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The Joys of Adult Education

From reading Homer to racing Porsches

by Nell Porter Brown

Nearly 30 years after his college graduation, John W. Cobb '49, Gp '94, finally hunkered down to tackle what he'd always wanted to learn: ancient Greek. After burning through many of Harvard's Greek and Latin classes as a special student, he turned to the Harvard Extension School, where he is now employed as an instructor in intermediate classical Greek—at the age of 75. "It certainly does keep the synapses firing," the retired trust banker says. "Teaching is a great way to continue one's education. Taking and teaching classes is also a way to have contact with people who share a common interest. I need the contact of fellow enthusiasts to keep learning."

Cobb is not alone in craving lifelong learning. There has been an explosion in adult education (defined here as learning outside of a formal degree program) during the last two decades, according to The College Board's former Office of Adult Learning Services. "People over the age of 25 are the largest and fastest-growing education sector in the country," says Robert Kegan, Ph.D. '77, Meehan professor of adult learning and professional development at the Graduate School of Education (GSE). Moreover, "the number of formal adult-learning courses that go on within businesses and organizations is itself larger than the entire higher-education enterprise in the United States," he adds. "It's a big boom. It's also the baby-boom generation, who were sold on learning like no other generation. That group, now moving into midlife, is the greatest consumer of learning and opportunities for self-examination in the history of humankind. This represents a kind of evolutionary reconstruction of the relationship between education and the lifespan."

In his 1994 book, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*, Kegan discusses the adult-learning phenomenon. "Over half of all available jobs now require a college education and over half of those studying for undergraduate degrees are now 25 or older. The great majority of students attending our country's community colleges are adults, and the majority of graduate students are over 25," he writes. "To stretch one's mind, to better adjust to new demands in one's private life, to advance in one's job or career, to change jobs or reenter the workforce after one's children are grown or one's marriage has ended, adults go to school."

There is a psychic and emotional component to adult learning that sometimes takes people by surprise. "Most career-oriented people end their graduate studies in their mid 20s," Kegan said in a recent interview. "They have a whole life ahead of them that is not just about new demands, opportunities, and the need for new learning, but about their own continued growth and change—and the need for such change in response to the complexity of the hidden curriculum of adult life. There is a need to support that continuing growth and development the same way in which

we support such development in the young."

The GSE, for example, has a division devoted to professional-education programs. "Continuing education and executive education—which goes on at Harvard to one extent or another at each of the professional schools—is potentially a much greater resource for the overall education community than any of us have yet fully considered," Kegan says about efforts to create a more dynamic relationship among adult and other learners on campus.

Adult learning takes many forms—some more bookish than others. If it *is* academia you miss, the region is loaded with opportunities to study almost any conceivable topic—as John Cobb has found. He has taken at least 10 classes at the Harvard Extension School, which offers about 560 courses annually that include such esoteric content as "Witchcraft, From the Burning Times to the Present," "Sports as Culture in Advanced Industrial Democracies," and "The Psychology of Addiction." Most colleges and universities today offer some type of continuing education. (An extensive list of schools and study-abroad options may be found at www.educationforadults.com, or, for a broader view of course offerings in the Boston area, visit www.boston-online.com/Education/Adult/. See page 28E for more resources.)

If you want to leave the books behind and try arts or craftsmanship, you might find the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Deer Isle, Maine—a beautiful oceanfront compound designed by architect Edward Larrabee Barnes, S. B. '38, M.Arch. '42—ideal for learning about jewelry-making, glass-blowing, quilting, or metalwork. There is even a week-long session on journal-writing. "Haystack is a place that can effect change very efficiently because of where it is and who is there and just the kind of bouillabaisse that gets made there," says Randy Darwall '70, who makes museum-quality hand-woven silk textiles on Cape Cod and has taught at Haystack. "Every two weeks, so many people from so many different places show up. Everyone is so motivated to explore, this ricochet thing happens. A lot of people have changed careers based on their experience at Haystack—it's an amazing place for people who want to pursue what they can do with their hands and minds."

In Vermont, the Frog Hollow Vermont State Craft Center offers students of all levels and ages (children included) year-round classes in three locations: Burlington, Manchester, and Middlebury. Other possibilities include the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and the DeCordova Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts, which boasts the largest non-degree-granting studio-art program in the state. For shorter courses or workshops, check community centers for adult education and local art stores (Paper Source in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for example, has classes in bookbinding, photo transfers, and stamp art).

If you pine for larger-scale architectural projects, like building your own cherry cabinets, or even an entire post-and-beam home, the Yestermorrow Design/Build School in Warren, Vermont, could be the place to start. It offers a wide range of courses, including "Taming the Wild Dovetail," and workshops geared to women. The Heartwood School for the Homebuilding Crafts, housed in an old schoolhouse in Washington, Massachusetts, also teaches timber framing and woodworking. The Center for Furniture Craftsmanship in Rockport, Maine, focuses on furniture, including an intensive three-month session for people considering a career change or who want to take a sabbatical from their jobs. If you want your wood to float, Maine is also home to the WoodenBoat School in Brooklin, where summer courses include marine diesel repair; how to build a dory, skiff, or kayak; and "Ropework—Plain and Fancy." (The school also runs workshops in other parts of the country in the spring and fall.)

Artists and aspiring artists may want to look at programs available at the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health in

Lenox, Massachusetts. There, one can presumably engage the mind, body, and spirit all at once in retreats like "Painting and Yoga in the Berkshires," "Write Your Life," or "The Healing Art of Poem-Making."

Sports, an arguably distant cousin to yoga, may provide more opportunities for adult learning and growth than is immediately apparent. Michael Culver, M.B.A. '80, swears that racing a Porsche 911 GT3 (among others) up to 175 m.p.h. makes him a better businessman. "There's more to racing than jumping in the car and going fast," he says. "It's a great way to do something and not think about anything else. After a race weekend, I come back Monday morning rejuvenated: I'm much more efficient and clearheaded." Racing also provides immediate feedback and teaches precision, timing, focus under pressure, and strategy: "You have to be very good when that green flag drops—just like in business," he explains. "People think you have to be good all the time in business, but really you just have to be good at the right time. When you're making a presentation to analysts, you'd better be good."

A few years after Culver and classmate Aaron Hollander (who flies jets for a hobby) founded First Equity Group in Westport, Connecticut, they celebrated its fledgling success by spending three days at the Skip Barber School of Racing (started by John Barber III '58) in Lakeville, Connecticut. Culver has since become a competitive racer, and the pair were so impressed with the school's potential for corporate entertaining and events that they bought the business in 2001. Now the school is developing a sort of Outward Bound-style racing program to teach corporate employees leadership skills, team-building, and self-esteem. "The racer is alone in the car," Culver says, "but you have a crew of up to 20 people—crew chief, strategist, mechanics, a marketing person" behind every win. (If you are considering hopping into a car, be prepared to shell out up to \$3,500 for the initial three-day instructional session alone.)

If physical—rather than mechanical—fitness is your goal, the Craftsbury Outdoor Center in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom offers adult camps in running and sculling. "It's removed from mainstream life, a sanctuary of sorts," says one past Craftsbury coach: Dan Boyne, Ed.M. '93, now director of recreational rowing at Harvard (and author of *Essential Sculling*). "It's a beautiful setting; you don't see much human habitation. They use a glacial lake [Lake Hosmer] that sits below the treeline. You don't even know it's there when you're driving by. Most of the people who go there are beginners of some sort and three-quarters of the day is taken up with rowing. You don't go up there to shop." The center offers 15 weeks of sculling in the summer, and training for marathons, road races, and triathalons. In the fall and winter, Craftsbury becomes a mountain biking and cross-country ski resort.

Is it a stretch to call such activities adult learning? Some people may think so. "Racing cars is certainly sexy," Kegan concedes. "It takes all those dimensions of being a success at work and gathers them into some compressed and substitute space." It may be more akin to an extracurricular activity—the kind of new interest that many people might pick up in midlife, he adds—and therefore a phenomenon more closely related to personal growth than to traditional classroom education. (As a youngster, Kegan was fascinated with aviation; he became a licensed airplane pilot.) "People are trying to include aspects of themselves they've had to put up on a shelf," he explains. "This is when you might see a highly competitive Wall Street guy take up a contemplative activity, like painting. Adult learning is often an expression of trying to develop underdeveloped parts of oneself."

Resources

The Center for Furniture Craftsmanship, Rockport, Me., 207-594-5611; www.woodschooll.com

Craftsbury Outdoor Center, Craftsbury Common, Vt., 800-729-7751; www.craftsbury.com

DeCordova Museum School, Lincoln, Mass., 781-259-0505; www.decordova.org

Frog Hollow Vermont State Craft Center, Middlebury, Vt., 802-388-4074; www.froghollow.org

Harvard Extension School, Cambridge, 617-495-4024; www.extension.harvard.edu

Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, Me., 207-348-2306; www.haystack-mtn.org

The Heartwood School for Homebuilding Crafts, Washington, Mass., 413-623-6677; www.heartwoodschool.com

Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health, Lenox, Mass., 413-448-3152; www.kripalu.org

ShawGuides Inc., New York City, 212-799-6464; www.shawguides.com

Skip Barber Racing School, Lakeville, Conn., 800-221-1131; www.skipbarber.com

University of New England, Continuing Education, Portland and Biddeford, Me., 207-797-7688, ext. 4412; www.une.edu/oce/

WoodenBoat School, Brooklin, Me., 207-359-4651; www.woodenboat.com

Yestermorrow Design/Build School, Warren, Vt., 888-496-5541; www.yestermorrow.org