



THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA MONTHLY LETTER

VOL. 52, NO. 4

HEAD OFFICE: MONTREAL, APRIL 1971

Standing on Your Own Feet

EVERYONE who leaves school or university this year is looking forward to standing on his own feet and making his own way in the world.

Benjamin Franklin was of the opinion that a ploughman on his feet is higher than a gentleman on his knees, and one of the characters in Ibsen's play *An Enemy of the People* says: "The strongest man in the world is he who stands most alone."

But before you can stand on your own feet you must have something more in your head than the desire to stand up. You need to know enough to keep your balance. That is why young people go to school and university and church; that is why wise older people keep learning by reading and observing. In this changing world it is not enough to have in your head nothing more than was there yesterday.

No person can be completely sovereign in the sense that he is in no way affected by what happens outside himself. Independence must walk hand in hand with knowledge of what is going on, intelligent obedience to certain laws of life, and fidelity to certain customs of humanity.

The advice given a thousand years ago: "Be yourself" has been translated in these days into "Do your own thing." Some people draw attention to themselves by lavish display of qualities, like a storekeeper who thinks he has to crowd into his window everything he has to sell, or like a flower arranger trying to cram all of her garden into a table vase.

What have you that is particular to yourself, a point of distinction, something in which you are proficient? That is the feature to display and develop. A man may find arithmetic or writing letters or carpentry difficult. That is no more remarkable than that a long-distance runner should find it impossible to do the 100-metre run in under ten seconds. The thing to do is find your best quality and bring it to maturity.

However, advice to concentrate on what you do well should be taken with prudence. If you play the guitar skilfully you may become a bore by playing it too often or too long. It is judicious to spread your interests so that you acquire new talents and to dabble

in things that broaden your life, even if you never rise above average in them.

Opportunity to shine will come to the man who enlarges his ability, stores his mind with useful data, and has the desire and energy to step out toward an objective.

Purpose and ambition

What is the basic imperative of life, the compulsion that makes one want to stand up? It is a paltry ambition if one's sole purpose in standing up is to display a suit or a dress.

A book on social pathology lists as the prime wishes of most individuals: new experiences, security, response and recognition. How insular and selfish these appear when they are compared with the ambition to contribute something constructive to the human experience. No person enjoys the greatest happiness possible to him unless he is able to say: "I am paying my way in the human scene." This is a satisfaction that cannot be matched by any social status or any standard of living, however high.

Anyone who is worried about his lack of advancement in social or business life might well take a few minutes to think up the answer to: "What motivates me?" Motivation may consist in the urge to succeed, to climb to the top of a mountain and add your stone to the cairn there, or it may be an ardent desire to serve people, as in one of the professions, or it may be a longing to add something to the beauty of life through one of the arts.

Most important is what follows: to work intelligently toward the objective under one's own power. One simple objective for everyone is to become all that he can become, to progress from what is passable to what is excellent, and from what youth yearned for to what maturity fulfils. The achievement applauded by the public or paid for by a corporation is dust and ashes in your mouth if you know that you could have done better. Thomas Fuller said this in a book he published in 1640: "Good is not good when proceeding from them from whom far better is expected."

Flaunting an ambition — like Tarzan thumping his

chest and yelling defiance at all the forest creatures — accomplishes little. One must step out toward the goal, having constructive ideas about where he is going and how to get there.

Equally important is to know the consequences. Ambition can be exalted into a most malignant goddess, demanding total surrender of all one's faculties and strength. The middle of the road may be the proper place for a man. He may not have the qualities needed to excel. He may not desire power, prestige or wealth. It would be a mistake to urge such a person to strive for something that would not make him happy. He should, however, try to be as good in his chosen niche as he has the natural gift to be.

Standards are important

To choose, or select, or decide, a man needs standards by which to judge. He may be ignorant about how to do a thing, but that will be cured by learning and by trying to acquire the skills needed in his particular job. Much more serious is the unwholesome sort of ignorance, the ignorance of what is excellent. This gives rise to the destructive belief that doing shoddy work does not matter.

One who is striving to be great in whatever line of endeavour he has chosen will find satisfaction in doing so with his own natural qualities and vitality rather than in dependence upon other people. By combining industry, enthusiasm, knowledge and ability, a man may touch genius, which is an individual thing.

The firmness with which you stand and the success that attends your effort depend upon the intensity of your purpose and your perseverance. It may be said that the capacity to stay on a job until it is completed is the *sine qua non* — the indispensable condition, the "without which not" — of success. Having entered upon activity you need to follow through. It has been said that ninety per cent of the world's failures are quitters.

Courage is needed in taking the first step and in going on from there. A timid person may avoid the chance of failure merely by not risking it.

If you are ambitious you must take calculated risks, but you may take comfort in the knowledge that relative failure in attempting great things is better than the ignominy of not trying.

Admiration of courage should not lure a man into stupid rashness. Courageous people are not all taking long chances. They balance risk against gain, and realize that coolness and calm are more effective than are heat and agitation. Most of the world's great portrait painters and sculptors have in their masterpieces represented men and women unruffled and serene, not as wrestlers and Amazons.

Personality

A man has to believe in himself. Standing on your own feet means having confidence in your ability

to do some task the outcome of which is desirable but not certain.

Self-confidence may be promoted by finding or creating an interest in something worthwhile and doing something about it. This is the opposite of the wishy-washy habit of copying the actions and mannerisms of other people.

Bluster and bluffing are weak tools with which to build self-confidence. There may be occasions when bluff will pay off. Napoleon once bluffed the Austrians into surrendering to a force only a quarter their strength. But if a man bluffs and fails it is a painful and embarrassing tumble, as the same Napoleon learned when he struck a medal and built a monument celebrating his victorious invasion of England — and then never got off the French shore.

Self-confidence is a necessary ingredient in personality, which is the distinct character one has. Character, one of man's best possessions, is the string that ties together a man's habits and acts and gives them validity and force.

A person of repellent personality quickly obtains a bad name. In ancient Italy they would have said of him: "He carries hay on his horns," this having reference to the custom of tying hay on the horns of a bull that made a practice of butting people, so that they should be warned to keep out of its way.

Any person may improve his personality by paying attention to the reactions of other people to him, and by observing the things in others which he dislikes. He will learn that shallowness and insipidity are just as unattractive as boasting and swaggering, and that self-centredness does not contribute to an attractive personality.

Some people, like some houses, are all frontage. An imposing façade leads to an ordinary interior. Striving to stand tall involves more than putting on a good external appearance. One must feel tall; he must have within him the values and virtues he wishes to display.

Surface graces are undoubtedly important, such as affability, courtesy, and willingness to do a favour, but personality is an assemblage of qualities inside a person that makes him what he is as distinct from other people. His personality is the end result of his habits of thought.

Character and personality, of course, cannot take root unless the cultivator has prepared a foundation of knowledge. But, some may say, studying is such a bore. It may, indeed, be tiresome in its individual parts, but acquiring knowledge is something like using an adding machine. You press a lot of keys, seemingly unrelated, and nothing happens . . . then you push down the "add" button and obtain a useful answer.

Knowledge is gained in many ways. A photograph may owe its attractiveness and its good quality to the inborn ability of the photographer to recognize a picture possibility, or it may be the product of study and painstaking care. The thing for the ambitious

person to do is to push out the boundaries of his ignorance in every possible direction and by all practicable means.

Knowledge may be rivetted in the mind and made available for quick use by committing to memory some maxims, mottoes and proverbs. These are general principles, serving as guides or rules, and are handy things to have around. Some people brush them aside as being "mere platitudes", but platitudes are not necessarily unimportant merely because they are familiar. A maxim is not a law to be slavishly followed, but a reminder or caution that pops into one's mind at an appropriate moment.

Knowledge needs to be applied with enthusiasm, which the dictionary defines as "passionate zeal." A more practical definition for everyday affairs is "interest plus energy."

If a job seems to be dull and tedious, merely deciding to think that it is going to be interesting will make it attractive. One may go a step further by giving the task or his method of doing it a new twist.

Originality, whether in little things or big, is something to be cultivated. It is, in fact, a good way to confirm to yourself that you are standing on your own feet. Take old things and give them new form. Dramatists and poets do not pretend to have originality in the invention of plots, but they compete in original treatment and development.

Dealing with people

Here is a problem: how to be different from other people and yet be accepted by them. When a person stands on his own feet that does not mean keeping aloof from contact with others. Much of the colour, drama, flavour, and variety of life are to be found only in association with people.

Part of every person's ambition should be the desire to serve his friends. It is robbing life of some of its excitement never to be interested in anything that is not of practical importance to oneself. Indifference to the stresses borne by others is a mark of smallness. We should try to understand the thoughts and desires of people who are older and younger, who live on a different social or economic level. Their environment is different from ours, and they cannot be expected to see eye-to-eye with us in everything.

In dealing with other people it is advantageous to practise some of the merits of the courtier. Count Castiglione wrote *The Book of the Courtier*, in which he says that a courtier shall not be stubborn, full of contention, a babbler, a liar, a boaster, or a flatterer.

The words courtier and chivalry call up pictures in our minds of knights in armour, tournaments and jousting in behalf of the weak. They make us believe that courage is splendid, that competition is man-like, that helping others is noble, and that courtesy is gentlemanly — all these are traits desirable in the man standing on his own feet.

In all dealings with people it will be found that good

manners smooth the way to understanding, and that gentleness, kindness and goodwill contribute to the decency and peace of society.

Being considerate and decent includes not being little or mean, not taking unfair advantage, not using personalities in arguments, and not being unjust in judging others. It gives consideration to the rights and feelings of people to whom one is under no obligation. It shows itself in the thoughtfulness that prompts one to speak well of the jobs other people are doing.

What do you want?

The most intense need of any person is that he should realize himself as a harmonious whole. What he wants of himself is the deciding factor in what he makes of himself. This requires that he look into his own mind to ascertain the height and strength of his ambition and the full extent of his abilities. He should also learn about his weaknesses, so as to work toward overcoming them.

Having studied one's qualities and abilities, the next step is to do some planning. Asking "how tall can you stand?" is equivalent to asking "how far can you see ahead?" Not everyone is in the position to employ survey makers and computers. Nearly everyone must scan the territory for himself, observe what is going on, and make his own appraisal.

This is the time to set up some workable guidelines, knowing that if life is to be worth living one must himself make it so. It would be easy to let someone else lay out our patterns of thought and action, but if we allowed that to happen we could never enjoy the satisfaction of saying: "I was myself; I stood on my own feet."

Having decided upon a destination, looked up the routes and chosen one: get going. Speed is not everything; the most important concern at this moment is to make sure that you are on the right road and that you are prepared for the journey. The Boy Scout motto "Be Prepared" has a fit and proper place in everyone's planning.

Being prepared does not mean learning a set of hard-and-fast rules. As a Boy Scouts of Canada *Fact Sheet* says: Scouting "must help boys to live in a world of change, to live with uncertainty and yet to act with confidence. It must help them to be prepared to modify yesterday's understandings in the light of today's knowledge so that they can move confidently into tomorrow's world."

Boys are learning through Scouting to become resourceful and responsible members of the community. That is a sort of preparedness that will benefit everyone.

Be positive

The self-directing person knows that a negative approach to life puts the brakes on progress. To be non-conformist merely for the sake of appearing different from others is irrational. Dr. Harry D. Gideonse, President of Brooklyn College, said in a

commencement address: "The country's insane asylums are full of people who can be classified in that way."

On the other hand, to be independent, to stand on your own feet, does not mean being indifferent or neutral. A vigorous constructive attitude is needed. No bright idea and no great achievement will be brought forth by a negative, fault-finding mind.

There comes a time when one must risk one's convictions in an act. One has to be positive, one has to do something, one has to commit oneself. There is a Sicilian proverb which says: "A life spent in digging is worth nothing if you plant no olive trees."

Now is the time to go in quest of experience. Francis Parkman put depth and vividness into his *History of France in the New World* because he was not content to shuffle papers in the archives but followed the trails of the French explorers, camped in the forest, and lived among Indians. He did his field work.

Nothing worth having is gained without effort, but in addition one needs to have a vital spirit behind one's work. Men in both public and private enterprise may be moved to make money, gain fame, or wield power, but there is a fourth aspiration more rewarding than any of these: the desire to do a good job, to make some contribution to the advancement of their industry or profession.

Some obstacles

A sense of frustration may be generated in a youth by the feeling that parents, teachers, and associates are trying to build him into an ideal they have for him. His consequent rebellion may exaggerate hardships and magnify restrictions, and he may join in such things as protest demonstrations and uncouthness to show his resistance. A feeling of frustration allowed to dominate one's mind may seem to justify burning down the house because one does not like the living-room furniture.

Inner unrest has preceded every great deed and every successful venture, but unrest in itself leads to nothing. It must be accompanied by the desire to shape and direct the unrest into recognizable form and harness it to constructive purposes. Can the situation be changed so as to make it manageable? Can you change your posture so as to turn the situation to good account?

Everyone has at times feelings of inadequacy. There is no notable career that has not had its hours of defeat. To make mistakes is far more honourable than to escape making them through never moving. The thing to do is to use one's head to get back on the beam. Clarence Chamberlin, who made history by piloting the first airplane to carry a passenger across the Atlantic, illustrated this. On one occasion he got off course. He swooped down on a ship to see its name, looked it up in the shipping column of a newspaper he found under the seat of his plane, calculated the ship's position, and set his course for Europe.

Obstacles and set-backs should be accepted with a shrug and tackled standing up. Once you try to crawl around them you abdicate your manhood.

On being mature

When a man is standing on his own feet he has passed from the dependence of adolescence to the responsibilities of adult citizenship.

A person is not mature so long as he continues to try to solve adult problems in childish ways, or to satisfy his ego with adolescent experiences. Maturity involves an intelligent appraisal of disappointments, burned fingers, spoiled pages, and plans that went wrong, as well as a balanced appreciation of successes.

One cannot escape the responsibility of maturity by quoting the doctrine of Marx, who held that every man's actions were conditioned by the social class to which he belonged, or the doctrine of Freud, who said that what a man does is subject to pre-natal and juvenile influences over which he had no control.

Responsibility is the inevitable price one has to pay for independence. When an individual is free to act as he likes he is accountable for what he does. A slave is not responsible, but as soon as he becomes a free man he participates not only in freedom but in obligations to himself, his family, his community and the nation.

It is not enough to remain standing, we must evolve. Growth is a characteristic of life and growth means change. The wise man regards his present situation as only the sketch of a picture which he must finish. If he does not try to do a little more or a little better than he can do easily he will never learn the best that he is capable of doing.

Pride and modesty

He is a wise man who does not allow himself to be elated by the things he comes to possess. When a man becomes eminent he should carry his honours with gentleness, magnanimity, and absence of arrogance.

Guard against allowing successes to go to your head, where the tightness of your halo may cause headaches. Recall the self-conceit of the man who said: "Geniuses are unbearable people. You have only to ask my family to know how difficult I am to live with."

Standing on one's own feet means seeking to be oneself, to live meaningfully. At the end of a year, or of a lifetime, you wish to feel that you came near in achievement what you aimed for and had the capacity to do.

So there is the open road. Those who walk it successfully ignore irrelevant attractions and refrain from activities which do not contribute to attainment of their purpose. They disregard the billboards designed to divert them into this or that blind alley of ease and pleasure. They stand on their own feet, set their own goals, and win their own victories.