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Schooling is Not Education

by Mortimer Adler, Ph.D.

For more than 70 years, a controlling insight in my educational philosophy has been the recognition that no one has ever been -- no one can ever be -- educated in school or college.

That would be the case if our schools and colleges were at their very best, which they certainly are not, and even if the students were among the best and the brightest as well as conscientious in the application of their powers.

The reason is simply that youth itself -- immaturity -- is an insuperable obstacle to becoming educated. Schooling is for the young. Education comes later, usually much later.

The very best thing for our schools to do is to prepare the young for continued learning by giving them the skills of learning and the love of it. Our schools and colleges are not doing that now, but that is what they should be doing.

To speak of an educated young person, rich in understanding of basic ideas and issues, is as much a contradiction in terms as to speak of a round square. The young can be prepared for education in the years to come, but only mature men and women can become educated, beginning the process in their 40's and 50's and reaching some modicum of genuine insight, sound judgment and practical wisdom after the age 60.

This is what no high school or college graduate knows or can understand. As a matter of fact, most of their teachers do not seem to know it. In their obsession with covering ground and in the way in which they test or examine their students, they certainly do not act as if they understood that they were only preparing their students for education in later life rather than trying to complete it within the precincts of their institutions.

There is, of course, some truth in the ancient insight that awareness of ignorance is the beginning of wisdom. But, remember, it is just the beginning. From there on one has to do something about it.

And to do it intelligently one must know something of its causes and cures--why adults need education and what, if anything, they can do about it. When young adults realize how little they learned in school, they usually assume there was something wrong with the school they attended or with the way they spent their time there. But the fact is that the best possible graduate of the best possible school needs to continue learning every bit as much as the worst.

How should they go about doing this? In a recent book, I tried to answer the question, "How should persons proceed who wish to conduct for themselves the continuation of learning after all schooling has been finished?" The brief and simple answer is: Read and discuss.

Never just read, for reading without discussion with others who have read the same book is not nearly as profitable. And as reading without discussion can fail to yield the full measure of understanding that should be sought, so discussion without the substance that good and great books afford is likely to degenerate into little more than an exchange of opinions or personal prejudices.

Those who take this prescription seriously would, of course, be better off if their schooling had given them the intellectual discipline and skill they need to carry it out, and if it had also introduced them to the world of learning with some appreciation of its basic ideas and issues. But even the individual who is fortunate to leave school or college with a mind so disciplined, and with an abiding love of learning, would still have a long road to travel before he or she became an educated person.

If our schools and colleges were doing their part and adults were doing theirs, all would be well. However, our schools and colleges are not doing their part because they are trying to do everything else. And adults are not doing their part because most are under the illusion that they had completed their education when they finished their schooling.

Only the person who realizes that mature life is the time to get the education that no young person can ever acquire is at last on the high road to learning. The road is steep and rocky, but it is the high road, open to anyone who has the skill in learning and the ultimate goal of all learning in view--understanding the nature of things and man's place in the total scheme.

An educated person is one who through the travail of his own life has assimilated the ideas that make him representative of his culture, that make him a bearer of its traditions and enable him to contribute to its improvement.



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