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Nobody can decide for himself whether he is going to be a human being. The only question open to him is whether he will be an ignorant undeveloped one or one who has sought to reach the highest point he is capable of attaining. —Robert M. Hutchins



Robert Maynard Hutchins

(January 17, 1899 – May 17, 1977)

EDITOR'S NOTE

When we decided to memorialize this week—the 115th anniversary of Robert M. Hutchins' birth, I pondered where to start. There is so much to say and so little space to say it in, we decided that the following excerpts from two poignant addresses that Dr. Adler gave, would best suit the limited parameters.

Because Bob Hutchins played such a large part in my life and influenced me so pervasively in what I did at the University of Chicago and in our editorial work together at Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., *Philosopher at Large* is filled with stories about our collaboration and with excerpts from our correspondence. But nothing will be found there that is an appraisal, accurate as well as adulatory, of the man himself and of what it was like to be so closely associated with him.

Here, it seems to me, I can remedy that defect by presenting my assessment of Bob Hutchins on two memorable occasions—the first in 1965 at a dinner party in New York, organized to honor his leadership of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions; and the second, at a memorial tribute to him in the Rockefeller Chapel at the University of Chicago, shortly after his death.

On the first occasion, I began by saying these speeches are limited to five minutes not because you (in the audience) are impatient, or because brevity is the soul of wit, but because, for Bob Hutchins, brevity is the essence of intelligent communication. The higher the intelligence, the fewer the words—the less the mind needs or can tolerate having things spelled out, explained, or repeated. Since the intelligence of Bob Hutchins outranks, outspeeds, and outruns all the minds with which he has any dealings—I mean all without exception—poor Bob has had to put up with an almost unbearable amount of prolixity on the part of his friends and associates.

Bob's innate politeness, fortified by his mother's injunction never to be rude, prevents him from showing his impatience in most cases; but even he could not always contain himself in the face of needless recitations of facts or reasons. In his office at the University of Chicago he had a sign in his desk drawer which, from time to time, he would take out and put on the front of his desk. It read: "Please do not tell the President things he already knows."

Having thus set the stage, I went on as follows.

In the tradition of the great books from Homer to Hutchins, there are no other great authors half as brief as he is, not even Aristotle who, for most of us, tends to let matters stand insufficiently explained. The nearest runner up to the rarity of the Hutchins intelligence is Isaac Newton. When Newton first read Euclid's *Elements* at Cambridge University, he complained to his tutor that the lengthy demonstrations were a waste of his time: all the theorems of Book I seemed to him just as self-evident as the axioms and didn't need proof.

Bob is that kind of reader. I remember his first reading of the difficult proofs for the existence of God in the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas. He understood the argument so well on the first reading that he could boil it down to a few paragraphs and improve on it in the process. Some of his letters seldom run beyond a single sentence...; and his books say so much in so few words that only an intelligence equal to his can understand them as he would like to have them understood.

At that point in my address, I tried to summarize the whole of Bob's teaching with maximum brevity. I said that he has taught us that Western civilization, in its highest reaches, is the civilization of the dialogue and that the essential progress mankind ... has made and must still make consists in the fullest realization of that civilization's ideals.

He has taught us that the civilization of the dialogue rests on the exercise of our highest faculties; that it grows with the application of our intellectual powers to every human concern; and that we participate in it to the extent that reason and reasonableness pervade our private conduct and our public actions.

He has taught us that the civilization of the dialogue is dedicated to the search for truth, to the advancement of learning, and to the dissemination of knowledge through the free interplay of minds engaged cooperatively in these pursuits; that it conceives education and politics as connected enterprises having the moral and the intellectual virtues as their common goal and rational discussion as their common means; that it conceives the state as a community of free men deliberating and acting for the common good; that it conceives government as the work of law, law as the work of reason, and reason as the source of the supremacy of right over might.

He has taught us that the civilization of the dialogue will expand with peace, and that peace will enable mankind to move toward the fullest realization of the potentialities of the human mind, but only if it is imbued with an evangelical universalism that seeks to unite all men as equals in dignity and as kinsmen in the life of reason.

I concluded by saying that Robert Maynard Hutchins had devoted his whole life and all his works to the civilization of the dialogue. He is for us its clearest symbol and its surest hope. We see in him its living essence—civility in all things. In mind and character, in thought and action, he is its paragon—the civilized man.

Being one of the speakers in the Rockefeller Chapel on the second occasion, I was fully aware of the solemnity of that ceremony. I followed James H. Douglas, one of Bob's best friends on the University's Board of Trustees, and preceded Edward Levi, then President of the University. Solemn though the occasion was, I thought it appropriate to introduce some levity into my remarks. I began as follows.

The friends and family of Robert Hutchins who are gathered here today do not need the utterance of a eulogy. The loss they feel and the memories they cherish bear silent testimony to the influence he exerted upon their lives and the affection he aroused in all who had the good fortune to be touched intimately by the elegance of his style; by the integrity of his character; by the beauty and grace of his person; by the keenness and wit of his mind; and by his gentleness, kindness, and compassion.

May I speak for them in trying to explain to others less closely associated with him and to those who knew him only by hearsay why we feel that the measured judgment which will be formed retrospectively, with the passage of time, cannot exaggerate his contribution to the improvement of this University and of education generally, here and abroad; to the realization of the highest ideals of a democratic society; to world peace and the establishment of a world community, founded, with justice, on liberty and equality for all the peoples of the earth; to the furtherance of the moral, intellectual, and spiritual revolution that was always the controlling objective of his thought and action; and last, but not least, to the advancement of knowledge itself, knowledge illuminated by the light that is cast upon what we know by the understanding of basic ideas, and is directed toward the wisdom derived from a consideration of first principles and final ends.

I then went on in a lighter vein.

Those who loved Bob Hutchins dearly must be excused for the excesses to which their admiration for him sometimes impelled them. Many years ago, in the summer just before Bob came to the University of Chicago, his secretary at Yale Law School wrote me a letter about the postponement of a meeting with Scott Buchanan that I had been trying to arrange. It would have to be put off until the fall, she wrote, adding, "until then, Mr. Buchanan will have to dream of Mr. Hutchins, and nothing he will dream will compare with the actuality."

And after Bob departed from these precincts to join Paul Hoffman

at the Ford Foundation, a friend, whose admiration for him may seem overzealous, referred to Bob as “the president of the ex-University of Chicago.” We should be able to smile with tolerance at such hyperboles, recognizing the truth they contain and correcting their exaggerations.

Mr. Levi, I know, will do just that, for he will talk of realities, not dreams, and he will describe and justly appraise the heritage that Bob Hutchins left this University, a heritage that continues to inform its life and spirit to this day.

Resolutely concerned, as Bob Hutchins was, with bringing about a moral, intellectual, and spiritual revolution, he never tired of preaching the gospel of the moral and intellectual virtues, of teaching the doctrine which underlies that preachment, and of assiduously cultivating these virtues in his own life.

The example he himself set was the most effective way to guide others to their acquirement, especially the students he taught and the colleagues he admonished. His moral virtues are, perhaps, best exemplified by his courage in undertaking the Manhattan Project that three great Eastern universities had turned down because they feared the risk of failure in the enterprise; and by his actions to preserve academic freedom on this campus, and freedom of speech in this country during the dark days of McCarthy.

His intellectual virtues are best exemplified by his scholarship in the field of law and jurisprudence; by his understanding of the great ideas in the tradition of Western thought through the study of its great books; and by the philosophical cast of his mind that made him pursue wisdom by grappling with fundamental issues in every sphere of thought, always patiently submitting his mind to the controversies they engendered.

He was always patient with and tolerant of those who disagreed with him in a rational manner, but his profound distaste for the irrational made him impatient with those whose disagreement bespoke emotional prejudices; and the acuity, as well as the rapidity, of his intelligence made him impatient with those who spoke at length but said little.

The sharpness and speed of his wit often embarrassed or angered those who suffered from its lightning flashes. When, as Dean of the Yale Law School, he attended a reception for the justices of the Supreme Court, one of the old conservatives then on the bench said to him: “Mr. Dean, I understand that you are teaching the young

men at New Haven what is wrong with our decisions.” “Oh no,” said Mr. Hutchins, “we let them find that out for themselves.”

When, in his second year as President of the University, he began reading the great books with a group of freshman, Professor Paul Shorey, the eminent Greek scholar, questioned him about the advisability of discussing *The Divine Comedy* after only one week’s study of it. “In my day at Harvard under Professor Grandgent,” Shorey said, “we spent a whole year on Dante’s poem. How can you expect your students...?” Shorey started to ask, only to be interrupted by Bob’s quick rejoinder: “The difference, you see, is that our students are very bright.”

In fifty years of close association with Bob Hutchins—at the Yale Law School, at The University of Chicago, at Encyclopaedia Britannica, and at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions—I never ceased to be astonished by the extraordinary power of his intelligence in dealing with difficult books that he was reading for the first time; in dealing with the practical problems of an administrator; in dealing with the arguments involved in the dispute of theoretical issues.

I concluded with reminiscences about Bob Hutchins as a teacher, as Chairman of the Board of Editors of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, and as President of the University of Chicago.

If anyone needs an explanation of the intellectual vitality and the excitement about ideas that, during the Hutchins’ administration, distinguished this University from all others, before and after, he will find it in Bob’s predilection and propensity for sustained discussion of fundamental issues.

That same predilection and propensity characterized his service to Encyclopaedia Britannica as a member of its Board of Directors from 1943, and as Chairman of its Board of Editors from 1949, until his retirement from both posts. During all those years, he was not only the moral conscience of the publishing company, but its persistent mentor as well. His leadership provided the guidance and the inspiration that led in 1952 to the publication of *Great Books of the Western World*, and to the production in 1974 of the radically reconstructed and greatly improved fifteenth edition of the encyclopaedia.

What may be, but should not be, forgotten is that, for fifteen of the twenty years that Robert Hutchins headed this University, he was also a teaching member of its faculty, actively engaged in teaching

students in the University, in the University high school, and in the Law School. As is the case with every good teacher, his impulse to teach sprang from his desire to learn. He was a splendid teacher, one of the best I have ever known, because of his own avidity for learning, accompanied by an acute sense of the difficulties of learning, which made him sympathetic to the pains of others engaged in that process.


Though seldom free from preoccupation with the problems of money raising and of dealing with trustees and faculty, Bob Hutchins never lost sight of his chief problem as a University President—the future of its students.

To convey to you the character of that abiding concern, permit me, in closing, to quote from his “Address to the Graduating Class,” in this chapel on Commencement Day, 1935:

“It is now almost fifteen years since I was in the position you occupy. I can therefore advise you about the dangers and difficulties you will encounter...

...My experience and observation lead me to warn you that the greatest, the most insidious ... the most paralyzing danger you will face is the danger of corruption. Time will corrupt you. Your friends, your wives or husbands, your business or professional associates will corrupt you; your social, political, and financial ambitions will corrupt you. The worst thing about life is that it is demoralizing...

...Believe me, you are closer to the truth now than you will ever be again. Do not let “practical” men tell you that you should surrender your ideals because they are impractical. Do not be reconciled to dishonesty, indecency, and brutality because gentlemanly ways have been discovered of being dishonest, indecent, and brutal.

...Take your stand now before time has corrupted you. Before you know it, it will be too late. Courage, temperance, honor, liberality, justice, wisdom, reason, and understanding, these are still the virtues. In the intellectual virtues, this University has tried to train you. The life you have lived here should have helped you toward the rest. If come what may you hold them fast, you will do honor to yourselves and to the University, and you will serve your country.” 

MORE ON ROBERT M. HUTCHINS

For those who would like to learn more about Robert Hutchins, there are thousands of websites, and a number of biographies available (see below). And of course much about him can be found in Dr. Adler's two autobiographies: *Philosopher at Large: An Intellectual Autobiography* (1902-1976) (New York: Collier Books, Macmillan, 1992, originally published in 1977), and *A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror: Further Autobiographical Reflections of a Philosopher at Large* (New York: Macmillan, 1992).

Unseasonable Truths: The Life of Robert Maynard Hutchins by Harry S. Ashmore Little, Brown and Company LB875.H9753A84 (1989)

Robert M. Hutchins: Portrait of an Educator by Mary Ann Dzuback University of Chicago Press ISBN 0-226-17710-6 (1991)

Hutchins' University: A Memoir of the University of Chicago by William Hardy McNeill University of Chicago Press ISBN 0-226-56170-4 (1991)

Robert Maynard Hutchins: A Memoir by Milton Mayer University of California Press ISBN 0-520-07091-7 (1993)

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