
My Friend's Education

A friend of mine did what all good friends do; he died. The loss caused the proper amount of grief, of course; but in this case the grief was polluted by an odd petulance. For some unknown reason I felt that he had abused his rights by dying at that time. For his going left me at loose ends. He had "done me wrong."

The friendship had been a highly profitable one for me. He was an intellectual warehouse from which I was always free to lift as much merchandise as I was capable of carrying; and much that I lifted and incorporated into my stock-in-trade was borrowed while we sipped a beer or munched a midnight rare-bit. For he was a superb raconteur, always with the parable that exactly fitted the subject at hand, and for his illustrations he could draw on an intimate knowledge of a half-dozen literatures, ancient and modern, augmented with much intelligent travel. He had digested a lot of thoroughly nonutilitarian information, covering such fields as medieval architecture, manners of the Second Empire, music, the culinary art, the Bible (in the original), lovemaking in the tenth century, and the econ-

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omy of the Minoans, and if you knew how to draw him out (he preferred to listen) an evening with him would prove a bonanza. A companion of that sort is not easy to come by.

Well, the inevitable is the inevitable, and one turns to pleasant memories. And to cogitating. The thought that hung on with tenacity was that all the knowledge and understanding he had stored away in three-quarters of a century went down into the grave with his body, and that seemed to be a terrible loss. That "you can't take it with you" is a self-evident fact; but the "it" referred to in the aphorism is the fund of tangible things the average man usually piles up in a lifetime. My friend, however, was outside the average, in that he never gave a hoot for anything that could be listed in a will; he acquired only learning and that he surely took with him. And except for examples of it in the half-dozen books he published, the literary style he never tired of perfecting was gone forever. Being something of a utilitarian, I could not help asking, why put in all that time and effort at pursuits that produced so little that could be seen and catalogued? It seemed so un-American.

To which he would have answered, I am sure, "Didn't I have fun doing it? And what can a fellow get out of life more valuable than fun?"

And thereby hangs a theory of education which he exemplified. It runs something like this: education is the pursuit of knowledge that pays off in the enjoyment of it; if it does not yield that kind of profit, you quit the pursuit, and you keep at it only in proportion to returns. For instance, he once told me that he had got so much fun out of reading the Greek and Latin classics, in his college days, that he later took on Hebrew, and found its literature just as gratifying. On the other hand, if he found a book uninteresting, even one he had been hired to review, he would drop it; one book which had received acco-

lades from eminent litterateurs he discarded after the first fifty pages with the remark, "I ain't got education enough for that kind of tripe."

THE TEST OF EDUCABILITY

According to this theory, some people are educable and some are not, and there is nothing one can do to change this natural arrangement. This does not mean that some people are "better" than others, for in respect to functional ability the noneducable are usually better endowed than the educable, and their contribution to material progress is certainly greater. Then again, the educable are so engrossed in self-betterment that they are of no use in the democratic business of improving others, and as reformers or politicians they are quite inept; in fact, they are a bit on the antisocial side, even though they can be wonderful companions. However, it is idle to pass value judgment on either of these personality groups; each is what it is and cannot be the other. As for determining who is educable and who is not, there is no other test than the purely subjective one of pleasure; the educable get satisfaction from the pursuit of learning, the others find the occupation distasteful.

It is an individualistic theory of education, resting its case on the premise of innate characteristics. My friend, obviously, was an individualist of the first water; he would have no truck with the notion that the individual is what his environment makes him. Environment, including college, can make it difficult for the educable to get an education, but it cannot prevent them from getting it. Just as a tree will work its way around impediments to reach the sun, so those bothered by a questing spirit will persist in reaching for "the best that has been said and thought in this world," and will absorb their share of it.

On the other hand, those born without the eternal “why” in their souls can live among books all their lives without being touched by learning.

The theory, most assuredly, rejects the democratic notion that all are equally and indefinitely educable. In point of fact, nobody really takes that notion seriously, least of all the hierarchy of professional teachers who pay it lip service.

In what is called “progressive education” the general objective is to produce what is called a social consciousness, with emphasis on both uniformity and conformity; but to reach that objective individual differences must be minimized; thus, it is inferred that all are equally educable only if those of greater intellectual capacity are written off, as if they did not exist.

COURSES GROW EASIER

Likewise, the democratic notion of education gets a lift in the colleges by the adjustment of courses to fit the lowest common denominator, which gets lower as more and more candidates for the commercially necessary degree are enrolled. It is certainly true that all are equally educable if you equate education with the ability to pull teeth, to use a slide rule, to memorize a legal code, or to order a meal in a foreign language; and you prove your case incontestably by fitting examinations to the examinee.

This is not to condemn our educational system; far from it. Given the premise of democracy, no other educational system would do. Certainly if the system were shaped to serve the needs of the educable, education would be making a concession to aristocratic notions, which democracy simply cannot do. The axiom of uniform perfectibility must be adhered to at all costs, even if this involves the redefinition of education. It

would hardly be democratic to deny the badge of educability—the degree—to those whose intellectual capacity finds expression in tending cows; therefore, we must have agricultural colleges. And so that there will be no discrimination against the geniuses of the household, a school of domestic science must have the power to grant appropriately engraved parchments.

It is only if you are a stickler for the purity of words that you find fault with our system of education. For instance, my late friend maintained that what goes by the name of education in a democracy is in fact only training. The high schools, with their courses in carpentry and bookkeeping, have replaced the discarded apprenticeship system, while the law school is simply a glorified clerkship in a legal office. Even in the schools of philosophy, the guiding spirit is utilitarianism rather than speculation; in the popular pragmatic philosophy—if it is a philosophy—the only absolute recognized is “that whatever works is good,” which is putting a premium on skill as against learning. However, since everybody above the grade of idiocy can be trained to do something, the democratic dictum that all people are equally educable is proved true by a simple device of semantics.

Not only does the democratic idiom give support to this equation of education with training, but so does another important facet of our mores—economism. From the time of birth, the American learns of the importance of getting on in the world, of acquiring wealth and social position, and it would be inconsistent with this ideal if his schooling did not take it into account. No American father should, in the circumstances, channel his offspring's development along any but utilitarian lines; were he to stress learning for the sake of learning he would be unfaithful to his parental duty. Should his own son or daughter prove educable, he must use his influence to try to

overcome the handicap, so that his progeny may not suffer from social disabilities. And, as a citizen and taxpayer, he must bring the conventional point of view to bear upon the established educational facilities.

A SANCTUARY FOR INQUIRING MINDS

If the intellectually curious find such facilities unsatisfying, they have only themselves, or their misfortune, to blame. They must shift for themselves. Curiously enough, they always do, as a matter of necessity, even if the colleges make the going rough for them; not infrequently, they pass up both the college and the degree in favor of an education. As a consequence, they will probably find it difficult to get a job as an insurance salesman, and about all they can claim for their educational spree is a lot of fun. That is all they ever get from it.

One wonders how many of these rare and unfortunate birds there are around. About the only way one could estimate their number would be by the establishment of a college designed for them, something like a sanctuary set up for almost extinct animal species. The special feature of such a college would be that one could get nothing from it except an education, and no one would think of going there for any other purpose. Not a single utilitarian course would pollute the curriculum. For instance, one might learn how to appreciate Molière and Racine, even though one might have difficulty in reading a French newspaper; economics would be taught as the science of how we make a living, not as a preparation for a job in the government; as for psychology, the textbooks would be Shakespeare and Tolstoy.

To make sure that none but the educable would enroll, this college would give no degrees or even certificates of attend-

ance; it would not deign to peddle such papers. In fact, no record of attendance would be kept, nor would there be any examinations or other means of judging the educability of the students. Each student would have to figure that out for himself, if the matter bothered him, by the test of fun.

That, I believe, would be a practical application of the theory of education my late friend propounded and lived. By the way, he was the editor of the original *Freeman*, published between 1920 and 1924, and his name was Albert Jay Nock.