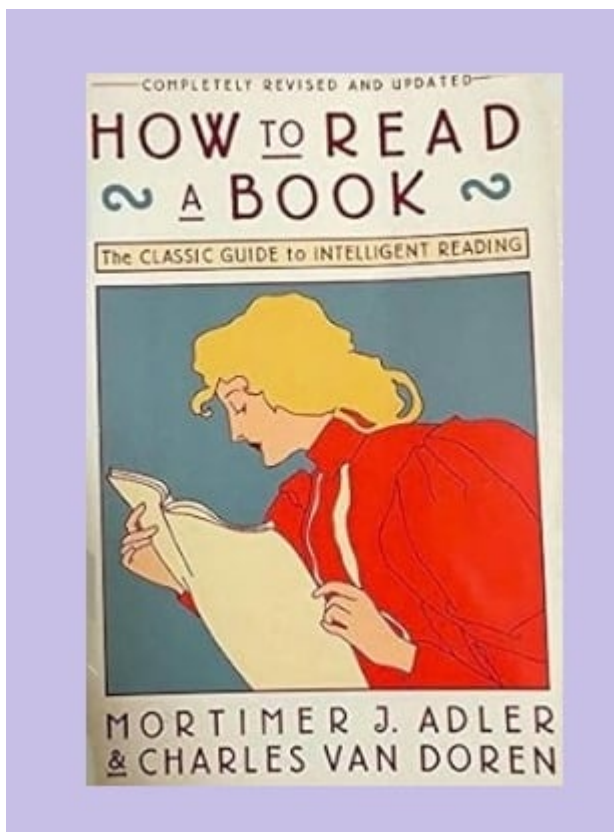


Western Civilization: My Non-Woke Personal Library and Its Saving Virtues – Part Two

By Geoffrey Clarfield

Occasionally, a book comes along that is so compelling that it blows everything else out of the water. Mortimer Adler's [*How To Read a Book*](#) was such a book for me. It occupies a special place in my library because it taught me how to think. *How To Read a Book*, was a post WWII best-seller. Adler became famous for his invention, more accurately, his renaming of the books of the Western Canon as "The Great Books." These are the books that well educated Western men (and some women) students of the liberal arts studied at colleges and universities across the Anglosphere up until the end of WWII. I will be forever grateful that, thanks to Adler, these books began to engage me seriously in my early twenties.



At that time, I was an undergraduate at a university that was imbued with a mild spirit of cultural relativism and a general belief that the social sciences, through an unquestioned left-wing adherence to "social engineering," however defined, would lead us to a new morality, something better than the system which had either brought on WWII or been unable to prevent it. We were bombarded with vague programmatic books on "directed social change" (how presumptuous!) that assumed that

we could somehow extract values to live by from science or sociology. I found most of these writings annoying.

They were composed by American (and British) writers like Daniel Bell, Alvin Toffler, and Julian Huxley of UNESCO perfidy. They ranged from not too bad, at one end of the scale, to Harvard-based Talcott Parsons's books, which were the worst. There were also a few Frenchmen, like Raymond Aron, who got in on the act. They all cultivated abstractions, and invented useless terminology as they proffered broad historical generalizations that do not stand up to reasonable scrutiny. Simply put, they were "know it all" Utopians of various kinds bent on climbing a trendy academic and journalistic ladder.

One of these academic sophists eventually became an advisor to British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, and helped popularize Blair's notion of a "third way" between socialism and the free market. Yes, I refer to the establishment Londoner, Anthony Giddens –did he get a knighthood for writing as Alice in Wonderland spoke?

In an off-handed, arrogant and declarative style, Giddens once informed us humble readers that "capitalism" was the most transformative force in history (how charmingly Tavistock!). Really? More transformative than the Scientific Revolution, more transformative than the Sermon on the Mount, the Ten Commandments, Buddha or Lao Tze, the evolution of monogamy and representative democracy in the West, the rise of modern medicine or the Marxism that caused the deaths of hundreds of millions under Lenin and Stalin?

More "transformative" than modern Nazism, the Holocaust, or its Mein Kampf-inspired Jihadi wars in the Middle East? None of my professors ever pointed out this contradictory nonsense. They were complicit. At the time, I read this assigned material, felt uncomfortable (more likely annoyed, especially by the casual sense of innate superiority which permeates

Giddens' writings), and rushed to finish the next article or book that I needed to read to pass the course.

Adler came as a breath of fresh air, delighting me with his dismissal of most of this kind of writing as a colossal waste of time, words and money that had the Anglosphere in its loving embrace after WWII. Instead, he advocated the expansion of what used to be called Liberal Education, based on the Liberal Arts. He pointed out that in the past, by engaging with these books, Western Civilization and Western educated men and women took part in a conversation that spanned millennia. This conversation began in Athens and Jerusalem in the middle of the first millennium BC and has continued with minor interruptions until today.

Adler demonstrated that each generation of readers of the Great Books often became the authors of the next round of books. Beginning with the Bible, (on which I have opined earlier in this essay,) with Homer, and with the ancient Greek philosophers, this ongoing conversation has taken place across the realms of theology, literature and drama, philosophy, science, and history.

The canon of the Great Books rests at about one hundred volumes. It contends with approximately one hundred key ideas, ideas so crucial that they recur repeatedly. There may be no progress in this conversation, no ultimate answer, but it is enlightening to consider the alternatives, and there sure has been development.

Adler's book remains a wonderful guide to reading, for not only did he explain *what* to read, and in what order, but *how* to read. He gave sixteen rules for reading which enable the reader to understand what a book is about: how to identify its structure; its author's underlying terms and arguments, whether explicit or implicit; and consider whether the author answers his initial premise. He also gives rules for reading literature (both novels and plays), as well as

non-empirical texts. I felt as if he had given me a non-lethal x-ray machine which allowed me to analyze and compare Great Books, and lesser volumes as well. Even op-eds. I am extremely grateful to Mortimer Adler. He authored a book that changed my life.

Adler came to my undergraduate university for a lecture, sometime in the early seventies. By that time, the study of the Great Books was in radical decline. He was there to sell his intellectual autobiography *Philosopher at Large*. He spoke for forty minutes and then took questions. Only twenty people came to hear him. I was one. I bought his book, he signed it for me, I read it, found it interesting but if memory serves, I took it to a used bookstore and traded it in for a hard copy of the Iliad and the Odyssey. Nevertheless, I am extremely grateful to Mortimer Adler. He authored a book that changed my life.

Inspired by Adler, I vowed to read most of the books he recommended. The intellectual heavy lifting of reading the Great Books without guidance began in my mid-twenties and continued throughout my thirties and forties. As I embarked on my own reading odyssey, I also read biographies and commentaries of these luminaries (plus lots of books on the nature and history of science) and often asked myself, "If these men and women define what it is to be a member of Western Civilization when will I "join the club"?

Well, it took a lifetime of reading and experience, but by the time I was in my late forties I felt that I had finally joined. No one lets you in. No one makes an announcement or gives you a degree or diploma. You simply find that you have become familiar with, and comfortable enough with the ideas and arguments you have encountered in these books, that you take (with effort) from every topic in the Great Books and that you find yourself able to test them against the world as it is –and as it is becoming – and discuss them without making a fool of yourself. Then and only then are you "in."

It is a volunteer only group, and you can usually recognize a fellow member with no need for a Masonic handshake. Some are Straussians, many of whom believe that many of the Great Books have a secret meaning. They have now written enough so that those meanings, hidden presumably because the author thought they should not be widely disseminated at the time, are now widely available to any interested reader. I say this without cynicism, for Strauss was a great thinker whose writings are worthy of careful reading.

Reading the Great Books cannot prevent you from being wrong or misinformed, but if you *are* wrong it will be wrong in application, not in the perspective that you bring to an informed and discursive understanding of yourself and the world around you which comes, not from a feeling of secular triumph or religious humility, but from a familiarity with the kinds of arguments which dwellers of the 21st century must bring to life and death issues.

I regret that I did not formally study the great books during the four years of my BA, before going on to graduate school and then out into the world to make a living. But truth be told, I was not ready to take on the Great Books as they presented themselves to me when I was 19-23 years old. Looking back, I do not think I was ready to climb that ladder, for at that age, I was possessed – legitimately – by the world of music, a field that I had entered when I was five and had built into a mini career by the age of fifteen. My undergraduate years as a music student gave that gift its breadth and depth. But that story can wait till we get to my music bookshelf.

I was lucky enough, however, to have enjoyed what I might call a prequel to the Great Books when I was in Grade 9. At that time, the Anglo-Canadian educational establishment was still run by English speaking war veterans who had a basic understanding of Western civilization.

One of our textbooks comprised a retelling of the Greek myths for young people. Our teacher was a Welsh war veteran named Jones. Because many of us were quite secular, he showed us that these non-Biblical myths expressed aspects of the modern unconscious mind, in addition to comprising archetypes that have informed Western literature since the time of Homer. He was right.

Being a young music student, the myth of Orpheus stuck with me. When I was dating in my early twenties, I often asked myself, "How many times did I fall into the archetype of Orpheus who wanted to save his partner from darkness through music?" But it was only later when I revisited this myth that I became fully conscious of this pattern. The myth of Orpheus helped me learn that entertaining a girlfriend is different from having one.

By the time I was fifty I was comfortable enough in the tradition (but never an erudite "master") and simply regret that I cannot read every one of the Great Books again. Who knows, there may still be time. I have read the *Odyssey* five times, so I do break some of Adler's rules and show favoritism.

Fifty years later, I have read many of the Greats, minus some of the more technical scientific writings by Euclid or Newton. I have not read all of Aquinas, but enough to know that I would have substituted Adler's choice of Aquinas with *The Guide for the Perplexed* by the Egypt based Medieval Jewish doctor and Rabbi, Moses Maimonides and who Aquinas himself quotes in his Summa.

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