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LEARNING BEGINS AT FORTY

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Part 2 of 2

But what of the realist argument that most men cannot or will not go on learning, and his tendency to agree with the aristocrat that those who can do so can be trusted to do so by themselves? Here the idealist is inclined to yield to a thoroughly realistic view of modern industrial democracy, crowded with adult diversions and absorbed by the puritanical determination to "get ahead." Even the idealist will not quarrel too violently with the ancient aristocrat who, under aristocratic pre-industrial conditions, held that those who had access to a liberal education could be relied upon to continue it by themselves. Under present conditions it is apparent to the idealist that, of those who can go on with liberal education by themselves and unaided, few will. Organized agencies have got to provide such programs and, more than provide them, promote them, "sell them" assiduously, for adult education is voluntary and is competing in the market place with widely advertised claims on the free time of the American adult.

Something more: even those adults who will go on with their own education by themselves need organization, informal or formal. The mature person is, of course, much more competent to study

alone than the young, but a lifetime of solitary study is lonely, ultimately discouraging in most cases, and generally less rewarding than the kind of study that provides for the interaction of many minds on the same problem. Man is sociable; he is also social. His social problems (and even his personal problems have social implications) are more intelligently (or at least more broadly) approached in company than in solitude. True, a book is company, or a picture or a concerto, but they cannot talk back. They provide one exchange of intercourse with the living individual; beyond that, except as one mines them for deeper meaning, they cannot go on talking. Adult education, like basic schooling, has got to be partly social; if men do not learn from one another, at least they learn with one another.

On all these points the democratic idealists, whether they take the traditionalist or the modernist position, see eye to eye. They agree, too, that the problem of how to give an undifferentiated liberal education to adults may be even more difficult than the problem of how to give such an education to every child in school. Here, again, they insist that we do not know that it cannot be done; we have never tried to do it. As in the case of basic schooling, experimentation with equivalent materials and methods is urgent. The urgency is clear, if we believe that our form of government and society depends, for its preservation and improvement, on a populace which has not only gone to school but continues to engage in learning all its life; in that case, we have got to find out how to educate every adult.

But what kind of education? Here the idealists divide, as they do on the school system, between the traditionalist and the modernist positions. The modernist, at this as at the adolescent level, would integrate liberal education, not with vocationalism in the narrow sense of job-training, but directly with the current concerns of modern life, and especially vocational concerns. Adult education would still be liberal in aim, but its content would be much different from the program recommended by the traditionalist, namely, the historic program of liberal education modified to reflect the change from a prescientific, non-industrial, and non-democratic age to that of industrial democracy keyed to scientific development.

The difference between the two idealist positions—in adult as in adolescent education—is very bitterly argued, although it may appear to be much less radical than the difference between the idealists and the realists or the democrats and the aristocrats. It is essentially a difference in emphasis. The modernist would emphasize change and the conditions of contemporary society and its im-

provement, while the traditionalist would emphasize the enduring character of human nature and human society and place contemporary problems in the setting of the human tradition.

Which of these emphases is more appropriate for adult:>? Is the education of already educated adults different, in this respect, from that of children? We have already observed that adults are better able than children to understand, in the light of their experience of life, the great moral, political, and theological problems raised throughout the tradition of Western thought. They are in the midst of life. They read, they study, they talk in an atmosphere beset by current reality. Which do they need the more—and do they need it more or less than children: emphasis on the contemporary or emphasis on the enduring? Which emphasis will have more meaning for them, more lifelong usefulness and enjoyment? Which will hold their attention better? For we must remember that their education, unlike children's, is voluntary. The answers to these questions lie partly, to be sure, in the quality of the leadership they get and in the selection of materials and methods; but they lie partly in the realm of judgment as to human nature and its needs and satisfactions at the different stages of life. And here the traditionalists and the modernists differ.

But, on the whole, the basic opposition with regard to adult education is not to be stated in terms of the six positions we have tried to identify in connection with the other controversies in education. The reason is that adult education is so insignificant an institution in the United States, so vaguely and variously defined, and so eccentrically practiced, that the opposition is an implicit one rather than a matter of positions clearly held and debated. This opposition is, therefore, perhaps best stated in terms of a theory of adult education—of what it is held that it should be—in contrast to the whole body of prevailing practices in the field. This opposition discloses something like a minority view with a close affinity for the idealist's program of reform of the school system and a majority view (as reflected in the whole complex of present practices) with a close affinity for the realist's acquiescence in the existing arrangements.

General agreement among those who would reform adult education (or construct a genuine program, in contrast with the prevailing chaos) is found on the following "shoulds":

1. Adult education should be conceived as necessary for all persons after they have completed their adolescent schooling, because of the limitations on learning in youth and the consequent deficien-

cies intrinsic to even the best schooling. It should, therefore, not be conceived as a form of schooling but rather as that part of the educational process which tries to complete what is barely begun in school.

2. Adult education undifferentiated in aim and quality should be conceived as possible for all persons, regardless of their inequalities, because the precept of equal educational opportunity implies the opportunity for all persons to receive the same kind of education, though their capacities to acquire it may differ in degree.

3. Adult education should be conceived as liberal in aim and content rather than vocational in the sense of job-training, and intellectual rather than moral or emotional, concerned with ideas and the pursuit of understanding and wisdom, because of the nature of human freedom and of human society.

4. Adult education should be conceived as interminable, a lifelong undertaking, because learning can never be completed and because the mind, if it does not live the life of learning, loses its vitality much as the unexercised body disintegrates.

5. Adult education should somehow be related to earning a living, citizenship, and the liberal activities of leisure-work, because the adult learner's role in the economy is of great importance both to him and to society, because he is a citizen with serious civic responsibilities, and because he is a man with ever increasing time for leisure-work.

The foregoing considerations lead irresistibly to the conclusion that post-institutional agencies and means of adult education must be devised, under public, private, or mixed auspices, to provide inducement and guidance for that large body of the adult population who, for whatever reason, will not carry on learning entirely under their own direction. Persuasion must play a large and continuous role because participation is not compulsory. The program, in so far as materials and methods are concerned, must be a continuing program, calculated to engage and interest its participants over a lifetime; if it is not, it can be justified only in so far as it arouses mature persons to begin some form of liberal adult education. And the numerous distinctions between such a program and the education of children should include the function of group leaders or directors, rather than teachers in the school-system sense, since the "teachers" and "pupils" are all equal as adults voluntarily engaged and not categorically distinguished in status.

When we turn from any such theory of adult education to the prevalent practices, we see at once how fundamentally different they are from such a theory—and from each other. We modern Americans are devoted to trial and error. We hesitate to adopt concepts of any kind as a guide to practice lest we find our freedom to experiment strait-jacketed. But we have had perhaps a century of experimentation with adult education, without a clear conception of what it is or what it should be, and we find ourselves with an ever increasing multiplication of offerings many of which, on any serious view of education (even vocational education), cannot be called educational at all. Impossible as it is to locate a theory underlying this immense tangle of practices, it is readily possible to discern a set of views, rarely articulated, that is common to almost all of them and contrary to the theory outlined above.

By and large, the existing forms of adult education suggest that the majority view among educators, especially those responsible for content at both the adult and the adolescent levels, tends to regard the completion of adolescent schooling as the completion of education. This view is manifested by all the efforts to construct a course of study which embraces, or tries to embrace, everything that ought to be known by an educated man or woman. The majority view among the students themselves, as well as their parents, tends to look upon the completion of school requirements as certification that education has been completed, and this is especially true, of course, as applied to the college curriculum. And the majority view, among educators, parents, and students, tends to regard! liberal education (no less than vocational) as preparation either for specialized study or for vocational success, or even for the duties of citizenship, but not for a liberal use of free time in adult life—not, that is, for the continuation of learning.

The prevalent practices indicate, on the whole, disagreement with or disinterest in the proposition that the same kind of education is both necessary and possible for all adults and that it should be liberal and intellectual. Many, perhaps most, of the adult programs are neither liberal nor intellectual, and, along with most of those that are, they are offered on the basis of differing capacities and interests in the adult population. The proposition that education is an unending process is contradicted, in practice, by the prevalence of short-term programs unrelated to other programs in the adult field. And the common use of the teacher as such, together with methods and materials appropriate to the education of uneducated adults but not to that of the educated, suggests a general disinterest in the proposition that the “teacher” and the “pupil” are, in adult education, peers as adults whose prior education differs only in

degree.

There is no intent here to say that the existing practices are right or wrong, but, rather, to discover among them some common basis that indicates a theory of adult education. In so far as we have been able to do this, we find that, on the whole, the practices and the theory they presuppose are contrary to the theory advanced by most of the educational reformers in the adult field and to both the traditionalist and the modernist views among democratic idealists. If the existing practices and theory are sound, the only problem is the improvement and extension of the present practices. If, however, they are unsound, the consequences of so holding are considerable with respect both to the school system and to adult education itself.

If the theory of reform is sound, the school system is affected in three ways. First, the aims of basic schooling must include the wise and profitable use of free time for leisure activities in adult life, such use to include continuing learning. Second, the content of basic schooling, especially at the secondary and collegiate levels, must be limited, on the view that not everything that has got to be learned in this life has got to be learned in school; nor should the expectation or insistence prevail that what is appropriately taught in school can be fully mastered in adolescence without re-examination in adult life. And, third, taking the first two together, the educational institution, including the college and even the university, cannot be regarded as terminal for liberal education but always and for everybody preparatory to the interminable life of liberal study.

A suggestive observation can be made here regarding the inclusion in basic schooling of the aim of the wise and liberal use of free time in adult life. There has been some revulsion against high-school and college football on a number of obvious grounds. One of the complaints is relevant here: that these are sports which cannot be played except in youth. It has been urged that greater emphasis be placed on the non-contact and "minor" sports that we can continue to play in middle and later life and even on sedentary games like chess. If the argument is valid with respect to athletics, the possibility at least exists that it is valid in the choice and emphasis of curricular subjects.

An indirect—but no less important—consequence for the school system of the reform of adult education would be its effect upon one aspect of the apparently unequal learning capacities of children: the inequality induced or perpetuated by the home environ-

ment rather than by nature. Children can be gravely handicapped by their parents' lack of education or, worse, lack of interest in the children's education. The parents' continuing education is even urged as a necessity in view of the present and projected shortage of school facilities. Professor Dwight L. Bolinger, chairman of the Romance Languages Department of the University of Southern California, observes that we Americans want our son or daughter to have "the best education that money can buy." He says, "Make sure of it by giving him what no money can buy—an attitude toward learning that will carry him past all the barriers that overcrowded colleges may set up. Do it by example, by displaying that attitude yourself, by leading him—and most of all, by accompanying him in his great intellectual adventure .... Give your child the interests that will help him in school by cultivating them in yourselves."

The "peer group" may be more influential with children, especially in their teens, than the older generation is, but children who come to their teens in a learning home are more likely to accept learning than those whose parents spend all their free time in light distractions. The parents' disinterest in learning (if, as in most American homes, it is not forced on them by economic stress) may arise from their own deficient schooling, but in our situation it is far more likely to arise from their culture's failure to interest them in learning, both because it bids high for their interest in non-educational diversions and because it fails to provide adequate adult education facilities.

The critical effect of the home on the supposed ability of the child to learn is indicated by the two-year study of a public school system by the Citizens' School Study Council of Fairfield, Connecticut. Author John Hersey, reporting the Council's conclusions, declares that one of the greatest of all current educational problems is the absence of what he calls "the urge to read." "Neither parents nor teachers," he writes, "do enough about fostering their children's inner urge to learn to read .... This is the area in which parents do the most harm and could do the most good. We believe that parents should create in the home an atmosphere that is conducive to reading. They should have good books and magazines at hand. Parents should read to children. They should try to entertain them with reading and make reading a pleasure, as television is a pleasure. If school is where learning to read belongs, home is where happiness in reading belongs." The idealist in the education controversy is particularly insistent that the reform of adult education may remove one considerable source of supposed inequality among children and affect the whole question of differentiation

based upon inequality.

If the theory of the reform of adult education is sound, the practical organizational implications are tremendous. We should have to decide how to establish, arrange, and administer the post-institutional agencies and devise the technical means for carrying out the program in a way that is suitable for the whole range of adult circumstances. The problem would call for great ingenuity in the invention of new techniques and in the adaptation of present programs. This much is clear: if we conclude that liberal education for all is necessary, we can afford to spare no effort to make it possible and effective. But if the present practices are adequate to both the human and the national need, the problem of extending and improving them is largely financial, and the areas of educational controversy are reduced by one.

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