

Invitation to the Pain of Learning

Mortimer J. Adler

(1941)

In Adler's view of education, learning is not something one acquires externally like a new suit. It is, in his own words, "an interior transformation of a person's mind and character, a transformation which can be effected only through his own activity." It is as painful, but also as exhilarating, as any effort human beings make to make themselves better human beings, physically or mentally. The practices of educators, even if they are well-intentioned, who try to make learning less painful than it is, not only make it less exhilarating, but also weaken the will and minds of those on whom this fraud is perpetrated. The selling and buying of education all wrapped up in pretty packages is what is going on, but, Adler tells us, it is not the real thing. This essay was published in The Journal of Educational Sociology (February 1941.)

G.V.D.

ONE of the reasons why the education given by our schools is so frothy and vapid is that the American people generally-the parent even more than the teacher-wish childhood to be unspoiled by pain. Childhood must be a period of delight, of gay indulgence in impulses. It must be given every avenue for unimpeded expression, which of course is pleasant; and it must not be made to suffer the impositions of discipline or the exactions of duty, which of course are painful. Childhood must be filled with as much play and as little work as possible. What cannot be accomplished educationally through elaborate schemes devised to make learning an exciting game must, of necessity, be forgone. Heaven forbid that learning should ever take on the character of a serious occupation-just as serious as earning money, and perhaps, much more laborious and painful.

The kindergarten spirit of playing at education pervades our colleges. Most college students get their first taste of studying as really hard work, requiring mental strain and continual labor, only when they enter law school or medical school. Those who do not enter the professions find out what working at anything really means only when they start to earn a living-that is, if four years of college has not softened them to the point which makes them unemployable. But even those who somehow recover from a college loaf and accept the responsibilities and obligations involved in earning a living-even those who may gradually come to realize the connection between work, pain, and earning-seldom if ever make a similar connection of pain and work with learning. "Learning" is what they did in college, and they know that that had very little to do with pain and work.

Now the attitude of the various agencies of adult education is even more softminded-not just softhearted-about the large public they face, a public which has had all sorts and amounts of schooling. The trouble is not simply that this large public has been spoiled by whatever schooling it has had-spoiled in the double sense that it is unprepared to carry on its own self-education in adult life and that it is disinclined to suffer pains for the sake of learning. The trouble also lies in the fact that agencies of adult education baby the public even more than the schools coddle the children. They have turned the whole nation-so far as education is concerned-into a kindergarten. It must all be fun. It must all be entertaining. Adult learning must be made as effortless as possible-painless, devoid of oppressive burdens and of irksome tasks. Adult men and women, because they are adult, can be expected to suffer pains of all sorts in the course of their daily occupations, whether domestic or commercial. We do not try to deny the fact that taking care of a household or holding down a job is necessarily burdensome, but we somehow still believe that the goods to be obtained, the worldly goods of wealth and comfort, are worth the *effort*. In any case, we know they cannot be obtained without effort. But

we try to shut our eyes to the fact that improving one's mind or enlarging one's spirit is, if anything, more difficult than solving the problems of subsistence; or, maybe, we just do not believe that knowledge and wisdom are worth the effort.

We try to make adult education as exciting as a football game, as relaxing as a motion picture, and as easy on the mind as a quiz program. Otherwise, we will not be able to draw the big crowds, and the important thing is to draw large numbers of people into this educational game, even if after we get them there we leave them untransformed.

What lies behind my remark is a distinction between two views of education. In one view, education is something externally added to a person, as his clothing and other accoutrements. We cajole him into standing there willingly while we fit him; and in doing this we must be guided by his likes and dislikes, by his own notion of what enhances his appearance. In the other view, education is an interior transformation of a person's mind and character. He is plastic material to be improved not according to his inclinations, but according to what is good for him. But because he is a living thing, and not dead clay, the transformation can be effected only through his own activity. Teachers of every sort can help, but they can only help in the process of learning that must be dominated at every moment by the activity of the learner. And the fundamental activity that is involved in every kind of genuine learning is intellectual activity, the activity generally known as thinking. Any learning which takes place without thinking is necessarily of the sort I have called external and additive-learning passively acquired, for which the common name is "information." Without thinking, the kind of learning which transforms a mind, gives it new insights, enlightens it, deepens understanding, elevates the spirit simply cannot occur.

Anyone who has done any thinking, even a little bit, knows that it is painful. It is hard work-in fact the very hardest that human beings are ever called upon to do. It is fatiguing, not refreshing. If allowed to follow the path of least resistance, no one would ever think. To make boys and girls, or men and women, think-and through thinking really undergo the transformation of learning-educational agencies of every sort must work against the grain, not with it. Far from trying to make the whole process painless from beginning to end, we must promise them the pleasure of achievement as a reward to be reached only through travail. I am not here concerned with the oratory that may have to be employed to persuade Americans that wisdom is a greater good than wealth, and hence worthy of greater effort. I am only insisting that there is no royal road, and that our present educational policies, in adult education especially, are fraudulent. We are pretending to give them something which is described in the advertising as very valuable, but which we promise they can get at almost no expense to them.

Not only must we honestly announce that pain and work are the irremovable and irreducible accompaniments of genuine learning, not only must we leave entertainment to the entertainers and make education a task and not a game, but we must have no fears about what is "over the public's head." Whoever passes by what is over his head condemns his head to its present low altitude; for nothing can elevate a mind except what is over its head; and that elevation is not accomplished by capillary attraction, but only by the hard work of climbing up the ropes, with sore hands and aching muscles. The school system which caters to the median child, or worse, to the lower half of the class; the lecturer before adults-and they are legion-who talks down to his audience; the radio or television program which tries to hit the lowest common denominator of popular receptivity-all these defeat the prime purpose of education by taking people as they are and leaving them just there.

The best adult education program that has ever existed in this country was one which endured for a short time under the auspices of the People's Institute in New York, when Everett Dean Martin was its director, and Scott Buchanan his assistant. It had two parts: one consisted of lectures which, so far as possible, were always aimed over the heads of the audience; the other consisted of seminars in which adults were helped in the reading of great books-the books that

are over everyone's head. The latter part of the program is still being carried on by the staff of St. John's College in the cities near Annapolis; and we are conducting four such groups in the downtown college of the University of Chicago. I say that this is the only adult education that is genuinely educative simply because it is the only kind that requires activity, makes no pretense about avoiding pain and work, and is always working with materials well over everybody's head.

I do not know whether radio or television will ever be able to do anything genuinely educative. I am sure it serves the public in two ways: by giving them amusement and by giving them information. It may even, as in the case of its very best "educational" programs, stimulate some persons to do something about their minds by pursuing knowledge and wisdom in the only way possible—the hard way. But what I do not know is whether it can ever do what the best teachers have always done and must now be doing; namely, to present programs which are genuinely educative, as opposed to merely stimulating, in the sense that following them requires the listener to be active not passive, to think rather than remember, and to suffer all the pains of lifting himself up by his own bootstraps. Certainly so long as the so called educational directors of our leading networks continue to operate on their present false principles, we can expect nothing. So long as they confuse education and entertainment, so long as they suppose that learning can be accomplished without pain, so long as they persist in bringing everything and everybody down to the lowest level on which the largest audience can be reached, the educational programs offered on the air will remain what they are today—shams and delusions.

It may be, of course, that the radio and television, for economic reasons must, like the motion picture, reach with certainty so large an audience that the networks cannot afford even to experiment with programs which make no pretense to be more palatable and pleasurable than real education can be. It may be that the radio and television cannot be expected to take a sounder view of education and to undertake more substantial programs than now prevail among the country's official leaders in education—the heads of our school system, of our colleges, of our adult education associations. But, in either case, let us not fool ourselves about what we are doing. "Education" all wrapped up in attractive tissue is the gold brick that is being sold in America today on every street corner. Everyone is selling it, everyone is buying it, but no one is giving or getting the real thing because the real thing is always hard to give or get. Yet the real thing can be made generally available if the obstacles to its distribution are honestly recognized. Unless we acknowledge that every invitation to learning can promise pleasure only as the result of pain, can offer achievement only at the expense of work, all of our invitations to learning, in school and out, whether by books, lectures, or radio and television programs will be as much buncombe as the worst patent medicine advertising, or the campaign pledge to put two chickens in every pot.