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Dinner for Mortimer Adler - Harvard University

Hosted by
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Introduction by Richard M. Hunt

I would like to begin by expressing a friendly welcome to all of the friends of Mortimer and Caroline Adler. What a pleasure and a treat to have them here at Harvard University. Many of you have come from far distances - California and Texas - others from nearby Cambridge and Belmont. All of us are at one in our admiration and respect for this marvelous human being, scholar, philosopher, man of letters and words, teacher and friend. All of us here tonight have been privileged to know Mortimer with some familiarity. Certainly we know him better than most folks who know him only by reputation.

How well we know him reminds me of a story, and it concerns another major cult figure in recent American history, Marilyn Monroe. One day Miss Monroe opened up the newspaper and read a scurilous charge against her by an unscrupulous journalist. This man had the effrontery to charge Miss Monroe with wearing falsies or gay deceivers in order to perfect her profile. Scandalized by this affront to her front, Miss Monroe shot back a seven-word riposte, "Those who know me, know me better." Indeed they probably did.

All of us here tonight know Mortimer well enough to know there are no false fronts to this man. He is up front all the way. It is true some have been privileged to know Marilyn Monroe. We are privileged to have Mortimer as our friend, and we know him well.

I think there is a sense in which every person has his own Mortimer Adler. My Mortimer is a man of:

- crystal clear mind and impeccable logic;
- enormous capacity for hard work;
- prodigious productivity, with an average of one book a year behind him; serious purpose and subtle appreciation of the sublime in life;
- humor, wit, and sensitivity to the absurd and ridiculous in life (who knows Mortimer knows his uproarious laugh);

My Mortimer is a man with a wonderful capacity for friendship. I've felt this in my life, and as further testimony, I can recount the numbers of telephone calls and letters received for this occasion. Sending him heartfelt greetings were nearly fifty friends, including Mr. Bill Moyers whose eloquent telegram will be read in a moment by Adele Simmons. Another friend, Sam Winograd, Chairman of Transcontinental Resources in Los Angeles, wrote me, "Mortimer Adler set my train in motion. For over 45 years he has stimulated me and my family to read and think and grow intellectually." This is a typical tribute from one whose life has been influenced by Mortimer's teaching.

My Mortimer is a man with enemies too. Having been in two of his Aspen Seminars, I have seen his hostility to obfuscation, muddle-mindness, to people unable to give a reference in a text to support their arguments, to those who accept too quickly the arguments of John Locke, Thomas Hobbs, David Hume, and Karl Marx (all special foes), and finally to determinists, relativists, and logical positivists of all stripes and colors.

But my Mortimer is also a man with special friends and special loves. Who knows Mortimer knows his regard for the works of Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Horace Mann, John Dewey (with some qualifications) and Robert Hutchins. They also know his fondness for dialectics, intellectual debate, argument, and brain-busting conversations. One small example of the "argumentative" Adler. Last night, at Logan Airport here in Boston, waiting at the American Airlines baggage claim carousel, Mortimer, Caroline and I started talking about the possibilities of artificial intelligence and whether computers will ever be taught to think. Mortimer said, "No, No, No." Two other passengers waiting for their luggage to arrive overheard our conversation and joined in. "Yes, Yes, Yes," they said and then expanded on their infatuation with computers. Shifting the argument, Mortimer proceeded to take the name of Charles Van Doren in vain as a person who relied too heavily on computers. When the bags finally arrived, one, of the computer types ended the discussion with the

comment, “Well, I think I’m on the side of Van Doren, whoever he is.”

In truth, Mortimer Adler is a born teacher. Whether in an airport baggage claim area or in a classroom of sixth graders tring to make sense of Ophelia’s relation to Hamlet; whether inspiring a group of high-powered executives at an Aspen seminar or addressing a throng of teachers or principals or school superintendants, Mortimer is there teaching and learning and teaching,

A journeyman plumber from Utah wrote to him recently with this comment about his influence. “I am writing on behalf of a group of construction workers, mostly plumbers. We believe we have finally found a teacher worth listening to. We may be plumbers during the day, but at lunch time and at night and on weekends, we are like you - philosophers at large.”

Norman Cousins has aptly called Mortimer Adler a “Knowledge Magistrate.” We can call him that too, but also we can say: he is our friend, and we are very glad that we can honor him here by this dinner at Harvard University.

Response by Mortimer Adler At Harvard Dinner November 17, 1985

One of the disadvantages accruing from writing one’s auto-biography too early—too soon before one dies—is that there are few if any good stories left to tell about yourself on an occasion such as this.

However, there are still a few that you may not know or remember. The most unlikely story of all is that I started out wanting to be a poet.

At the age, of nine I wrote my first poem entitled “Girls.” I cannot remember all of it, but the last stanza went like this:

Girls were not made to be soldiers brave
Nor were they made for boys to save
But they were made by Him above
For boys to honor, respect, and love.

I sent that poem to Cosmopolitan and many other inappropriate magazines and received rejection slips that I treasured as a sign that I was beginning my professional life as a poet.

By the time I was 14 and 15, I had written so much verse—I say “verse” rather than “poems”—that I wanted to publish a volume of them. Thank God that His Providence intervened and saved me from doing so.

When I decided after two years of work on the *New York Sun*, after dropping out of high school, that I wanted to go to college, it was a poem that I wrote which obtained my admission to Columbia and a full scholarship there.

My teacher in a class in romantic literature was Frank Allen Patterson. The course involved reading Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Landor, and so on. He was so impressed by the poem I wrote for him that he used his influence to get me into Columbia and a scholarship to boot.

The title of the poem was “On Placing Shelley Next to Wordsworth on the Bookshelf.”

At Columbia I continued to write poetry and became a member of Boar’s Head, the undergraduate poetry society, of which John Erskine was the faculty advisor.

I wrote a poem entitled “Lines Written Toward the End of Winter,” and when I read it aloud Erskine said, “Why not call it Ode to Spring.”

I wrote a dramatic monologue in the manner of Robert Browning, agitating the question whether it was better to be a poet or a philosopher. In response to that Erskine said that he didn’t know which it was better to be in general, but he certainly did know which was better in my case. That finished me as a poet and saved me for philosophy.

Having referred to John Erskine, let me digress for a moment to tell you about the contribution he made to my life and to the life of all of us.

It was he who invented the great books course at Columbia in 1921 and with it the brand new idea of seminars, conceived as a pedagogical device.

He introduced the great books seminar at Columbia to overcome the horrors of the elective system, under which few students in the college were reading the same books—books not textbooks—together.

Up to that time, seminars—the invention of German universities in the 19th century and imported into this country from there—were places where Ph.D. candidates reported to their peers and their professors about ongoing research they were doing.

Erskine’s seminars, in which I participated in 1921-23, were the very opposite of that. They were for undergraduates. They consisted in everyone sitting around a table and engaging in a lively discussion of a great book which all of them had read, under the leadership of a teacher who was simply a better reader than the rest and a good Socratic questioner.

I lead such seminars with Mark Van Doren from 1923 to 1929 at Columbia. When Robert Hutchins became President of the University of Chicago in 1929, he asked me what had meant most to me in my undergraduate education. I told him about the great books and the Erskine seminars. Since his collegiate education had been at Yale, he had read very few of the great books and had never been in the kind of seminar I described. His main, if not his only, reason for inviting me to come to the University of Chicago was so that we could together conduct such seminars for freshmen and so that he would be compelled to read the great books he had never read at Yale.

So I brought the great books seminar from Columbia to Chicago. The great books course that Hutchins and I taught there led to the great books seminar for executives that we later developed at Aspen.

And all of this lies in the background of the third column of the three-column Paideia diagram—the introduction of Socratically conducted seminars from kindergarten to the 12th grade.

Finally, I must tell you about two very wise maxims of conduct that I have never been able to follow, or even approximate.

When Hutchins sent me out to discuss with the faculty at Chicago the educational revolution we were plotting against them, he cautioned me by saying: “Please adopt the posture of proceeding with naive inquiry and intelligent humility.” Nothing could have been a more unlikely posture for me to assume. I failed miserably with awful consequences.

A colleague of mine at the University came to me to tell me why I was arousing such an adverse reaction from so many members of the faculty. He said: “When someone asks you a question, you do not wait until they finish asking it before you start answering it. Do the very opposite, he said. Let them get the question out, knit your eyebrows, ponder it, say with hesitation that you would like to think about it a moment, and then, slowly, haltingly, start to answer it, even perhaps stumbling a tittle in doing so. That will make friends of them and even influence them a little.”

I found it absolutely impossible to follow his advice, again with the most disastrous consequences at the University of Chicago in the early thirties.

This brings me to some maxims and rules of conduct that I have been able to follow during the last forty years.

Another occasion, somewhat like this one was a party that Encyclopaedia Britannica gave me on my 80th birthday. On that

occasion, Tom Goetz, the Editor-in-Chief, delivered a wonderful speech, to which I tried to reply.

The best I could do was to report some rules or recommendations that I have been able to follow in the pursuit of happiness or, if not that, at least success.

So far as mere success is concerned, I have been forced from time to time, to adopt Machiavelli's controlling maxim: Do whatever is honorable as well as expedient in order to succeed, and if not completely honorable, at least appear to be virtuous in doing it.

Among the ten rules of life that I stated on that occasion, I would like to repeat the following:

To achieve a long and healthy life, never exercise.

Never work more than seven days a week or twelve hours a day.

Never take money for work you would not do if you did not need the money.

Never write more than one book a year. You cannot sell them if you do.

Get over the folly of supposing that there is any conflict between high thinking and high living.

Always say "if I die, never "when I die."

Surround yourself with friends and associates with whom you can be almost as honest as you are with yourself.

This last rule brings me back to Aristotle once again and to a bit of very special wisdom that is uniquely his—wisdom that I never allow myself to forget.

> Virtue and talent, he said, are not enough for success in achieving a good life. You also need to be blessed by good luck -by good fortune.

That is what I am most thankful for. I have been blessed by very good fortune indeed.

Plato, when asked what he counted as his blessings, said he was fortunate to have been born a Greek rather than a barbarian, and in the time of Scorates rather than at any other time.

Well, I count, among my strokes of good fortune, that I was born in America rather than anywhere else and in the 20th century.

By good luck I also read the autobiography of John Stuart Mill when I was 15 and therein met Socrates who led me to decide very early in life to become a teacher and a philosopher.

Just a little later I had the good fortune to be picked up by Bob Hutchins, an event which changed the course of my life in countless ways from that point on.

Thinking back to the years with Hutchins at the University of Chicago, years when I annoyed and provoked so many of my academic associates, as Socrates provoked his fellow Athenians, I count among my blessings the fact that I was never given hemlock before I voluntarily retired from academic life. Unlike Socrates who refused to ostracize himself, I exiled myself from academe.

These things by no means exhaust my good fortune, for among the blessings that have enriched the last half of my life have been a good wife—very good, indeed—good children, and a host of good friends.

You who are here tonight I count among my most treasured blessings

-- friends and colleagues in the work of the Institute for Philosophical Research

-- friends from the Aspen Institute

-- friends of the press and on TV

-- and especially, because of its relevance to this occasion, friends who have worked with me on Paideia, without whom neither I nor you would be here tonight.

Permit me one concluding remark about Paideia itself. You all know how I argued and fought with John Dewey in my youth.

You also know how, with the mellowing and insight that come with years, I have changed in relation to that great American educator to whom, along with Bob Hutchins, The Paideia Proposal is dedicated.

Dewey in two extraordinary sentences, written in 1900, summarized the whole thrust of Paideia. He said:

> "What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow

> and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy."

Diane Ravitch, in an article written a year ago, commented on Dewey's statement, as follows:

> "The best and wisest parents, I expect, want their child to read and write fluently; to speak articulately; to listen carefully; to learn to participate in the give-and-take of group discussion; to learn self-discipline and to develop the capacity for deferred gratification; to read and appreciate good literature; to have a strong knowledge of history, both of our own nation and of others; to appreciate the values of a free, democratic society; to understand science, mathematics, technology, and the natural world; to become engaged in the arts, both as a participant and as one capable of appreciating aesthetic excellence; I expect such parents would also want a good program of physical education and perhaps even competence in a foreign language."

Presumably, these mythical best and wisest parents want their child to have some sense of possible occupation or profession, but it seems doubtful that they would want their child to use school time for vocational training, at least in the pre-collegiate years."

This is precisely the kind of schooling that the Paideia Program aims to produce.

With God's help and yours, it will be produced—if not in this century, then in the next.

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