

# The Education Manifesto

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## The preface and the first chapter

January 7, 2008: I called the health authority and they confirmed that Maureen Cromie had died in December 2007. She did not make it to wish me a happy new year when I came back from vacation, as she had hoped. And there would be no more lonely Christmas for her.

I had expected it when I called a few days earlier and her number was not in service. I had thought I would take it lightly. After all, I had only known her for two months, seen her twice, and talked a few times over the phone. I was her volunteer visitor assigned by the health authority. Besides, I am quite disillusioned by life and consider myself neither romantic nor sentimental. I have had my share of suffering. I should be happy that this is the end of her suffering. There was nothing left in life for her.

But for a while I had a strong wish that she was still alive. I thought about those intelligent conversations we could have, so much more I could learn about her, she could learn about me. My appearing in her life at the last stage was beyond her abandoned hope. I know I made a difference before she died. But it seems useless now. I could bring more warmth and light to her life if only she had lived longer, despite her pain and suffering. Now every detail in my memory breaks my heart. The story remains uncompleted. Death took the ending away. There is no more chance. She died. I have my grief to deal with. I thought I had become cold-hearted. But no, there is still one thing I can not take lightly: death.

So this is it? An intelligent woman, PhD, professor of French History, was left isolated and poor in her old age. She fell through the crack of a "humane" society, because she was not married and had no children. The old age security program apparently is not secure enough. Nobody's extended medical benefits covered her. She never got that hearing aid she much needed. She was on the long waiting list of a charity to get a free one. It was not covered by the provincial medical plan and she could not afford it. To pay for a crown for her tooth she had to go to some "spiritual" group which promised to find her a job on the condition that she attend their meetings. She could not find their spirituality compatible with her intellect, and they did not find a job or money for her. When she told me this, there was an ashamed smile on her deformed face. She said, almost in apology, "I'm not as strong as you are."

I'm not strong. I just haven't outlived my earning power. And I'm angry with this society I chose to be a citizen of, for letting her live and die without dignity. She was such an intelligent being. Toward the end, lonely and frail, afraid of being seen by the world, and deeply depressed, she remained courteous,

considerate, and sensible.

So this is it. I was the last light of her life, she was the first reader of this education manifesto. This must be fate. Let my work be done in memory of her, of all lost lives. Once again, my compassion for my fellow human beings overcame my disillusionment and indifference.

May all beings be enlightened, be liberated, be peaceful, be happy.

May life be sacred again.

I had intended to hide the “why” behind this manifesto, but Maureen’s death changed my mind. I am no longer afraid to be offensive. So I decided to include this preface which also serves as the opening chapter. After all, I have never liked rule-bound, dispassionate academic writing. I don’t like any writing unless I sense there is a burning personal reason behind it. Nor have I ever been impressed by people who have lost their ability to speak simply. So why should I play by the rules? I don’t play the game anyway.

So, these are the observations that have driven me to write this manifesto:

- Most people live in silent despair. Or, in Henry David Thoreau’s words, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.”
- At least half of human beings go through life without knowing the basics of being human.
- The basics of being human have never been taught in any curriculum.
- Education has been concentrated on specialized knowledge and skills only.
- The literacy in important human legacies is at a pathetic level among “educated” people.
- The average quality of human beings is low. If you dare not make your own observation, read Aristotle, Dante, John Stuart Mill, for a start.
- The average quality of human lives is low. Despite our arts, sciences, and global wealth, most of us are unfamiliar with a life of self-discovery, self-expression, and self-actualization.
- Society is often running on nonsense, not common sense.
- Collectively, the best-educated people have committed the worst crimes throughout history. Education did not help prevent any man-made horrors, because the enlightenment of humanity is not included in education.

- A global enlightenment is needed if humanity is to be saved.
- Otherwise, we have no reason to continue, and the Earth is better off without the human species.
- My observations hold true in both the East and the West.

Finally, what compelled me to write this manifesto is my love for many of you, and my die-hard belief that these situations can be changed.

## **Education redefined**

Education is what we need to live a good human life, which is much more than making a living. It is our preparation for life. It is the equipment we need to deal with any situation. It is our weapon to open a new path for ourselves. It is not just knowledge. It is not just skill. The ultimate purpose of education is to help each individual find his or her interest, strength, relationship with the whole world, and unique way to live a full life.

Education is not vocational training or teaching on any subject. It is the fundamental understanding of human life, of the universe, of society, of ethics, of relationship. It gives a person the ability to grasp the essence of things, to make sound judgments, to think for oneself, to identify what to learn, to chart one's own course, and to express one's own feelings and thoughts. Only a human being with such understanding and ability is a human being in the full sense, and can therefore live his or her life with freedom and dignity.

All the specialized subjects taught in school, the so-called "education", should more appropriately be called "training". Therefore, all the professionals, technicians, specialists, scholars, and experts should be called "trained" rather than "educated" people. They are not educated if they do not have the education as defined here. This education is close to, but not exactly, what is called liberal education. General education might be a better term.

The education defined here is more for adults than for children. As Mortimer Adler put it: children are more trainable, but adults are more educable – because of their real life experience. In this sense, education can also be called "adult education". However, this term has been misused and therefore must be clarified from its current usages and implications. Adult education should not mean basic schooling for the underprivileged, who missed it when they were younger, nor should it mean the pursuit of an avocation by the privileged, such as learning a tasteful hobby. Adult education is the education all adults should be engaged in their whole adult life. It is self-directed research and growth.

The current definition of education is wrong. The current “education” provided in schools is wrong. It is fundamentally deficient and contributes to the dysfunction of democracy and modern society. Until we have quality individuals, there will be no quality citizenry and electorate, and therefore no real democracy, no good society. Without the right education, there will be a persistent lack of quality people.

## **The importance of education**

Education is the most important thing to any species. This is the transmission of knowledge from generation to generation, so the species as a whole can survive and evolve. Any knowledge we are not born with, we rely on education to give us. Where education fails, individual life will fail, and society will fail too.

From the viewpoint of an individual, since life is given to each person but once, it is critical that we each get the right education, at the right time. We must be equipped to deal with nature, human relationships, and the full gamut of life. What our predecessors learned through failure and death, we cannot afford to learn in the same way again. The price is too high for an individual life. The lessons should be passed down to us as our collective human inheritance. The collection of such lessons is true knowledge. The transmission of such knowledge is true education, that which contains the essential truths of human life and experience.

From society’s viewpoint, all misfortunes can be attributed to the failure of education. For example, war, the worst of all. Winston Churchill was right in saying that permanent peace is only possible when we have good men and women. Without quality people, peace is temporary at best, and civilization remains subject to destruction.

Why is it that the hardest learned lessons are not being passed down in a way that engenders a deep understanding of the root causes? Who is eager to repeat the two World Wars, the Holocaust in Europe, the atomic bombing in Japan, the Cultural Revolution in China, the ethnic cleansing in Africa? Yet these man-made horrors are doomed to recur if education fails to impart what really happened and what could have been done to prevent them. Focusing on the sensations and sentiments of such events is not enough. They must be more deeply investigated and understood.

How can we expect human society to move forward when the most important knowledge of life itself is forgotten with each new generation? All generations’ efforts to survive and evolve, with the devotion and sacrifice of our best and most enlightened people, end up for nothing when the torch is not passed on.

What has been disguised as education has failed and continues to fail us. It is not fulfilling its mission, which is to make whole and enlightened human beings. Most educators, and all ministries of education in all countries, are not aware of this mission. They regard the role of education simply as the manufacture of people to fill jobs in market economies. This is a degrading and debilitating view of human life and potential.

As a result of this limiting view of education, we have workers of all skills at all levels, but we do not have enough quality people. The foundation of inner qualities is missing.

The quality of a full human being can only be built on a foundation in which the person has acquired the fundamentals of being human:

1. knowledge of human history, including the sufferings, struggles, and mistakes;
2. compassion for one's fellow humans, who go through sickness, loss, aging, and death, the same as oneself;
3. love of the human spirit that makes all our progress possible and the future hopeful;
4. awareness of one's position in the universe and in human progression.

Without this foundation, students are stuffed with technical details at school, then thrown into society unprepared for either life or work. Despite their degrees and professional designations, they do not know what being human is all about, how to learn, how to love and be loved, what their position is in this universe and in evolution. The consequence of this neglect confronts us everyday.

The first half of life is usually an unavoidable mistake. It is the second half of life in which we *choose* how to live, and we cannot afford to forfeit this hard-earned privilege. For this purpose, we must learn. As adults, we can choose our own education. It should be an education through which we learn the best, the most fundamental lessons that have stood the test of time, the basic facts of this world and our species, the rules of independent thinking, the standards to discriminate between pseudo-knowledge and genuine knowledge, between the important and the trivial.

Only then can we identify what the problems are, where the hope is, how our natural gifts and intrinsic interests can best interact with reality, thereby benefiting the world to the greatest extent and creating fulfilling lives of our own.

## The current situation

### Schools

True education is missing at schools. Their so-called education is only vocational training and very narrow subject matter. Few colleges claim they will teach you something not for sale, but for your own development. The primary task of education is being disregarded.

What does “learned” mean? What is a learned person? You can possess a thousand job skills yet still have no intellect or inner life. You can be dead in spirit while alive in exercising all your skills. Isn’t this the case of bureaucrats? And many other high-earning professions? So many dead people around. If you don’t live with your heart, then you are dead. The brain should work for passion.

Education, under the charge of near-sighted people, answers the needs of the job market only, not the needs of individual life, nor the needs of human development as a whole. Jobs must be filled so society can keep running; people need jobs to make a living. This is a simple, repetitive cycle, but even this imperative is being met in a make-shift, primitive manner. Rather than ask how many people are happy in their jobs, let’s ask how many people are even competent in their jobs. We see so many misfits that it impresses us to see a person competent in his or her position. We are delighted if he or she even shows genuine interest and enjoyment in the job, whatever it is. Seeing a competent and happy person at work restores our faith in human nature, in this world, in life, in the future.

Most people graduate with serious deficiencies, and without knowing what their true interests and strengths are. They were fed meaningless facts, stuffed with fragmental memorizations, trained to have mechanical skills. The best thing we can expect of them is an internalized discipline. We know they were not taught of love, of care, of the whole picture and what they can best contribute. This is why employers seek so hard for good employees and also why workers seek so hard for good bosses. Low quality people can be neither good subordinates nor good supervisors.

To be fit for a job takes more than knowledge and skills. It takes character, care and respect for the people whom your work will affect, real interest and natural talent, and the awareness of how your labor links to the whole, to a higher purpose. If you are so employed, you are blessed with the meaning of life, you are part of the joy of the world and you add to it.

The real concerns of students are not addressed in schools. Their studies are separate from their problems and questions in life. Subjects and courses are designed to kill their interest, rather than stimulate and inspire it. The inquisitive spark within is soon extinguished by a lack of fresh air, lack of liveliness, lack of relevance, lack of meaning, and loss of sight of the big picture. This is why we

have drop-outs, why kids unfit for this rigid system end up on the streets, on drugs, in gangs.

Or, by the time many earn a degree, they are so fed up with school that they swear never to study again. Really, doesn't the word "study" bring back the bad memories of being forced to learn something you felt was neither interesting nor relevant, of being bound to textbooks and assignments on sunny beach days? School is supposed to be a feast where the hunger for truth is satisfied, yet the force-feeding of bad food causes many to rather starve than eat. There are adults who, for the rest of their lives, will never touch a book again. Schools have committed the murder of education for these people, then rushed to ruin the next batch.

Such a society of job fillers and degree earners is doomed. Such forced learning is a torture of the mind, and such a tortured mind cannot be the cornerstone of a learning society. Being a learning society, however, is the only way human society can survive and thrive.

Why not concentrate our efforts on the primary task of education, and accumulate, filter, organize, share, interact, so we have a select treasure of the plain and the basic and the best? In this way, we build the foundation of education. Based on this foundation, the existing schools can better accomplish the secondary tasks they undertake.

## **Mass media**

Media also shoulders the responsibility of education, given its huge influence on people of all ages. Yet it defines itself as entertainment and works mainly for profit. The guiding theory of the media producers is: the lower the needs, the wider the audience. Therefore mass media seeks to arouse and satisfy the remaining beast left in human beings in order to create and expand its market, often disregarding conscience, decency, and social consequences.

Surf the TV, and notice how many channels have people speaking in a hyper, unnatural way, how fast they speak, how loud and rude, how pretentious. The reality shows are laden with bad taste and bad behavior. Even on the news, rather than simply convey what is happening, the reporters dig into every corner to find the sickest, darkest pieces to broadcast. Good news rarely makes the headlines. Kind deeds are not sensational enough, compared to crime, violence, perversion, gossip. Most programs have effects ranging from stupefying to poisonous.

At best, media produces fast food for the mind – usually junk food. A person can watch TV many hours a week and have absolutely no improvement of mind, or can become an astronomer in the same amount of time. This is the difference between real knowledge and mental junk. You choose. Newspapers, magazines, and TV are fast junk food; quality books and other great works provide refined

and lasting nourishment.

How we choose to spend our time is actually how we choose to live our lives. Scary, isn't it? There are so many decisions to make. The task of deciding how to spend each day lies heavily, especially when we have the freedom of idle time. This is a freedom most people try to get rid of. The luxury of such freedom can easily turn into emptiness and eat away at a person. People seek escape from this emptiness in entertainment, in scheduled courses, in meaningless 9 to 5 jobs, in travel, in social events, in sex, in having kids. This is a pity, because when we jump into these commitments without a conscious choice, we make bad use of this freedom. It is through the hard work of previous generations that making a living today is relatively easy and does not occupy all our time. So we have this privilege, this luxury, this freedom to choose how we spend our time, which was not available to our ancestors.

I believe people want to make better use of their gift of time. I believe they are seeking quality food for their minds—food that nourishes, strengthens, expands, improves. They long for new learning that exposes them to both reality and the possibility of a larger, deeper, higher, better existence.

### **Ethics training**

Today we live in an ethical vacuum. The old ethics have died. The new ones are yet to be born. People believe in nothing. Sociologists claim all values are social constructs and therefore relative.

In this context, for instance, corporate scandals have become a daily occurrence. The fall of Enron and its auditor, the esteemed Arthur Andersen, declared the bankruptcy of public confidence in corporate management and the accounting profession. The post-Enron auditing standards prohibit the auditor from assuming the integrity of a company's management.

To deal with this crisis, we now patch the "indispensable" ethics training onto each career training, and increase the volume of the rules of conduct for every profession. Such ethics training and professional rules of conduct are castles built on sand, superficial and unrealistic. They can not even achieve a quick fix of the problem. The only result they achieve is that students have learned how to lie in answering case study questions.

The current method of teaching ethics does not work. How could it work? It is impossible to make people do the right thing by telling them what is right and what is wrong. Students can do the assignments, write the exams, analyze the cases the way they are taught, and give all the right answers on paper. They then walk into real life, face real threats and real temptations, and make choices based on needs rather than ethics.

They need to know better than "should". They need to know "why". Being

ethical is a choice. If a person won't end up in jail, why should he or she be ethical and sacrifice the immediate interest? After all, society worships wealth, a family requires financial support, a person needs security and comfort. In nearly all cases, ethics run against one's animal instincts for survival and self-centered interest.

Being ethical is based on being human. If a person has no idea what being a human is, he cannot be expected to be voluntarily ethical in either his profession or personal life. Since few people can make ethical choices voluntarily, the rules have to be enforced by fear of punishment, hence the ever-increasing encumbrance of the laws and regulations.

Morals become a personal choice. This is a good thing. However, making such choice is a heavy responsibility and takes a lot of knowledge and compassion, which can only be obtained in education about humanity. It takes wider background knowledge to make ethical choices. It is not feasible to teach ethics without teaching humanity. At the same time, it is inevitable, and far more effective, to impart ethics when exposing students to humanity. This is the "why" behind the "should". Once they know the "why", they can make choices on their own.

This is why essential books such as Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* should be the first required readings in any ethics readings handbook. But they are not. They are not included at all. Sociologists and ethicists may not even have heard of such books.

This situation will be remedied when one generation has gone through the general education I define in this manifesto, detailed in *The Curriculum*.

## **End result**

People think they live a decent life, while blinded to the absurdities that surround them, both near and far. From time to time they feel helpless, hopeless, lost, angry, but do not know why. The fundamentals and insights about life are missing from their mind, and therefore from their character. They are ill-equipped for life, for work, for relationship, for anything.

This is how people live, and how they die. It is a tragedy on an immense scale. Not only do they live a wasted life, but they also cannot help but contribute to the darkness of all times. History is written this way. The enlightened have been too few.

Generation after generation, most people live and die without ever becoming fully human. Their quality of life is in a very narrow sense. They never know the history, the current predicament, and the potential of human beings. Yet they believe their learning is complete, they are educated, and life is the best it can be. They have set their standards too low.

Human misery does not make sense. This planet is beautiful. We have the ability to feed and clothe the entire species. Why should we continue to live such miserable lives?

When we were young, we assumed the world was running on wisdom or at least common sense. We trusted that all the systems were pretty much okay, and that all we needed to do was to follow the set path and make small changes when necessary. We grew up and discovered that this is not the case. On the global scale, the human situation is outrageous. Wherever we look, we see injustice, stupidity, incompetence, indifference, cruelty, insipidity. Lives are thwarted, underdeveloped, buried alive, scrapped.

Certainly, we have a lot of wonderful inventions, both in technology and in the social system. The washing machine is a good invention. Democracy is a good invention. But these are not enough. Human conditions are far from ideal. This is true both in the developing and developed countries. It is hard for anyone aware of this situation not to panic.

We need a school that can train true thinkers, people who are immune to foolish, narrow doctrines and whose minds will not be hardened by any “isms,” people who can make judgments and choices based on knowledge of the past and the present. More importantly, we need a school that can produce thinkers with a heart, people who choose to care, to fight, to make a difference.

We do not have such a school. We have to start one.

Here it is.

## **The Curriculum**

The average quality of the human race is still too low. This is a painful truth observed by thinkers and writers, such as Aristotle, Dante, John Stuart Mill, Ayn Rand, to name a few. We are still prone to stupidity, cruelty, and degradation. However, we have hope for a more lucid, humane, even heroic life, individually as well as collectively.

To refine this race while preserving the nature of humanity, the improvement must be made through education, not through genetic modification or design, or any other violation to the natural liberty of humans.

All learning must be voluntary. It must not be imposed on anyone, whether adults or children. No matter how perfectly an education scheme is designed, once imposed it will defeat its own purpose, that is, to facilitate an individual's free search of learning. Education should be an exercise of liberty by each and every one of us.

Children should be left to play; adults should be left to whatever pursuits that satisfy. When there is no need or interest, true learning cannot happen and should not be attempted. We are born curious and inherently inclined to learn, then why do people resist learning? The answer is simple: they have been wounded by imposed education and become resentful towards learning. Until this heals, learning cannot begin.

Society should provide sufficient exposure to what would satisfy curiosity and enrich human experience. There is always something one wants to learn, no matter how much he or she has been fed up by schooling.

What are the things that should be learned to make a life a good one? Each individual must decide that for oneself, since we each have different definitions of happiness and different ways of learning. However, there are fundamental things common to all races, creeds, and genders. There are things each individual must know in order to become fully human, while embarking on one's own journey to the vast kingdom of knowledge.

### **Curriculum**

In order to become a well-rounded human being, capable of

- 1) independent thinking,
- 2) free exploration of one's life path, and
- 3) humane feelings,

a general education must be acquired as the foundation for any specialized subject.

This general education consists of ten main areas.

### **Part 1**

#### **Human suffering**

Examples: Spain's conquest of South and Middle America, Nanjing massacre, Hiroshima, Gulag, China's Cultural Revolution, the Holocaust, the Rwanda genocide, other man-made disasters, historical crimes, and catastrophes.

Here you also explore the topic of death, including what people feel and think when facing death, and practical wisdom for the end of life. Death is a taboo in modern society. Our denial deprives us of a deep sense of the preciousness of life, as well as the development of empathy. Sooner or later we all have to face death, either our own or of someone we care about. Such an honest and brave encounter is an indispensable part of our knowledge and wisdom.

### **Part 2**

#### **Current problems**

Examples: Pollution, population explosion, unsustainable development, species

extinction, corruption, war, terrorism, nuclear weapons, the conscienceless mass media, bureaucracy, poverty, large scale of depression and mental illnesses, corporate scandals, violence and crime, youth violence and crime, cruelty, cults, perversion, AIDS, cancer, drugs, dangers of technology: genetic modification, cloning, etc.

After your research, you may want to pick a problem and try to solve it. Even if you don't, at least you will live your life without being blind to the problems going on.

### **Part 3**

#### **Beauty and insight**

Examples: Poetry, music, art and craft.

Here you take a break from the gloomy reality of the past and the present, and balance your learning on human nature and behavior. You expose yourself to some of our best heritage to recognize the height of human achievement in beauty and spirit. You read great poems, listen to great music, view great paintings, and appreciate any other art form of your interest. You cannot exhaust the vast treasure. It will be your lifelong enjoyment. A little enlightenment will suffice here. The seed of light will not die in you. At the right moment, it will help your life blossom.

### **Part 4**

#### **Visions and dreams and their critiques**

Examples: Utopia, Capitalism, Communism, all other major schools of thoughts which have shaped this world we live in. You should also study and be aware of the danger of idealism, such as Hitler and the Holocaust, Pol Pot and the slaughter of the intellectuals of Cambodia.

In this part, you will also study religions and cults, and draw your own conclusions.

### **Part 5**

#### **The human mind, the human spirit, and the fundamentals of humanity**

1) The human mind: intellectual standards and the independent way of thinking; man's cognition of the workings of the world.

Examples: Kant, Locke, Descartes.

All major philosophies in rationalism should be studied, to some extent. This will acquaint you with basic principles you can use when performing independent rational thinking. Few people are capable of such thinking in their lives when facing difficulties and challenges, and when bombarded with propaganda and popular ideologies. This is an essential skill for your existence as an independent individual.

2) The human spirit from major philosophers' points of view

Examples: Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Montaigne, Martin Buber.

3) The fundamentals of humanity: the humanistic standards, basic human rights and freedoms

## **Part 6**

### **Progress**

Examples: Democracy, women's rights, aboriginal and black people's struggles.

You should also read the stories of representative people in the pursuit of truth and justice, who made progress in these areas possible. In addition to history, see if you can find at least a few such people among your contemporaries.

## **Part 7**

### **Ways of life**

These include fundamental thinking in this regard, famous experiments, and practical wisdoms. You should also learn about the modern psychologies on strength, flow, authentic happiness, career interest and choice.

## **Part 8**

### **Scientific truths**

Examples: Evolution, astronomy, modern physics.

## **Part 9**

### **Education and human development**

Exploration in this critical area is contradictory and full of failures. However, a few books are recommended, such as A. S. Neill's *Summerhill - A Radical Approach to Child Rearing*, Rousseau's *Emile*, and Carl Rogers' works.

You should also learn the basic techniques for the improvement of mind, for your own development.

## **Part 10**

### **Hope and optimism**

Example: Helen Keller and her book *The World I Live In*.

After your study of a rather dismal picture of human past and present, you need to know where to draw courage to carry on with your own pursuits, either in learning or in action.

## **Part 11 (elective)**

### **Readings around interests**

This elective can serve as a rewarding lifelong hobby, opening your mind to

other people's lives. This consists of great literature, biographies, and lighter reading, including children's books. These readings will keep you young at heart and rich in experience, with greater understanding and compassion.

This curriculum is the foundation of your learning. Specialization in any subject matter is secondary. You cannot be a good specialist without being a human being first—knowing how to live your own life with strength, freedom, truth, beauty, and hope.

## **The real learners**

The real learners are self-motivated adults, men and women who have matured through real life experience, who have endured hardship and shouldered responsibility. Children do not meet this criterion. No matter how old, anyone who still lives within the walls of a school or depends on parents is not an adult yet. Adults are depended on. They have themselves, the old, and often the young to take care of.

Real learners seek true education, not just a specialized knowledge or skill. They have earned a living, and some have become respected professionals. However, they have not learned the foundation of humanity, the secret of a good life, the path to great joy, and the way to make a difference.

Without the enlightenment of this education, it is likely that you will be sucked into the black hole of ordinary life. Things will happen to you rather than you making them happen. You will die a small and disconnected individual. All the suffering you have endured in life will have no meaning or purpose.

Your awareness of this despairing situation makes you depressed. How can you not be? Anti-depressants won't work. Neither will psychiatrists. Nor will TV, chocolate, video games, sex, travel, sports, a big house, a yacht, money, your spouse or your children. Life is not about pleasure. Life is about victory. We do not deny pleasure, but it is not all there is to strive for. For victory we must seriously equip ourselves with true education.

This education is a lifelong engagement. It is never too late to start. Children are brighter and more trainable. Adults are slower but more educable. John Dewey and Mortimer Adler were probably right in saying that youth is the biggest obstacle to learning.

However, despite the above definition of real learners, it is also never too early to start. Adler recognized the importance of exposing young minds to great works. His metaphor is that of giving juicy bones to puppies. The puppies may not be able to chew and absorb it all, but that first bite will help them develop a taste for good things. From my own experience, I know this is true. Although born and

raised in poverty, my fortunate early encounter with a few great books planted in me the lifelong urge for beauty and insight. This experience is echoed in almost every famous autobiography.

## **The methodology**

All mandatory programs should be abolished. A person has the right to choose not to be educated if he or she does not feel the need, the urge, or the curiosity. One must choose one's own learning for learning to take place. Needs and interests make learning happen. Exams and classes do not.

We seek education actively and reject everything our heart tells us is false. In this way, education is customized to each individual's needs. It is a path of self-discovery. You take the initiative and you remain in control.

In choosing one's own education, the most rewarding methodology is to read great books. Direct experience is always limited. How many people will you be able to talk with in your lifetime? And among these, how many would engage in deep conversation with you? Then, among those with whom you go deeply, how many are great minds? What are the odds that you will learn all the great truths through your direct experience? If we live a weakened life, it is probably because we are not aware of the stronger concepts in life.

Most people do not read well. They didn't have the exposure to great books at school, or later in society. This era of information explosion provides an inexhaustible supply of seemingly useful and entertaining publications, produced by mediocre minds, and dealing with the trivial aspects of human life. People who feed on such inferior mental food are subject to the manipulation of authority and propaganda, the abuse of life's drudgery and cruelty. They have little strength and power to rise above their environment. The more exposure to popular reading, the more irreversible the development of poor taste. Once the mind is set at mediocrity, there is no possibility for greatness.

Schopenhauer said you should always read the original classics, because contemporary comments on great works of the past have little value. I was lucky to learn this point from him at an early age. Now, as an adult, I make a point of staying away from newspapers, magazines, and popular books. To ensure the highest quality learning with limited time and energy, reading great books that interest you is the best approach. As the years go by, you will notice the difference. A more satisfying life will open to you because you will have the mind to command it. It is one of the most exhilarating experiences. Moreover, unlike other pleasures, its effect is far-reaching and long-lasting.

Stay away from all the hype, the noise, the cheap and easy and fast and popular.

Choose a saner existence. Take advantage of the treasures that have stood the test of time. You do not need to read plenty, but you do need to read the best. You do not need to read fast, but you do need to read well.

“To read well, that is, to read true books in a true spirit, is a noble exercise.”

– Henry David Thoreau (Walden)

The St. John’s College reading list is a superior selection, evolved from Mortimer Adler’s great books list. However, because of Adler’s particular social identity and perspective, the selection consists dominantly of works by white men. It is also found by some people to be antiquated. For a more balanced, relevant, and practical list to start with, the brief reading list based on the curriculum described earlier is recommended.

Nothing less than the best deserves our attention.

## The Vision

Education is very personal, and should be individualized as much as possible. We are born unique, we experience different events during our lifetime, and we come to different stages of maturity at different times. It is absurd to have a program to fit all. Our feet are different sizes, so we need our own shoes. It would not be wise to trim or enlarge our feet. So why is it acceptable to constrain a human mind into a set program?

The school I envision starts with questions, not answers. The philosopher Alan Watts said that if he were to establish a university where real learning could take place, he would ask each student on the first day of class just one question, and then use that question as the basis for that student’s years of learning in the university.

His question would be: “What do you consider a good life?” If the student answered, “A beautiful home,” Watts would ask him a series of questions such as: What is a home? What aspects of home are most important to you and why? What do you need to know about architecture?

This is where the learning starts, through natural interest and inquisitiveness. The point is to start with what is most relevant to a student, most important to him or her at this very moment, and to help students find the questions within themselves:

What do you care about? What are you most curious about? What are your wildest visions toward the future?

Through learning, more questions will naturally appear. Interests may change,

real passion may emerge, a sudden event may awaken a deep concern and caring toward the outside world and away from oneself. The only thing predictable is that there will not be a dull moment.

Along the way, learners deserve the best resources available. They should have access to a collection of the best, be it people or books or any other form, in all fields of human knowledge and effort. Nothing but truth will be offered. There will be no dogma, only opportunities to explore. All interests will be encouraged. Faculty will stay out of the way unless their counsel is sought. Lectures will be from the first-class experts in a particular field.

The school will end with questions, too. Its students will have inquisitive minds, not stuffed ones, when they step out the door. All their lives they will be hungry for truth. They will be equipped with fundamental human knowledge and the ability of independent thought. Through them a new generation of free, noble, beautiful, and strong human beings will be born and raised. They will be the parents of a new world, a much better one – one that is of understanding, not hostility; of beauty, not distortion; of creation, not destruction; of honesty, not deception or pretense; of kindness, not cruelty. This world will replace woes and poverty with trees and flowers, concrete jungle with artistic architecture, wars and terrorism with music and sports.

Such a world will be based on the full development of each individual's uniqueness, not the thwarting of it. This is not the Utopia the philosophers imagined, one based on the sacrifice of individual freedom and free will. No, definitely not. Born in a collectivist culture, I am forever an advocate of individualism. Each life is unique and worthy. Without freely developing individuals, freedom cannot be sustained in any society. No matter what kind of unanimity and prosperity such a society achieves in the short run, in the long run it will fall.

Individuals must be respected by the whole; they must have the unconditional and uncompromised freedom to choose their own beliefs and endeavors. The community must not interfere with each individual's free will, as long as the exercise of it does not harm others.

Throughout history we have learned that any detriment done to personal freedom predicts the downfall of that society/country/civilization. We have also learned that enthusiasm and longing for a sense of belonging often pave the road to hell, if they are not guided by independent thinking, if they come through the surrender of free will and the disregard for humanity.

We love this planet. We wish to see a world in which humanity and nature live in harmony. We wish such a world for ourselves, and more importantly, for all our children, born and to be born. We wish to see a refined human race, of which everyone is free, noble, beautiful, and unique.

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