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Making the Most of Your Life

THERE IS NO EASY WAY to make the most of your life. Even if you follow the Hedonists in believing that pleasure is the only good, you have to do some work to make the pleasure possible.

The Canadian way of life has as one of its principles the fact of work. One is expected to contribute economically, socially and culturally.

Having mastered the daily routine of living within this pattern, then we add grace notes and go on to fill our lives with personally rewarding projects. These may be in any of six areas: aesthetic, economic, political, social, religious and philosophical. Some persons are successful in linking three or four in their satisfying lives.

Of what does a full life consist? First of all, it requires that you be awake and active. It requires that you stretch your mind muscles so as to grasp and comprehend much that will not force itself upon you. It requires that you see and appreciate beauty. It requires you to stand on your own feet, measuring up to life's demands, while at the same time you bow in awe of life's unexplained mysteries. This adds up to seeing life steadily and seeing it whole.

Obviously then, there is more to making the most of your life than learning the plod and punctuality books by heart. You need to absorb their precepts into your own individuality, tailored to your environment and your purpose in life.

Here is where mottoes and slogans, auto-suggestion and the association of ideas, principles and standards, come in handy. This *Letter* is an attempt to pull together some of the precepts in capsule form.

As you progress from youth to adulthood you will learn to adjust yourself to the circumstances of your new life so that you fit into the total situation. Insofar as you adapt yourself intelligently, you are master of your fate.

The time has come to grow up, and growing up consists in the main of bringing random impulses under control and co-ordinating hit-or-miss activities. The mature world, whether business, professional or tech-

nical, has no use for youths who enter it glorifying infantilism . . . like a small child crying "look at me!" as he jumps off a six-inch high step.

Do not be afraid of getting wrinkles on your face in the process of developing maturity. There is nothing less interesting than a face on which life has written no story. In the ruins of Pompeii the visitor sees a wall painting of Narcissus, the young man who was so enamoured of himself that he could not tear himself away from a pool that reflected his good looks. He had thrown away his past, he ignored what was going on around him, and he gave no thought to the future. A myth-maker tells us that when Narcissus came to the end, and was being ferried over the River Styx, the River of Death, he passed the time gazing over the side of the boat at his reflection.

One needs a sense of proportion, and to learn to command the self one has to live with. Mind-set, whether on self-gratification or some other love, is a state that prevents your making the most of your life.

About being ambitious

When you are seeking personal fulfilment, that is true ambition. You take into account your talent, your tastes and your hopes, the demands of the business or professional or scientific career you want, and you move toward perfecting your ability to meet them. It is remarkable what may be accomplished by plain, homespun capacities governed by an indomitable purpose and common sense.

What is your real, chief and foremost object in life? The vocation you choose will colour your relations with the world. The act of choosing will give you a miniature plan to stimulate and rouse you, to urge you on to desirable action, and to keep you from false paths.

Self-fulfilment does not always mean reaching a lofty height of perfection. The perfection of a tree on a rocky hillside is judged by this: in its environment of soil and climate and molestation by men and animals, it has done all that could be expected of it. The tree may be poverty-stricken, hunger-pinched, tempest-tortured, and stripped of bark, not at all an ideal tree

of its species, but it has prevailed in being the best tree possible under the circumstances.

Ambition to succeed must take account of two things as you enter the world market-place: what have you to offer, and what are you prepared to do to improve the quality of what you offer? During the next thirty years you will sell about seventy thousand hours of your time and energy. What you get for it depends upon a constructive and determined answer to these questions.

How constructive are you? Instead of urging their imagination to produce a high and attainable goal, some people are content to struggle and whine through their days with a dull resentment of what they call their "bad breaks". They are the sort of people who, about to be cast away on a desert island, would select a packing-case full of light novels and cartoon books to keep them company. The constructive person would ask for some blank notebooks and a supply of pencils.

The best in life

A perceptive person discriminates between what the herd approves and what he himself has set his mind upon as being valuable. To such a person most of the pleasures which are run after by mankind are superfluous, or even a trouble and a burden.

Discrimination means to prefer the best. It takes account of what may be, rather than what is. It looks for possibilities. It has learned to scorn mediocrity and things that are shoddy by becoming acquainted with the best. This is easy to do. Whether your interest is in poetry, science or business, there is available to you the opportunity to make yourself familiar with the first-rate of all time.

Everything else in your life is relative to the thing you choose as your measure of success, so let it be nothing small.

When you are striving for money, position, or power, you have many competitors, but when you are developing your own personality so as to get the most out of life you have no outside competition. The chief good you seek is something which is your own, not easily taken from you.

We can add very much to our happiness, said a great German philosopher, by a timely recognition of the simple truth that every man's chief and real existence is in his own skin and not in other people's opinions. We need the courage to be what we are, and to follow the course we have mapped out.

All of this presupposes activity of thought. This is different from gathering scraps of fact or amassing technical detail. It implies the possession of an ideal against which to measure critically the value of things.

A good question to ask once in a while is this: "How close am I to what I should expect to be at this stage?" It brings your thinking to a point. It reminds you that though there is no reason why every man cannot grasp

all the happiness of which he is capable, he has to keep reaching.

The search for happiness

Happiness is an individual thing, made up of work, interests, friendships, the pursuit of an ideal, and health.

A man does not have to go around oozing cheerfulness in order to be a happy man. He may be happy in depth, and that sort of happiness, in the words of Robert Frost, the United States poet, "Will bear some keeping still about." He is enjoying durable satisfactions.

To get the most out of life we need to do our best work, participate in the best sort of leisure activity, and solve our problems in the best way. "Best" in this context means the highest for which our talents equip us. It means more what we put into life than what we loot out of life.

A rich full life cannot be described in terms of money, power and prestige. It cannot be defined as winning notoriety, for glory is only an impassioned name for what is merely our itch to hear ourselves spoken of. John Ruskin, the nineteenth century essayist and lecturer, insisted that to live a full life we must have five qualities similar to those required in good architecture: Unity, the type of divine comprehensiveness; Repose, the type of divine permanence; Symmetry, the type of divine justice; Moderation, the type of government by law, and Infinity, the type of divine incomprehensibility.

There is no place for make-believe in such a life. You are not living through the day to please others or to put on a good show, but to meet your critical self at nightfall. That self takes little account of what the people around you during the day said about you. They are incompetent to judge your compulsions and your purposes, and if your standards are high you need pay no heed to their finicky criticisms.

One thing needed is to avoid the habit of mind in which a man is forever looking for something against which to defend himself, and to face your future with a positive spirit and a confident posture. You must step resolutely from the cloistered life of home and school into the hurly-burly of the working world. Having given your best thought to where the step will lead you, stride out boldly. When Caesar, with a small force of horse and foot, reached the banks of the River Rubicon, he halted to consider the greatness of his enterprise. Then, having weighed the difficulties against the gains, he said to his staff: "Let the die be cast", and led his army across the Rubicon to become master of Rome.

What is character?

All the precepts looked at so far contribute to the building of character. A person of character is one who hates cruelty, despises softness, and detests those

who climb on the shoulders of others. He recognizes the dignity of duty, fairness, sympathy, co-operation, and all the other things that make a decent society possible. He has taste, which is the instinctive and instant preferring of one material object to another without any obvious reason.

These are essential to making the most of life. They imply development of the whole man and the harmonizing of all his parts.

To live a full life you need to score heavily on interests, tapping your energies and your store of qualities through a great variety of outlets. A person who is not wise enough to seek diversity of interests leads a monotonous and thin life, and is subject to the evils of satiety and boredom.

Look around at people who are laggards in business: are they not people who have buried themselves in their immediate occupations? They never give a thought to what they need to know or do so as to ready themselves for the next stage of advancement. They see facts singly or in twos or threes, but their sight becomes blurred and dim when they try to grasp in their rough proportions all the multitude of facts that compose a future situation.

If you are "well-rounded" everything you do will be done with enthusiasm, a sense of values, imaginative thinking, and self-confidence.

Without enthusiasm you are living only half a life, merely "getting by". This most dynamic of human qualities can be pictured as the ideal descended on earth to battle with realities. It is the whole-heartedness that carries you through difficult tasks and routine activities.

Another word for it is "zest", defined by the dictionary as "gusto, something that gives a relish". Having zest means that you are so eager about living that you can hardly wait for morning to get started again. It makes life perpetually fascinating.

Should one of your enthusiasms run into an immovable barrier, call your sense of values to your aid. Here is a chance to test your standards, to put first things first, to give up the lesser good in favour of the greater good. So long as you have not lost the something in your life which is vital to you, continue with your usual zest to do the important things.

Use your imagination

Imaginative thinking is necessary if you are not to be merely a plodder, but you must be able to dream without making dreams your master. Imagination is not a sedative to deaden life, but a force toward a more abundant life. It is the mind's ability to recall past experiences and relate them to new situations in combinations of infinite variety.

Your imagination needs limbering up once in a while. It cannot be ignored for long periods and then called upon in some crisis. The difference between

on-going and routine men is simply this: the successful people have kept their imaginations at work. The flash of inspiration is important, without doubt, but the certainty that it will occur can be increased by enlarging the stock of ideas in your mind upon which imagination has a chance to work. The bright idea, the brain-storm, will come if you have been alert in observing, persevering in examining, and constructive in thinking, looking expectantly for a link between something present and something not yet thought of.

Hold your mind's door open to new ideas, all kinds of them. When a new idea enters, it may seem timid and rough hewn, it needs to be encouraged and to have its jagged edges smoothed. It may be only a small idea, but don't despise it. Look back over the past year and you will find that your truly significant ideas started in a small way, perhaps just as some new slant on something already in your mind.

The highest, most varied and most lasting pleasures are those of the intellect, toying with ideas and building them into new forms such as no one has seen before.

It is said that people who give free scope to this sort of creativity are not conformists, but their difference from other people lies in the realm of the mind and not necessarily of outward appearance. If a man seems out of step with his fellows it may be because, as the social rebel Henry David Thoreau said, "he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away."

This is quite different from indulging in extravagances of appearance or behaviour thought up in some joyous hour. Being strange in your manner or clothes may make you distinguished, but distinguished for what? To cultivate idiosyncrasies may give the impression that you are striving to convey something. Why not strive to *be* something?

Instead of working to increase their individual knowledge and understanding so as to make the most of their lives, some young people attend congresses and parades where they find fault with the lack of attention they are accorded. How can self-indulgence, self-preoccupation and exhibitionism contribute to a full life?

This kind of behaviour is far removed from the self-confidence of the constructive seeker after goodness in life. He knows the difficulties but does not shrink from them; he is not one who leans on others; he is not afraid to face facts; he is not one who has to be pampered at every turn. Our happiness in our endeavour to make the most of our lives depends on what we back ourselves to be and do.

On making friends

Be fastidious in adopting new modes and new friends. They must fit your personality and your ambition.

Everyone needs friends. Joy is empty unless it is shared with someone. Success is valueless unless friends

participate in it. The friendless man recalls the plight of the grand army of Napoleon entering Moscow — for the first time, entering a capital, they found none but themselves to be witnesses of their glory.

The company you keep should be no less worthy than yourself. It should be made up of people who make you feel the roominess of life. Even if you feel more at ease with third-raters, you must not repose there: people of a higher intellectual order must be your companions if you are to fulfil your potentiality.

This is not to say that you must be a climber, a detestable sort of person, but you need to protect your good name and your future against the disrepute of bad or inferior company. And when you have made friends of whose affection and devotion you can be sure, take Shakespeare's advice to heart: "Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel."

The strenuous life

The person in search of a satisfying life does not ask for comfort, but for an opportunity to exercise his abilities. Not everyone is born with a longing for strenuous discomfort in remote places, but everyone who is trying to accomplish something knows that you cannot make the most of your life if you try to exist as a non-participating unit in the life around you.

Indolence is a distressing state. We must be doing something to be happy. Effort and struggle with difficulties are as natural to a man as grubbing in the ground is to a gopher. To have all his wants gratified is intolerable. It is a denial of the abundant life.

We recall the address by Theodore Roosevelt in the closing year of the nineteenth century. It was called "The Strenuous Life", and even then, when the affluent century had not yet dawned, it was derided. Now, after sixty years, it seems to thoughtful people that a return is needed to Roosevelt's principles if we are to make life rewarding. A life of ease, lived by those who are slow in thought and sluggish in action, is shabby and worthless.

Roosevelt summed up his principles in this way: "I wish to preach not the doctrine of ignoble ease but the doctrine of the strenuous life; the life of toil and effort; of labour and strife; to preach that highest form of success which comes not to the man who desires mere easy peace but to the man who does not shrink from danger, from hardship, or from bitter toil, and who out of these wins the splendid ultimate triumph."

Absorption in ease or passing pleasure is one of the most common signs of present or impending decay. There is a phrase: "To rest on your laurels", meaning to quit trying after winning a crown or a gold medal or a promotion. A prize does nothing else but reward past achievement. To abandon ambition upon reaching a plateau is to suffer diminution of our essential manhood.

"Comfort," said Kahlil Gibran, the Lebanese poet, "is a stealthy thing that enters the house as a guest, and then becomes a host, and then a master." We should be alert to unmask its nature before we learn to love it too greatly.

Don't sit down too soon

The problems accompanying success are more agreeable than those contingent upon failure, but they are no less challenging. To handle any sort of problem successfully, we need to weigh possibilities, discard details that are irrelevant, divine the general rules according to which events occur, and test our decision by experiment.

You can't treat all facts as being of equal value. Some have validity in your circumstances, and some have not. The problem must be tidied up and its dimensions learned. Get inside it and feel its contours. This approach avoids rushing toward an answer and then retracing your steps to check. By working more deliberately, marshalling facts and resources, you move with an air of certainty.

Do not be easily discouraged in your search for a satisfying life. Some people sit down too soon. They remind us of the Lotus Eaters, people told about in Homer's *Odyssey*, who lay lazily on their beach eating a fruit which caused them to lose all interest in work and all desire to reach their native country. The worst thing in life is not to fail, but not to try to succeed; to live in the gray twilight that knows neither brightness nor shadow, neither victory nor defeat.

You may not always be able to play the game gleefully; you may, indeed, be glad to think sometimes that because an unhappiness has not befallen you that is your happiness. Like Robert Louis Stevenson, writer of remarkable poetry and still-living prose, you may rise above self-pity. He was so frail in health that he had to leave the home he loved and go into far countries: and he wrote an essay called "On the Enjoyment of Unpleasant Places".

Let your preparations for making the most of your life be suitable to your hopes and the greatness of your enterprise. Of this be sure, there is no free pass that will admit you to a full life. But if the effort you make appears to be tedious or irksome, recall your purpose and your quest, then the vexations of daily life will seem trivial.

These are some parts of a well-rounded life, but so dismembered life loses its attractiveness and its joy. You will not find your desired life in shrivelled abstractness and formally stated precepts, but you will find it clothed in the living form of your own personality when all these principles are made part of you.

Then, every day, you can look forward to tomorrow with calmness and anticipation, because you have lived fully today.