BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL

LONDON SATURDAY AUGUST 27 1955

ADULT EDUCATION

BY

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The idea of adult study is more than 2,000 years old. Plato, who divined all the great problems, wished the lives of his ruling class to be divided between action and thought—a period in the world being followed by one spent in study. Who will doubt that we should be better governed if our rulers' lives were ordered so? And the same principle applies to all, except purely mechanical, occupations. Thought without experience and experience without thought are barren. When the two are wedded, wisdom is born.

The idea of adult study is old; its methodical practice did not begin till the nineteenth century. Then, when the Industrial Revolution created a demand for craftsmen, the Mechanics' Institutes were started "to instruct artisans in the scientific principles of arts and manufactures," as the original programme of Birkbeck College put it. Later, the Extension Movement attempted to fill the void in higher education left by inadequate university provision; and at the beginning of this century the Workers' Educational Association gave the working-man, for whom no secondary education had then been provided, a chance to retrieve the opportunities that had been denied him. None of these movements were quite what Plato had in mind. Designed for those whose earlier education had been deficient, they were intended to repair gaps which ought never to have occurred. But in Plato's view everyone, however excellent and thorough his original education had been, needed at regular intervals through life periods of study and reflection, to bring his knowledge up to date, to keep abreast of the changing times. A headmaster once said to me, "All these schoolboys are born knowing things which I have painfully to learn." The older generation, though its experience gives it advantages denied to youth, is always in that position, and has to take steps to overtake the new knowledge, the new outlooks, which have come into the world since its formal education ceased.

Hence in this century the development of adult study of the Platonic type in the form of "refresher courses." The first were in the teaching profession—I remember Sir Amherst Selby-Bigge, then Permanent Secretary of the Board of Education, saying shortly after the first world war that, of all the money which the Board spent, none, in his opinion, was more remunerative than that devoted to refresher courses. Their value is recognized in the medical profession, and in different forms they are appearing in many occupations—in the last two years I happen to have attended such courses organized by bodies as different as the Society of Production Engineers and British European Airways. All these are

of the type which Plato planned for his ruling class. The aim is to keep people up to date in their life-work, to give them a chance to think about what they are doing, to refresh and reorientate their minds, to break the crust of unthinking routine and habit which slowly cramps the growth of the mind, to bring new life and vigour to its slowing activities. They can be compared to the periodic repainting which maintains a house in good condition, to the periodic overhaul which keeps a car fit for the road. No doubt in all occupations they will be increasingly recognized as essential for high efficiency.

Refresher Course for the Human Spirit

But there is another sense in which the human house needs repainting, the human car reconditioning. Men are something more than their occupations; they are human beings, with capacities for development largely unrealized, moving in a world of infinite interest. At the centre of all their activities is a spirit, a soul, a personality, which is themselves. It is shaped from outside by home atmosphere and upbringing, by school and college, by human contacts, by reading, by the experiences of life; and it is shaped from within by thought which reviews and puts into order all its experiences. But as soon as men are swept into the stream of action there is little time for thought. Yet at 40 a man is much more fitted to think than at 20, for he knows much more of life and men. Unless his mind has stiffened, his insight into religious, moral, and political questions is greater, because it is based on experience. (Aristotle remarked that the young are not fit to be students of philosophy or politics, "for they have no experience of life.") But the more he has to think about, the less leisure he has to think, unless he can escape from the stream for a period and reflect on himself and on the world and life "in the light of all time and all existence."

In his poem *Palladium*, Matthew Arnold wrote:

Still doth the soul, from its lone fastness high,
Upon our life a ruling effluence send,
And when it fails, fight as we will, we die;
And while it lasts, we cannot wholly end.

In our age the soul has a hard time and needs more attention than it always gets. Here is another use for adult education, as a refresher course for the human spirit.

And there is a further motive for it. Life may be compared to a long corridor. The corridor is bare, but countless rooms open off it. Each room has a title over its door—religion, philosophy, medicine, law, farming,

education, politics, the sciences, music, art, drama, literature, history, gardening, and many many more. I have taken a few titles at random; if I mentioned all the rooms, this article would fill an issue of the *Journal*, for the list would contain all the occupations, activities, and interests of men. The rooms are locked, but each has a key, which is sometimes called education. Perforce we walk along the corridor for some seventy years. We all enter one room, over which is written the name of the occupation by which we earn our bread, but most people get the keys to other rooms, for merely walking along the bare corridor is dull; and the happiest people are those who enter the rooms with the richest contents. There is more time to get the keys during the first 25 years of life, but we can enter a room at any age, if we can unlock its door.

But how can one get the keys, or find time to enter the rooms? Of course something can be done by individual reading in spare moments, but the limitations and difficulties in this are obvious. Ideally, study of the kind which I am suggesting should have two features. We should get free for a period from the occupations, distractions, and worries of normal life; and we should pursue our studies in the company of others who are bound on the same quest. This second condition is important. Mind sharpens mind and learns from mind. As the Ecclesiast said, "How can one be warm alone?" It is interesting to reflect that the intellectual life of the fifth and fourth centuries of Greece, one of the great ages of thought, was based not on books, of which there were very few, but on discussion, on mind meeting mind.

Adult Residential Colleges

Now both these conditions, a retreat into quiet and company for study, are provided in one of the most interesting developments of post-war Britain, the colleges and centres for adult residential study, of which more than thirty have been founded in different parts of the country since 1945. They are in pleasant surroundings, many of them in old country houses adapted for the purpose. One or two are specialized, notably the Administrative Staff College for business executives at Henley, but most offer the widest variety of courses—one programme before me ranges from astronomy to the social implications of science, from mountains to the nationalized industries. Usually the colleges provide the courses, but sometimes they are taken for a period by some association which chooses its own programme and provides its own lecturers.

Adult residential colleges have existed for more than a century in Denmark, which to-day has about sixty for its population of 4½ million. They are a feature of all the Scandinavian countries, and have produced in them the best-educated democracies in the world. The English development has been on rather different lines. In Denmark and Sweden the courses last from three to six months, and the students are mainly young; in England the students are of all ages, and (with some exceptions, notably Woodbrooke near Birmingham, which was founded before the war) the normal length of a course varies from a fortnight to a long week-end. A series of such week-ends are sometimes given to a single subject—an effective technique of study.

It would be quite possible for a college to have longer courses. Those at the Administrative Staff College last two months. But in the un leisured conditions of modern life the majority of courses must be shorter than these, and short courses have the advantage that anyone can spare some days from their vacation for this slightly more arduous form of holiday. Nor should the uses even of a long week-end at a residential college be despised. It gives the chance of opening the door of some room of the mind and learning enough to explore it further.

Period of Study for Doctors

But is this enough? Should not all doctors be able, at least once in their career, to leave their work and study for from, say, three to six months? Might not the National Health Service follow the example of the industrial firms who release their promising executives for a long course at the Administrative Staff College? That is a question for the National Health Service and the medical profession to answer, but something may be said about the practical uses of short and long courses. Of course, more can be done in six months than in a week or a fortnight, and if it is a question of thorough research into some professional subject the longer period is essential. But it should be remembered that long-term Sabbatical leave can easily turn into little more than a mere holiday unless the object of study is substantial and clearly defined. A vague idea of bringing oneself up to date and having leisure for thinking may end in very little result. If, however, the aim is not what I have called thorough research but an opportunity to keep in touch with developments in medicine, shorter periods repeated at regular intervals may be not only more easy to manage but better; just as many people find that a month's holiday is more effective when taken in two periods of a fortnight at different times of the year. A single dose of study in a lifetime is not enough; for in progressive subjects like medicine men become out of date within five years or less.

So too, in what I call refresher courses for the spirit, repeated shorter periods of study are better. For here it is a question of taking in, not new facts, but new ideas; and ideas are more slowly digested than facts. The food is more effective when it is not given all at once but distributed over a series of meals taken at intervals.

What is the advantage of these suggestions to a practising doctor? So far as his professional work is concerned the answer is easy. Periods of release from the exacting demands of his work are the best means of re-equipping him, refreshing and re-orientating his outlook, breaking the crust of routine, and protecting him from the sclerosis which attacks the human mind. But what of refresher courses for the spirit, the study of religion and philosophy, the development of new interests in the infinite variety of life? Obviously they enrich the mind, but have they any special use for a doctor?

Their use is indicated in the remark of an eminent physician who said, "Patients come asking for a tonic, but often what they really want is a philosophy of life." Now it is not the business of the doctor to prescribe specific religions or philosophies. Yet he is more than a mere "medical practitioner." His healing powers partly—sometimes largely—depend on the impact of his personality, on what he is and believes. That is the argument for studies which enrich and deepen his personality, for refresher courses of the spirit.

If an angel visited the earth he might sum up his impressions by saying that its inhabitants were very busy people who sometimes seemed more adolescent in character and mind than one would expect, and that they might improve considerably if they had, interspersed among their activities, more opportunities for thought, not only about their work but about themselves and their civilization and its problems. The development of adult study, and in particular of the residential colleges (which is very significant in view of post-war difficulties), indicate that we are beginning to feel that there is some truth in the view of my imaginary angel.¹

¹ There are good short books on the Adult Colleges of Denmark and Sweden; *Education in Democracy*, by J. C. Möller and K. Watson (Denmark); and *School for Life*, by F. M. Forster (on Sweden). Perhaps I may also refer to my own book *The Future in Education* (now published under the title *On Education*). The National Institute for Adult Education, 35, Queen Anne Street, London, W.1, publishes twice yearly, in March and in September, a list of residential short courses at the colleges mentioned in this article (price 1s. 2d. post free).