



Mortimer J. Adler

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90

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

When I am king, they shall not have bread and shelter only, but also teachings out of books, for a full belly is little worth where the mind is starved.

—Mark Twain, *The Prince and the Pauper*

DUSTING OFF THE GREAT BOOKS

by Matt Kaufman

A funny thing is starting to happen on some college campuses. Courses teaching the classics of Western literature—usually denounced for focusing on the works of "dead white males"—are winning favor among black and Hispanic students.

The trend is developing (reports the Jan. 18 *New York Times*) not at the usual high-powered academic leaders, but in mid-size and smaller settings with sizable minority populations, ranging from places you've heard of (Clemson University, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee) to others you may not know of (Delta State, midway between Memphis and Jackson, Miss.) In just the last three years, courses featuring the Great Books curriculum are springing up, and the names they cover are the sort who allegedly hold no interest for minority students: Homer, Plato, Dante, Augustine, Hume, Yeats, Keats, T.S. Eliot.

An especially interesting case highlighted by the *Times* is Wilbur Wright College, a community college in the north side of Chicago "that caters to high school graduates considered not ready for four-year institutions, as well as to X-ray technicians, cellular phone sales clerks and bank tellers looking to better their lot." There, a Great Books curriculum in only its second year has 900 students enrolled, many in night classes. Comments the *Times*: "What may be most remarkable at Wright, where more than half the students are minorities and recent immigrants, is that students who grew up worlds away have been so drawn to courses that center on writers from Western Europe, white America or ancient Greece or Rome."

What's going on here? If you believe the self-proclaimed spokespersons for various racial minority groups, this shouldn't be happening. Black students supposedly only care about black writers like, say, Toni Morrison. Hispanic students just want to read Gabriel Garcia Marquez. All those dead white guys—well, they're just part of the racist/sexist power structure bent on keeping all the

nonwhite peoples down.

Only that's not what the students at places like Wright College say.

Keith Morgan, a black former army sergeant, found he could relate to a story about another returning veteran: F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. "I have a dream, just like Gatsby, to be successful," he says. "To me, as a black man, you have to get past your color and just appreciate what's being written."

"I'm here to make myself a more intellectual person, regardless of my race, regardless of my background," adds Mexican immigrant Oscar Martinez, who studied and appreciated Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* last semester.

All this is good to see, for more reasons than the obvious fact that these students are getting exposed to great literature.

It's good to see because if you really want to experience *diversity*—the catchword of people who promote minority-focused classes—you won't just read books focused on the experiences of your race. You'll read authors who took on great and transcendent themes like the relationship between God and man, man and man (and woman), man and the state. You'll read authors whose work has stood the test of centuries, and learn why people saw things differently than they do today.

It's good to see because it provides not just diversity, but a basis for *unity*. Yes, I know I just praised diversity. But there's a difference between valuing diversity and making it our overriding priority. Any society needs common ground—a sense among its citizens that they are one people with a common culture, not merely a bunch of consumers who happen to occupy the same continent. Our country cannot survive if a large portion of its people see themselves not primarily as Americans, but as hyphenated Americans—especially when, whether the hyphen is preceded by "African," "Hispanic" or "Asian," the emphasis is always on the first word, not on "American." It

cannot survive when large numbers of people see another race as The Enemy. But when students in a city as race-conscious as Chicago reach out to explore the heritage of Western civilization—which is also the heritage of the country we all live in—it’s a hopeful sign.

But the best aspect of the Western civ resurgence is that many students will discover something more than history; they’ll discover truth.

To be sure, they’ll run across plenty of disagreements among the authors they read. (The Christian giant Augustine isn’t on the same page as the atheist David Hume). But they’ll notice that certain questions and themes are recurring. They’ll see Christians warning of worldly and spiritual temptations in works like John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* — temptations like popularity or despair — and they’ll recognize similar things in their own lives. They’ll see the destructiveness of revenge and the noble-but-difficult calling of duty in Shakespeare’s royal characters. They’ll see the connection between classical philosophers and America’s Founding Fathers in stressing the need for limits on government, and for a virtuous people to sustain self-government.

These things can be found in Western civ, but they’re not just Western. They’re universal, and everyone can benefit by them.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Hello Mortimer and Max!

I will write you now and then about our forays (with the help of Dr. Adler's reading plan) into the Great Books, and most recently, his new book 'The Great Ideas.'

We meet almost every Sunday afternoon in the town of Ben Lomond, California (about 40 minutes south and west of San Jose, CA.) Our group includes professionals and working people. Our group leader is Swami. Some of us have been with Swami for 30 years. Together we read and

practice the precepts of 'The Great Books of the East.' Those are the ones which deal with yoga or the search for the universal divine principle within each of us.

Swami has always loved Dr. Adler. When he began his first residential program for the study of Yoga in the 1970s, the first book we studied and discussed together was Dr. Adler's 'How to Read A Book'!

At first blush this may seem odd to you, but it's not in Swami's eyes. As he puts it: 'Dr. Adler is not only very learned, he's a great writer, very organized in his thinking and clear in his expression. He knows how to read books for understanding. The yoga texts of the East contain vast wisdom, and they aren't written as well as the Great Books of the West. That makes it even more important for us to understand Dr. Adler's rules of reading for enlightenment. Then we can absorb more of what the ancient yoga texts have to offer us.'

We've been at the Great Books reading plan for some time now. Read and discussed were some of the great Greek philosophers and playwrights-including Aristotle and Aristophanes . Our favorites were Plato, and Montaigne. We moved on into luminaries like Rabelais, and St. Thomas Aquinas-both of whom proved to be heavy sledding. After reading Locke, we decided to take a well earned break with Dr. Adler's 'Great Ideas.'

You did a fine editing job on the 'Great Ideas' book, Max. It's clear Dr. Adler put extraordinary effort into the preparation for the broadcasts. His scripts read like well-crafted essays. Swami is not one to shy from an investment in education, and along with many other of Mortimer's video offerings he already has in his collections, he purchased the entire broadcast set of your 'Great Ideas' videos. We watch these as a group on a Sunday and take notes. The week after, we read the relevant chapter in the 'Great Ideas' book individually. On our own, we actively take notes, underline, mark, and outline each chapter. The next Sunday we discuss what we thought about and learned.

I found Dr. Adler's chapter 20 on 'Youth is A Barrier to Learning,' inspiring and motivational. I want nothing less than a lifetime of adult learning for myself. Tomorrow (Sunday, July 9) we discuss Chapter 21, 'How to Read A Book.' All of us are grateful for the wonderful job the two of you have done and continue to do. Please keep the flame of wisdom, understanding, enlightenment and philosophy burning bright for the whole world to see by.

Love and Best Regards to You Both,

Rob Ryan

Max:

The PDF file opened like a charm and #89 was great! The fireworks were a bonus. I read #89 twice and had Wendy read it too. Then I went back and reread #36, the Gettysburg Address and The Declaration of Independence.

Thanks for your continual effort to awaken all of us from our slumbers. The photo of MJA reading with his macanudo was a nice touch.

Thanks,

John Segvich

Dear Max,

I have been eyeing "How to Think About The Great Ideas" for a few weeks now, and the other day I sat down with it at one of those bookstore/coffee places and started reading. I bought it! Because I'll be reading it primarily on my trip. I can't tell you what a great book this is. It is just the tool I have needed for quite some time (why am I so slow in finding these things?). Congratulations to you and Dr. Adler.

Sincerely, Bob Sale

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As always, we welcome your comments.
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