

HOW TO KEEP FROM LOSING YOUR MIND

Deal W. Hudson

Deal W. Hudson, *How To Keep From Losing Your Mind: Educating Yourself Classically to Resist Cultural Indoctrination* (TAN Books)

What I call losing your mind is not about those moments when you throw up your hands in disgust, it's about losing your mind to a lie. When you buy into a false worldview, such as one that guarantees your happiness, you have made yourself captive and you have lost your freedom. All the big lies of the twentieth century—those of Hitler, Lenin, and Mao—promise a state that will meet all human needs. Once you hand that responsibility over to the state, you've enabled tyranny.

“Wisdom begins in wonder,” Socrates said. The intense desire to understand an incredible sunset or an excruciatingly beautiful passage of music—it is a natural response to something inexplicable, something good, true, or beautiful.

I am one of those who believe, however, that digital technology has diminished our capacity for wonder. Too many of us stay tethered to our electronic devices, through which we have almost unfettered access to the “World Wide Web” and all the information, intrigue, and deception therein. The ease of finding almost anything spoils us. What used to be distant and hard to find is now close at hand.

It is not all bad; indeed, it has many obvious benefits: vast libraries and beautiful performances are accessible on our multiple devices. The world, or at least a particular impression of it, is only a click away. Our children may never know the patience required to find just the right books, magazines, and newspapers for a research project or the

jubilant of finding the rare, the out-of-print, the long-lost work.

Since three-step plans are all the rage these days, I offer my own for the sake of keeping our sanity and freedom. First, I recommend we put technology to good use, to return to the classics. Many classics are now available online free or at a nominal cost. Second, let us set some time aside for leisure and contemplation. Let's adjust our habits of attention so we can read, listen, and watch without distractions. The use of social media and ubiquitous entertainment has shrunk attention spans. Third, let us engage ideas that created our civilization before they are entirely forced out of existence by the iconoclasts and book burners of today. Several generations of students have been taught lies about our civilization and have not read the classics for themselves.

We can pursue self-education because we live in a free society, at least for now. No one is burning books yet, though many of the classics have been eliminated from university curricula by "progressive" university professors. Thus, I don't rule out the possibility of book-burning, or its equivalent, in my lifetime. Fires are unnecessary when robust social media and search engines can prioritize information online and virtually erase those with whom they disagree.

The classic texts, films, or music I highlight are intended for delight and discovery. We begin by discussing what the Canon of Great Works consists of and why such collections became the subject of so much effort and discussion in the last century. I argue that the widely-accepted lists of Great Books would benefit from including now-classic films and musical works in their ongoing conversation, as I believe such dialogue will open up possibilities for new audiences and discoveries. Next, I revisit the movements in the twentieth century that together became an all-out assault on the classics, and indeed on the civilizational memory of the West. Finally, I offer a series of dialogues between great works

within the framework of the “Four Loves,” as determined in antiquity and famously discussed by the great classicist, apologist, and novelist C. S. Lewis.

The goal is not only enjoyment of the works themselves but to recover the first mark of an educated person, his freedom in thinking. I’m not interested in helping you to check classics off a list or better prepare you to “name drop.” I’m not handing out a list of “must-reads,” one of the most annoying phrases of the modern social media-dominated landscape. An educational journey should not feel like a grind or an assignment handed down from above. Classics are classics because they’ve brought joy and understanding to generations over centuries. They are self-recommending and don’t need to be pressed into your hands.

It is a privilege that we live in a society where we are not forbidden access to these treasures. Even thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, there remain countries that censor what is read or seen by their citizens. I grant you that a healthy society would feature “some” censorship, but the kinds of things such a society should censor—I suspect you know what I am referring to here—are heartily consumed in our own.

We have a virtually limitless amount of information at our fingertips. In researching this book, I was astounded at the resources I found on the Internet. A century ago, no one except perhaps Jules Verne and H. G. Wells could have dreamt that the contents of vast libraries would be made available in a person’s hand.

Some habits of thought are inculcated in us by culture czars who insist we see the world from their point of view. These views are often laden with assumptions, usually wrong, about life’s purpose and what is most needed. In some settings, failure to “drink the Kool-Aid” can put you on the firing line. You will not merely be found wrong; you will be judged a

bigot for refusing to accept their worldview, however absurd. A climate of intimidation pervades most public debate found in many of our nation's colleges and universities. Sadly, ideological indoctrination had made its way into K-12 education as well.

Culture is the school we go to every day. I use the word advisedly: "culture," in its original definition, which had to do with veneration in a religious context, is not what we have today. Nor do we have the understanding of culture that shares its root with "cultivate," the act of toiling to grow something, such as crops. No, I use the term in its reduced modern understanding, in which it refers to the massive collection of norms, behaviors, habits, assumptions, arts, entertainment, institutions, and interests that define a place and time. This "culture," we do have, and there is little to be proud of. We would do well to recover the word's original meaning.

If we want to change the culture, we need to remain aware of all the factors that create and sustain it. The most influential factor in shaping society is education, followed closely by media in all its various platforms. Unfortunately, traditional religion plays a relatively small and diminishing role. Thus, the messages, attitudes, and values of those controlling the schools, media, and entertainment industries are the primary sources of modern culture.

Culture is also expressed by our manners, how we dress, and how we communicate, but even these are subject to regulation and manipulation. Strong religious faith and a distinctive family culture are the best antidotes to avoid being another product of cultural expectations. Attention to the classics can help to transform your culture at home.

I dedicate my book to one of my intellectual heroes, Mortimer J. Adler, whose example has served as a lodestar. We became friends, and I was privileged to be the Adler Fellow at the

Aspen Institute for three summers in the early 1990s. As a reader, I had learned from him about how deeply the “great ideas” were rooted in the history of our civilization. I saw that it was his prodigious learning, lightly carried, which enabled him to write simply about these ideas like truth, goodness, beauty, liberty, equality, and justice. Dr. Adler recoiled when anyone called them “simplified”! Anyone who has read Dr. Adler’s books knows that he did not trade truthfulness for clarity. This book grows out of what I learned from Dr. Adler and the conversations we shared.

This book is divided into three parts: Beauty, Truth, and Goodness, three transcendental aspects of being. Each of these represents a different way, or modality, of apprehending everything that exists. Truth is being as the mind knows it. Goodness is that which we rightly desire by the will. Beauty is the splendor of all the transcendentals united, a magnet for the senses and the heart. Wherever you find one of the transcendentals, you find the others as well.

Part 1 is called “Beauty: The Irresistible Canon” because the classics have stood the test of time—they have been irresistible because we learn more from them about ourselves, the lives we lead as human persons. Classics raise questions about how to live well or whether seeking a good life is an obligation we all share. I also respectfully present the benefits of expanding the canon to include both film and classical music: filmmakers and composers have created their own masterpieces of expression and exploration about human experience.

Part 2, “Truth: About Bad Ideas,” begins with reminding the reader of the habits of attention and detachment needed to engage with classics. Classics are demanding. They require detachment from the name-calling and political quarrels of the day’s headlines. Contemplation, not polemics, is needed. I try to unravel postmodern ideas now dominating the academy, education, public discourse, and the media. I argue these

ideas have poisoned the culture by rejecting truth, objective knowledge, and the idea of a shared human nature. With the rejection of objective knowledge, postmodernist arguments rely on power rather than reason or facts.

Part 3, "Goodness: Love Is the Crux," begins by revisiting the classic book by C. S. Lewis *The Four Loves*. Love, in all its forms, is the ground of our moral life. In each of the four chapters, I juxtapose books, film, and music, comparing how each love is expressed and portrayed. Human freedom is crucial to authentic love. A mother naturally loves her child, but she can freely abandon it. Friendships are made freely, and though Eros may feel like being possessed, it requires choice not to be swept along by it. Agape, most of all, requires the freedom of God to give and man to receive.

I wrote this book with a mounting sense of joy as I revisited classics I had not encountered for many years and some I was considering deeply for the first time. If you read it, I hope this book prompts you to start on your own exploration, and I will have been successful.

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