

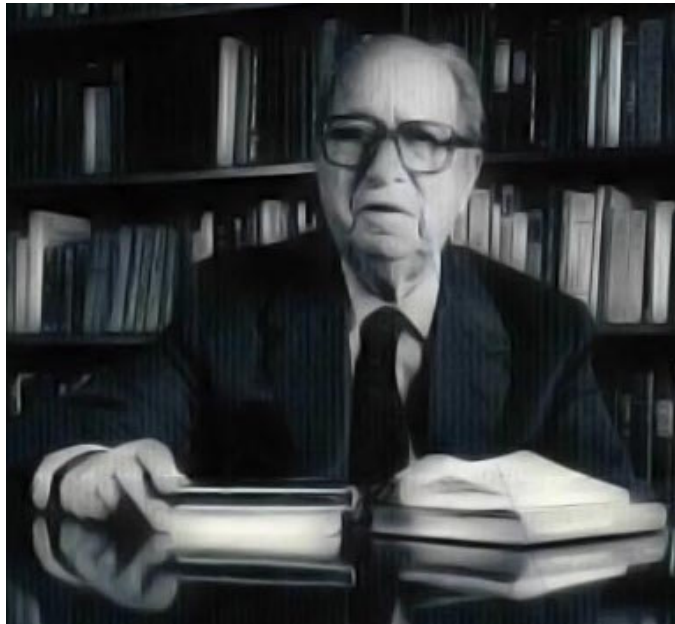
# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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## ONLY ADULTS CAN BE EDUCATED

**Max Weismann interviews Mortimer Adler**  
(1995)

Part 3 of 3

**WEISMANN:** Would you explain what you mean when you speak of liberal training for children?

**ADLER:** I do not mean a great deal of learning because I do not think that liberal education can be accomplished in school. As I've said, I do not contemplate the production of educated men and women at the age of sixteen. I recommend only these two things. First, our children should be disciplined in the liberal arts, which means the ability to read and write and speak and think as well as they can. Second, our children should experience some intellectual stimulation and be enticed by learning itself. I would hope that somehow the feast of knowledge and the excitement of ideas would be made attractive to them, so that when they left school, they would want to go on learning. In school they must be given,

not learning, for that cannot be done, but the skills of learning and the desire to learn, so as adults they will want to continue learning and will have the skills to use in the process. So much for the Bachelor of Arts degree. This is what the degree meant in the thirteenth century when it was first instituted. In the thirteenth century the baccalaureate did not signify an educated man. On the contrary, the meaning of the word itself is “first degree” or initiation, and the certificate indicated that a young person was now ready to start learning. He could now be admitted to the university to study law, or medicine, or theology. He was certified as a trained student, not as an educated person. It is this kind of liberal schooling we must again restore.

**WEISMANN:** Let us turn now to the consequences of this basic educational proposition for adults. Here, too, the consequences are serious. If my understanding of what you’ve said about the relation of schooling to education is right, then education is necessary for all adults—just as much for those who have gone through colleges and universities as for those who have not gone beyond elementary school. The person who has had more schooling has some advantage in the long process of learning, but actually all adults, as they begin their adult life, are on much the same footing as far as the goals of education are concerned. Please explain this, to be sure we understand the difference between education—that is adult education—and schooling.

**ADLER:** There are three remarkable differences between the education which takes place in adult life and the kind of thing that goes on in the schools at any level. In the first place, adult education must be voluntary. You cannot compel adults to undergo a course of study or a process of learning because, if you have to compel them, that means they are not adults. It is proper to compel children to go to school or to compel their parents to send them. The common good of the republic and the individual good of the human beings who are its citizens require it. Adults are responsible for their own welfare and they participate in their own government. Therefore they must engage in education voluntarily, not under compulsion. The second characteristic of education in adult life is equality among all those involved. Let me explain. In the schools you have teachers and pupils, and the relation between teacher and pupil is one of inequality—not simply because the teacher knows more than the pupil (let us assume that is the case), but because the teacher is mature, a grown-up man or woman, whereas the pupil is a child. And I hope you all agree with me that grownups are better human beings than children. For if you do not, then there is no point ever in saying, “Oh, grow up,” as if you were admonishing

somebody to improve. Most people may not agree with me because they suffer from the widespread American illusion that the best thing in the world to be is a child. Nothing could be further from the truth. A child is the most imperfect of all human beings. Our job is to make him an adult. Except for those progressive schools where teachers mistakenly try to become equal with their pupils by getting on the floor with them, and by asking their opinions about everything, the classroom situation is one in which the teacher is superior. Now in adult learning situations, we do not have teachers in this sense, or if we have, as we do in the Great Ideas and Great Books classes, discussion leaders as well as participants in discussion, we do not admit inequality. The leader may know a little more about the book under discussion than the other persons participating in the class, but that is not the point. The point is that he is one mature human being talking with others, and that is a relation of equality. It is quite different from what goes on in the schools, or should.

**WEISMANN:** But as you've indicated, most Americans think of adult education as schooling, and therefore misunderstand it. They think it puts them back into a position of inferiority. They think it consists in going to school, sitting under a professor, listening to a lecture.

**ADLER:** That is not adult education; that is a perversion of it. That is putting schooling into adult life where it does not belong. Adult education, or basic education for adults, involves a relation of equality among all the persons participating. The third characteristic of education for adults is the most important. Basic education in adult life, which succeeds all the years of schooling, is and must be interminable—without end, without limit. Any part of schooling involves a fixed number of years. In this country we have eight years of elementary school, four years of high school or secondary school, four years of college, three years of professional (medical, law or engineering, etc.) school. This is quite proper, for these spans of time, these terms of years, are intended to provide time for a course of study embodying a subject matter or discipline to be acquired by the student. It is proper that he be certified when and if, upon examination, he shows himself competent. It is proper for a person to say, "I completed my legal education in three years," or "I have completed my four year college program." But think of an adult human being saying, "I have been going on with my learning for the last five years, from thirty to thirty-five, and now I have completed my adult education." No more preposterous words can be uttered. For if anyone were to say, at the age of thirty-five, "I have now completed my adult education," all you could respond is,

“Are you ready to die?” What are you going to do with the rest of your life, if you have completed your adult education at the age of thirty-five. As you listen to these words, you know how silly they are, because you know now that adult education does not consist of a course of study or a subject matter to be mastered in a fixed number of years, something to take an examination on and pass, and then be finished with it forever. That is not the point. Adult education, once begun, is interminable. Nothing but a serious illness relieves any adult of his responsibility to continue learning year after year, every part of every year, until the end of his life.

**WEISMANN:** Even though I recognize that what you are saying must be so because it is absurd to say, short of death, “I’ve finished my adult education,” some may not fully understand why it is absurd. Will you explain why this is so?

**ADLER:** There are two reasons: one in the nature of the human mind itself, and one which derives from the goal of learning. Let me take the second first. What is the real end of learning? What is the ultimate goal toward which every part of schooling or education is directed? I think you all know the word that describes it. It is wisdom. We would all like to be a little wiser than we are—to have a little more understanding, a little more insight, a little more comprehension of the human situation, of the conditions of our lives, of the world in which we live; to know better the difference between good and evil. But how long does it take to become wise? The answer is, a lifetime. Certainly we all know that we cannot become wise in youth. Nothing would be more preposterous than the supposition that a boy or girl graduating from college could be wise. Nor can you ever have enough wisdom, or too much. No matter how wise we become little by little in the course of a lifetime, we are always less than perfectly wise, nor are we ever as wise as we can be. Hence, if wisdom is the ultimate goal of the whole process of learning, then that process must go on for a lifetime. For any of us to attain even the little wisdom we can acquire in the course of our whole life, there is no stopping short. We can never become wise enough to say, “Now I can stop learning or thinking.” Wisdom is hard come by and is slowly won. That is one reason for the interminability of adult education. The other reason for the interminability of adult education lies in the nature of the mind itself. The human mind is not a muscle. It is not an organic thing, in the sense of an ordinary bodily organ. But it is a living thing. And like any other living thing, there are certain indispensable conditions of its vitality. Think of the body, for instance; think of muscles and body tissues in general. Everyone knows what basic things must be done with and for the human body to keep it

healthy, alive, and in repair. You must first of all feed it regularly. No one supposes you can feed the body today or this week, and keep it alive and healthy next week or month or year. In addition, you must exercise it regularly. Everybody knows how a body unexercised, a body that is forced to lie in bed day after day, atrophies. Strength is sapped, muscles grow weak, almost collapse. What is true of the body is true of the mind. The care and feeding of the mind is just as important as the care and feeding of the body. The mind unfed weakens just as the body does. The mind not sustained by the continual intake of something that is capable of filling it well or nourishing it, shrinks and shrivels. And the mind unexercised, like a muscle unused, atrophies, grows weak, becomes almost paralyzed. Hence, just as we know that we cannot support the life of the body this week on the basis of last week's feeding, so we ought to realize that we cannot support the life of the mind this week on last week's reading, much less last year's reading, or the reading done in college. The process of keeping the mind alive and growing is as perpetual and continual a process as that of keeping the human body alive. But whereas there are limits to the body's growth, the mind, unlike the body, can grow every year of our lives. Until there is a real physical breakdown, real decrepitude, the human mind can grow. The only condition of its growth is that it be fed and exercised. Yet these are the very conditions most of us do not provide for our minds. Let me add just one more thing that may help to clarify the point. Recently, giving a lecture in Chicago, I had occasion to point out most graphically the need for the actual continuation of learning year after year. I was giving a lecture on a fairly difficult philosophical subject, one about which I had written a book in 1940, and in 1941 a very elaborate essay. In order to give a lecture on this subject, I had to spend a whole week reading my own book and article, and trying to understand what I thought then. I am sure that in those years I had these thoughts, this analysis, this reasoning, at my fingertips. And now I had to work a week to recapture them. This proves that no learning stays with you unless it is used. In the intervening years I had done little thinking on that particular subject, and, consequently, years later, I could not pull the ideas out of my mind as if they had been put into a safe deposit vault or a storehouse, ready to be pulled out. The mind is simply not like that. The only ideas we have at our disposal are the ideas we are living with right now. The thoughts we do not revive by thinking them over again, the ideas we do not resuscitate, die very quickly. By some effort we can breathe life into them, and we must breathe life into them, if they are once more to be lively ideas for us, not dead ones. Anyone who supposes that he has a set of ideas left over from college days which he can carry around with him the rest of his life, to pull out of a draw-

er when he wants to use them, is supposing something that simply is not the case. Any ideas we want to think with, we must re-think. We must give life to them by the use we make of them. Every adult who has had the best liberal training we can give in school years needs education which will continue throughout all the years of adult life. This is a large order, large in two senses: if we really mean every adult citizen, that is a large number; and if we really mean all the years of adult life, that is many years. The whole school system, from kindergarten through college, only occupies sixteen years; and yet, if you began the education of adults at twenty-two or twenty-five, that would involve at least fifty or sixty years more of learning.

**WEISMANN:** That is a large order. How can we solve a problem of such magnitude?

**ADLER:** We cannot solve it unless we have some conception of what adults must do in order to sustain their minds, keep them alive, keep them growing, not just for four years, but for ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty—until the end. The program must be something that treats adults as adults, not as children in school; something they can do voluntarily; something that fits them as adults or mature persons. With all these requirements in mind, I mention the Great Ideas and the Great Books programs as fully and properly fitting all the circumstances of the case.


**WEISMANN:** Explain why this is so, and why the Great Ideas and the Great Books?

**ADLER:** First of all, the great books are great because they are inexhaustible. Unlike most of the things we read and could not possibly stand reading a second time, because it would bore us stiff to do so, the great books are indefinitely re-readable. My own experience in re-reading them, many of them ten or fifteen times, only to find them each new and more significant than before, is sufficient evidence for me that they are inexhaustible. Because the great books can be read over and over again, this relatively small body of literature is large enough to sustain a lifetime of learning. Secondly, the great books are intended for the adult mind. They were not written as textbooks for children. The great books are for adults in the sense that theirs is the level at which adults operate and think. I do not mean that we should not—in fact, I firmly believe that, for the liberal training of children in school, we should—start young people reading the great books in high school or in college. Not because they can understand them at that age; but because, beyond the obvious fact that students must be taught to read and the-

se are good books for the purpose, they must be read several times to be read well, and it is a good idea to accomplish a first reading as early as possible. In the third place, the great books deal with the basic problems, both theoretical and practical, of yesterday and today and tomorrow, the basic issues that always have and always will confront mankind. The ideas they contain are the ideas all of us have to think about. The great books represent the fund of human wisdom, at least so far as our culture is concerned, and it is this reservoir that we must draw upon to sustain our learning for a lifetime. Suppose there were a college or university in which the faculty was thus composed: Herodotus and Thucydides taught the history of Greece, and Gibbon lectured on the fall of Rome. Plato and St. Thomas gave a course in metaphysics together; Francis Bacon and John Stuart Mill discussed the logic of science; Aristotle, Spinoza, and Immanuel Kant shared the platform on moral problems; Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke talked about politics. You could take a series of courses in mathematics from Euclid, Descartes, Riemann, and Cantor, with Bertrand Russell and A. N. Whitehead added at the end. You could listen to St. Augustine, Aquinas and William James talk about the nature of man and the human mind, with perhaps Jacques Maritain to comment on the lectures. In economics, the lectures were by Adam Smith, Ricardo, Karl Marx, and Marshall. Boas discussed the human race and its races, Thorstein Veblen and John Dewey the economic and political problems of American democracy, and Lenin lectured on communism. There might even be lectures on art by Leonardo da Vinci, and a lecture on Leonardo by Freud. A much larger faculty than this is imaginable, but this will suffice. Would anyone want to go to any other university, if he could get into this one? There need be no limitation of numbers. The price of admission—the only entrance requirement—is the ability and willingness to read and discuss. This school exists for everybody who is willing and able to learn from first-rate teachers, though they be dead in the sense of not jolting us out of our lethargy by their living presence. They are not dead in any other sense. If contemporary America dismisses them as dead, then, as a well-known writer recently said, we are repeating the folly of the ancient Athenians who supposed that Socrates died when he drank the hemlock.

**WEISMANN:** As we are out of time for now, I would like to thank you for sharing your insights with us and for your contributions towards a better understanding of basic general education and ask that you give us a closing comment on this important matter.

**ADLER:** The aim of education is to cultivate the individual's capacities for mental growth and moral development; to help him ac-

quire the intellectual and moral virtues requisite for a good human life, spent privately in a noble or honorable use of free time and publicly in political action or service. Our schools are not turning out young people prepared for the high office and the duties of citizenship in a democratic republic. Our political institutions cannot thrive, they may not even survive, if we do not produce a greater number of thinking citizens, from whom some statesmen of the type we had in the eighteenth century, might eventually emerge. We are, indeed, a nation at risk, and nothing but radical reform of our schools can save us from impending disaster. Whatever the price we must pay in money and effort to do this, the price we will pay for not doing it will be much greater. 

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