

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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Philosophy is Everybody's Business

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In Memorium



Max Weismann
1936-2017

How to Make the Practical into Principle (by Terrence Berres)

Max had a voice like a someone with a late shift jazz show on radio. When I noted this and suggested he look into doing audio-books of Adler's works, he couldn't be persuaded. As far as I know, the only way you'll hear Max now is if you call the Center and happen to get the answering machine.

Max was known for emphasizing that our organization be called "The Center for the Study of The Great Ideas", specifically with that capitalized definite article before "Great Ideas". This refers to Mortimer Adler's creation, *The Great Ideas* or the Syntopicon, the extensive topical index to *Great Books of the Western World*. The Center holds itself out as offering, among other things, "A syntopical approach to the Great Books". So Max's insisting on this made perfect sense.

Yet if you check the public records, the Center's name is shown the "Center for the Study of Great Ideas"; no "The". And if you read the Acknowledgements in Mortimer Adler's book *Adler's Philosophical Dictionary* (1995), he also gives the name as "Center for the Study of Great Ideas"; again, no "The". If I'm remembering right, even Max's voice on the Center answering machine tells callers "You have reached The Center for the Study of Great Ideas"; yet again, no "The".

I brought this to Max's attention. He told me he added "The" informally so that inventors would stop calling the Center with their "great ideas".

Lament

It has been proved to us by experience that if we would have pure knowledge of anything we must be quit of the body—the soul in herself shall attain the wisdom which we desire, and of which we say that we are lovers; not while we live, but after death; for if while in company with the body, the soul cannot have pure knowledge, one of two things follows—either knowledge is not to be attained at all, or if at all, after death. For present life, I reckon that we make the nearest approach to knowledge when we have the least possible intercourse or communion with the body, and are not

surfeited with the bodily nature, but keep ourselves pure until the hour when God himself is pleased to release us. And thus having got rid of the foolishness of the body we shall be pure and hold converse with the pure, and know of ourselves the pure light everywhere, which is no other than the pure light of truth. For the impure are not permitted to approach the pure. These are the sorts of words, Simmias, which the true lovers of knowledge cannot help saying to one another, and thinking. Socrates

It may seem strange that those who are sincerely concerned with philosophy are merely learning how to die and how to be dead. Death may be the greatest of all human blessings. Socrates

Many brave men lived before Agamemnon, but all unwept and unknown, they sleep in endless night, for they had not poets to sound their praises. Horace

Heroic victory combines worthy motives with lofty goals. This victory is symbolized by the leaves of the Laurel tree. This tribute is to Max Weismann, who, with Mortimer Adler, lived lives as it were, that were the two sides of one laurel leaf, and which by extension to their disciples becomes a wreath.

I approach the most unusual temple dedicated to Apollo. Unusual for both its architecture and its ability to lift one's soul, as far as possible while still in the body, to pure light.

Outside the entrance to the temple sit the nine Muses and the three Graces, arranged in a semi-circle around a singer, Orpheus. Orpheus, whose gentle music entwined with words captivate the heart and soul so that even the gods in their journeys, stop and listen enchanted. For the lyre-player poet sings not only of the joys of love and wisdom, but of dissipation and ignorance and folly. Thus did he in song, under direction of the Muses, remind all men, women and gods of the three venerated epigraphs carved above the temple entrance, calling all to hesitate before entering: Know Thyself; Everything in Moderation; E(ternity).

What could be more moving than the song of Orpheus? Could the temple lift me more than his songs surrounded by inspiration and grace? I hesitantly approached the temple. The three epigrams hovered over my head like the stone of Sisyphus. With a resolve that seems to come from outside me, I walk in. The temple has seven rooms, the first leading to the second and so on. Each room is named for a cardinal virtue in this order: Fortitude, Temperance, Prudence, Justice, Wisdom, Humility, Love. The walls of the tem-

ple are of a whitish hue without being pure white. The ceilings are sky blue. Each room has windows on both sides through which the Sun shines. This shining made each window seem unique while being one of many. It is as though the Sun surrounded the temple and was not at a point in the sky which Helios in his chariot had striven to reach.

This Sun-light has replaced the Pythian Oracle, foretelling is now replaced by enlightenment. Ignorance and hubris are transmuted in each room into the corresponding virtue in each person by dint of their willingness to submit and be taught. Of course, for some, Sunlight is merely sunlight. I began to see why the poet's songs suggested hesitation. For have not the gods decreed that the opposite of a blessing is a curse, that ignorance, like that of Oedipus, and hubris like that of Tantalus, shall be punished by the Furies?

In the farthest room, the seventh, labelled Love, stands a Laurel tree. Its roots are firmly embedded in earth, its branches and leaves spread to the heavens. The leaves sparkle with a golden sublimity, suggesting that of my soul after death, as the venerable Socrates taught us.

Much to my surprise and utter astonishment I find two venerable old sages talking quietly to whoever will listen. They are Max and Mortimer. In the tradition of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle they exhort, correct, teach, question, and in their own individual way bespeak the beauty and uplift of knowledge. This blessed atmosphere of learning and submitting and ingesting is that sublimity which after a lifetime of striving for moral excellence, may be called happiness.

I had questioned whether the temple could hold any spiritual uplift greater than the songs of Orpheus. Here was the answer. I had to experience the discipline of the journey through the seven rooms, the seven virtues, willingly submitting myself to each one resolving that my life would reflect this journey. A life of striving for moral excellence.

In this blessed place I saw my friends and family, all those who have sat, lo these many years, at the feet of Max and his counsel. We who know the woes and frustrations of living in this post-modern world of immaturity, a lack of moral bearing and responsibility, anti-rationalism, and the unseen anti-virtues of despair and culpable ignorance, which are enshrined on other temple walls, we who know the chaos and dissolution and count the cost of the loss

of the very wisdom and knowledge that founded our civilization, we admire and venerate Max, who stood for truth, goodness, beauty and justice. I kneel and give thanks for his life and his perseverance in truth.

I, with my brothers and sisters, disciples of The Great Ideas, shall resolve to live lives that strive to be morally excellent, and we shall teach our children and any who will listen.

As I leave the temple I perceive that the song of Orpheus has changed, under the direction of the Muses. It is now a lament. Those who have lost know such lament, even as Orpheus lost Eurydice, even as we have lost Max. So I kneel once again. My heart of pain and sorrow and grief joins with the hearts of Max's family and friends. Farewell dear friend.

In our sleep, pain which cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon our heart, until, in our despair and against our will, wisdom comes through the awful grace of God. Aeschylus

The temple analogy is taken from Edgar Allen Poe's story, The Masque of the Red Death.

Patrick Hickey on Max Weismann

The Most Interesting Man in The Pump Room

Max Weismann was philosopher, classicist, architect, bon vivant, raconteur, discerning pintsman, and Chairman of The Center for the Study of The Great Ideas.

Max Weismann was also the Commodore of Chicago's Ambassador East Pump Room. His Station was at the northeast corner of the elegant horseshoe bar and from his perch he dispensed good will and jammed his long athletic arm deeply into his pockets - to the elbows mind you - to bring coin of the Republic in saloon largess only matched by Boz O'Brien - owner of Midway Airport's Reilly's Daughter Pub.

Max made Henry Kissinger go bashful.

Brian Erlacher was sacked by Max.

Jim Thome asked Max to watch him in the cage.

Mayor Daley opened his mail.

The Lincoln Park Zoo sang to Max at Christmas.

The Black Hawks sang Chelsea Dagger whenever Max dropped a cocktail napkin to catch the eye of a Swedish stewardess.

Max got tips from bartenders.

Max used only the vowels he truly needed.

Max never needed Tom Skilling* - clouds parted with his advent.

When it was raining, it was because he was sad.

Even his parrot's advice was insightful.

If there were an interesting gland, his would have been larger than most men's entire lower intestines.

His shirts never wrinkled.

He was left-handed. And right-handed.

Even if he forgot to put postage on his mail, it got there.

He once knew a call was a wrong number, even though the person on the other end wouldn't admit it.

You could see his charisma from space.

Max Weismann was my friend.

* "chief meteorologist for the weekday 5, 6, 9 and 10 p.m. newscasts on WGN-TV (channel 9)." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v., "Tom Skilling" (accessed June 21, 2017) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tom_Skilling



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