

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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## LEARNING BEGINS AT FORTY

**Mortimer Adler**

**Part 1 of 2**

**I**n his study of the “new leisure” in America, Robert Bendiner, under the title “Could You Stand a Four-Day Week?” writes as follows:

In the main it will take all the educational facilities of the country to create the new climate, and here again, I think, there is need to break loose from old concepts. With time available throughout a man's existence, why should education, even in its formal sense, be confined to the first twenty years or so? It might be well to let some restless youngsters get into the working force at fifteen if they wish, rather than have them turn to juvenile delinquency out of boredom, and then bring them back to school at twenty-five, when they are mature enough to want to learn. Others might proceed pretty much along present lines, and still, others could return to school intermittently over the years, either for the purpose of changing their occupations or simply to expand their horizons.

Sooner or later we shall have to shake off the whole tradition of “terminal education,” I was told by Dr. Clarence Faust, who heads

the Fund for the Advancement of Education. “We have to get rid of concepts like graduation and all the phraseology that suggests that education has fixed limits. ‘Where did you get your education?’ we ask a man, and the answer will be, ‘At Yale’—as though it comes done up in a package.”

The need is for more than adult classes or extension courses such as we now have. It is for a fresh concept altogether—a national interest in continuous education, through a combination of formal institutions, specialized television, discussion groups like the Great Books, and, perhaps above all, the ancient method of person-to-person instruction. If leisure makes it possible for more and more people to learn, it can also provide more and more people to teach—people whose primary job may be in a bank or a shop but who, having acquired proficiency in a language or an art, find it pleasant and profitable to teach it to others.

Work, said Aristotle, is for the sake of leisure; and in answer to the question, “What ought we to do when at leisure?” he immediately went on to say that “we ought not to be amusing ourselves.” He thought of amusements or recreations as medicine for removing the fatigues or strains caused by hard work and thus preparing for more hard work. Play, in short, is for the sake of work, as toil is for the sake of leisure. But what should occupy the free time of those who are fortunate enough not to have to toil in order to gain their subsistence? Aristotle’s answer was that “those who are in a position which places them above toil [should] occupy themselves with philosophy or with politics,” which, more freely translated, means that they should engage in the creative work of the liberal arts and sciences, of citizenship and statecraft.

Leisure is thus a higher or nobler kind of work than toil, just as the goods it produces (those of civilization and of the human spirit) are higher or nobler than the goods produced by toil (those of subsistence or of the body). But, like toil, leisure is work, not idleness or play. Above all, it is not to be confused with “free time,” which is nothing but the time left unused by sleep or toil-time which can be squandered in idleness or usefully employed either in play and recreation or in leisure-work. In Aristotle’s view, it would be possible to say that a man who was not liberally educated for the use of his free time in leisure-work might have too much free time on his hands for his own good; but it would not be possible to say that a man had too much leisure, any more than it is possible to say that he could have too much virtue.

In America today most people use the words “leisure” and “free

time” as if they were synonymous, and they do not distinguish between leisure-work and play or recreation as quite opposite ways of using free time. The current view is that a free man’s free time is his own to use as he pleases. He cannot be told what he should do with it for his own good or the good of his society. A people with “leisure time” (i.e., free time) may have as many different ways of spending it as there are persons. One fishes; another plays cards or chess; another “putters around the house”; another has any one (or more) of a thousand hobbies; and another goes to the movies, the prize fights, or the night clubs or takes a walk or a ride. In a culture distinguished by the thickness and proliferation of its periodicals, many spend a good part of their free time in reading for current information or light entertainment. And some play horse-shoes, and some breed fuchsias.

Some American adults spend their free time studying and learning an immense variety of useful or fine arts. Some read serious books seriously, but surprisingly few. In England, where education is still far from universal, 55 per cent of the adults can be found reading a book at any time; in the United States, the land of universal education, only 17 per cent are reading a book, any book. Of the books written, published, and purchased between 1945 and 1955, the top ten each sold more than three million copies apiece. What were they? Numbers one, two, three, four, five, six, and seven were titles by Mickey Spillane. Eighth was Fulton Oursler’s *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, ninth Betty Cracker’s *Picture Cook Book*, and tenth James Jones’s *From Here to Eternity*. “One might brutally surmise,” says former President Gordon Dupee of the Great Books Foundation, “that our culture is a culture of blood, guts, gastronomy, and a little God.”

We should be surprised that Americans read fewer—and “faster-moving”—books than any other highly advanced people; surprised but not shocked. Ours is a society incredibly rich in amusements or diversions within the economic reach of all, a society, in addition, puritanically influenced in the direction of hard work. We are again, par excellence—the people of the quick lunch, the long commutation trip, the day unbroken by the siesta, and the two-week building construction job. “Work is for the sake of leisure,” but many Americans, thousands of whom are not economically needy, spend their free time working. To purchase the burgeoning apparatus needed to occupy themselves off the job, a rapidly increasing number of Americans are spending the time won by reduced working hours on a second, part-time job.

We should be surprised but not shocked to hear of our illiteracy in

terms of adult self-education, and we should not be disheartened. If it is important—if the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome were not produced exclusively by light comedy or “do-it-yourself” kits—we should do something about it. And no other people are as well equipped to do something about it if they want to. Educators, with pardonable prejudice, think that education is important, including adult education. But their view is supported by the concept of a democratic society. A democracy is the only society that can be destroyed merely by the ignorance of its people, for its people are its sovereigns. The subject can live—politically without education. The citizen cannot.

Why should free time be used for leisure rather than for play? The adult has the political necessity to learn and to go on learning. He also has the moral necessity, because he has to make moral choices all his life. Perhaps—this is arguable—there is not much new from age to age in the knowledge that underlies moral choice. But what is old takes a lifetime of study to learn, and if there is anything new discovered (and such fields as criminology and child psychology suggest that there is, continually), every adult ought to know it for his own, his children’s, and his community’s good.

· Man has a psychological necessity to go on learning, a necessity perhaps more basic even than his moral and political need. Without exercise the body becomes flabby and susceptible to disease, and, while different forms of exercise are appropriate to the different stages of physiological life, it is self-evident that some sort of bodily exercise is indispensable, even in old age. The mind, too, becomes flabby without exercise, and susceptible to “disease,” that is, to partisanship, prejudice, and dogmatism in non-dogmatic matters. The unexercised mind, like the unexercised body, is unable to keep up with those around it. Left behind, it is reduced to solitude or to the deadly company of similarly unexercised minds, dependent on strong external stimulation and increasingly difficult to stimulate except by increasing the strength and dosage of the stimulant.

There is no exercise, as we know from our bodily experience, without effort. Reading the funnies is effortless. And staring at even the best television production—if no effort goes into doing it—is no more mental exercise than reading the funnies. The effort to master problems—mental hurdles—alone exercises the mind and keeps it growing. And while some mental functions are, like physical functions, affected by age, the most important appear to be much more resistant to the years than the body is. It is much rarer for a man who has been running all his life to be a runner at eighty than it is for a man who has been a thinker all his life to be a

thinker at eighty. The physiological “peak” is reached in the twenties; the intellectual, decades later, if ever. It would be a supererogation to name the men who have produced their intellectual masterpieces in their sixties, seventies, and even (if their bodies sustained them) in their eighties.

Bertrand Russell, who at eighty-five is still making contributions to human knowledge in philosophy and political thought, said forty years ago:

The same love of adventure which takes men to the South Pole, the same passion for a conclusive trial of strength which leads some men to welcome war, can find in creative thought an outlet which is neither wasteful nor cruel, but increases the dignity of man by incarnating in life some of that shining splendor which the human spirit is bringing down out of the unknown. To give this joy in a greater or less measure, to all who are capable of it, is the supreme end for which the education of the mind is to be valued. It will be said that the joy of mental adventure must be rare, that there are few who can appreciate it, and that ordinary education can take no account of so aristocratic a good. I do not believe this.

Why, he asks, is this “joy of mental adventure” so common in children, so rare in later life? “Because everything is done to kill it during education.”

Adult learning would seem to be indicated by the moral, political, and psychological nature of the human case. Like the subordinate questions concerning the organization of the school system, many disputes in the sphere of adult education occur on the level of practice rather than of theory—disputes having to do with administration or with the use of various means and methods. But the basic controversy, which we shall deal with here, has to do with its aim and, consequently, with the kind of education that adult education should be. It involves only one fundamental opposition, and, although that opposition (like all issues in adult education) is less clearly defined in the literature of the subject than the controversies about the school system, it has the advantage of being singular.

The antecedent conditions of the controversy are, first, all six of those conditions of modern American life listed on page 71 of this book. But the adult education issue involves another, special condition of our modern life: the increasing availability—now to the point of universality—of adequate schooling in childhood and adolescence. The six common conditions of American life, plus the

radical decline in immigration (and the increase in popular education in the emigrant countries), have all but eliminated the need, so acute only fifty years ago, to provide basic schooling for adults who were unschooled or very inadequately schooled in their youth. To the limited extent that such compensatory schooling is still with us, its purpose, character, and content involve the same issues as the school system, already discussed. Only its method—inasmuch as the pupils are adults—differentiates it from the school-system controversy.

So the distinction must be made sharply between what Sir Richard Livingstone calls “adult education for the uneducated and adult education for the educated.” Our concern, in the present and prognosticated development of American society, is with adult education for the educated, that is, post-school learning to continue education beyond its termination in youth, or even beyond all institutional education, including the college and the university as well as the elementary and secondary schools.

The opposition in adult education so conceived begins with the aristocrat and the democrat. The contemporary (like the ancient) aristocrat holds that only a small proportion of mankind are genuinely educable, in either youth or maturity. These should receive education of such a character that they are equipped to continue learning throughout their lives. Given the truly aristocratic view—the separation of the virtuous and intelligent, not the rich or hereditarily noble, from the ineducable masses—those who are capable of being liberally educated will be of such disposition as to continue their own development in later life and can be relied upon to sustain and increase their own learning.

The democrat rejects the aristocrat’s first principle. The equality of men requires equality of educational opportunity. But the democrat has, here again, to confront the facts or suppositions of inequality of backgrounds, capacities, talents, and interests among persons. And once more the democrats divide into realists and idealists. The realist believes that the largest part of the adult population cannot (or will not) engage in the kind of liberal learning which is a continuation of the liberal curriculum offered to the few in school and college. For the many, who, at the point of differentiation (which the realist accepts or approves), go on to vocational education, the appropriate adult education should be partly on the vocational and partly on the emotional and social side of the adult’s life. For the few, who go on with liberal education through college, the appropriate adult program should, of course, be liberal in character. But here the realist tends to agree with the aristocrat that such persons

can, on the whole, be left to take care of their adult education by themselves.

The democratic idealist disagrees radically with his realist brother and applies the precept of equal educational opportunity to adult education in the same way he applies it to the school system. In short, he thinks that it should be of the same kind for all. As in the case of the school system, it should not involve specific training for jobs but should be liberal in character, either in the traditionalist's or the modernist's version of liberal education. The democratic idealists are, of course, going to quarrel among themselves again, on the basis of the traditionalist and the modernist views, but before they do they want to present a united front long enough to make, with particular emphasis on adult education, a point they both made earlier.

All education, in the idealist view, is preparation for more education, for the lifetime of learning. Liberalism—in the sense in which it is applied to education—does not sustain itself after the adolescent human has received his degree of Bachelor of Liberal Arts. By definition, liberalism is (among other things) open-mindedness, and if, through life, the mind is open and nothing is going into it, it will wind up empty, or sterile, or a little less metaphorically and a little more likely—it will wind up closed. Basic schooling is liberal only if it prepares the young for adult education, and adult education is liberal only if it prepares the mature for more education.

The life of the mind is learning, and it never ends. No man's education is complete, nor will it ever be; and if, contrary to possibility, it were, he would soon die intellectually. The satisfaction of school requirements—at any level—merely certifies that the individual is equipped to carry on learning in any sphere of knowledge or skill. There are things of the vastest importance for life that the young cannot learn; there are, as has often been pointed out, no infant prodigies in morals or politics. Life itself provides the materials and the struggle with those materials for learning and enjoying some of the things that, to the young, are “academic.” The Bachelor of Arts is not yet wedded to them, and the Doctor of Philosophy is qualified only to practice a branch of continuing learning.

*[We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.](#)*

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