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THE ASPEN IDEA

**ROSALYNN &
JIMMY CARTER**

TAKING ON THE WORLD

IDEAS FEST 2015

OUR STAGE, YOUR IDEAS

**MELODY BARNES &
OPPORTUNITY YOUTH**

AMERICA'S UNTAPPED RESOURCE

ASPEN SEMINARS

TEACHING LEADERS
HOW TO THINK





CIVILITY, LIBERTY, + THE COMMON GOOD

Sixty-Five Years of Aspen Seminars

> Todd Breyfogle

When Walter Paepcke, Robert Maynard Hutchins, and Mortimer Adler set out the “Aspen Idea,” they recognized that our ability to make humane judgments in any area of our lives depended upon the practice of civil discourse—both in organizations and in political institutions. Like Aristotle, they recognized that to live in a city, as citizens, was above all to understand ourselves as *civil* beings: civility, from the Latin *civis* (*civitas* translating the Greek *polis*), is the virtue of being able to live together not by violence or coercion but by deliberation and persuasion. By definition, politics that ceases to be civil ceases to be politics at all.



Ferenc Berko

Walter Paeppcke and Adlai Stevenson

For 65 years the Aspen Institute has been a laboratory where we learn and practice the habits of civility. Perhaps uniquely, the Institute combines expert knowledge with the habits of what Aristotle called “practical wisdom”—rational deliberation and persuasion with an eye to the common good. Whatever group has come together, whether from policy, public, and leadership programs or at a seminar event, becomes—for a moment—a civil association. Participants are able to work together to move from thought to action not necessarily because they agree but because they understand more clearly why they *disagree*.

Each of the nine or ten Executive Seminars on Leadership, Values, and the Good Society held each year gathers fifteen to twenty people from diverse professions and places for a moderated, text-based dialogue over several days. Participants are nominated or selected for their leadership ability, both demonstrated and potential, and are drawn from the corporate sector, civil society, nonprofit organizations, the arts, journalism, government, and the military. Many are senior executives; roughly a third are from outside North America; all are keen to learn from accomplished professionals they would otherwise not likely meet. The seminar complements participants’ expertise by exploring the frameworks of fundamental values that lie behind decision-making. Drawing on excerpts from some of the best minds of past and present—authors from Plato and Aristotle to Martin Luther King and Vaclav Havel—seminar participants test their own and others’ beliefs.



Within a day or two of the start, the group's reflective dialogue shifts from the set speeches of political and professional correctness to a frank engagement in what it means to live a good life in a just society. At issue are our contested notions of democracy, liberty, efficiency, equality, community, justice, transcendence—all complex, easily misunderstood goods. No issue is off the table: race, gender, religion, politics, the existential solitude of making decisions that affect our organizations and our families.

An Aspen seminar aims not at skills training but at two fundamental leadership qualities: self-awareness and self-correction, as Paepcke put it in some of the earliest Executive Seminar materials. Both are habits, not skills—habits that must be nurtured if they are to flourish, habits that are the bedrock not only of genuine leadership but of civility itself. In Aspen seminars, we get beyond the superficial civility of dismissive politeness and acknowledgement of differences to the civility of genuine mutual recognition. Firm common ground comes from understanding common ends and clarifying how we can work together, even if we may disagree about the means to those ends. “Leaving politics aside,” one participant recently remarked to another, “I admire your courage and the values that inform it.”

The late Vaclav Havel wrote that civility can come about only through the “complex, long-term, and never-ending work involving education and self-education.” Paepcke, Hutchins, and Adler understood that the habits of civility could not be taught. But they can be learned—if we give ourselves the space and time to listen, to reflect, and to challenge ourselves and others to pursue the never-ending work of self-education.

Todd Breyfogle is director of seminars for the Aspen Institute.
