

# The Aspen Seminar

The Institute's signature offering draws on its roots and looks toward the future



Early Aspen Seminar participants pose after performing *Antigone*. Original moderator Mortimer Adler is seated, fifth from right.

By Jamie Miller

Soon after the Institute was founded in 1950, one program quickly emerged as its backbone: the Executive Seminar. A two-week-long, intensive series of readings-based discussions of the “Great Ideas” of Western thought, it brought together groups of American business leaders to consider how they might apply the wisdom of the ages to their own work and lives. Today, the same program — recently renamed the Aspen Seminar to reflect its centrality to the Institute’s mission — has trained its sights even more acutely on the need for timeless values and enlightened leadership in the 21st century. Reaching back to its roots, the Aspen Seminar has entered the global conversation and is challenging accomplished domestic and international

participants to think more deeply about leadership, values and the good society.

The original Seminar was the brainchild of idealistic Institute founder Walter Paepcke, chairman of the Chicago-based Container Corporation of America, who had become enamored with the University of Chicago’s Great Books seminar (which spawned a national movement) in the 1940s. He used it as the basis for the first Executive Seminar, held in the summer of 1951 for a group of top American executives in Aspen. To Paepcke, the Socratically moderated seminar had a number of purposes. He hoped it would foster the “cross-fertilization of ideas” and that it would improve American society at large by imbuing humanistic values in its decision-makers. He also envisioned the Seminar as an intellectual weapon in the Cold War, helping its businessman-

students become the best possible advocates for democracy by fully understanding its roots.

To help launch the program, Paepcke tapped the formidable leader of the original Great Books seminar, University of Chicago professor Mortimer Adler, who went on to moderate the Seminar for nearly 50 years and became legendary for the intellectual rigor of his sessions as well as his confrontational style. Each seminar’s 20-some participants were assigned some 80 hours of reading beforehand including Aristotle, Plato, St. Augustine, Alexis de Tocqueville, John Locke, and *The Declaration of Independence*. They then spent 14 days in Aspen sparring with Adler and one another and, to complete the experience, performed Sophocles’ classic tragedy *Antigone* (in their best renditions of classical Greek attire).



Over the next two decades, the basic contours of the seminar stayed the same, but its content and the people around its tables began to shift, reflecting the sweeping social changes of the times. The readings were expanded to include both non-Western and more contemporary texts, including Muslim and Buddhist writings and works by Gandhi, Rachel Carson, and Martin Luther King, Jr. The Institute actively recruited women and minorities to join the mix, as well as leaders from fields outside of business, such as academics, journalists, scientists, and artists.

By the late 1970s, the Seminar had become widely revered as a major intellectual force among American leaders, drawing not only top executives but also presidential advisors, labor leaders, social activists, and others. Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun found it so valuable that in 1979 he started the Institute's Justice and Society Program as a more narrowly themed spin-off (see page 50).

In 1982, when Johnson & Johnson recalled Tylenol worldwide after tampered-with pills had killed seven Americans (a move still famous as a model of corporate responsibility), its vice chairman, David E. Collins, had just finished the Executive Seminar and lauded its influence on him. "As the crisis unfolded, we had to identify our principles and priorities, and then develop creative and complex solutions," he later said. "This is exactly the type of thought process that evolves from the Executive Seminar."

Institute vice chair Leonard Lauder, chairman of Estee Lauder Companies, first took the Seminar in 1978. "It changed my life totally. In today's world, values-based leadership is crucial," he says. "Everyone needs the Aspen Seminar to help navigate the future."

Now shorter, at five nights and six days — responding to modern participants' more packed, fast-paced lives — the Seminar experience is more intense and focused than before. "The conversation has a greater sense of urgency," says new Director of Seminars Todd Breyfogle (a Rhodes scholar and an expert on the Great Books movement himself, as well

as a veteran moderator and teacher of philosophy and theology, Breyfogle is a veritable Adler for the 21st century). Under his direction, the essential classic and contemporary texts have remained central — each group still performs the timeless *Antigone* — and Institute EVPs Elliot Gerson and Peter Reiling

have consistently stressed the Seminar as a foundation for thoughtful action in pursuit of a good society. "Leadership would be easy if people were sheep," says Reiling. "But they are not. They have values they hold dear, and they won't follow someone who doesn't take these values into account. This was important enough in past days when leadership was mostly local and domestic. But in these days of global companies and organizations, it is nothing less than critical."

"Its transformative power comes from its several complementary faces," says Breyfogle. "The understanding of others' values to be sure, but also the clarification of one's own values, recognizing the complex tensions in varying conceptions of the good society, the habits of reflection and listening, the challenge always to think and act with reference to a moral compass of concern for others."

Top executives and other established leaders still fill many of the seminar's seats (see end of story for information on how to apply), but over the past decade, a new audience has joined the conversation. In 1998, the Seminar was part of the inspiration for the Henry Crown Fellowship, whose 24-month program for extraordinarily successful young leaders placed it at the core of the four-seminar curriculum. Henry Crown Fellows have in turn been instrumental in developing the dozen-plus similar leadership initiatives that now make up the Aspen Global Leadership Network, each of whose participants takes the clas-



Leaders from all over the world — and from the Institute's global leadership initiatives — now take the Aspen Seminar.

sic Aspen Seminar — whether in Aspen (where most of the leadership fellows do it) or in Cape Town, New Delhi, or Managua. The Aspen Seminar thus stands at the intellectual center of this ever-growing, influential community.

This potent new global audience deeply enriches the Seminars' conversations, says Breyfogle. "It is always fascinating to read and talk about Aristotle's *Ethics*, *The Declaration of Independence*, or Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *Letter From Birmingham City Jail*. But these texts take on a different, new vitality for all of us when participants from around the world add their insights and experience."

And, says Institute President and CEO Walter Isaacson, exposing each and every one of these young leaders to this experience is bound to cause powerful ripples around the world. "These are tremendously accomplished people — CEOs, leaders in media and government — and we are meeting them at an inflection point in their careers," he says. "It is in an increasingly global environment that they're having these important conversations; they're asking questions about these timeless ideas from a global perspective."

This is why, says Breyfogle, the Seminar's potential for positive impact is limitless — a view Paepcke and Adler would certainly share. "We're always better prepared to act if we've had the chance to think deeply about the tough, fundamental questions we face in the company of great minds from the past and present." ♦

For further information or to apply for the Aspen Seminar, visit [www.aspeninstitute.org/AspenSeminar](http://www.aspeninstitute.org/AspenSeminar) or contact Todd Breyfogle at (202) 341-7803 or [todd.breyfogle@aspeninstitute.org](mailto:todd.breyfogle@aspeninstitute.org).



Institute Director of Seminars Todd Breyfogle