

Learning softeneth the heart and breedeth gentleness and charity.

—Mark Twain

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THE TREATMENT OF THE AGED *

Dear Dr. Adler,

The problem of the aged citizens of our society is of urgent concern. It has been commented on by social workers, political leaders, and other interested persons. Did societies in the past have this problem? What was the position of the aged in former times? Do the great writers of the past have anything illuminating to offer us on this vital matter?

F. W. B.

The attitude toward the elderly has varied in different times and cultures. In general, the aged have been held in great respect and even veneration in primitive and ancient societies. Old age was regarded as the time of wisdom and spiritual power. Rule by *the elders* in both the political and the religious community was a common practice.

The present problem of what to do about our *senior citizens* is unique. It arises from the technological and social changes of the past hundred years. Man's life span has been lengthened, but his services to the economy have been rendered unnecessary in the extra years he has gained. The aged have become supernumeraries in our society. We have substituted *gerontology* (the study of the aged and their problems) for *gerontocracy* (rule by the aged).

The writers of the past have no advice to offer us on our special problem, for they never faced it, not even as a possibility. Montaigne, in the sixteenth century, notes that most men do not live beyond forty. The aged, as a numerous class, were no problem.

However, we do find passages from the ancient poets

which resemble our own sense of the plight of the aged. In one of Sophocles' plays, the chorus of elders calls old age dispraised, infirm, unsociable, unfriended. Another chorus, in a play by Aristophanes, laments: We who have lost our music, feeble nothings, dull, forlorn.

Jonathan Swift, in *Gullivers Travels*, also paints a grim picture of old age. On the mythical island of Luggnagg, a few people in each generation live on to an everlasting old age. In addition to being opinionative, peevish, covetous, morose, vain, talkative, incapable of friendship and dead to all natural affection, they can remember only what they learned in their earlier years, and even that incorrectly. At the age of eighty, they are held legally dead, given a small pension, and regarded as incapable of employment or business transactions.

Some philosophers of antiquity, such as Plato and Cicero, take a brighter view of old age. They see it as the period when intellectual activity and wisdom are at the highest and replace the waning physical powers and enjoyments. They also regard old age as the time when practical judgment is at it's best and men are most qualified to direct public affairs. The study of philosophy, according to Plato, should not begin until after fifty.

Montaigne, on the other hand, maintains that we are fully formed by the time we are twenty, do our best work before we are thirty, and decay thereafter in everything, including our mind. He is skeptical of the traditional view that we increase in understanding and wisdom as we get older, and believes, rather, that we get duller. He proposes, however, various psychological stratagems for overcoming the stupefaction of old age, and holds out the hope that our sensual tastes and appreciation can be developed as we grow older.

Many writers insist that the lapses in memory, acuteness, and interest which are supposed to afflict the aged can be avoided or overcome. Samuel Johnson contends vehemently that the loss of mental acuteness is the result of weak will and laziness, not of old age.

* From his book, *Great Ideas from the Great Books* (1961)

BOOK REVIEW

SHELF LIFE

from National Review - Sept. 11, 2000

by Michael Potemra

The humanities are not just for the professoriate: This is the perspective of two impressive new books by prominent intellectuals.

Literary critic Harold Bloom's 1998 book *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* helped create something of a Shakespeare moment in the mass culture. His new book, *How to Read and Why* (Scribner, 283 pp., \$25), builds on that surprising popular success by trying to explain, to a broad audience, what literature is trying to do. While Bloom often returns to Shakespeare, his subject here is the entire spectrum of Western imaginative literature.

The book offers excellent advice on a general level. For example, Bloom urges us not to refuse the pleasures of identification with favorite characters, any more than the authors have been able to resist such pleasures. (One of my favorite writers, Vladimir Nabokov, discouraged this particular indulgence. But the book can be read most profitably as a series of short introductions to key novels, plays, and poems. Bloom provides pithy, memorable distillations of his lifetime of study: *Crime and Punishment* is dreadfully powerful but somewhat pernicious, almost as though it were a *Macbeth* composed by Macbeth himself; Kafka and Borges do not give you dirges for the un-lived life.

Fifty years ago, Mortimer Adler was working on a similar project of popularizing high culture, the Britannica series of Great Books of the Western World. His new book, *How to Think About the Great Ideas* (Open Court, 530 pp., \$24.95), is an artifact of that era: a transcription of 52 television shows he did in 1953-54. Adler's approach was controversial at the time, condemned by some as middlebrow—but the new book demonstrates the value, indeed the necessity, of Adler's project.

He begins with the insight that philosophical thought is an activity to which all people have a proclivity, and that the words denoting the Great Ideas are not the jargon of a specialized science but the words of everyday speech. His task is to take words such as truth, beauty, justice, and love, and deepen his audiences understanding of them without recourse to a technical vocabulary. That he succeeds in this, for over 500 pages, is a tribute both to his devotion and to the possibilities of popularization.

I also strongly recommend Adler's *How to Read a Book* (Simon & Schuster, 426 pp., \$14), written with Charles Van Doren, and Bloom's *The Western Canon* (Riverhead, 546 pp., \$15) as excellent companions to reading ones way through our cultural patrimony.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Max,

As one who has spent years trying to work with educators to raise their standards of teaching, I wholly endorse your idea. Looking forward to reading your *Classical Homeschooling* magazine.

Ken Wareham, Utah State University

Dear Max,

The last two issues of The Great Ideas Online seemed to summarize my *quest* for understanding by means of the great conversation. A *possibly impossible* quest to learn how to teach, how to *pass on* the wisdom of what others have learned and the joy or happiness that can come of such a journey. The bitter experiences with my dear Abigail forced me to look at the conversation from a more *passionate* perspective than that reflected in Dr. Adler's writings. In a sense I used a dialectic of Adler vs. Russell (Bertrand), brilliant believer v. brilliant skeptic to teach me reflecting the unsettling disposition to change sides at intensely emotional moments in my life. Russell's ethical mixture of *Love* and *Knowledge* seemed to better suit my own experience rather than the persuasive, but somewhat cold perspective of Adler/Aristotle. But Russell's mixture rested on sandy relativistic soil, a fact that he acknowledged and I despised. Faith in the existence of ethical Truth with a capital "T" drove me to continue the quest. Yet *Love* and *Knowledge* continue to form the two extremes of my motivational Bow understood in a Nietzschean sense.

You sent me Christina Sommer's essay *Teaching the Virtues* and I used her insight to choose the weapon for accomplishing my task. But my outline began with a poem rather than declarative phrases or sentences. From a poem that outlined, in my opinion, life's fundamental *lessons* I advanced these arguments in fable form. The argument was further developed by means of concrete examples and

experiences blended into the lives of my relatives in the form of a play. Some day I hope to complete the novel version. Enclosed is the latest draft of the plays Forward. It introduces my ongoing attempt to create an *educational funnel*. A task that Dr. Adler says is impossible and may very well be. But I am driven by the necessity to realize *an impossible possibility*.

Thanks once again for keeping the conversation alive.

Warm regards,

Todd McCune, MD

P.S. For Abigail, at least, the funnel seems to be working.

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As always, we welcome your comments.
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