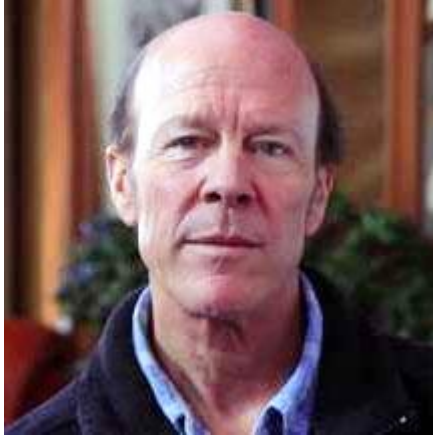


Living up to the ‘Aspen Idea’

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ASPEN – As ideas are being launched like cottonwood seeds into the thin mountain air during the Ideas Festival, credit must be given to the founding idea of Aspen and the *raison d’être* for the Aspen Institute.

Mortimer Adler, the Institute’s resident philosopher of half a century ago, said that two competing triads are at work in Aspen. One is the Machiavellian triad of money/fame/power. The other is the Platonic triad of the good/the true/the beautiful.

Life choices in Aspen determine which triad touches you most. Take a look around Aspen and you may conclude that many align themselves on the Machiavellian side. Others aspire, not so visibly, to the Platonic. Regardless of one’s chosen triad, most people who live in Aspen revel in a self-realized paradise of nature, arts, music and ideas.

These cultural riches are the work of another triad, one that is defined by life choices available to anyone with a discerning mind, an open heart, and a seeking spirit. This triad – the “Aspen Idea” – is both readily accessible and damnably elusive.

The Aspen Idea describes the integration of body/mind/spirit – the nurturing of the whole person – and it came to the fore in the earliest beginnings of the Aspen Institute. To label this triad with the Aspen brand is an historical conceit, but the Aspen Idea stands as the organizing principle underpinning the cultural and philosophic heart of this old silver mining town. It shines as the brightest nugget among the gilt and rhinestones for which Aspen is sometimes dismissed and often disparaged.

If you look at material wealth as a burden, then Aspen is an invitation to seek higher planes. Living the Aspen Idea can mean shrugging off the mantle of prestige and self-absorption and embracing the more egalitarian virtues that define humanism. Taking on the Aspen Idea can start tomorrow, when you wake in the morning and you celebrate a day in the mountains.

The first order of business is the body. Feed it with healthy food. Infuse it with clean air and pure water. Hone it with exercise. Improve it with sensory awareness. Celebrate its beauty. Feel its vitality. Let your body take you far into the mountains where nature is embodiment of your church, your cathedral, your solace. Give the body good rest. You need this body, and it needs you. Living harmoniously with it is the most personal partnership you'll ever have.

On to the mind. Challenge it with ideas. Focus it by thinking. Test it against other minds, contrary whenever possible. Work it like a muscle. Stretch it beyond its comfortable limits. Open it without fear. Fill it with substance. Discipline it with the pleasures of learning. Keep it limber and agile. Actively energize it. Never waste it on junk.

Spirit offers the greatest challenge. Most of us can't quite define it. I call it the ethereal, abstract other. Some call it essence. You can't touch spirit, except with emotional force and sensory inputs. Spirit is pervasive. It envelops us. We can enrich it with receptivity. Like a radio receiver picking up invisible signals, our spirits are in constant contact with impulses far beyond our ken. We just need to tune them in.

Spirit is enriched through positive choices. A healthy spirit goes beyond well-being into the stratosphere of euphoria and rapture. Spirit needs peace, quiet, contemplation, fulfillment, love. Spirit is elevated by our sense of self and the roles we play in the world. Spirit is the aggregate of everything we do and think. Spirit defines us, in totality.

Living the Aspen Idea should be purposeful, filled with high intent. The Aspen Idea is ultimately communal. As Goethe wrote: "Since we are so miraculously met, let us not lead trivial lives." Human interactions are gifts that should be honored and elevated. Every meeting is an opportunity. Every contact is meaningful. This is what Robert Maynard Hutchins meant by "The Great Conversation."

Mortimer Adler once referred to Aspen as the "Athens of the West." To him and his peers, Aspen was a "culturstaat" or culture state. Albert Schweitzer, upon his visit here in 1949, said "Aspen is a little too close to heaven." Walter Gropius climbed to 13,000-foot Buckskin Pass and, looking from delicate wildflowers to rugged mountain peaks, exulted at the stimulus he felt coursing through his being.

The Aspen Idea can't be packaged. It's not a commodity. The pieces can be provided, but assembly is required, individually. Putting it all together is not about mechanics. It's about

the art of living. Finding the balance that works is not taught, it's intuited. The only requisite is aspiring to personal growth, with a sense of adventure.

Best of all, you don't have to live in Aspen to do it, and you don't need to be rich, either. There's no charge, fee or payment schedule. There's no debt. You write your own contract. You are your own agent. You make the choices that matter.