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The Great Books, the Great Ideas, and a Lifetime of Learning

by Mortimer Adler

Dean Shinagel, Ladies, and Gentlemen

I would like to begin by congratulating the Harvard Extension School on its 80th anniversary, fulfilling the hope of its founder A. Lawrence Lowell in 1910. I think the Harvard Extension School is preceded by some 10 or 15 years by a similar extension school at the University of Chicago. It was founded in 1894, by William Rainey

Harper, who as the first president there, not only created an extension school, but a correspondence school. I do not know the date of the establishment of the extension school at Columbia University, but I do know the part it played in my own life.

I was a drop-out from high school. I wanted to be a journalist, and went to work on the old, very great New York Sun under editor Edward Page Mitchell. I thought that I should have a little more schooling than I had, having had only two years of high school, so I enrolled in extension courses at Columbia—took a course in Victorian Literature and a course in Wordsworth and Coleridge, of the century before. In the course in Victorian Literature I was assigned to read John Stuart Mill's Autobiography. I discovered, to my amazement, that John Stuart Mill could read Greek at the age of three, had read the dialogues of Plato in Greek at the age of five, and by eleven had read most of the books that I later discovered were the Great Books. At eleven he edited his father's history of India. At twelve he edited Jeremy Bentham's *Rationale of Judicial Proof*. And I was now fifteen and had read none of these.

So I decided to buy a set of Plato, which ruined me. I decided I could play the Greek game of Socrates—a game with one's mind. I had impressed Frank Allen Patterson, who was Director of the extension school; he taught this course in Victorian Literature. He got me a three-year scholarship at Columbia. And I did go there for three years—sophomore, junior and senior year—but unlike what Dean Shinagel told you, I did not graduate in 1923, though I did get a Phi Beta Kappa key a few years later. I got an Honorary Bachelor's degree in 1983—some sixty years after I had my Ph.D.

The story that's usually told is that I did not get the degree because I did not swim. That's true, I didn't swim and I don't swim now. But the real reason why I didn't get my degree is that I refused to go to gym.

Physical education was required at Columbia for graduation. The commencement exercises were on Tuesday, the first Tuesday in May. The Friday before that Tuesday, Dean Hawkes called me into his office and said, "Mortimer, I'm sorry to say that you can't get your diploma next Tuesday." I asked, "Why not, Dean Hawkes?" He said, "You haven't been to the gym." I said, "You're right." He said, "That's it, no diploma." Columbia relented finally, and gave me the degree. My real reason for not going to gym at 10 o'clock in the morning was that I had a logic class at 9 o'clock, and a philosophy class at 11 o'clock. I thought it was a nuisance to get dressed and undressed in the middle of the day. You had to do so to put on a gymsuit.

My congratulations also to Dean Shinagel and the teaching staff of the school for a record enrollment of 14,000 students in this year. I was interested in the analysis of the motivations of the students in the school—35 percent are participating in classes for professional development, 37 percent for personal interest, 28 percent seeking some degree or form of certification. One statistic I found in the Alumni Bulletin I received interests me greatly. Only 20 percent of the 14,000 students enrolled in the Extension School here at Harvard are taking courses for no credit. This fact has a bearing on a distinction that is central to my talk this evening.

The distinction is between all schooling—in youth and in the years of one's adult life—and adult learning after all schooling is completed. As I will try to make clear, this distinction separates all those phases of education that have some kind of termination and the one phase that is interminable.

Before I explain this basic distinction and indicate its significance for a lifetime of learning, let me tell you the standpoint from which I will be speaking to you. I speak to you as an educational reformer—active in educational

reform at the college level from 1930 to 1960—at the University of Chicago and at St. John’s College in Annapolis from 1937 on: in both cases, focusing on the importance of reading the great books and discussing the great ideas, not for the sake of acquiring more and more specialized knowledge, but rather to increase one’s understanding. Since the early 1980s, the Paideia reform of basic schooling (K-12) has been at work in the US; and from 1923 on, I have been an advocate of the importance of the great books and the great ideas in everyone’s education.

The three main objectives of schooling are: preparation for earning a living; preparation for intelligent fulfillment of one’s civic duty, to be a good citizen of the republic; preparation for fulfilling one’s moral obligation to lead a morally good life, enriched by the continuation of learning after all schooling is terminated.

Of these three objectives the first may be partly accomplished in K-12, but it is mainly accomplished in colleges or in the extension divisions of our great universities; the second should be accomplished in basic schooling and, if not completed there, in college; the third cannot be accomplished at any stage of schooling, in youth or in adult years, but only in that interminable phase of education, the phase that is genuinely adult learning after all schooling is terminated or completed.

Let me now state for you the principles of the Paideia reform of basic schooling. Its first principle is genuine equality of educational opportunity—not just the same quantity of schooling, but the same quality for all. Only this would be truly democratic schooling, a kind of schooling that we have not yet achieved in this country. My friend Frank Keppel, who died earlier this year, enunciated this first principle, when he said: “Education must make good on the concept that no child within our society is either unteachable, or unreachable.”

We say the same thing when we say that, except those in asylums for mental deficiency, all the children are educable and educable in exactly the same sense.

Schooling, in addition to producing competent specialists, should prepare their graduates to go on learning for the sake of becoming generally educated human beings.

The second principle, one that applies mainly to basic schooling, though it should also be adopted by good colleges, is that in addition to didactic instruction in subject-matter, by means of lectures and textbooks, there should be coaching in the skills of learning, mainly reading and listening, writing, and speaking; and most important of all, Socratic questioning in the discussion of books read and ideas or issues considered. In most of the K-12 schools and in most of our colleges, didactic instruction in subject-matter greatly predominates. There is inadequate coaching on the basic skills of learning; and almost no Socratically conducted discussion.

The third principle—the one most relevant to this evening's lecture—is the distinction between specialized education and general learning (which is the meaning of Paideia), together with the controlling insight that no one ever has been, or can be, generally educated in basic school or in college.

Why not? Because youth—immaturity—is an insuperable obstacle to becoming a generally educated human being. Maturity—the experience of years—is indispensable. It is something to be hoped for in the years beyond middle life after all schooling has been completed.

The best indication that schools and colleges have done the job they should be doing is that their graduates have been given the skills and the motivation to continue general learning after all schooling is completed. In

other words, schooling, in addition to producing competent specialists, should prepare their graduates to go on learning for the sake of becoming generally educated human beings before they die, and in order to lead morally good and intellectually enriched lives.

These principles correct the false views of schooling that abound in this country.

That the purpose of schooling in youth and in extension courses in adult years is to turn out educated human beings when our educational institutions confer diplomas, degrees, or certificates, (an educated young person, or a wise young person, is a contradiction in terms, like a round square). That extension courses in adult life are all that is necessary for adult learning, either to compensate for deficient schooling in youth or to go beyond schooling in youth. That adult schooling should be regarded as an avocation or a hobby, a harmless and pleasurable use of spare time. That the young are more educable than adults and can profit more from schooling than adults. The very opposite is the case: adults, being more mature, are more educable than the young, and can profit more from schooling.

Let me now return to my distinction between schooling at all ages, and the kind of education that can be completed and terminated, and the kind of education that is interminable, that begins after all schooling is completed, and is terminated only with a death certificate.

Adult learning, once begun, is interminable.

We normally have eight years of elementary school, four years of high school, four years of college, three or four years of medical school, law school, engineering school. Degrees, diplomas, or certificates honor the completion of these phases of schooling. It is proper for a person to say "I've completed my college program" or

“I completed my professional training.” It is similarly proper for a person, enrolled in extension courses, to say “I have now completed the specialized education that I did not complete in college or professional school.” But it is totally improper for an adult to say, “I have now completed my adult education.”

No more preposterous words can be uttered than for someone to say—at the age of thirty, forty, or fifty—“I have now completed my adult education.” To that, the only response should be: “Are you ready to die? What are you going to do with the rest of your life?”

Adult learning, for the sake of becoming a generally educated human being, once begun, is interminable. Our minds, unlike our bodies, are able to grow and develop until death overtakes us. Unless it declines because of serious mental illness, the mind is not like a muscle, bone, or bodily organ that begins to decline when youth ends, but it is a vital instrument that, if properly exercised, continues to improve. The only condition of its continual growth is that it be continually nourished and exercised. How nourished? By reading the great books year after year. How exercised? By discussing them.

Permit me to digress for a moment by speaking to you autobiographically. I became an undergraduate in the college of Columbia University in 1920. At Columbia two strokes of good fortune befell me and changed my life. The great books seminars were invented by John Erskine, of whom I was a student in 1922 and 1923. My first stroke of good fortune was to be asked to teach one of those seminars with the poet, Mark Van Doren, from 1923 to 1929. I would have supposed, under other circumstances, that I had read the great books and understood them, and would not have to read them again. What I learned by having to teach them Socratically the year after I graduated from college was that I did not really understand them.

This gave me the insight that the great books are endlessly rereadable and that the attempt to understand the great ideas to be found in them is an interminable pursuit. That insight was reinforced by the years of teaching great books seminars at the University of Chicago with President Robert Hutchins, between 1930 and 1950, by the teaching of adult seminars in Chicago and at the Aspen Institute ever since, and by all the work I did in editing *Great Books of the Western World* for Encyclopaedia Britannica, and all the work I did in producing the *Syntopicon* of the Great Ideas.

As I assess my own career as an adult learner, my judgment is that I have learned more from all the great books seminars that I have conducted, especially with adults, than I have ever learned from any other source. And I would dare to say that, sometime after sixty, I have gradually achieved a sufficient understanding of the great ideas and a minimum measure of wisdom to regard myself as a generally educated human being.

Why are all great books and the great ideas the indispensable substance of a lifetime of learning? The great books are great because they are inexhaustibly rereadable, as few books are. Not all of them fulfill this high expectation. But many of them do; as, for example, the fifteen authors one would take to a comfortable island if one could take only fifteen authors to read over and over again in fifteen years. But the others, less great than that, approximate this high ideal of inexhaustible rereadability, or of being studiable over and over again.

The great ideas—the 102 that are treated in the *Syntopicon*—deal with all the basic issues and problems that human beings confront when they think about the world in which they live, themselves, and their society. They are the ideas that all of us have to think about and think with. Without any understanding of them, we have no purchase on the wisdom all of us should seek.

If the great books are worth studying in schools and colleges, as the Paideia reform thinks is the case, for the sake of gaining initially some skill in intellectual pursuits, they are certainly worth studying for the rest of one's life, not only for the sake of increasing that skill, but in order to transform one's self, slowly, painfully, but rewardingly, into an educated person.

Generally educated persons are those who, through the travail of their own lives, have enough experience to assimilate the ideas which make them representative of their culture and the bearer of its traditions. Generally educated persons are those who have enough experience to assimilate the ideas which make them representative of their culture and the bearer of its traditions.

In conclusion, I have only a few more words to add. The interminable learning that all mature adults should engage in after all terminable phases of schooling are completed is the learning of an autodidact. But there are two big ifs here. Persons are autodidacts if their only teachers are the great books that they read and discuss with their peers and if the great books teach them as Socrates taught those with whom he discussed ideas; as a midwife, merely helping the activity of the learner's own mind. So far as the growth of understanding and wisdom are concerned, no one ever learns anything from a teacher, but only by the activity of one's own mind, with or without the help of a teacher.

In 1986, I published *A Guidebook to Learning*. Its concluding chapter was concerned with the continued learning to be performed by autodidacts. It gave autodidacts two bits of advice.

One was that they should recognize the three great areas of subject matter to be studied, because only those three are transcendental in the sense of dealing with all aspects of human life. They are history (for everything

has history) and philosophy (for philosophy is everybody's business) and poetry (the great works of imaginative literature, the novels and plays that are of significance to all of us).

I have not included science because science as it has developed in the modern world has become more and more the province of the specialists. No one of the many sciences is everybody's business, any more than law, medicine, or engineering should be everyone's profession. The particular positive or empirical sciences, along with mathematics, enter into the continuing self-education of autodidacts, only to the extent that some understanding of these disciplines or subject-matters should be part of everyone's general education. The approach, in other words, should always be that of the generalist: in other words, historical and philosophical.

My second bit of advice to autodidacts is short and sweet. To the question: what should autodidacts do? The answer is: Read and Discuss. Not just read, for reading without discussion with others who have read the same book is not nearly as profitable as it should be for the mind and its effort to understand what has been read. (Solitary reading is as horrible as solitary drinking.)

As reading without discussion can fail to yield the full measure of understanding that should be sought, discussion without the substance for discussion that good and great books afford, is likely to degenerate into dinner-party chit-chat or little more than an exchange of opinions and personal prejudices.

Autodidacts who read, year after year, the great books of history, philosophy, and poetry, and discuss them with their peers, are on the road to becoming generally educated persons before they die, and to have lives that are enriched by a lifetime of learning.

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