

The Education of Adults

❧ THE Editors believe that these books should be read by all adults all their lives. They concede that this idea has novel aspects. The education of adults has uniformly been designed either to make up for the deficiencies of their schooling, in which case it might terminate when these gaps had been filled, or it has consisted of vocational training, in which case it might terminate when training adequate to the post in question had been gained.

What is here proposed is interminable liberal education. Even if the individual has had the best possible liberal education in youth, interminable education through great books and the liberal arts remains his obligation; he cannot expect to store up an education in childhood that will last all his life. What he can do in youth is to acquire the disciplines and habits that will make it possible for him to continue to educate himself all his life. One must agree with John Dewey in

this: that continued growth is essential to intellectual life.

The twin aims that have animated mankind since the dawn of history are the conquest of nature and the conquest of drudgery. Now they seem in a fair way to be achieved. And the achievement seems destined, at the same time, to end in the trivialization of life. It is impossible to believe that men can long be satisfied with the kind of recreations that now occupy the bulk of their free time. After all, they are men. Man, though an animal, is not all animal. He is rational, and he cannot live by animal gratifications alone; still less by amusements that animals have too much sense to indulge in. A man must use his mind; he must feel that he is doing something that will develop his highest powers and contribute to the development of his fellow men, or he will cease to be a man.

The trials of the citizen now surpass anything that previous generations ever knew. Private and public propaganda beats upon him from morning till night all his life long. If independent judgment is the *sine qua non* of effective citizenship in a democracy, then it must be admitted that such judgment is harder to maintain now than it ever has been before. It is too much to hope that a strong dose of education in childhood and youth can inoculate a man to withstand the onslaughts on his independent judgment that society conducts, or allows to be conducted, against him every day. For this, constant mental alertness and mental growth are required.

The conception of liberal education for adults that is here advanced has an important effect on our conception of education in childhood and youth, its purpose and its content. If we are to expect the whole adult population to engage in liberal education, then the curriculum of schools, colleges, and universities should be constructed with this end in view. At present it is built upon the notion, which is unfortunately correct, that nobody is ever going to get any education after he gets out of school. Here we encounter the melancholy fact

that most of the important things that human beings ought to understand cannot be comprehended in youth.

Although I have known several astronomers who were contributing to the international journals before the age of sixteen, I have never known a child of any age who had much that was useful to say about the organization of human society or the ends of human life. The great books of ethics, political philosophy, economics, history, and literature do not yield up their secrets to the immature. In the United States, if these works are read at all, they are read in school and college, where they can be only dimly understood, and are never read again. Hence Americans are unlikely to understand them fully; we are deprived of the light they might shed upon our present problems.

Here the theory that education must meet immediate needs comes in to complete the chaos in our educational institutions. If the aim of education is to meet the immediate needs of the person educated, and if he is never to have any more education after he gets out of educational institutions, then he must learn everything he might ever need while he is in these institutions. Since there is no way of telling what the graduate might need, the only way out is to offer him a little bit of everything, hoping that he will find some bits useful. So the American high school and college are jammed with miscellaneous information on every conceivable subject from acrobatics to zymurgy; for who can say that some future high-wire artist or brewer will not be found among the students? The great, wild proliferation of the curriculum of American schools, colleges, and universities is the result of many influences; but we can say with some assurance that if adult life had been looked upon as a time for continued learning, the pressure toward proliferation would have been measurably reduced.

A concern with liberal education for all adults is necessary

if we are to have liberal education for anybody; because liberal education can flourish in the schools, colleges, and universities of a country only if the adult population understands and values it. The best way to understand and value something is to have it yourself.

We hear a great deal today about the neglect of the liberal arts colleges and the decay of humanistic and social studies. It is generally assumed that all that these colleges and scholars require is money. If they had more money, their problems would be solved. We are led to believe that their failure to get money results from the obtuseness or perversity of college and university presidents. These officers are supposed to be interested in the development of natural science and technology at the expense of the liberal arts and the humanistic and social studies.

One may be permitted to doubt whether the colleges of liberal arts and scholars in the humanities and the social studies could wisely spend more money than they have. The deficiencies of these institutions and individuals do not seem to result from lack of funds, but from lack of ideas. When the appeal for support of a college is based on the fact that its amenities are almost as gracious as those of the local country club; when scholars in the humanities and social studies, misled by their misconception of the scientific method and by the prestige of natural science, dedicate themselves to the aimless accumulation of data about trivial subjects, the problem does not seem to be financial. Unfortunately, the only problems that money can solve are financial problems.

Institutions and subjects develop because people think they are important. The importance comes first, and the money afterward. The importance of experimental science is obvious to everybody. Science produced the atomic bomb; and the medical schools are doing almost as much to lengthen life as the departments of physics and chemistry are doing to

shorten it. Many colleges of liberal arts and the researches of many scholars in the humanities and the social studies are important only to those whose livelihood depends upon them.

Yet the great issues are there. What is our destiny? What is a good life? How can we achieve a good society? What can we learn to guide us through the mazes of the future from history, philosophy, literature, and the fine arts?

These questions lie, for the most part, in the areas traditionally assigned to the liberal arts, the humanities, and the social studies. If through this set of books, or in any other way, the adult population of laymen came to regard these issues as important; if scholars in these fields were actually engaged in wrestling with these problems; if in a large number of homes all over the country these questions were being discussed, then two things would happen. It would become respectable for intelligent young people, young people with ideas, to devote their lives to the study of these issues, as it is respectable to be a scientist or an engineer today; and the colleges of liberal arts and scholars in the humanities and the social sciences would receive all the support they could use.

An axiomatic educational proposition is that what is honored in a country will be cultivated there. One object of this set of books is to do honor to the great tradition of the West, in the conviction that this is the way in which to promote its cultivation, elaboration, and extension, and to perpetuate it to posterity.