

Mortimer Adler

July 1979

## HOW TO BECOME EDUCATED

The question, "Is life worth living?" (Samuel Butler observed in his Notebooks) is a question for an embryo, not for a man.

One might suppose that young people would ask themselves "What should we do to become educated?" For the most part, they don't. That question is a question that human beings tend to ask themselves toward the end of their lives rather than in the early years.

Why is that so? If my own experience is the normal or usual one that other older persons share, the answer lies in our realization that, to whatever extent we do become educated men and women, we arrive at that happy state only in our later years.

I am approaching my seventy-seventh birthday. I hope I can be forgiven for the immodesty of regarding myself as an educated person. I have become educated only in the last twenty or twenty-five years of my life. I may have thought that I was educated when I

was graduated from college or when I received my Ph.D. But I now know that that was an illusion.

I have long since forgotten most of the things that I learned in school, or when I was a student in college and university. Therefore, what I learned during the years of my formal schooling—most of it now forgotten—cannot account for my becoming an educated person, assuming for the moment that I am right in so regarding myself now.

I do not mean to say that my years of formal schooling were entirely wasted or to no purpose at all. For one thing, they did introduce me to the world of learning and gave me some sense of the attractions I might find if I were to explore that world more thoroughly.

For another thing, they trained me in the skills of learning—the skills of reading and writing, of talking and listening, of asking questions and seeking the answers to them, of defending what I thought true and arguing against what I thought false.

Above all, they opened books for me, books worth reading but books that were way over my head at the time. I could not really understand them then because I was simply too young.

Here, then, is what I have retained from my years in school, college, and university: not the informational content of the courses that I took and passed, nor the knowledge that I remembered well enough at the time to get creditable grades when examinations came around, but the skills of learning that I acquired (which I have since improved by continual use) and a superficial acquaintance with books and ideas that I was then too young to understand.

The understanding that I could not have achieved then has come slowly with the years and with the accumulation of challenging experiences that demanded reflective thought. Most of the education that I think I now have has resulted from thinking and learning that I have done, either by myself through the reading of books, or throughout the conversations that I have had with other adults about books we have read or experiences we have suffered. A third source to be mentioned is travel—the challenge to the mind that results from confronting institutions, customs, and peoples other than those of one's native land.

From all this, the most important thing that I have learned about the business of becoming educated is that it is a life-long process, in which schools and

teachers play only a part and a relatively small part at that.

A much larger and more important role is played by the use of one's mind in the years after all schooling is left behind—the mature years when one has enough experience to understand the ideas that throw light on the shape of the world in which we live, our own human nature, and the problems of human life and human society.

It is only by prolonged reflection and hard thinking in the light of the enlarged experience of one's maturity that one acquires a sufficient measure of understanding and wisdom to call one's self an educated person. Possession of one or another body of specialized knowledge makes one a specialist or an expert—a lawyer, a physician, an accountant, a scientist, or a scholar—but not an educated person.

That honorific title should be reserved for the human being who manifests some general understanding of the world in which he lives, of himself and his fellow men, and of human institutions; and is able to apply that understanding wisely to the problems that confront us as human beings.

The various things that I have mentioned as

contributing to my own education in the latter part of my life do not enable me to prescribe the course of mature learning for anyone else. That is largely an individual matter, determined by temperamental inclinations and interests, occupational tasks, and a wide variety of circumstances that condition the individual life. Nevertheless, I think I can draw from my own experience some suggestions that may be of help or guidance to others.

First of all, books to read. I have made up many lists of great or important books to read, but most of them have been too long. It seems to me now that it would be much more helpful to mention the small number of books that I have reread many times and profited from increasingly on each re-reading.

Here are the dozen or so that I would recommend as mind-moving: The History of the Peloponnesian War by Thucydides; some of the shorter dialogues by Plato (Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Meno, Protagoras, Symposium); Aristotle's Ethics and Politics; Plutarch's Lives; Augustine's Confessions; Dante's Divine Comedy; Montaigne's Essays. The four great tragedies by Shakespeare (Hamlet, Lear, Macbeth, and Othello); Lock's Second Treatise on Civil Government; Swift's Gulliver's Travels; John Stuart Mill's essay On Liberty his essay on Representative Government; The

Federalist Papers by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay; and Tolstoy's War and Peace.

My second recommendation is to read these books not once, but a number of times; to read them with a pen or pencil in hand, marking the book, making notes to yourself of questions to be pursued or points to be elaborated; and, above all, to read them together with someone else with whom you can discuss the book after both of you have read it. Solitary reading may not be a vice, as solitary drinking is thought to be, but it is not the best way to get the most out of a book.

My third recommendation concerns the ideas that one should seek to clarify and understand in the course of reading great books and discussing them. I have in the past made long lists of the great ideas, consisting in a hundred or more. That is too much. The number that really matters is much smaller than that. Here they are, or here, at least, are what have been for me the most illuminating of them.

To begin with, three ideas that represent the most fundamental or over-arching of all human values: TRUTH, GOODNESS, and BEAUTY. Next, three ideas that represent the values that men have over the centuries sought and fought to maximize: LIBERTY, EQUALITY, and JUSTICE. Then, ideas that we must grapple with in our

efforts to deal with the problems of our own society: LAW, CONSTITUTION, GOVERNMENT, and DEMOCRACY. Finally, ideas that are indispensable to understanding ourselves, our place in the universe, and what is involved in the successful conduct of our lives: MAN, GOD, NATURE, and WORLD: LOVE, VIRTUE, and HAPPINESS.

There is obviously an intimate connection between the books I have recommended for reading and discussion and the ideas I have recommended for reflection and pondering. Neither the books nor the ideas can be understood in all their fullness and richness by immature and inexperienced human beings. We may study them in school, but we cannot really understand them there. They are the stuff of mature learning which, if assiduously pursued, turns a human being into a truly educated person.

A handwritten signature or set of initials, possibly 'W.A.', written in black ink. The letters are stylized and somewhat abstract, with a large 'W' and a smaller 'A' to its right.