



# Connected Learning

## Learning and Ignorance

September 14, 2020

This anthology has been prepared in draft form for use in a special seminar curriculum and are provided for private, non-commercial use in extraordinary times. Additional information about the seminar and this volume is available from The Aspen Institute, 2300 N Street NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20037.

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## Other resources,

including daily meditations, periodic podcasts, on-line seminars and discussions, and occasional on-line conversations about this week's curriculum, are available at:

[aspeninstitute.org/programs/executive-leadership-development/resources-for-living-and-leading/](https://aspeninstitute.org/programs/executive-leadership-development/resources-for-living-and-leading/)

# How to Use this Curriculum

**Connected Learning in Times of Confinement is designed to support people and their families, neighborhoods, organizations, and networks by building upon the Aspen Institute's unique expertise in facilitating meaningful conversations in a seminar setting.**

We envisage a weekly curriculum that can be used in pieces, or all at once, or in various combinations. Our hope is that these readings and guidance will allow you and others to reflect on fundamental human questions in ways that nourish our hearts, minds, and fellowship in a time of confinement. A curriculum (from the Latin *currere*, to run) is a path, an exploration, not something to be mastered but an invitation to discovery and wonder. These materials are curated to intrigue and delight you, and we invite you to reflect upon them on your own, and to share them—with family, friends, neighbors, teams, networks. In this, the journey itself is the destination, a call to thought, dialogue, and action.

**In a journey it is often helpful to have a guide, and in this curriculum you will find three guides:**

**First, the authors themselves—**

we do not need to follow the authors, but we do well to understand what they are saying;

**Second, guiding questions—**

for each reading, there is a set of guiding questions designed for individual and collective reflection; they are not the only (or even most important) questions, but a way of getting started; these may be found at the back of the packet and are best read after you have read the texts;

**Third, general guidance—**

for each discussion, participants and discussion leaders may want to remind themselves of some best practices; these may be found at the back of this packet.

We invite you to share these readings widely and encourage others to engage in conversation. As you do so, know that fellow seminar graduates and their families, friends, and colleagues are doing the same. We all contribute to a global chorus of conversation about ideas worth sharing and acting upon.

**—Todd Breyfogle, PhD  
Managing Director, Aspen  
Executive Leadership Seminars**

## About Aspen Institute Seminars

The Aspen Institute Executive Leadership Seminars Department drives change through reflection, dialogue, and action in service of a more free, just, and equitable society. We do this by: curating brave spaces of shared meaning which help people become more self-aware, more self-correcting, and more self-fulfilling; deepening participants' humane sensibilities and capacities for moral judgment through an examination of the humanistic traditions; establishing meaningful connections among diverse people and organizations in service of a better society.

For more information, including information about customized programs for companies and other organizations, please contact Kalissa Hendrickson, PhD, Director, at [Kalissa.Hendrickson@aspennst.org](mailto:Kalissa.Hendrickson@aspennst.org) or 202-736-3586. [Learn more.](#)

# Philosophical Basis

The Aspen Institute starts from an act of faith in the humanistic tradition: one must be reflective in order to insure that all human activity – political, scientific, economic, intellectual or artistic – will serve the needs of human beings and enrich and deepen their lives.

The Institute believes in the value both of the “Great Ideas” of the past as well as the importance of the sometimes inelegant and highly controversial ideas of the present.

The Institute is dedicated to the fundamental educational value of dialogue for mature men and women from different nations and cultures -- intercommunications between people of comparable competence from various backgrounds and specialized fields of experience.

The Aspen idea recognizes that the processes by which persons learn and develop or change their ideas are not mechanical or even purely rational. As there is a mystery at the edge of human thought, so there is a magic about human relationships, and the magic we attempt to invoke in Aspen is that of the sheer beauty of this area of the Rocky Mountains.

With Erasmus, we hold that “nothing human is alien” to the inquiring purposes of the Aspen Institute. The Institute intends to be, in sum, a place of excellence and excitement where men and women of the finest qualities of mind and spirit from all walks of life in the United States and abroad can meet to learn from one another through serious discussion of and work on significant problems facing society and the greatest ideas which have been expressed throughout history and today concerning these problems.

—J. E. Slater, President, The Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, 1972

# Reading

- 5 **Martin Luther King, Jr., "On Education"**
- 7 **Chuang Tzu, "The Woodcarver"**

# On Education

by Martin Luther King, Jr.  
(1929–1968)

<sup>1</sup> Writing in the campus newspaper, the *Maroon Tiger*, King argues that education has both a utilitarian and a moral function. Citing the example of Georgia's former governor Eugene Talmadge, he asserts that reasoning ability is not enough. He insists that character and moral development are necessary to give the critical intellect humane purposes. King,  
<sup>5</sup> Sr., later recalled that his son told him, "Talmadge has a Phi Beta Kappa key, can you believe that? What did he use all that precious knowledge for? To accomplish what?"

As I engage in the so-called "bull sessions" around and about the school, I too often find that most college men have a misconception of the purpose of  
<sup>10</sup> education. Most of the "brethren" think that education should equip them with the proper instruments of exploitation so that they can forever trample over the masses. Still others think that education should furnish them with noble ends rather than means to an end.

It seems to me that education has a two-fold function to perform in the  
<sup>15</sup> life of man and in society: the one is utility and the other is culture. Education must enable a man to become more efficient, to achieve with increasing facility the legitimate goals of his life.

Education must also train one for quick, resolute and effective thinking. To think incisively and to think for one's self is very difficult. We are prone to  
<sup>20</sup> let our mental life become invaded by legions of half truths, prejudices, and propaganda. At this point, I often wonder whether or not education is fulfilling its purpose. A great majority of the so-called educated people do not think logically and scientifically. Even the press, the classroom, the platform, and the pulpit in many instances do not give us objective and unbiased truths. To save man from  
<sup>25</sup> the morass of propaganda, in my opinion, is one of the chief aims of education. Education must enable one to sift and weigh evidence, to discern the true from the false, the real from the unreal, and the facts from the fiction.

The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. But education which stops with efficiency may prove the  
<sup>30</sup> greatest menace to society. The most dangerous criminal may be the man gifted with reason, but with no morals.

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From Martin Luther King, Jr. "The Purpose of Education" Originally published in the Morehouse College *Maroon Tiger* (January-February 1947): 10. Available online as part of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project, Stanford University: [http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document\\_images/Vol01Scans/123\\_Jan-Feb1947\\_The%20Purpose%20of%20](http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/Vol01Scans/123_Jan-Feb1947_The%20Purpose%20of%20)

1           The late Eugene Talmadge, in my opinion, possessed one of the better  
minds of Georgia, or even America. Moreover, he wore the Phi Beta Kappa key.  
By all measuring rods, Mr. Talmadge could think critically and intensively; yet he  
contends that I am an inferior being. Are those the types of men we call educated?

5           We must remember that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus  
character—that is the goal of true education. The complete education gives one  
not only power of concentration, but worthy objectives upon which to concentrate.  
The broad education will, therefore, transmit to one not only the accumulated  
knowledge of the race but also the accumulated experience of social living.

10          If we are not careful, our colleges will produce a group of close-minded,  
unscientific, illogical propagandists, consumed with immoral acts. Be careful,  
“brethren!” Be careful, teachers!

## NOTES

1.           In 1925, the *Maroon Tiger* succeeded the *Athenaeum* as the campus literary journal at Morehouse. In the first semester of the 1947-1948 academic year, it won a First Class Honor Rating from the Associated Collegiate Press at the University of Minnesota. The faculty adviser to the *Maroon Tiger* was King’s English professor, Gladstone Lewis Chandler. King’s “The Purpose of Education” was published with a companion piece, “English Majors All?” by a fellow student, William G. Pickens. Among the many prominent black academicians and journalists who served an apprenticeship on the *Maroon Tiger* staff are Lerone Bennett, Jr., editor of *Ebony*; Brailsford R. Brazeal, dean of Morehouse College; S. W. Garlington, city editor of New York’s *Amsterdam News*; Hugh Gloster, president of Morehouse College; Emory O. Jackson, editor of the *Birmingham World*; Robert E. Johnson, editor of *Jet*; King D. Reddick of the *New York Age*; Ira De A. Reid, chair of the Sociology Department at Atlanta University; and C. A. Scott, editor and general manager of the *Atlanta Daily World*. See *The Morehouse Alumnus*, July 1948, pp. 15-16; and Edward A. Jones, *A Candle in the Dark: A History of Morehouse College* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1967), pp. 174, 260, 289-292.

2.           Martin Luther King, Sr., with Clayton Riley, *Daddy King: An Autobiography* (New York: William Morrow, 1980), p. 143. In an unpublished autobiographical statement, King, Sr., remembered meeting between governor Eugene Talmadge and a committee of blacks concerning the imposition of the death penalty on a young black man for making improper remarks to a white woman. King, Sr., reported that Talmadge “sent us away humiliated, frustrated, insulted, and without hope of redress” (“The Autobiography of Daddy King as Told to Edward A. Jones” [n.d.], p. 40; copy in CKFC). Six months before the publication of King’s article, Georgia’s race-baiting former governor Eugene Talmadge had declared in the midst of his campaign for a new term as governor that “the only issue in this race is White Supremacy.” On 12 November, the black General Missionary Baptist Convention of Georgia designated his inauguration date, 9 January 1947, as a day of prayer. Talmadge died three weeks before his inauguration. See William Anderson, *The Wild Man from Sugar Creek: The Political Career of Eugene Talmadge* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975), pp. 226-237; Hugh Clinton Griffis, “Ethnic Culture and the Political Thought of Georgia’s Politician-Editors: Tom Watson, Eugene Talmadge, and Roy Harris” (M.A. thesis, Emory University, 1978), p. 63; Joseph L. Bernd, “White Supremacy and the Disfranchisement of Blacks in Georgia, 1946,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 66 (Winter 1982): 492-501; Calvin McLeod Logue, *Eugene Talmadge: Rhetoric and Response* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1989), pp. 213-229, 279-284; Clarence M. Wagner, *Profiles of Black Georgia Baptists* (Atlanta: Bennett Brothers, 1980), p. 104; and Benjamin E. Mays, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), pp. 221-223.



# The Woodcarver

by Chuang Tzu

(c. 369 BCE – c. 286 BCE)

1 Khing, the master carver, made a bell stand  
Of precious wood. When it was finished,  
All who saw it were astounded. They said it must be  
The work of spirits.

5 The Prince of Lu said to the master carver:  
“What is your secret?”

Khing replied, “I am only a workman:  
I have no secret. There is only this:

10 When I began to think about the work you commanded  
I guarded my spirit, did not expend it  
On trifles, that were not to the point.  
I fasted in order to set My heart at rest.

15 “After three days fasting,  
I had forgotten gain and success.  
After five days  
I had forgotten praise or criticism.  
After seven days  
20 I had forgotten my body  
With all its limbs.

“By this time all thought of your Highness  
And of the court had faded away.

25 All that might distract me from the work  
Had vanished.  
I was collected in the single thought  
Of the bell stand.

1 “Then I went to the forest  
To see the trees in their own natural state.  
When the right tree appeared before my eyes,  
The bell stand also appeared in it, clearly, beyond doubt.  
5 All I had to do was put forth my hand  
And begin.

“If I had not met this particular tree  
There would have been  
10 No bell stand at all.

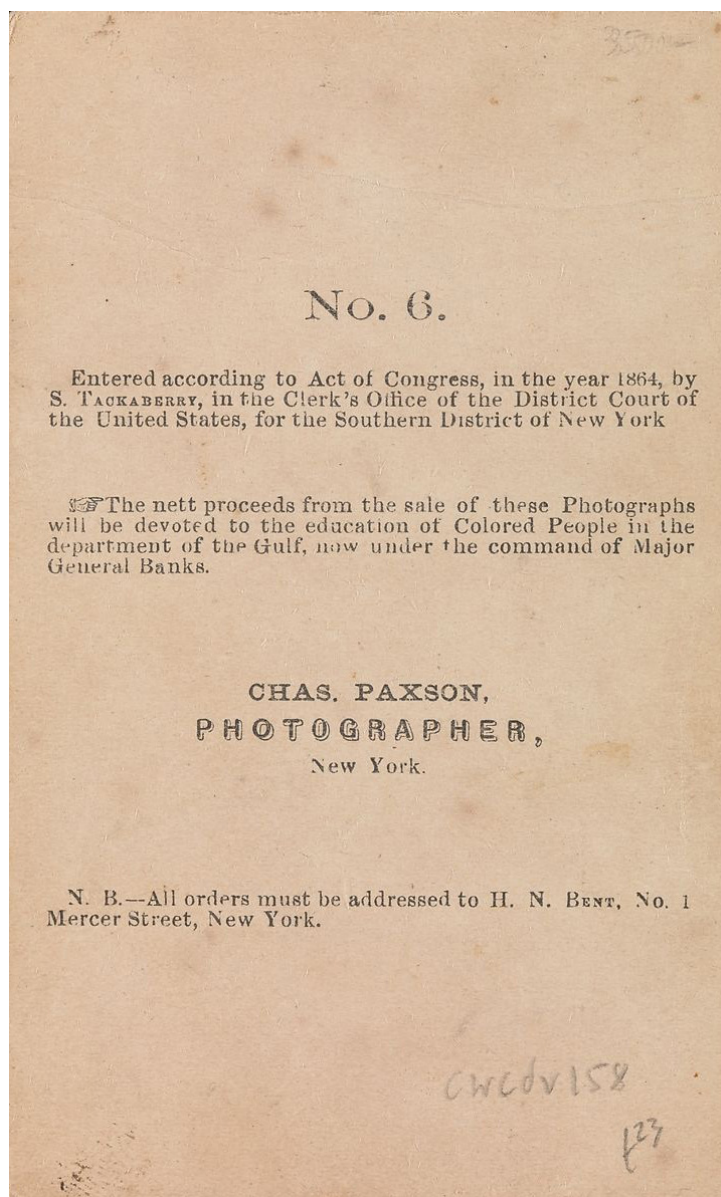
“What happened?  
My own collected thought  
Encountered the hidden potential in the wood;  
15 From this live encounter came the work  
Which you ascribe to the spirits.”

# Image of the Week (A)



**Charles Paxson, *Learning is Wealth*  
(Wilson, Charley, Rebecca and Rosa. Slaves in New Orleans), 1863–1864  
(front)**

# Image of the Week (B)



**Charles Paxson, *Learning is Wealth*  
(Wilson, Charley, Rebecca and Rosa. Slaves in New Orleans), 1863–1864  
(back)**

# Guiding Questions

**The best questions arise from careful listening (to the author, oneself, and others), and from the spontaneity of wonder**

## **Martin Luther King, Jr., "On Education"**

- How does King describe the "two-fold" purpose of education?
- What misconceptions of education does King identify?
- What is King's diagnosis of the "mental life" of his contemporaries? Does his assessment still ring true? In what ways?
- What might ignorance look like to King?
- "Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education." What does this mean for King? What does this mean for you?

## **Chuang Tzu, "The Woodcarver"**

- Read the poem aloud: What words, images, and/or feelings does the poem evoke in you?
- What is the master carver's secret?
- Is this a story about learning or ignorance?
- In what ways is unlearning things essential to learning?
- Would Chuang Tzu agree with King's definition of the purpose of education? Why? Why not?

## **Charles Paxson, *Learning is Wealth***

- Set a timer and look at the image for 3 minutes: What do you see? What feelings does the image evoke?
- What story or narrative do you find yourself inventing as a way of making sense of the image? What is going on here?
- How are we to understand the title: "Learning is Wealth"? And the title: "Slaves from New Orleans"?
- Is learning wealth?

## **General questions for the week**

- What kind of education best accomplishes "intelligence plus character"?
- Is education the great equalizer?
- Is ignorance the great vice?
- Why might education generate intelligence but not character?
- What do you prize in your own education? What did your education not provide you?
- How do you approach those whom you deem ignorant?

# Notes



# Short Guide to Leading a Discussion

## General Principles for Participants

- Read the text(s) to be discussed in their entirety (ideally twice)
- Make notes about what you understand, don't understand, agree or disagree with
- Focus comments and conversation on the ideas expressed in the shared text(s), not on outside
- knowledge
- Seek to understand your fellow participants, not to persuade them
- Be freely authentic and morally present
- Listen to the text, to others, and to yourself

## General principles for discussion leaders:

- Hold the space for honesty and vulnerability: be honest and vulnerable yourself
- Ask questions, don't teach: the aim is shared understanding and meaning, not agreement
- Be attached to the conversation: avoid rigidly following your planned order of questions
- Make sure every voice is heard: don't move too quickly to fill the silence
- Start and end on time: end not with conclusions but with questions you're taking away

## Format:

- Match the texts to the time allotted (*Each text can productively stimulate 20-40 minutes of discussion, and can be read discussed individually or together in one sitting, depending on the time available; it is better to end with more to be said, rather than straining to fill the time*)
- Begin with introductions:
  - name (if not everyone is well known to one another)

- what is on your heart and mind?
- the person speaking chooses the next person
- Set the frame:
  - remind participants to enjoy the gift of time and conversation by avoiding other
  - distractions
  - revisit the key general principles above
- It always helps to read a passage aloud
- Layer your questions: be patient, each layer builds upon the next
  - What does the text say? (sometimes we read the same thing different ways)
  - What does the text mean? (sometimes we interpret the text differently)
  - What does the text mean to me? (sometimes we apply the texts to ourselves differently)
  - What does the text mean for us? (we may have different understandings of what the text means for living in community)
  - What does the text mean for society? (we may have different approaches to what the text implies for action in society)

## Some helpful tips to keep the conversation going (for discussion leaders and participants):

- "say more about that"
- "where do you see that in the text?"
- "how is that related to what N said earlier?"
- "do you think that's true?"
- "do others see it the same way?"
- "what did you see in the text that we haven't addressed?"



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