IN MEMORY

LIFE photo by Alfred Eisenstaedt (1952) NY

Mortimer J. Adler

December 28, 1902 – June 28, 2001

Remembrances

Charles Van Doren

I met Mortimer for the first time more than seventy-five years ago. I know the place and date exactly: Lennox Hill Hospital, New York City, February 14, 1926. Mortimer was a little over twenty-five years old. I was two—two days, that is. My father and Mortimer were colleagues at Columbia, leading a great-books seminar together. Dad had brought Mortimer to see his first born, and Mortimer en-

tertained me by neologizing. To neologize is to speak employing words that you make up as you go along. The meaning is not important; it is the sound that counts. I loved the sound of Mortimer's voice then, and I never ceased to do so. At that time he spoke too fast for most people to understand him, unless they paid very special attention, which many people do not like to have to do. Later, he slowed down and spoke in short, simple, direct sentences—and wrote them too. The mellifluousness that had charmed me as a two-day-old then began to charm everyone else. What a speaker he was. You never had any doubt what he was saying. But, if you disagreed, it was because you did not quite understand. This was also true of his books. With a single exception, every book that he wrote after his sixtieth birthday was distinct and clear, its language perfectly conformed to its meaning. As a reward, almost every book was a best seller (comparatively speaking, no bodice ripper he).

And what a teacher, too. In his autobiography, he wrote about what he had learned from my father about leading a seminar. And in every one of the more than two hundred seminars Mortimer and I led together over thirty years in Chicago, San Francisco, Minneapolis, and other places, I always learned something important about something important—as his friend Arthur Ruben used to say.

When I was a child, Mortimer astounded and fascinated me. He would visit us, whenever he came to New York on business—always with an agenda in hand of items to discuss. I thought that was astonishing. We visited him at Stone Pond in New Hampshire, and I was again astonished, to see him happily splashing about with water wings above his head, like Mickey Mouse ears. He never sneezed just once, always three times, never more, never less. And when I learned about his work with the Hayes Office, which among other things ordained that a movie actress could not show her legs more than a few inches above the knee, and especially not the inside of her thighs, I was kerflummoxed. (That's not a neologism.) Since the inside of a

woman's thigh was at time (I was thirteen) a matter of enormous interest, I envied Mortimer. I imagined that he had to check out all those beautiful thighs and make sure they were not breaking the rules.

And then there came the time when I fell down, face down in the mud, and he picked me up, brushed me off, and gave me a job. It was the best kind of job: as he described it, one you would do anyway, if you did not need the money. And I did it for thirty years. First we worked together making books for Encyclopædia Britannica. Then I, and many others, helped him to design and edit the greatest encyclopedia the world has ever seen. It has fallen on bad days, but it will rise again and outlive us all—just as Mortimer's philosophical work will do.

I remember the first seminar we led together, nearly forty years ago. The text was Plato's dialogue, The Sophist. I had read it twice or three times and struggled to get the point. It could not be what it seemed to be. But Mortimer helped us all to understand it was. The true sophist, Plato is saying, cannot be trapped—if he is willing to say anything whatsoever to win the argument. If he wants to win at all costs and does not care what is true, and if he is adept at fending off the truth when it is presented, the sophist will triumph, and you will fail. I asked Mortimer after the seminar whether he agreed. "Yes," he said, surprisingly, "Plato is right." But he believed (and I do to) that this is the tragedy of intellect. In other words, truth must be fought for, even though one may not be able to win. Mortimer fought for the truth all of his life, although he believed in the end that he had been defeated. We tried to persuade him that this was not so, but we failed. Time, merciless and remorseless, betrayed him—as eventually it betrays us all.

And now, having said that, I want to praise him. As another man, a great general, praised another philosopher, long ago. The general compared that other philosopher to a satyr. (And, indeed, there was a certain rotundity of body and an amused, ironic look on Mortimer's face most of the

time.) That general said that that other philosopher was like Marsyas, the great flute player who challenged Apollo, and whose melodies charmed all who heard them. But the general said that this philosopher produced the same effect with his words only, and did not require a flute. "When we hear any other speaker," the general said, addressing his friend, "His words produce absolutely no effect on us, or not much. Whereas, the mere fragment of you and your words, even at second hand, and however imperfectly reported, amaze and possess every man and woman and make them confess that they ought not to live as they do. Your words seem simple when we first hear them," the general said, "and not worthy or appropriate for their matter, and are even laughed at, because you are always repeating the same thing, in the same words. But when we look within those words," the general said to that other philosopher, his friend, "We find that they are the only words that have a meaning in them, abounding in fair images of virtue and of the widest comprehension, or rather extending to the whole duty of a good and honorable man." Thus did Alcibiades praise Socrates, Mortimer, and thus do I praise you. Your words, simple, direct, and clear, still tell us we ought not to live as we do and describe the whole duty of a good and honorable man.

I will not end with Plato, who, although he may have started Mortimer on the road to philosophy, did not accompany him for long. Mortimer would refute me is I did not mention his nearly lifelong admiration for Plato's famous pupil. Many times he told me, as I imagine he told you, that he hoped to meet Aristotle in the afterlife, so he correct his errors—and also have the opportunity to talk about all the most important things with a man who knew, as Mortimer did, what they were and why they were important.

Mortimer and I agreed, when St. Christopher was struck from the list of proper saints, that the action, although probably correct, was a pity. I myself have stubbornly per-

sisted in addressing the benevolent giant every day of my life. You know the gentle, little prayer:

> St. Christopher be my guide,
> In my most need,
> Go by my side.

I have modified it in various ways over the years, and I offer you another modification now:

> St. Christopher, be Mortimer's guide,
>   and Aristotle's too,
> In their most need.
> If they are wandering in some
>   dark, cold, and lonely place
>   and cannot find one another,
> Bring them together,
> Join their hands,
> Shed warmth and light upon them.
> Go by their side
> And from time to time,
> Let Thomas Aquinas come for lunch.

Mortimer, we miss you, and we need your help. We all pursue happiness, but we do not know what it is or how to find it. We need you to remind us that happiness is not a moment of ecstasy or a feeling of contentment that can come and go. Instead, happiness is the product of a whole life—a life lived in accordance with the two kinds of virtue: intellectual and moral. We have to use our minds and not waste them. And we have to acquire the habit of desiring the right things, the things we really need and are good for us, not the wrong things, which are bad for us and for everybody else. In addition to all that, we need to be lucky—in our country, in our friends, and in our loves. You were lucky in all these, dear friend, and therefore we can conclude that yours was a happy life. It is our great loss, not yours, that it had to end.

Remembrances

Peter Norton

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Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.*

I spent something over thirty years with The Encyclopædia Britannica, and, of course, in that time I met many very intelligent, very smart, very well-read intellectuals and people generally. Unfortunately, I fell into none of those categories. So, when I first knew that I was going to meet Mortimer Adler, back in London in the early Sixties, I was decidedly nervous. In fact, the feeling I really had was one of great awe. I spent all my time trying to talk in sentences as short as possible, so that he would not work out quite what a nitwit was running the London company. But we got on really quite well, and Mortimer, of course, as always, was charming. Here was a man who had not just read but had written more books—and was still writing at that stage—than a lot of people have read in their lives. Now, that's not Britannica people, of course, because we had all been weaned on *How to Read a Book*, and Mortimer had made sure we all read the great books of the Western world, to keep up with it. Consequently, I had quite a lot to be nervous about.

But I am not going to talk about what Mortimer achieved, and what he did. I am sure the others who follow me will do that much better than I can. But I would like to talk a little while about a Mortimer that I knew. In the early Seventies, after I had relocated to the United States, at one of Britannica's international functions in Hawaii—we always chose the best places to have our functions—sin attacked me. In the course of an afternoon session, when I should have been working with everybody else, I snuck out of the meeting because there was the allure of a great and wonderful ice-cream parlor. And I went down to the ice-cream parlor, and I crept in very quietly to make sure there was nobody there. And it was empty—except in the far corner there was one very large ice-cream and chocolate concoc-

tion, out from behind which came a wonderful, very large, ear-splitting grin on this wonderful, elfin-like face. And that was when I met the other Mortimer.

As the years passed, Mortimer and I managed to commit all sorts of terrible sins of gluttony, in all sorts of different parts of the world, in ice-cream parlors and candy shops and places like that. And what I came to find out was that behind this austere intellectual facade was a fun-loving, excitable, and very happy, life-loving little boy. This was the little boy who, after having some problems in his youth with swimming, at an age when most people had given up swimming, succumbed to the challenge of a great marathon swimming match at another Britannica meeting. He agreed that he would do this, and he not only took on this challenge, but he won it in great style and was triumphant. (Now I must point out that the pool he swam in was approximately fifteen feet long, and it was not more than three feet deep, and there were at least twenty people ready to jump in to save him if anything happened). At the end of the course there was a bottle of champagne for the winner, and that, of course, was the sort of incentive that Mortimer always liked.

This was the Mortimer who not only liked to joke but could take a joke when it was aimed at him. This was the Mortimer who could walk with crowds and talk with kings, and, although I cannot talk about his virtue, I can absolutely guaranty that he never lost that common touch, that common touch that made so many people love him, and why so many people are here today who miss him. I shall miss my young friend. But I have one remaining regret. I have no doubt that, at this particular moment, Mortimer and his God are in very deep discussions, which I would love to be able to hear. I only hope that God is up to it.

(Congregation: laughter)