

Learning is a treasure that will follow its owner everywhere.

—Chinese Proverb

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THE JOY OF LEARNING

by Mortimer Adler

In one way, the joy of learning is as simple to explain as the joy of eating; and in another way, it is as complex—perhaps more complex. The simple sense in which we enjoy eating is that it satisfies a fundamental appetite in us. At frequent intervals we are hungry and when we are, we experience the pleasure of satisfying our desire for food. So, too, if Aristotle is right, as I think he is, we have a fundamental appetite for knowledge, and the satisfaction of our desire to know gives us great pleasure. But that is certainly not all there is to it—either in the case of eating or in the case of learning. A large book could be written about the joys—notice that I said "joy" in the plural this time—the joys of eating, a complex set of gustatory pleasures which we derive from savoring a wide variety of tasty edibles. The joys of learning are also plural and just as diversified or varied.

I am not going to write the large book that could be written about them, but I am going to try in this short essay to tell you autobiographically about the many different pleasures I have enjoyed either as a result of learning or in the process of learning. The particular joys or pleasures that I am going to describe and illustrate with stories from my own life are only some of the pleasures or satisfactions that learning affords. They are the pleasures or satisfactions

experienced by a person who is temperamentally and by intellectual bent and training a philosopher. I wanted to be a philosopher when I was a very young man and I have spent most of my life trying to be one. But if I had wanted to be a scientist, or a historian, or a mathematician, or a lawyer, or a physician, and if I had devoted my life to learning in one or another of those fields of knowledge, I would probably have a different set of pleasures to describe and to tell autobiographical stories about.

Be that as it may, the first of the joys of learning that I remember vividly from my youth is one that is probably common to the experience of learning in every field of knowledge. It is the joy of being able to remember what one has learned. I took great pleasure, when I was a boy in elementary school, in being able to remember—and to recite to myself out loud—the dates in American history that I had learned and the names of the capital cities of the states in the USA. A little later, after I had been "dropped out" of high school and gone to work on *The New York Sun*, I bought, out of the four dollars a week that I was then earning at the age of fifteen, a history of philosophy by Frank Thilly (I still have that book on my shelves). I was fascinated by the speculations of the ancient philosophers—or physicists—who lived in the Greek colonies before Socrates walked the streets of Athens; and I derived great pleasure from being able to recite to my self the names of these early Greek thinkers—from Thales to Democritus and Leucippus—remembering as well the contribution each one of them had made to the study of nature.

Still later, when I was in college, I experienced this same pleasure in a number of ways. I took a course in the medical school in neuroanatomy and thought it great sport to be able to recite the names of the twelve cranial nerves. I began to read the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas and could recite the names of the nine hierarchies of angels, and the names of the four cardinal virtues, the five intellectual virtues, and the three theological virtues. When I was a senior in Columbia College, one of my classmates,

Edward Roche Hardy, was an infant prodigy—he was twelve or thirteen, and I was all of nineteen. This rankled me and, on one occasion, in the presence of fellow students. I challenged him to summarize the intellectual history of Western civilization within the time it would take to walk from 120th Street on Riverside Drive down to Grant's Tomb. The report of the competition, which appeared in the college newspaper, awarded me the victory: I had succeeded in outlining the intellectual history of the West—from the Egyptians, Babylonians, and Greeks down to American pragmatism with William James and John Dewey—in 22 minutes flat.

The pleasures of remembering and outlining whole fields of knowledge have recurred again and again in my life. Twenty years ago, outlining the intellectual content of the great books, I took pleasure in remembering and reciting the names of the 102 great ideas, about each of which I wrote an essay in the *Syntopicon*. Still more recently, outlining the whole of human knowledge as the basis for planning and editing the new Britannica, I enjoyed reciting the names of the ten major parts in the circle of learning, and I could even remember the titles of most of the 42 subdivisions of those ten parts, but not, of course, the titles of the more than 200 sections that the outline contains.

I will have more to say later about the pleasure I get from outlining, but I wish to turn now to another joy of learning—the pleasure derived from a sudden clarifying insight. The Institute for Philosophical Research opened its doors in 1952 and started to work on the idea of freedom. We floundered in the darkness for months, not knowing how to give an orderly and clear account of the basic issues about human freedom in the vast body of writings about that subject. Suddenly, one day, I had a "brainstorm." As clearly as one sees everything for miles when a fog lifts and the sun shines on the sea, I saw at once that there are only three ways in which men possess freedom (either naturally, circumstantially, or by the acquisition of knowledge and virtue), and that the kind of freedom they possess differs

according to the way in which they come to possess it. This single vision, gained in a moment of insight, controlled the researches of the Institute staff in the next five years and produced the two large volumes I wrote on *The Idea of Freedom*.

I could give many other examples of the same intense joy that one experiences when a momentary flash of insight disperses the fog in which one has been stumbling and fumbling. But I am just going to mention two that were closely associated with editorial work I have done for Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.

When Mr. Hutchins and I undertook to edit the *Great Books of the Western World*, I took on the additional assignment of indexing their content by reference to the basic ideas that the great books discuss. Books have been indexed by their own authors for many centuries, but no one had ever created a single index for 434 works by 74 different authors. Since no one had ever done it before, I naturally did not know how to do it when I first started. The work that I did with a large staff during the first two years had to be thrown away; it just was not doing the job. Then, suddenly, I saw that the indexing had to be done to topics expressed in fairly elaborate phrases, not just by reference to single words as in ordinary indices. That worked. The problem was solved—and the Syntopicon was finished six years later.

More recently, when I undertook to outline the whole of human knowledge as the basis for producing a totally new Britannica—another job that had never been done before—I was stumped for months. Once again, the work of a large staff seemed to be getting nowhere. One evening, I came home from the office in despair, telling my wife that I thought the job could not be done. I gave her all the reasons why it seemed impossible to me (which, by the way, is one of the best ways to stimulate one's own mind to come up with the solution to an apparently insoluble problem). I went up to my study and promptly fell asleep. Hours later,

awaking from a deep and dreamless sleep, I had the solution in the form of a single insight—the distinction between the role that titles play in an analytical table of contents and the role played by the particular subjects listed under those organizing titles. All I needed was that single insight in order to direct the work of my many associates in the production of the *Outline of Knowledge and Guide to the Britannica*, which is the Table of Contents of the new Fifteenth Edition.

Sudden insights such as these are among the most intense joys of learning. But there are other pleasures or satisfactions that are almost equally intense. As everyone knows, philosophers are prone to argument. I have spent many hours of my life arguing with my intellectual friends or colleagues, disputing this or that philosophical point, often with more heat than light. The pleasure of learning does not come from arguing itself. That is often painful. Nor from winning an argument. What can anyone learn from winning an argument, except that he is right, of which he was convinced in the first place? No, the great pleasure of learning that one derives from arguing comes only when one loses the argument and thereby realizes that an opinion that one had been stubbornly defending was wrong. And this experience is especially pleasurable when one loses an argument to a student who resists being taught an error.

I learned some truths about the superiority of democracy to other forms of government, about the necessity of world government for world peace, and about the difficulty of demonstrating God's existence, in the course of arguments in which I stubbornly defended errors on these various subjects. Losing the argument resulted not only in my acknowledging the error I had made, but also in learning the truth which corrected that error. That is learning the hard way, and precisely because it is the hard way, the joy of learning that way is so very great.

Closely connected with the pleasure that comes from learning the truth by losing an argument is the pleasure of

being able to put down on paper a rigorous demonstration of the truth one has learned. I have not been able to do that with many of the truths I have learned, but I can vividly remember the few instances in which I have experienced that pleasure.

In the course of teaching the great books with Mr. Hutchins at the University of Chicago, we were reading Aristotle's *Politics* with our students. I expressed the view that Aristotle's opinion of democracy as the worst of the three good forms of government was wrong. Challenged by the students, I undertook to prove the very opposite—that democracy is, of all forms of government, the most just, the only completely just form. It took me some time and effort to produce the demonstration, but I eventually came up with a first draft of a proof that had almost mathematical rigor. I perfected it in papers that I subsequently delivered at various philosophical association meetings; and defended it against criticisms and objections which appeared in the philosophical journals. I was finally and firmly convinced that the demonstration could and would stand up against all criticisms or objections. There are few pleasures as satisfying as the one you derive from the conviction that you have been able to prove something—and make the proof stick!

I subsequently wrote a book on *The Theory of Democracy*, at the heart of which the proof lies; and the direction taken by my most recent book, *The Common Sense of Politics*, was controlled by that proof. Without going into all the autobiographical details, just let me say that I had the same experience of pleasure in being able to prove that world government is necessary for world peace—the central thesis of a book of mine entitled *How To Think About War and Peace*. I hope some day that I will feel the joy of being able to prove the existence of God, or at least of being able to prove that God's existence cannot be rigorously demonstrated. I have been working on this for the last forty years and I am going to keep at it until I can accomplish one or the other of the proofs just mentioned.

Finally, I come to the pleasure which is for me the supreme joy of learning. I have already touched on it, but now I want to describe it more fully. It began for me when I was a small boy in the seventh grade. I had a teacher (I can remember him clearly to this day; his name was Mr. Duke, and he had one glass eye), a teacher who taught me how to construct outlines. For some reason which I do not fully understand, I developed a passion for outlining, and became extremely proficient at it. This ability has stayed with me all my life. All the lectures I have given were written in outline form. Most of the books I have written were first completely written in outline form before I turned them into ordinary expositions in which one paragraph follows another, without the structural elegance of an outline, in which every element occupies a special numbered position and is either supraordinate to, subordinate to, or coordinate with every other element. Once or twice I insisted upon keeping what I had written in outline form and compelled my publisher to bring the book out in that form, but I soon discovered that most people did not get as much pleasure from reading outlines (in fact, most people cannot read outlines) as I got from writing them.

What is the pleasure that I get from outlining? It is certainly a pleasure that involves learning. It is the pleasure of putting things neatly in order, relating one thing to another in the most perspicuous fashion, and, as a result, seeing a clearly defined structure which embraces everything that should be covered. In my more delirious or fanatical moments, I have compared the joy of outlining with the joy that God must have experienced in creating the universe. Where, before, there was nothing but chaos, now there is a cosmos—an intelligible structure which fits everything into its proper place.

I have lived a very fortunate life. The two biggest jobs I was ever asked to undertake and was paid to do—producing the *Syntopicon* for *Great Books of the Western World*, and producing the Outline of Knowledge for the new

Britannica—were jobs that allowed me to indulge my passion for outlining and gave me the greatest joy that is associated with learning.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Hi Max,

Regarding TGIO #98 “Teaching the Virtues”, I could not agree more. We do not teach the virtues in school. But this is nothing new. As I look back on my own college years at the University of Illinois in light of the Great Books (my set came a few weeks ago) I cannot help but wonder why with a major in political science and a minor in history I was not exposed to the great authors. I can remember only one course that was built around a classic text and that was a sociology course that used the Republic. We should have been reading what the great writers had to say about government. Even in a 300 level political theory class the great writers were replaced with a text book. Sad. Perhaps I will become educated yet. I have enrolled in the adult program at the U of Chicago.

I remember listening to Steven Allen addressing the National Press Club on NPR a year or so ago expressing his unhappiness at the violence and the poor taste in today's humor as seen on TV and in the movies and the impact that had on children. But I was also struck by the fact that he could not construct a logical argument as to why it was bad. I felt sorry for him as he groped for reasons in front of a national radio audience. He knew it was but bad, but he could not effectively attack it. Plato and Aristotle might have helped.

Regards,

Lyle Sykora

Dear Max,

I would like to publicly thank Christina Hoff Sommers for her article on "Teaching the Virtues: A blueprint for moral education" in TGIO #98. As a father of a 3 year old son, I continually struggle to prioritize how and what is a priority on the education of my son. I am continually bombarded by moral relativism, however we have chosen to stand fast on teaching him Christian virtues. As S. Truett Cathy (the founder of Chick-fil-A) said "It is easier to raise good boys and girls than it is to fix bad men and women". I am glad to see a scholarly philosopher take this stance.

On a completely separate issue, please pass along to all the member to keep a sharp eye at garage sales for The Great Books. While travelling last week for work my wife frantically called me to say that she had haggled a complete set of the Great Books of the Western World (1993 edition) for \$16 dollars (from the asking price of \$25) at a local garage sale. This new set nicely compliments the full price set I purchased earlier this year, and more importantly gives me a set to hand down to my son.

Regards,

Hank Rawlins

Max,

This may be of interest to some members:

Adler, Mortimer J.: *Dialectic* (his first book) ; London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1927. First Edition, Hard Cover, Fair/No Jacket, Signed by Author Outer binding split at front hinge down length of book; some splitting to rear hinge as well. Chipping at head & base of spine. Green cloth covers have darkened to brown on spine strip. Bumping to all extremities. Inner hinges intact. Flyleaf inscribed "To Donald Slesinger - with most cordial

regards. Mortimer J. Adler Nov. 1927" Pages clean & crisp
on cream stock., Philosophy (UR#:11689) Offered for sale
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Regards,

Terry Berres

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As always, we welcome your comments.
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