effective means of learning what cannot be taught by others.

Apart from teaching others, what should an autodidact do to continue learning throughout his or her adult life? In the closing pages of *A Guidebook to Learning*, my answer was summed up in three words: "Read and discuss." Reading the great books alone will not do. I said many years ago, after I had written *How to Read a Book*, that solitary reading is as undesirable as solitary drinking. To enrich one's understanding of what one has read, one must discuss it with others who have read the same book, with or without the guidance of someone who is a better reader than most of us are.

Nor will discussion itself serve the purpose, without any control by or reference to topics or themes developed in the great conversation to be found in the great books. Without that control, discussion usually degenerates into superficial chatter, after-dinner chitchat, or what is worse, a bull-session that is nothing but an exchange of opinions with everyone speaking in turn without anybody listening to what anyone else has said.

The regulative maxim for the autodidact is "read and discuss" with emphasis on the word "and" to signify that the two activities must be done in planned conjunction with each other, not each in the absence or deprivation of the other.

If I were called upon to add anything to that maxim as advice to the autodidact, I would add only one more word of counsel. I would admonish individuals to travel as much as they could in their mature years; only then can they benefit by direct acquaintance with the diversity of peoples and cultures, as enlightening to their understanding of the specific, common human nature that all of us share alike, especially the sameness of the human mind that is to be found in all human beings.

At the invitation of Dean Michael Shinagel of the Harvard Extension School, I delivered the Lowell Lecture at Harvard University on April 11, 1990. My title was "The Great Books, the Great Ideas, and a Lifetime of Learning." I thought it appropriate for the occasion to begin in an autobiographical vein. On rereading the opening paragraphs of my address, I find them to be of relevance here

and so I quote them below.

I was a drop-out from high school. I wanted to be a journalist, and went to work on the old, very great New York Sun under editor Edward Page Mitchell. I thought that I should have a little more schooling than I had, having had only two years of high school, so I enrolled in extension courses at Columbia—took a course in Victorian Literature and a course in Wordsworth and Coleridge, of the century before. In the course in Victorian Literature I was assigned to read John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography*. I discovered, to my amazement, that John Stuart Mill could read Greek at the age of three, had read the dialogues of Plato in Greek at the age of five, and by eleven had read most of the books that I later discovered were the Great Books. At eleven he edited his father's history of India. At twelve he edited Jeremy Bentham's *Rationale of Judicial Proof*. And I was now fifteen and had read none of these.

So I decided to buy a set of Plato, which ruined me. I decided I could play the Greek game of Socrates—a game with one's mind. I had impressed Frank Allen Patterson, who was Director of the extension school; he taught Ethel course in Victorian Literature. He got me a three-year scholarship at Columbia. And I did go there for three years—sophomore, junior and senior year—but unlike what Dean Shinagel told you, I did not graduate in 1923, though I did get a Phi Beta Kappa key. . . . I got my Bachelor's degree in 1983—sixty years after I had my Ph.D.

I reminded my audience of the basic distinction among all the phases of schooling—from kindergarten up to the graduate degrees (which are terminated by diplomas, degrees, and certifications) and the one phase that is truly interminable, the phase that is genuinely adult learning.

We normally have eight years of elementary school, four years of high school, four years of college, three or four years of medical school, law school, engineering school. Degrees, diplomas, or certificates honor the completion of these phases of schooling. It is proper for a person to say "I've completed my college program" or "I completed my professional training." It is similarly proper for a person, enrolled in extension courses, to say "I have now completed the specialized education that I did not complete in college or professional school." But it is totally improper for an adult to say, "I have now completed my adult education."

No more preposterous words can be uttered than for someone to say—at the age of thirty, forty, or fifty—"I have now completed

my adult education.” To that, the only response should be: “Are you ready to die? What are you going to do with the rest of your life?”

Adult learning, for the sake of becoming a generally educated human being, once begun, is interminable. Our minds, unlike our bodies, are able to grow and develop until death overtakes us. Unless it declines because of serious mental illness, the mind is not like a muscle, bone, or bodily organ that begins to decline when youth ends, but it is a vital instrument that, if properly exercised, continues to improve. The only condition of its continual growth is that it be continually nourished and exercised. How nourished? By reading the great books year after year. How exercised? By discussing them.

I then proceeded once again in the autobiographical vein.

Permit me to digress for a moment by speaking to you autobiographically. I became an undergraduate in the college of Columbia University in 1920. At Columbia two strokes of good fortune befell me and changed my life. The great books seminars were invented by John Erskine, of whom I was a student in 1922 and 1923. My first stroke of good fortune was to be asked to teach one of those seminars with the poet, Mark Van Doren, from 1923 to 1929. I would have supposed, under other circumstances, that I had read the great books and understood them, and would not have to read them again. What I learned by having to teach them Socratically the year after I graduated from college was that I did not really understand them.

This gave me the insight that the great books are endlessly readable and that the attempt to understand the great ideas to be found in them is an interminable pursuit. That insight was reinforced by the years of teaching great books seminars at the University of Chicago with President Robert Hutchins, between 1930 and 1950, by the teaching of adult seminars in Chicago and at the Aspen Institute ever since, and by all the work I did in editing *Great Books of the Western World* for Encyclopaedia Britannica, and all the work I did in producing the *Syntopicon* of the Great Ideas.

I concluded my address by saying:

Generally educated persons are those who, through the travail of their own lives, have enough experience to assimilate the ideas which make them representative of their culture and the bearer of its traditions. . . .

Autodidacts who read, year after year, the great books of history, philosophy, and poetry, and discuss them with their peers, are on the road to becoming generally educated persons before they die, and to have lives that are enriched by a lifetime of learning.

The question period after the lecture was vigorous and penetrating. It was a thoroughly enjoyable occasion, preceded by a dinner hosted by my old friend and colleague Professor Richard Hunt, and attended by notable members of the Harvard faculty, including Professor David Riesman, with whom I was glad to renew my acquaintance, harking back to the days when we lived in adjoining houses on the campus of the University of Chicago.

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Rick Hunt had been an associate of mine at the Aspen Institute. He also was and is on the Board of Directors of my Institute for Philosophical Research, and he was a founding member of the original Paideia Group that sponsored *The Paideia Proposal* (1982). Adele Simmons, then President of Hampshire College, and now President of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, was also a member of the original Paideia Group. I had known her since her childhood, for she is the daughter of Hermon Dunlap Smith, as Trustee of the University of Chicago and a member of the Board of the Institute for Philosophical Research when it was established in 1952.

I mention these facts to explain the background of the affair they arranged at Harvard in the fall of 1985. The previous spring, the three of us had had lunch together in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and I must have aroused their sympathies by complaining about the difficulties I had experienced in obtaining charitable grants from foundations to support the ongoing work of the Paideia reform. They never told me this, but I think this is what led them to host a banquet to cheer me up, to which they invited friends of mine from all over the country, among whom were Douglass Cater, then President of Washington College in Chestertown, Maryland; Fred Drexler from San Francisco, the Chairman of the Board of the Institute for Philosophical Research; Louis O. Kelso, also from San Francisco, with whom I had co-authored *The Capitalist Manifesto* in 1958; Gail Thomas and Donald Cowan from Texas, with whose Dallas Institute for Humanities and Culture, I had been associated; Mary Tyler Cheek from Richmond, Virginia; Tom Goetz, the Editor in Chief of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*; my close associates at the Institute for Philosophical Research, Charles, Geraldine, and

John Van Doren; and my wife Caroline.

I recall the witty and amiable speeches made on this occasion by Tom Goetz, Louis Kelso, Charles Van Doren, and, of course, by Adele Simmons and Rick Hunt. The foibles, follies, and idiosyncrasies of Mortimer J. Adler gave them plenty of material to make jokes about. One thing in particular sticks in my mind. Among the encomiums that Rick Hunt heaped on me, he called me “a born teacher.”

Whether he was right or not, I have always immodestly taken pride in my ability as a teacher. But what is meant by calling anyone “a born teacher”? Are teachers born, not made? What is the innate gift of temperament—certainly not intellectual endowment—that predisposes an individual to be good at teaching.

As I have reflected about this, it seems to me that being a born teacher is something like being a born actor. Think of the countless young men and women who go to drama schools year after year and seek training for a career on the stage. How many of them end up recognized by the public as stars of the theatre, or even as chosen by theatrical producers for bit parts in the plays they put on the stage? The selection process that winnows a very small amount of wheat from a large amount of chaff must have something to do with the native endowment, not the training of the few who succeed in their ambition to be actors or actresses. Is the same true of the many who go to schools of education to prepare themselves for the teaching profession and the few who turn out to be really good teachers? Does it also explain why some who never went near a school of education, and would not be caught dead doing so, turn out to be very good teachers? If I am a good teacher, I am one of them. And what is the innate temperamental gift that underlies this result?

I think I can answer this last question, and the answer may throw light on the similitude between teaching and acting. The temperamental endowment is a love of thinking combined with a sympathetic concern for the thinking of others and for the improvement of their intellects—the growth of their understanding. The born teacher is one who is motivated not just to think, but to think with others in order to help them think, and also to teach, thereby to learn.

The born actor or actress is likewise one who is endowed with a temperament for projecting the personality he or she portrays so that an audience can empathize with the character of that personal-

ity. The born teacher has the ability to project his own thinking in a way that engages the thinking power of others. Whether these reflections are sound or not, I have always deeply enjoyed teaching and will go on doing it whenever the opportunity for doing it is afforded me.

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For me, teaching is the most effective means of learning. If everyone who wished to learn something was engaged in teaching it to others, he or she would learn more than the individuals being taught. The best teachers are those who learn the most from teaching, and those who learn nothing in the process of teaching are hardly teachers at all. They should be called indoctrinators who impress the memories instead of developing the minds of their students.

I said earlier that I have learned more from the seminars I have conducted in the last seventy years than from any other source. I have also learned a great deal from the lectures I have given and from the books I have written, insofar as my intention in lecturing and writing was wholly or partly that of teaching.

As compared with conducting seminars, lecturing is an inferior form of teaching. It was wittily remarked by someone that lecturing is the process whereby the notes of the teacher become the notes of the student without passing through the minds of either. That is as true of public lectures as of classroom lectures. The only way to correct this miscarriage of teaching is to hold a forum after the lecture—if possible, a protracted question and answer session. Then the lecturer learns from the questions he is unable to answer on the spot and takes away for later reflection.

In a long career on the lecture platform, I have always insisted upon a question and answer period after the lecture. When that is not possible or permitted, lecturing is not teaching at all, at least not for me, because it is not a learning experience.


The nub of the matter lies in the questions the teacher is asked that he or she cannot answer at once and profits from keeping in mind and returning to for subsequent reflection. The easy questions that the teacher can answer at once can be dismissed from mind. Not so, the difficult—the perplexing—questions. Therein lies the learning that results from teaching, more so from conducting seminars than from lecturing, but especially from conducting seminars about one's own books, as I have done in recent years at the Aspen Insti-

tute.

Socrates is the model teacher. The Socratic method of teaching is by questions and answers. The dialogues of Plato should be read as an account of the process by which Socrates learned in the course of questioning others, and also answering questions raised by others. That may be why my first reading of a few early Platonic dialogues in my teens awakened in me the desire to teach. I was so inspired by the Socratic performance that I tried to engage my friends in mimicry of it, with me playing the role of Socrates.

In the first twenty years of my teaching experience, I taught young adults in college classrooms, either conducting seminars Socratically or giving lectures, accompanied by questions and answers. In the last forty years I have lectured to adult audiences and conducted seminars, in Chicago, Aspen, and elsewhere, for mature adults. For the same reason that mature individuals are better able than the immature to learn what is requisite for becoming generally educated persons, one is also able to learn more from trying to teach them than one can learn from teaching the young, the immature.

The difficult questions mature individuals ask in terms of experiences they have acquired in their mature years go to the heart of the matter. Trying to answer their questions is more rewarding than answering questions raised by students in college. In short, trying to teach one's peers in the mature years of one's own life is teaching and learning at its best.

I remember the year before I wrote *How to Read a Book*. That book originated in a lecture I gave to assembled alumni of the University of Chicago. I spoke from notes I had made on the two sides of a three-by-five card. As I gave that lecture again and again in the months to follow, the questions I received from a diversity of audiences enlarged my notes until the file of notes I compiled gave me, in outline form, the book I wrote at the end of that year. 

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