

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

March 2019 *Philosophy is Everybody's Business* Nº 983



Archivist's Note

This week we take a break from our serialization of *The Capitalist Manifesto* to introduce the Center's newest Senior Fellow, Professor Michael Gose of Pepperdine University. Dr. Gose and I have been in touch by email and phone since last year when he approached the Center about becoming the co-publisher of a book. After reviewing the book, the Center agreed. It's hard to pass up the opportunity to co-publish a book about reading and discussing Great Books where someone else does all the work and the Center gets some of the credit. Learn more about Dr. Gose's over 30 years involvement in creating and staffing Pepperdine University's Great Books Program and the book as you read his essay.

Ken Dzugan
Senior Fellow and Archivist
March, 2019

The Joys of the Maieutic Seminar
Professor Michael Gose

A preamble

The Center for the Study of The Great Ideas has given me the great honor of having asked me to be a Senior Fellow for the Center. I have determined to accept honor I do not deserve because I am also blamed for things I didn't do. (I did compile a book for The Center, *Great Books: 100 Years, 100 Stories*. You may very well be interested in former Great Books students looking back at their experiences: https://www.amazon.com/Great-Books-100-Years-Stories/dp/1792656505/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1550089993&sr=1-1&keywords=great+books+100+years+100+stories.) This appointment is the occasion for me to contribute to our journal.

In looking back at past issues of "Philosophy is Everybody's Business," Clifton Fadiman's essay on "The Joy of Reading" (Fadiman: No. 853) led me to thinking about the joys of being a part of a maieutic seminar. My assumption is that the readership of this online journal have all been drawn to reading the Great Books. I admire the autodidact like Mortimer Adler apparently was in his youth. But I admit that I need others to help me process the books worth talking about. One summer I read a worthy book. Away from my campus and colleagues and students. Hmm. That Fall my own daughter read the same book in her Advanced Placement English class and asked me some great questions about her reading. Putting me to shame. I had not done the work necessary to have made that book my own. I was disappointedly unprepared for the dialectic she sought. I needed my colloquium.

I hope you have either been blessed to be a part of a group engaged in socratic dialogue about the Great Books, or that you will soon find one. I have had the great good fortune of having led Great Books Colloquia for almost forty years. I invite you to consider with me some of the joys we have either shared, or providentially may await you.

Despite having had very limited contact with Mortimer Adler, he has had a huge impact on me. He has done definitive work on socratic dialogue, the selection of books to share, and the importance of the discussants creating a learning community. Curiously, he made a remark to our group that has always stayed with me, and that only may seem to contradict what he has written.

As found in the pages of this journal, “possession of truth is the ultimate good of the human mind...(and we) must commit ourselves to the pursuit of truth.” (Adler: 878) I am fairly confident that the readers of these pages share that commitment to the truth.

Yet at the same time when asked about the Great Books, the architect of the Great Books Program said forthrightly, and quite emphatically, “None of it is true!” My first response was surprise. In my limited experience of Mortimer Adler, the legend, I know he liked to use Socrates’ analogy of the midwife in terms of how a teacher helps the student give birth to an idea. But he rather seemed even more taken by the Socratic role of the gadfly in provoking thought. In Adlerian terms, of course none of it is true. Because as he also writes about truth, “the pursuit is endless,” but we can come “closer to...the whole truth.” (Adler: 878) But my emphasis here is in acknowledging the power and significance of Adler’s words that “none of it is true.”

Thus I argue that neither Mortimer Adler nor the Great Books are intimidating per se. We may at times feel intimidated by such forceful voices, and we may rightly feel the obligation to be our most thoughtful selves, but intimidation is not allowed. We need not cower in the presence of great authors because, after all, “none of it is true.” Thus each and every one has the opportunity to ask that question or make that remark that gets a bit closer to whole truth.

I find great joy in that.

However, accepting the Great Ideas challenge is something of an acquired taste and learned skill. Following a visit to our campus by Mortimer, I became the architect of the Great Books program at Pepperdine University. In establishing the program I had the good sense to enlist smarter people than I am also to teach in the seminars. Two Professors especially were the best of our best. Which otherwise sounds like a good thing. But when we had our meetings to talk about the books and develop our program, after about an hour and a half my head literally felt like it had grown twice as heavy and that I needed to go lie down. With proper rest I did find that I could occasionally make a contribution, and sometimes even catch one of them offering an opinion based in received knowledge instead of what was actually written in the text. None of it is true; so we better all set about the business of philosophy. English Professor Robert Ryf once observed that he preferred the term dialectic to dialogue because all too often dialogue was only two monologues with inner punctuation. The meeting of minds is not a competition. A rigorous conversation becomes a great joy.

I suspect that Mortimer's emphasis on philosophy being everyone's business is why he was ousted from The University of Chicago's Philosophy Department, and moved by the University President, Robert Hutchins, to their Law School (a home for Socratic dialogue). I have observed that many philosophers pride themselves in trying to establish whether a truth is verifiable. On the one hand I admire that rigor and discipline (that only an elite few can apparently do). On the other I also admire Adler's insistence that philosophy is everyone's business. After all, none of it is true. We can all work towards a closer approximation of Truth. Thus, in my decades of engaging in Socratic dialogue about the Great Books, I better realize how important the foundational thinkers are towards helping us chart our discourse, and giving us terms by which to start our discussions about our otherwise inadequate understanding of the Truth. For example, Dante describes God as three lights in *Paradiso*. Anything with weight drifts away from God. Now we apparently know that even light has gravity. None of it may be (entirely) true, but what a classic paradigm Dante gives us to consider in "reflecting" on the nature of God. Discussions about Truth may sometimes become arduous, but also become exciting

I try to encourage my own students by telling them that they have the opportunity to be smarter than the authors they read because they have the advantage of looking back at them. Paraphrasing Goethe, without our three thousand years of history, we would be living hand to mouth. What sense could we make of the world without the constructs of the great authors, who help us chart our ways, and others to help our understanding? I find joy in that perspective.

If I have successfully shown myself to be both arrogant enough, and humble enough to take on The Great Books, and I am preaching to the choir of others who have found meaning in conversation about ideas, I will limit the remainder of my essay to calling attention to some of the other factors that give me joy in being a part of a maieutic seminar..

Perhaps the paramount consideration Mortimer brought to our attention, and certainly the first requirement, "Only when teachers realize that the principal cause of learning that occurs in a student is the activity of the student's own mind..." (Adler: 891) The official Pepperdine University affirmation is that "the student is the heart of the educational enterprise." If you have a leader who does not believe that, change leaders. That premium on each individual is basic for a dialectical conversation to hum.

To paraphrase Tom Hanks in the baseball film, *League of Their Own*, there is no crying in Great Books. Well, maybe in isolated moments. As Adler pens, “Nothing is more conducive to learning than wit and laughter.” (Adler: 2) I once read in *USA Today*, which I have been known to do on occasion, that Americans laugh on average less than six times a day. The Great Books groups to which I have belonged usually have more laughs than that before all the participants have managed to open their texts. Laughter is a premier joy of an effective Great Books group.

A Great Books Colloquium (a much more delightful word than “seminar”) enhances big picture thinking. The first time I consciously thought of big picture thinking was while reading Huxley’s *Brave New World* in 12th Grade Honors English. The narrator expressed what a privilege it was to have been shown the big picture of how things work before his subsequent indoctrination. I am quite the baseball fan, and just yesterday, as I write this, a major league pitcher noted for his great success in the biggest games, announced that if his manager went with the new trend of using someone else to pitch the first inning of a baseball game instead of the traditional starter, he would walk off the field and out of the stadium. And I thought about the latitude the Greeks gave their best warrior, Achilles, but if Aeneas was the manager, it would probably be bloody. Invariably discussants help suggest a wider perspective of connections and interconnections.

When I was a school administrator I sponsored faculty basketball in the early mornings before school started. We had a great time during my four years. That group tried to keep it going once I had left, but it ended almost immediately. I was told that my presence was missed because no one continued to care whether the other player was or was not out of bounds, whether someone had been fouled, nor even played to win. And it quit being fun. Of course it would be better if the remaining group enforced the rules that make a game actually enjoyable. Adler condemns “phony tolerance”. (Adler: 857) Presumably in a democracy each citizen has to hold all other citizens responsible. True joy in a colloquium can only come when members call each other out for sloppy preparation, thinking, and commitment. Playing to win, seeking the whole truth, demand full attention. And then the activity is consummate fun.

Adler also understands, and helps us understand, “the advice was not to criticize a book—not to say you agree or disagree—until you can first say you understand.” (Adler: 868) I frankly have little or no tolerance for those who make Great Books a springboard to what they happen to be feeling about the text—without first

understanding the text. If this essay is primarily about the joy of the maieutic seminar, this is a case of pleasure as the absence of pain. Hold members' feet to the fire about the requisite of understanding as the first requirement of a Great Books discussion. (I am similarly greatly annoyed by those who jump to judgement before understanding the respective author on her own terms.)

Take joy in the person who dares to be wrong. I can understand why school students are reluctant to be visibly wrong in class. If the teacher does not grade anonymously, there is the danger of being prejudged. But the most delightful and valuable students are those who unabashedly put something out for discussion about some work that is simply wrong. It always seems to me the discussions that clarify why a student got it wrong are much more instructive than the discussions where students only venture to talk about something they are sure about. Those who consistently risk being wrong are a joyful treasure. They must not be scoffed at; they must be celebrated.

Adler well warns us against "glorified bull session(s)." (Adler: 804) There is magic in a group that clicks. This is more possible in a Great Books group because as Adler notes, "the ideas and issues raised by good books are more permanent and more interesting than those that are raised by inferior books." (Adler: 2) A Great Books group consistently offers the prospect of community. As Adler concludes: "We at least tentatively today have begun our understanding of philosophy by thinking of it as rational talk about the basic problems of mankind. It consists in human beings thinking together." (Adler: 718)

While the book I compiled, *Great Books: 100 Years, 100 Stories*, solicited former students to look back at the influence the Great Books had had on their lives, many contributors called attention to the importance of their sojourners. Because those groups have been so important to me, I will end my own reflections with a few selections about what they found in the camaraderie of having studied the Great Books with worthy peers. The joys of the maieutic seminar!

Nothing has changed my thinking like Great Books and I can't even define how, I just know it did. I'm not sure if I can pick a word to describe the sense I got while in class. I felt inspired and the opposite of lonely. It felt meaningful. It wasn't quite class and it wasn't quite community but it was definitely bonding. We weren't really sure yet what we were pursuing but it felt meaningful and exciting. We were in it together. This is the essence of college right here, that there isn't quite a word for. "*What Dekalog are you on?*

Who is the hero!!? Get out of the cave!!” We had our own dialogue, rhetoric. We were pursuing the good! For what point? I don’t think we knew, besides it was electric and receiving a fist bump when you nailed the “defining passage” might have been a better feeling than acing my physics exams.

What made Great Books great for me was not the books (though I thoroughly enjoyed many of them) but that the friendships that I made while arguing (as the hours passed in the night the discussions became increasingly heated and often ended up in arguments) the great ideas became some of the greatest friendships of my life. You truly get to know someone when they are passionately defending their definition of good and evil and how either, neither, or both of those things has anything to do with truth, justice, virtue, or happiness.

I still look back with great fondness on the early morning discussions when a small group of people were trying to figure out life, and our only tool was a marked up paperback with words written by a person that had been dead for more than two thousand years. The fierce, contentious debates were only surpassed in enjoyment by the feeling of acceptance upon finding another former stranger who became your ally in pursuing Truth.

This is different than the way you get to know people in Speech class or abroad or in the dorms. You all explore these complex works of fiction together and as they unravel so does each person and at the end you realize everyone is woven together.

I am grateful for my classmates and professors who challenged me and molded me wittingly and unwittingly into a person who thinks about Great Ideas and who is willing to let them affect the ways I live my life and serve others.

And when I’m having a particularly arrogant day, my subconscious likes to push to the forefront our class’ discussion of *Candide* when every single person, save one who would not back down no matter what was thrown at her, argued the exact opposite of the point. Because we were too literal. We saw the tree and missed the forest. A really, really big forest. For a fairly small tree. It was a humbling experience, but a valuable lesson.

My knee-jerk response, selfishly, is to characterize my greatest appreciation for my Great Books experience as that it was the first time that I felt that I was allowed to speak and be heard in a classroom. So as not to appear that I am indicting the sum of my undergraduate experience I should clarify that I have communicated verbally in other classes. That being said, when I think back on GB

I recall the sheer joy of discourse. Unlike the requisite espousing of opinion, exhibiting that I had read a book, or regurgitating what the professor delivered, I had the opportunity to share my understanding of text, feelings about that understanding, and apply this understanding to my life and environment. I can't think of any prior experience in any other academic setting including my post graduate studies.

If anything, Great Books has been the spark of my intellectual thoughts, and my times at Pepperdine in the Honors Program were the most intellectually challenging years of my life. Great Books was the vehicle for challenging thoughts and ideas and helped me develop an ability to have mutual discourse with peers without making it personal.

When I reflect on my college years—what I learned, how I was shaped, and how I grew—Great Books is truly the anchor that represents that time. It was the most influential course of my college education. How great it would be to find a place like that today—a group of people to think with, to explore with, to grow with, to be challenged by. Life has so many questions to explore, and the people around me have so many thoughts to discover. Conversations with people that think differently than me are stimulating and necessary—not for the sake of throwing my ideas at them, but to hear their story and their thoughts and to not be stagnant, but continually growing. It's just as important to question my own thoughts and hold them up to “the light” to see if something needs to shift. Great Books has inspired me to listen, to question, to be open minded, to share my thoughts, to shift when needed, and to think deeply.

The biggest compliment that I can give the Great Books program is that I hope that when my children are of age that are able to take part and pursue the understanding of those ideas with their friends with the same enthusiasm that I did with mine.

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