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The Meaning
of ADULT
EDUCATION

by Eduard C.
Lindeman

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Social Discovery*

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**THE MEANING OF
ADULT EDUCATION**

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To
ALFRED DWIGHT SHEFFIELD

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FOREWORD

FOREWORD

"EACH of us," wrote Anatole France, "must even be allowed to possess two or three philosophies at the same time," for the purpose, I presume, of saving our thought from the deadly formality of consistency. No one can write about education, particularly adult education, without deserting at various points all "schools" of pedagogy, psychology and philosophy. Incongruities are obvious: one cannot, for example, be a determinist and at the same time advocate education; nor can idealism be made to fit the actualities of life without recognition of the material limitations which surround living organisms. One cannot, that is, make use of these opposed points of view if they are conceived to be mutually-exclusive. But it is pre-

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cisely because I do not so regard them that all are included in this essay. Light comes from learning—just as creation comes everywhere—through integrations, syntheses, not through exclusions.

The essay which follows will be best understood in the light of personal experience. My formal education began at the age of twenty-one—after I had spent twelve years in various occupations and industries. I could, of course, speak the English language (at least, the Americanized version which workers used) but it was not my natural medium of communication. My initiation to formal education was, next to the unsuccessful attempt to adjust myself to automatic machines, the most perplexing and baffling experience of my existence. The desire somehow to free education from stifling ritual, formalism and institutionalism was probably

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born in those frantic hours spent over books which mystified and confused my mind. I had already earned my way in the world from the age of nine, had learned the ship-building trade, had participated in strikes, and somehow none of the learning I was asked to do seemed to bear even the remotest relation to my experience. Out of this confusion worse confounded (confounded confusion, some one has called it) grew the hope that some day education might be brought out of college halls and into the lives of the people who do the work of the world. Later I came to see that these very people who perform productive tasks were themselves creating the experience out of which education might emerge.

In 1920 I visited Denmark, not primarily to study education but to pick up lost ancestral threads—a quest which arose from my dislo-

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cated youth. Here I came into contact with a civilization which, by sheer contrast with hate-ridden Europe, seemed like a cultural oasis in the desert of nationalism. Whereas the victorious nations were grasping for territory, Danish statesmen were conducting a scientific study to determine how much of Schleswig-Holstein might be regarded as being integral to Denmark. All of it was within their reach, for Germany was incapable of making effective protest even through the doubtful means of plebiscites; they, the Danes, wanted not what overheated nationalism might have demanded but merely what scientific research could validate. And then I saw farmers studying in peoples' colleges (Volkshochschulen), studying for the purposes of making life more interesting; these same farmers were members of comprehensive coöperative enterprises—dairies, creameries,

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cheese-factories, egg-shipping associations, slaughtering-plants, banks, stores, insurance societies, et cetera—enterprises which performed so many economic functions that the farmers were freed for other activities; and there could be found neither wealth nor poverty in the land.¹ Here, it seemed to me, was a culture which included many of the attributes which have been desired since the time of the early Greeks; besides, it was founded upon rigorous science and a degree of economic freedom—both of which were absent in Greek culture.

Beneath the easily-recognizable distinctions in Danish life—collective economic organization, interest in literature, art and recreation, absence of imperialism, et cetera—one finds an educational ferment such as motivates no other people in the modern world. Since the days of Grundtvig, which were also the days of Den-

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mark's material and spiritual impotence, Danish adults have striven to close "the yawning abyss between life and enlightenment." "What the enemy has taken from us by force from without, we must regain by education from within," they said and forthwith laid the foundations for a system of education which continues so long as life lasts. Adult education, one begins to learn after prolonged observation, has not merely changed citizens from illiteracy to literacy; it has rebuilt the total structure of life's values.

Can adult education do as much for us? Our situation is, obviously, out of range of comparison: we are a large nation in area and in population; we possess no homogeneous culture; and we have already become wealthy. In addition, we have become habituated to a method of achievement which is in essence antithetical to intelligence. We measure results

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quantitatively. We could have an adult education movement in America almost overnight; advertising psychologists and super-salesmen could "put it over" for us for a cash consideration. But, what gets "put over" never stays "put." The chief danger which confronts adult education lies in the possibility that we may "Americanize" it before we understand its meaning.

I have therefore chosen the theme: *The Meaning of Adult Education*. The topic is, obviously, preliminary. We shall discover *our* meanings when we are engaged in the process of adult education, not in advance. My treatment of the theme is also partial since I have, following the advice of Walt Whitman, "let myself go free." The material which composes this essay has been brewing for years but it has been formulated within a short space of time—

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short, that is, for one who is accustomed to aim at accuracy of statement. It goes forth, not primarily to explain and convince, but to challenge. I trust that proper credit has been given to those whose thought has stimulated mine.

"Greystone"

High Bridge,

New Jersey.

August, 1926.