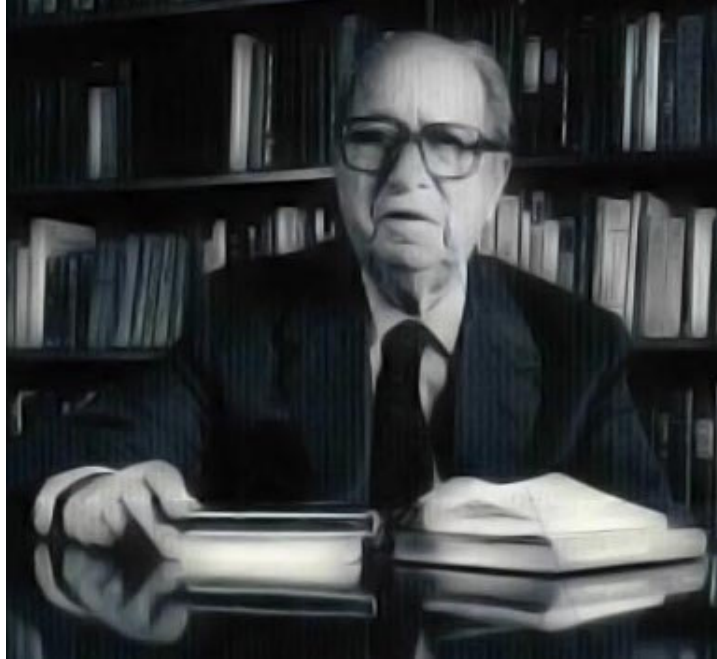


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ONLY ADULTS CAN BE EDUCATED

Max Weismann interviews Mortimer Adler
(1995)

Part 1 of 3

Mortimer Adler was a high school dropout at age 15; yet for more than 60 years his name has been synonymous with education—teaching and learning. Now at 93 years of age he persists in exhorting us to understand the distinction between schooling and education, as well as, the importance of our lifelong obligation to continued liberal learning. Before we begin, in all fairness I should point out that subsequent to dropping out of high school and following a series of events, too lengthy to recount here, he became (I suspect) the only person in this country ever to receive a Ph.D. without a high school diploma, a bachelor's degree, or a masters degree. I am honored to bring you this insightful interview on the Great Idea of Education with my dear friend, mentor, colleague, philosopher, teacher, author, and high school dropout.

WEISMANN: William F. Buckley, Jr. on his television show *Firing Line*, once introduced you as “Our nation’s pedagogue”; yet even with that appellation and your long career in education, I have heard you say that schooling is not education. This is at least a very provocative statement, particularly today when all over America parents are screaming about the poor education their children are receiving in schools. Please explain and help us to understand what you mean by that statement?

ADLER: I am going to begin my answer with an even more provocative statement, or should I say “fact,” and that is “only adults can be educated.” So before I answer your question, we must first discuss “adult education.” Let me explain. The word “education” has come to have so restricted a connotation that it is misleading. When most people think of education, they tend to think of the development of their children, not of their own development; they think of learning in school, not outside of school. A serious result of this is that the phrase “adult education” is generally misunderstood. Because we think of education as something done primarily with the young and in school, “adult education” comes to be a queer kind of thing, something which you usually think of, if you think of it at all, as for the other person, not yourself. In years of thinking and working in the field of education, the insight that I am going to try to communicate to you is one which is basic to the whole theory of education. It not only changes our conception of what should go on in the schools, and what should be done with children, but it also changes our conception of what each adult must do for himself to sustain his own life of learning. I can hardly remember what I used to think when I had the mistaken notion that the schools were the most important part of the educational process; for now I think exactly the reverse. I am now convinced that it is adult education which is the substantial and major part of the educational process—the part for which all the rest is at best—and it is at its best only when it is—a preparation.

WEISMANN: We know only too well that words can be mischievous and treacherous. Those of us who are engaged in adult education have been thinking for some time of how to avoid using the words “adult education,” because in the minds of the general public they have such an unfortunate connotation. How can we correct this misconception?

ADLER: You are quite correct about words, and if by issuing an edict, I could get everybody to use words the way I would like them to, I would try to set up the following usage: use “schooling” to signify the development and training of the young; and “education” (without the word “adult” attached to it) to signify the learning done by mature men and women. Then we could say that after

schooling, real education, not adult education, begins. This is my main point.

WEISMANN: From my own long experience I am sadly aware of the misconceptions in the minds of almost everybody which prevents this basic proposition from being understood. Would you indicate for us the major misconceptions that must be rectified.

ADLER: Most of us, and most professional educators, hold a false view of schooling. It consists in the notion that it is the aim or purpose of the schools—and I use the word “schools” to include all levels of institutional education from the kindergarten to the college and university—to turn out educated men and women, their education completed or finished when they are awarded a degree or diploma. Nothing could be more absurd or preposterous. This means that young people—children of twenty or twenty-two—are to be regarded as educated men and women. We all know, and no one can deny, that no child—in school or at the moment of graduation—is an educated person.

WEISMANN: Yet it seems this is the apparent aim of the whole school system—to give a complete education. At least this is the current conception which governs the construction of the curriculum and the conduct or administration of the school system; it is also the conception of most parents who send their children to schools and colleges.

ADLER: That is correct. This error about education being completed in school is widespread, as shown by the fact that most of us also hold a false view of “adult education.” I held it myself for many years. We think of adult education as something for the underprivileged, some poor people who were deprived in youth of schooling by economic circumstance or hardships. Perhaps they were foreigners who came to this country under difficult circumstances. Deprived of the normal amount of schooling, these people in later life, while they are working all day to support a family, go to night school to make up for their lack of schooling in youth. Night schooling or remedial schooling—to compensate for lack of sufficient schooling in youth—is, for a great many people, the essence of adult education. When they think of it in this way, they—the majority who are more fortunate—conclude that adult education is not for them, but only for the unfortunate few who lacked sufficient schooling in youth.

WEISMANN: Another false and very misleading notion about adult education is that it is something you can take or leave because it really is an avocation, a hobby that occupies a little of your spare time, something a little better than card games or television. On

this level, adult education consists of classes in basket weaving, or folk dancing, or clay modeling—things of that sort. Even lectures about current events are of that sort. Aren't these all wrong notions—wrong notions of the meaning of what schooling is or should be, and wrong notions of what fundamental education for adults should be? What is your prescription to correct these misconceptions?

ADLER: Perhaps the easiest way for me to correct these errors is to state the contrary truth, and tell you what every schoolboy does not know. Every schoolboy or girl, particularly at the moment of graduation from school, does not know how much he does not know—and how much he has to learn.

WEISMANN: Yes, but as this is perfectly natural, the children are not to be blamed for it, are they?

ADLER: Of course not, this is one of the natural blindnesses of youth. There is hardly an intelligent adult—a college graduate two or three years out of college—who will not readily and happily confess frankly that he is not an educated person, that there is much more for him to learn, and that he does not know it all. If we should find a college graduate three years out of college who does not know he needs an education, charity would recommend that we speak no more of him.

WEISMANN: I wonder how the college graduate, two, three, or five years out of college, who recognizes the fact that he was not educated, or that his education or training was far from complete in all the years of schooling, explains that fact?

ADLER: He usually has one or another incorrect explanation. If he is a gentle and generous person, he is likely to say, "The fault was mine. I went to a good school. The curriculum was good. I had a fine set of teachers. The library facilities and all the other conditions in my formal schooling were excellent; but I wasted my time. I played cards or took the girls out, or went in for extracurricular activities, or something else interfered with my studies. If only I had studied, I would now be an educated person." This, I assure you, is quite wrong. But, at the opposite extreme, there is the person who is equally wrong. He is less generous. He puts the blame on somebody else. He says, "It was the school's fault. The teachers were no good; it was a bad curriculum; in general the facilities were poor. If all these had been better, I would now be educated." This opposite extreme is equally incorrect. The truth can be expressed only by what may seem to you for a moment to be an extreme or outrageous statement. But I must make it. Consider the brightest boy or girl at the best imaginable college—much better

than any which now exists—with the most competent faculty and with a perfect course of study. Imagine this brightest student in the best of all possible colleges spending four years industriously, faithfully, and efficiently applying his or her mind to study. I say to you that at the end of four years, this student, awarded a degree with the highest honors, is not an educated man or woman, and cannot be, for the simple reason that the obstacle to becoming educated in school is an inherent and insurmountable one, namely, youth.

WEISMANN: You say that the young cannot be educated, youth being the obstacle. Why is this so?

ADLER: We should know the answer almost as soon as we ask the question. What do we mean by young people? What are children? In answer to your question, I use the word “children” for all human beings still under institutional care. I do not care what their chronological age is, whether it is fifteen or eighteen or twenty-two. If they are still within the walls of a school, college, or university, they are children. They are living a protected, and in many ways an artificial, life. I repeat, what does it mean to be a child? What is our conception of being a child? It is obviously a conception of human life at a stage when it is right to be irresponsible to a certain degree. Childhood is a period of irresponsibility. In addition to being irresponsible, the child or young person, precisely because he is protected or safeguarded, is greatly deficient in experience. Most or all of the things that make us adults or mature occur after we leave school. The business of getting married, of having children, of having our parents become ill, or dependent on us, or die, the death of our friends, our business and social responsibilities—these are the things that age us. And aging is a part of what makes us mature. We cannot be mature without being aged through pain and suffering and grief. This kind of suffering children are spared, but they pay a price for being spared it. They remain immature, irresponsible, and unserious, in the basic sense of that word. Let me indicate this in still another way. Teachers in colleges and universities have had the experience of having, in the same classroom, the returned GI, from military service continuing his education on the GI Bill of Rights, and ordinary boys and girls right out of high school. The difference between those two groups of students in the same classroom is like the difference between night and day. The actual ages are not too far apart—sometimes the GI is hardly more than a year or two older than the boy sitting next to him. But the one is a man and the other is a child. And the difference between a man and a child is a difference wrought by experience, by hard knocks. It cannot be produced by schooling.

WEISMANN: Does it follow, then, that precisely because they are immature, understandably irresponsible, not serious, and lack a great deal of experience, children in school are not educable?

ADLER: Yes. However, I do not mean they are not trainable. In fact, they are much more trainable than we are. As we get older, our nervous system becomes much less plastic. It is much harder for us to learn languages, much harder for us to learn shorthand, for example, or ice-skating. The child, in all matters of simple habit formation, is much more trainable than the adult, but the adult is much more educable, because education is not primarily a matter of training or habit formation. Though these are preparations for it, education in its essence is the cultivation of the human mind. Education consists in the growth of understanding, insight, and ultimately some wisdom. These growths require mature soil. Only in mature soil, soil rich with experience—the soul in the mature person—can ideas really take root.

WEISMANN: When you say adults are more educable than children, are you really saying that adults can think better than children?

ADLER: Yes, and I hope that our readers believe that this is so, because if they do not, then adults ought to stay away from the polls and send their children there instead. But if you really believe—as I certainly do without embarrassment or hesitation—that you can think better than a child, then you must also realize that you are more educable than a child. Basic learning—the acquisition of ideas, insight, understanding—depends on being able to think. If adults can think better than children, they can also learn better—learn better in the fundamental sense of cultivating their minds.

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