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This Western devotion to the liberal arts and liberal education must have been largely responsible for the emergence of democracy as an ideal. The democratic ideal is equal opportunity for full human development, and, since the liberal arts are the basic means of such development, devotion to democracy naturally results from devotion to them. On the other hand, if acquisition of the liberal arts is an intrinsic part of human dignity, then the democratic ideal demands that we should strive to see to it that all have the opportunity to attain to the fullest measure of the liberal arts that is possible to each.

The present crisis in the world has been precipitated by the vision of the range of practical and productive art offered by the West. All over the world men are on the move, expressing their determination to share in the technology in which the West has excelled. This movement is one of the most spectacular in history, and everybody is agreed upon one thing about it: we do not know how to deal with it. It would be tragic if in our preoccupation with the crisis we failed to hold up as a thing of value for the world, even as that which might show us a way in which to deal with the crisis, our vision of the best that the West has to offer. That vision is the range of the liberal arts and liberal education. Our determination about the distribution of the fullest measure of these arts and this education will measure our loyalty to the best in our own past and our total service to the future of the world.

The great books were written by the greatest liberal artists. They exhibit the range of the liberal arts. The authors were also the greatest teachers. They taught one another. They taught all previous generations, up to a few years ago. The question is whether they can teach us.

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The Great Conversation

Preface to *Great Books of the Western World*, 1952

Robert M. Hutchins

Until lately the West has regarded it as self-evident that the road to education lay through great books. No man was educated unless he was acquainted with the masterpieces of his tradition. There never was very much doubt in anybody's mind about which the masterpieces were. They were the books that had endured and that the common voice of mankind called the finest creations, in writing, of the Western mind.

In the course of history, from epoch to epoch, new books have been written that have won their place in the list. Books once thought entitled to belong to it have been superseded; and this process of change will continue as long as men can think and write. It is the task of every generation to reassess the tradition in which it lives, to discard what it cannot use, and to bring into context with the distant and intermediate past the most recent contributions to the Great Conversation. This set of books is the result of an attempt to reappraise and re-embody the tradition of the West for our generation.

The Editors do not believe that any of the social and political changes that have taken place in the last fifty years, or any that now seem imminent, have invalidated or can invalidate the tradition or make it irrelevant for modern men. On the contrary, they are convinced that the West needs to recapture and re-emphasize and bring to bear upon its present problems the wisdom that lies in the works of its greatest thinkers and in the discussion that they have carried on.

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quaint productions of primitive peoples. We have not thought of providing our readers with hours of relaxation or with an escape from the dreadful cares that are the lot of every man in the second half of the twentieth century after Christ. We are as concerned as anybody else at the headlong plunge into the abyss that Western civilization seems to be taking. We believe that the voices that may recall the West to sanity are those which have taken part in the Great Conversation. We want them to be heard again—not because we want to go back to antiquity, or the Middle Ages, or the Renaissance, or the Eighteenth Century. We are quite aware that we do not live in any time but the present, and, distressing as the present is, we would not care to live in any other time if we could. We want the voices of the Great Conversation to be heard again because we think they may help us to learn to live better now.

We believe that in the passage of time the neglect of these books in the twentieth century will be regarded as an aberration, and not, as it is sometimes called today, a sign of progress. We think that progress, and progress in education in particular, depends on the incorporation of the ideas and images included in this set in the daily lives of all of us, from childhood through old age. In this view the disappearance of great books from education and from the reading of adults constitutes a calamity. In this view education in the West has been steadily deteriorating; the rising generation has been deprived of its birthright; the mess of pottage it has received in exchange has not been nutritious; adults have come to lead lives comparatively rich in material comforts and very poor in moral, intellectual, and spiritual tone.

We do not think that these books will solve all our problems. We do not think that they are the only books worth reading. We think that these books shed some light on all our basic problems, and that it is folly to do without any light we can get. We think that these books show the origins of many of our most serious difficulties. We think that the spirit they represent and the habit of mind they teach are more necessary today

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important that is said in any field and can see and use the light that it sheds upon his own. The liberally educated man is at home in the world of ideas and in the world of practical affairs, too, because he understands the relation of the two. He may not be at home in the world of practical affairs in the sense of liking the life he finds about him; but he will be at home in that world in the sense that he understands it. He may even derive from his liberal education some conception of the difference between a bad world and a good one and some notion of the ways in which one might be turned into the other.

The method of liberal education is the liberal arts, and the result of liberal education is discipline in those arts. The liberal artist learns to read, write, speak, listen, understand, and think. He learns to reckon, measure, and manipulate matter, quantity, and motion in order to predict, produce, and exchange. As we live in the tradition, whether we know it or not, so we are all liberal artists, whether we know it or not. We all practice the liberal arts, well or badly, all the time every day. As we should understand the tradition as well as we can in order to understand ourselves, so we should be as good liberal artists as we can in order to become as fully human as we can.

The liberal arts are not merely indispensable; they are unavoidable. Nobody can decide for himself whether he is going to be a human being. The only question open to him is whether he will be an ignorant, undeveloped one or one who has sought to reach the highest point he is capable of attaining. The question, in short, is whether he will be a poor liberal artist or a good one.

The tradition of the West in education is the tradition of the liberal arts. Until very recently nobody took seriously the suggestion that there could be any other ideal. The educational ideas of John Locke, for example, which were directed to the preparation of the pupil to fit conveniently into the social and economic environment in which he found himself,

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the education of free men. Other types of education or training treat men as means to some other end, or are at best concerned with the means of life, with earning a living, and not with its ends.

The substance of liberal education appears to consist in the recognition of basic problems, in knowledge of distinctions and interrelations in subject matter, and in the comprehension of ideas.

Liberal education seeks to clarify the basic problems and to understand the way in which one problem bears upon another. It strives for a grasp of the methods by which solutions can be reached and the formulation of standards for testing solutions proposed. The liberally educated man understands, for example, the relation between the problem of the immortality of the soul and the problem of the best form of government; he understands that the one problem cannot be solved by the same method as the other, and that the test that he will have to bring to bear upon solutions proposed differs from one problem to the other.

The liberally educated man understands, by understanding the distinctions and interrelations of the basic fields of subject matter, the differences and connections between poetry and history, science and philosophy, theoretical and practical science; he understands that the same methods cannot be applied in all these fields; he knows the methods appropriate to each.

The liberally educated man comprehends the ideas that are relevant to the basic problems and that operate in the basic fields of subject matter. He knows what is meant by soul, state, God, beauty, and by the other terms that are basic to the discussion of fundamental issues. He has some notion of the insights that these ideas, singly or in combination, provide concerning human experience.

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Though we do not recommend great books as a panacea for our ills, we must admit that we have an exceedingly high opinion of them as an educational instrument. We think of them as the best educational instrument for young people and adults today. By this we do not mean that this particular set is the last word that can be said on the subject. We may have made errors of selection. We hope that this collection may some day be revised in the light of the criticism it will receive. But the idea that liberal education is the education that everybody ought to have, and that the best way to a liberal education in the West is through the greatest works the West has produced, is still, in our view, the best educational idea there is.

Since the set was conceived of as a great conversation, it is obvious that the books could not have been chosen with any dogma or even with any point of view in mind. In a conversation that has gone on for twenty-five centuries, all dogmas and points of view appear. Here are the great errors as well as the great truths. The reader has to determine which are the errors and which the truths. The task of interpretation and conclusion is his. This is the machinery and life of the Western tradition in the hands of free men.

The conversation presented in this set is peculiar to the West. We believe that everybody, Westerners and Easterners, should understand it, not because it is better than anything the East can show, but because it is important to understand the West. We hope that editors who understand the tradition of the East will do for that part of the world what we have attempted for our own tradition in *Great Books of the Western World* and the *Syntopicon*. With that task accomplished for both

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the West and the East, it should be possible to put together the common elements in the traditions and to present Great Books of the World. Few things could do as much to advance the unity of mankind.

The Tradition of the West

The tradition of the West is embodied in the Great Conversation that began in the dawn of history and that continues to the present day. Whatever the merits of other civilizations in other respects, no civilization is like that of the West in this respect. No other civilization can claim that its defining characteristic is a dialogue of this sort. No dialogue in any other civilization can compare with that of the West in the number of great works of the mind that have contributed to this dialogue. The goal toward which Western society moves is the Civilization of the Dialogue. The spirit of Western civilization is the spirit of inquiry. Its dominant element is the *Logos*. Nothing is to remain undiscussed. Everybody is to speak his mind. No proposition is to be left unexamined. The exchange of ideas is held to be the path to the realization of the potentialities of the race.

At a time when the West is most often represented by its friends as the source of that technology for which the whole world yearns and by its enemies as the fountainhead of selfishness and greed, it is worth remarking that, though both elements can be found in the Great Conversation, the Western ideal is not one or the other strand in the Conversation, but the Conversation itself. It would be an exaggeration to say that Western civilization means these books. The exaggeration would lie in the omission of the plastic arts and music, which have quite as important a part in Western civilization as the great productions included in this set. But to the extent to which books can present the idea of a civilization, the idea of Western civilization is here presented.

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These books are the means of understanding our society and ourselves. They contain the great ideas that dominate us without our knowing it. There is no comparable repository of our tradition.

To put an end to the spirit of inquiry that has characterized the West it is not necessary to burn the books. All we have to do is to leave them unread for a few generations. On the other hand, the revival of interest in these books from time to time throughout history has provided the West with new drive and creativeness. Great books have salvaged, preserved, and transmitted the tradition on many occasions similar to our own.

The books contain not merely the tradition, but also the great exponents of the tradition. Their writings are models of the fine and liberal arts. They hold before us what Whitehead called "the habitual vision of greatness." These books have endured because men in every era have been lifted beyond themselves by the inspiration of their example. Sir Richard Livingstone said: "We are tied down, all our days and for the greater part of our days, to the commonplace. That is where contact with great thinkers, great literature helps. In their company we are still in the ordinary world, but it is the ordinary world transfigured and seen through the eyes of wisdom and genius. And some of their vision becomes our own."

Until very recently these books have been central in education in the West. They were the principal instrument of liberal education, the education that men acquired as an end in itself, for no other purpose than that it would help them to be men, to lead human lives, and better lives than they would otherwise be able to lead.

The aim of liberal education is human excellence, both private and public (for man is a political animal). Its object is the excellence of man as man and man as citizen. It regards man as an end, not as a means; and it regards the ends of life, and not the means to it. For this reason it is

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