

THE MEANING OF A LIBERAL EDUCATION

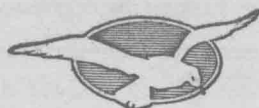
BY

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To her who lovingly gave me the first and most
important instruction, and inspired the
desire for scholarship,

MY MOTHER

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED

PREFACE

Most books that deal with the subject of education, and there are many, are concerned with the training of the young. Much is said about educational methods but very little about content. There is discussion, also, of the effectiveness of institutions, schools and colleges, and the interest of the State in education. This book does not deal with such matters.

It is concerned with other problems. What is an educated person like? How does he differ from the uneducated? Does he think differently and, if so, why? We shall be empirical in our study. We shall study persons who are generally recognized as outstanding educated minds and ask what it is that characterizes them. Is an educated person one who is like Socrates, Erasmus, Montaigne, Goethe, Arnold, Santayana?

The theme of this book is that education is more than information, or skill, or propaganda. In each age education must take into account the conditions of that age. But the educated mind is not a mere creature of its own time. Education is emancipation from herd opinion, self-mastery, capacity for self-criticism, suspended judgment, and urbanity.

It is often believed that education, adult education in particular, is an avocation or an interest to occupy the individual in his leisure time, like music or stamp collecting.

The work of The People's Institute at Cooper Union, New York, where these lectures were given, is essentially that of adult education. I have tried to think through with those who attended the lectures what it is that for ten years we have been trying to achieve. Adult education is now becoming an important interest in American life, and the inquiry seems timely.

This book, then, contends that education is a spiritual revaluation of human life. Its task is to *reorient* the individual, to enable him to take a richer and more significant view of his experiences, to place him above and not within the system of his beliefs and ideals. If education is not liberalizing, it is not education in the sense of the title of the book. I use the term "liberal" not in the political sense, as if it meant half measures, but in its original sense meaning by a liberal education the kind of education which sets the mind free from the servitude of the crowd and from vulgar self-interests. In this sense, education is simply philosophy at work. It is the search for the "good life." Education is itself a way of living.

I have written the book not from the standpoint of the professional educator for whom education is frequently—if it be adult education—an enterprise designed for the uplift of other people, but from the standpoint of one who is concerned that his own education shall not stop in middle-life. No one is fit to be a teacher in whose own mental process education has ceased to go on. One is a student first and only incidentally a teacher. The best teacher is the seeker after truth amongst his students. Probably the most successful educator cannot tell what is the secret of his success in teaching. That which is important about

the philosophy of education is not method but that background of knowledge which enables its possessor to judge what is worth knowing and doing.

EVERETT DEAN MARTIN.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The evidence is unmistakable that there is an important change in the attitude of the public toward education. There is an increasingly general demand for it in some form or other. Everywhere and in all classes of society the interest in acquiring better knowledge is apparent.

In England and on the continent of Europe there are thousands of classes and groups patiently pursuing long and serious courses of study. American colleges and universities are crowded and many students are each year turned away. Vast and increasing numbers register annually for correspondence and university extension courses. The demand for more education is shown also in the increasing number of lecture courses, people's colleges, and other centers of public discussion.

While people do not always know just what it is they demand and frequently the thing which they receive is not education, nevertheless there is a new and very wide spread interest. This new interest shows itself not only in the increasing number of persons engaged in some kind of educational activity but also in the fact that people are beginning to see that education properly may be extended into adult life.

Until recently, people have thought of education as something for children, something which a man either got or

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missed in his early years, something which he generally forgot in his mature years. To the average person, education was a matter of fond memories or of unpleasant associations with teachers, school houses and experiences of childhood. The "highly" educated person was the exceptional person in the community, discussions of the philosophy of education did not appeal to a wide public interest. Now higher branches of learning are being pursued by numbers of people outside regular educational institutions. Something very significant is happening. Perhaps at no time since the thirteenth century has the desire for knowledge so nearly approached a mass movement.

Certain qualifications must however be made. While much of the demand for education is genuine and spontaneous, much of it is spurious, irrelevant, inconsequential. The increased attendance at school or university does not necessarily mean that more education is going on. It is frequently said that our colleges are crowded with inferior students. Athletics, fraternities, schools of business and the automobile tend to displace science and the classics. American youth has acquired its ideal of college life from the motion pictures. We should not infer from the large numbers engaged in adult education that democracy has suddenly decided to rid itself of intellectual shoddiness. If the advertisements of correspondence courses in self-improvement which regularly appear in the popular magazines are an indication of the instruction offered for sale, people might better spend their money for patent medicine or in having their fortunes told. At best adult education consists largely of brief courses of a vocational nature. Even worker's education, a movement which has inspired hope in many liberals, may easily be over estimated. Much

of it is little more than a recrudescence of antiquated radical propaganda, designed to enable the proletariat to "emancipate itself from the slavery of capitalism," and to get it "ready for a millennial industrial democracy." The initiative often comes not from studious minded workers, but from enthusiastic intellectuals and idealistic uplifters. The cultural gesture is often pathetic or comic. It is not uncommon for those who have completed the courses of study in a "workers" college to find themselves more unadjusted than they were before.

It is sought to make of adult education something which will broaden the interests and sympathies of people regardless of their daily occupation—or along with it—to lift men's thought out of the monotony and drudgery which are the common lot, to free the mind from servitude and herd opinion, to train habits of judgment and of appreciation of value, to carry on the struggle for human excellence in our day and generation, to temper passion with wisdom, to dispel prejudice by better knowledge of self, to enlist all men, in the measure that they have capacity for it, in the achievement of civilization.

Adult education is a way of living which should be open to all who care for it for its own sake. It is not surprising that it frequently fails of its true aims. Education has always been regarded as a mere means to ends that have nothing to do with it. It is to be expected, therefore, that education in our day should be regarded primarily as a means of entrance to the already overcrowded professions, or to material gain or better social position. Doubtless it must remain so until the community becomes sufficiently civilized so that some degree of liberal education is the expected thing in all classes, an interest and a goal, a

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spiritual bond of union somewhat like the idea of catholic religion in the middle ages. This is an ideal which will not be realized by magic. There is no cheap popular substitute for education. Nor are we nearing the goal while as now almost anything passes for education.

Almost any method of salesmanship or trick of influencing people for any ends whatever is now "education." Every one educates the public. It is marvelous how large a portion of the population of these states is qualified to instruct. Education has become the game men perpetually work to convert their neighbors. It is the cure for every social ill. How shall we put an end to the crime wave, abolish war, how to prevent social revolution,—or bring revolution about, how induce unwilling people to accept cheerfully the coercion of national prohibition or give lip service to some one's favorite brand of patriotism? The answer is in all cases—education. If you are engaged in increasing the sale of a certain soap, in putting everyone on guard against that social disability of which one's best friend will not tell him, if you can frighten a multitude with the danger of pyorrhea and thus increase your profit in tooth paste—all this is now called education.

Many see in the general movement for more education a great hope for humanity. It was the belief in its political benefits that led to the compulsory education of children in the nineteenth century. Men were sure that all that held the world back was ignorance. People would surely wish to have their ignorance removed. Remove it, teach men the laws of a reasonable and beneficent nature, and mankind in general would be wise and happy and good. Ingersoll used to rejoice whenever he visited a town where the school house was larger than the church.

As the humanitarians of the nineteenth century held that public school education must inevitably put an end to tyranny and superstition, so many of our contemporaries look upon adult education as the guarantor of a new and better civilization. There is to be an end of bigotry and partisan strife and of crowd hysteria and of the vulgarities which beset democracy. They see genius appreciated, a selection by the masses of a sincere and competent leadership. Men everywhere are to learn "not only how to make a living, but how to live."

Finally, it is hoped that adult education will give us new methods and aims which will be carried back into our schools and colleges and transform them. A better informed adult population will naturally take a more active and intelligent interest in the education of youth. And when teachers try to instruct adults it will become necessary for them to make their teaching interesting and significant. The teachers will also learn something about life, glean sheaves of ripe wisdom out of the mature experience of their students; they will become better teachers. All this may or may not come to pass. The point of interest is that there is this tendency to make a gospel of education.

We Americans have a weakness for new gospels. They are a pleasant form of verbal exercise. Liberty, Democracy, Social Reform, the Cause of Labor, Psychoanalysis—all have been put to such evangelistic use. Now we are to become an educated nation by the simple process of everyone educating everyone else. Education is like reform, it is something which is always good for other people. There is much talk about adult education and there are many conferences. But I have not attended a conference for the discussion of this subject in which anyone spoke of adult edu-

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cation as his own pursuit of knowledge. And as with most gospels, we are in such a hurry to save souls that we would begin proclaiming the new salvation to the nation before pausing to find out what education is.

Education has one thing in common with religion. One must come to it with clean hands and a pure heart or one can never know the secret power of it. This is as true of a nation as of an individual. As a people we have certain traits which may be praiseworthy in themselves, but are distinctly hostile to the work of education. I will enumerate them and then briefly indicate their element of hostility. They are, first, our genius for organization; second, our well-known utilitarianism; and third, our cleverness in finding shortcuts to the ends we seek; fourth, our tendency to make propaganda.

The American way of doing things is to proceed to organize them. Our genius for organization is probably our most generally recognized national characteristic. It has given us such prestige as we enjoy among the nations of the earth. Ours is the land of the Woolworth Building, the Ford factories, the Anti-saloon League, Rotary, the Ku Klux Klan, and the college cheer leader. In organization there is power and there is efficiency, as seen in the success of our industries. Labor, politics, morals, religion, charity have all followed the same course. In fact a man gains recognition in this country only by virtue of his membership in some power-seeking group. He who remains unorganized is lost. And without a chairman, a committee, an executive secretary and a press agent no human interest can survive. We simply do not know what to do with it or how to think about it.

Organization, which is instrument or means, tends to be-

come an end in itself. This is the fate of most organized causes; a movement arises with its standardized labels and values, its stereotyped mannerisms, its rigamarole. Success is estimated in terms of material effects, tangible results, numbers and power. The organizer takes precedence over those who possess the interest which it is his task to serve. When a man becomes a labor organizer, he stops work. Many university presidents are not themselves teachers or even scholars. They are good organizers, and with very much the same methods and standards of value one could as well organize a labor union or an insurance company. This is no criticism of the college president. His practical ability is requisite of modern conditions. But ways of thinking and of feeling are elusive and essentially personal, and when the attempt is made to institutionalize them they vanish and a lifeless imitation is substituted. You may as well try to organize the weather as to organize faith, hope and love. "Organized charity" is almost a contradiction in terms. Organized religion is a garden of artificial flowers, badly faded too. The spiritual life of the race was carefully weeded out long ago.

To know the effect of organization upon education, one need only attend a convention of the National Educational Association, or familiarize oneself with the public school system anywhere. The system supplants education. The present interest in adult education is in part a protest against the system. The thirst for knowledge is nowhere more genuine and healthy than in such groups as those which attend The People's Institute of New York and other educational centers where learning is pursued with a minimum of organization. In such places people who desire further knowledge of some subject in which they are interested

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come together, voluntarily, and their only basis of association is their common intellectual interest. There is no cult or "movement"; there are no promoters for there is nothing to promote. There are no ulterior ends to serve and there are no outside influences or regulations save those necessary to insure honest scholarship and competent instruction. Many adult students would resent any attempt at further organization.

There is in existence at the present time a World Association for adult education, and there was recently formed an American Association. But these associations have no ambition to guide or control or to standardize. Nor are they equipped to do so. One of the greatest services that such an association, made up of teachers and students, could perform would be to work to prevent the diversion of the present interest in popular education to ends that are not educational.

"Adult Education" is becoming a slogan, a phrase to capitalize, a label to attach to various activities which have hitherto borne other brands,—Americanization for instance, or social work, or community organization, or reforms and propagandas of one sort or another. Much that is now labeled Adult Education has a curiously familiar look. There are faces one has seen before somewhere in other climes that then enjoyed the sunshine of popular interest. Praiseworthy enterprises no doubt, and not less praiseworthy is the somewhat tardy discovery that the organizers have all along been speaking the prose of adult education without knowing it.

The danger is that persons with long experience in promoting and administering many things may also conceive of each educational task as primarily one of organization.