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Our Prejudices

PREJUDICE is our number one problem in human relations.

It is prejudice that closes our minds to the truth and knowledge which would enable us to work together in friendship, vote with intelligence, worship in understanding, and avoid international disputes.

This *Monthly Letter* does not particularize prejudices such as social, racial, sectarian, and so forth, but deals with the improvement of individual and social living brought about by tolerance.

In one of Aesop's *Fables* he tells how Jupiter, in a mischievous mood, made mankind a present of spectacles. Every man had a pair, but they did not represent objects to all mankind alike. One pair was purple, another blue; one white and another grey; some were red, green and yellow. "However, notwithstanding this diversity", says Aesop, "every man was charmed with his own, believing it the best, and enjoyed in opinion all the satisfactions of truth."

Many civilizations in the world at different times and places have had widely different patterns of behaviour. Almost anything in social and personal life which we now deplore was somewhere and at some time acceptable. Out of those practices, which were right and proper in their age, have come today's cultures. A respect for the traditions of other people will lead to understanding and avoid prejudice.

All of us are entitled to our own petty prejudices. Most of us have been biased against books we were told we should read, though later we liked them. Many business men are prejudiced against people who sign letters "dictated but not read." Elevator operators are prejudiced against people who press elevator buttons needlessly; we all are prejudiced against people who stride imperiously through revolving doors.

Everyone makes mistakes

That is not the kind of prejudice this letter is about. The hurtful prejudices are the mental fixations of the 100-per-centers, people who won't admit you have a side to your case, and demand that you either agree wholly with their opinions, or disagree.

It may be true that the more ignorant a person is, the more positive he is in his opinions, and the more belligerently inclined to look upon your doubt of his statements as a sin against him.

Intelligently alive people have no such delusions. They know that absolute certainty is regarded by scientists as an impossibility, and scientists, of all people, have the opportunity to check and re-check their findings.

Mistakes occur in the mental processes of all living people. In the Provincial Museum in Toronto there is a wizened caveman who hasn't made a mistake for several thousand years, ever since he curled up in his grass mat and went to sleep. The only people who are never mistaken are dead.

We do ourselves an injury by killing part of our minds when we reject contradiction, refuse to hear the other side of a story, or oppose opinions without learning the facts. We may be persons who think that new truths may have been desirable once, but that we have enough of them now; we may be addicted to attending committee meetings devoted to keeping things as they are; or we may be, as Stefan Zweig said of a famous clergyman: fundamentally honest and straightforward, but wearing blinkers; one of those persons "for whom only their own truth is true, only their own virtue virtuous, only their own Christianity Christian."

The closed mind

The difficulty is that you cannot prove to really prejudiced people that their beliefs are not true. Quite often they register triumph over your argument by pointing to some particular case where their beliefs have been successful. They seem unable to grasp principles and laws. They are like those who laughed at Socrates when he tried to teach men a new way of reasoning fearlessly, compelled him to drink the hemlock and in that one cup drowned a whole civilization.

Many such people go through a process they call "making up their minds" and then close their minds with a one-way zipper. That process will be avoided by persons seeking or building a happy philosophy. They will ward off dogmatism, smugness, bias, and closemindedness. They realize that the fullness of living can be attained only by wide understanding.

There are many different causes of closed minds. As children we were all tolerant. We played with the neighbours' children without a thought of race or creed or class. But the democracy of childhood was broken down by the artificial standards of the grown-ups.

Boys going home from high school on a commuter train out of Montreal typified this. There were at least three racial strains in the party, but they talked and laughed together in a friendly open way. Their frank countenances showed their belief in a good and neighbourly world. These teen-agers had not yet been touched by the hand of prejudice.

By and by they will realize that discrimination exists in their families, in their schools and in almost every sector of their lives. Many of them will conform to the discriminatory patterns of their groups, not because they are prejudiced but because it is easier to discriminate than to resist the group's demand for conformity.

Sad to say, the opinion which they are compelled to accept may be based on hearsay or tradition: what Voltaire called "The reason of fools." Long before Voltaire's time, a philosopher of the Cynic school said that the most necessary branch of knowledge is to unlearn prejudices.

What causes prejudice?

Many of our prejudices are due to unquestioning acceptance of the beliefs commonly held by members of our group; others may be traced to the way in which we make snap judgments; still others can be blamed on our wishful thinking.

Envy is the cause of much prejudiced thinking. The person who cannot mend his own case is tempted to do what he can to impair another's. In fact, some who would go to great and good lengths to help someone who fell on evil days will become annoyed if that same person should have good fortune.

Prejudice is a personal thing. Even if the conduct of others has roused our emotion — envy, anger or fear — it is really we ourselves who create the prejudice by the way in which we think about the objectionable conduct.

Our opinions should not be blamed upon others. We ourselves can so manage our opinions as to save us from worry and prejudice and a host of other thoughts that are bad for us. It is quite true to say that our prejudices do not hurt others as much as they hurt ourselves, physically, mentally and spiritually.

It is easy for us to be tolerant of others' opinions when we like them, but we must build up a certain philosophy if we are to stand what we don't like. Tolerance distinguishes what is essential, and lets the unessential go. It admits that firm convictions are splendid when they relate to important matters, but they are a public nuisance when they provoke a row over petty things.

The open mind

It is not necessary to have an opinion on every matter. All that we know is still infinitely less than all that still remains unknown. A scientist may search for days and years, and return without a single opinion. His habit of life and thought demands that he shall believe nothing without evidence. Like him, we shall profit if we learn to be painstaking in the discovery of truth, and to identify it before expressing opinions. That is much more exciting and rewarding than trying to prove something.

When we approach the choices and judgments of life with open minds we are likely to find that nothing is altogether good or true, and nothing is altogether bad or false. What may appear to the casual person as a stain on someone's character will perhaps reveal itself to you as a scar from a hard-won field.

The opinions of three eminent men, widely separated in time and in qualities, may be brought together on this point. Socrates, the Greek philosopher of the fourth century B.C., said: "I am extremely desirous to be persuaded by you, but not against my own better judgment." Thomas Carlyle, the Scottish essayist, said: "It is useful, nay essential, to see his good qualities before pronouncing on his bad." And Thomas Edison, the inventor, said: "I haven't any conclusions to give; I am just learning about things myself."

Human relations

Human relations are the result of a complicated interplay of thought and emotion. The result may be understanding, not understanding, or misunderstanding.

Our attitudes toward particular people may be affected by our attitude toward people in general, but there are exceptions. One may be sincerely fond of a particular member of another race or creed, and still possess race or religious prejudice. A man may be in love with a particular woman, elevate her on a pedestal, and sincerely feel inferior to her: but at the same time, if he is an employer, he may refuse to hire women.

If we see a person whom we believe we know very well acting in a manner which doesn't meet our expectations, we may be shocked or we may try to save our own false conception by declaring something is wrong with him. It all too infrequently occurs to us that something might be wrong with our own assumptions and interpretations; that we might have a trace of prejudice in us.

Misunderstanding is particularly likely if there is hesitancy to communicate thoughts and feelings, or a barrier of some other sort, between us. Business people are up against this problem continually, because it is the nature of business to require co-operation among those engaged in the same sort of work. We cannot escape the dilemma by the simple technique of avoiding problems.

People who are inclined toward introversion find it difficult to understand those who are inclined toward extroversion. They are moved by different impulses and by different ways of looking at life. The thing to do is to realize that people are different in their personality structure. It is the fate of human beings to see the world differently, and to develop different meanings and values

of life. Insight into this fact will go far toward avoiding prejudice.

Once again, as has been said so often in these *Letters*, emphasizing the positive has its virtues. When we look for the good we are likely to appreciate a person's excellencies and find that they far outweigh his faults.

Communicating ideas

In all our human affairs the communication of ideas is of utmost importance. We can be sadly misled in our judgments if we neglect the fact that two things may be called by the same name and yet not be the same.

Things in nature are not either this or that. Nature is filled with gradations: from hot weather to cold, from a stormy sea to a calm, from a minute organism to great animals. When we apply this test to things that are happening around us every day we find that there is usually a smooth series from extreme to extreme.

Kenneth S. Keyes gives a few hints for avoiding this pitfall in his book *How to Develop Your Thinking Ability*. "We must have patience with those who would push us toward an extreme position," he writes. "If we fall into their trap... they will have no trouble making us appear foolish." Mr. Keyes then goes on to suggest that we make more use of the word "many" instead of "all"; "usually" instead of "always"; "seldom" instead of "never"; and "similar" instead of "same".

He also advocates use of protective phrases such as: "from my point of view; as I see it; apparently; up to a point; it is possible that." Look at the futile arguments that could be avoided if we used the words "to me" consistently!

Another help toward avoiding prejudice would be to define words and notions. "Let's define our terms" is not an idle phrase, but a necessary tool for use when two persons converse on some serious topic.

Need for philosophy

Prejudices cannot be entirely eliminated (not, at any rate, in the present stage of human development) but their destructive influence and their pathological result can be reduced by the acquiring of wisdom. Without wisdom, the intellect remains the slave of prejudice and superstition.

None of us knows enough. We can keep on, with profit, hearing what can be said about a subject by persons of every variety of opinion, and by studying all the ways in which it can be looked at by every character of mind.

How far removed that is from arriving at choices and judgments on the basis of sheer guesses, superstitions, and folkway habits of thought. Just think of the futility of guessing: if a million people should guess how far it is from the earth to the moon, they would know no more than they did before, and if one of them should accidentally hit on the correct distance (average 238,857 miles) he would not know it.

Scientists and philosophers do not judge by guess-work or intuition or tradition: they try to find the facts.

Philosophy begins when one learns to doubt, particularly to doubt one's cherished beliefs. Wise men may profit by fools, because they see the faults and avoid them; but fools do not profit by wise men, for they will not imitate their good examples.

A. E. Wiggam tells in his book *The Marks of an Educated Man* about a friend who was much given to acting on impulsive thought. Realizing his handicap, he adopted the plan of writing his idea on a piece of paper, laying it on his desk, and assuming that it was on the witness stand. He would subject it to a merciless cross-examination. Only if it got through this "third degree" did he call his idea a good one, and put it into practical use. Formerly a "dreamer", he developed into a very strong executive.

It is a big advantage to see things, from the smallest to the greatest, through other people's eyes. In reading an essay or a business contract, your eyes may follow the writer's steps, but to know what the writer saw you need his eyes. You need to think of the circumstances that surrounded him and the ambitions that moved him; what his desires were and the method he took to acquaint you with them.

Because we cannot, in many cases, see the picture whole in this way, why don't we say that so-and-so behaved in a certain situation, at a certain time, in a certain way, instead of saying positively that he is such-and-such? That approach would save us both heartaches and headaches.

Black and white

Nothing, we are told by scientists, is pure black or pure white. We need to accustom ourselves to thinking in degrees of black and white, goodness and badness, poisonous and wholesome.

Keyes tells, in his book previously referred to, about a chemical called phenyl-thio-carbimide, the "tolerance chemical." One out of five persons finds it tasteless, 65 per cent find it bitter, 5 per cent call it sour, 2 per cent insist that it is sweet, and 5 per cent are sure it is salty. Others call it something else. There is no one answer on which people can agree. Knowing this, we realize the futility of argument about the taste of the chemical, and we shall not be prejudiced against friends whose opinions differ from ours.

Our thinking habits are quite often incompetent to wrestle with a world in which no two things are identical. There are similarities, it is true, but they do not justify our overlooking the differences. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: "Nature never rhymes her children nor makes two men alike."

Furthermore, no idea or thought comes to our minds singly. Every one comes preceded by many others, attended by many, followed by many. And we ourselves differ from other people in mentality, training, heredity, environment and objective. Surely, in face of all these hazards of thought, threatening us always with the penalty that follows foolish word and action, we need to consider our ideas from all sides — and perhaps with a slight

inclination toward a different conclusion than the one we ardently desire.

The middle path

We shall find, perhaps in the majority of cases, that there is a middle path where both we and those who have different convictions may walk comfortably together. This middle path is not a compromise; it stands for the emancipation of the mind, as well as for personal freedom and well-being.

How do we get on to this middle path? Some hints have already been drawn from ancient and modern writers, but chief among them is to inquire into the truth, respect others' opinions, and watch our thinking so as to guard against "either — or" words, "black or white" thoughts and "all or none" attitudes.

In the quaint idiom of a Stoic philosopher: "Doth a man bathe himself quickly? Then say not 'wrongly' but 'quickly'. Doth he drink much wine? Then say not 'wrongly' but 'much'. For whence do you know if it were ill done till you have understood his opinion?"

Above all, perhaps, is the necessity to know one another. Congenial people exist on both sides of every antagonistic boundary. Heart calls to heart and mind to mind the world over. But not unless we know one another.

On changing your mind

It seems somehow criminal to some people to change their minds. There is nothing wrong with telling people one thing today and something else tomorrow: we change, and the world changes. Many things which were true yesterday are not so today.

It is a sign of our vitality to own that we have changed our opinion, indicating that we are wiser than we were. They are, indeed, wise people who keep their minds open so that they recognize important changes.

People with closed minds are prejudiced in favour of yesterday's thoughts. They resent having to question and re-examine their attitudes and ideas; still more do they resent it when others raise questions. Emerson dismissed such people in this way: "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines."

Seeking truth

The philosophic person recognizes that if a thing is true you must accept it no matter how incredible or unpalatable it may be. No real values are destroyed or impaired by learning the truth about them. The falsities and prejudices of the world are allergic to truth and will die if sufficiently exposed to it.

In Sir Henry Rider Haggard's fantastic story *She,* truth was represented in the temple of Kor by a statue of a woman, leaning forward with poised wings. Her arms were outstretched like those of some woman about to embrace one she dearly loved. Her whole attitude was tenderly beseeching. Her face was thinly veiled. The inscription read: "Is there no man that will draw my veil and look upon my face, for it is very fair?"

And Sir Richard Livingstone, great scholar, set a high and shining prospect of truth in outlining the tasks of education in today's world: truth is "... that veracity which does its best to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth; where it is uncertain, confesses to uncertainty; where it lacks knowledge, does not pretend to it: which is candid and frank, takes no unfair advantage in argument, is careful not to misrepresent an opponent or to ignore the strength of his case and the weakness of its own."

When a person makes this surrender to truth, he is for the first time in his life free — free from superstition, free from prejudice and free from dogmatism. He finds himself with a strange new power, the power to discover, handle and control facts. He can claim to be an educated man. He is ready to polish his mind against the minds of others in a poised way.

Discretion is needed

We do not know all the answers to the questions about human life and destiny... we do realize that there is still very far to go and very much to learn.

Those who are trying hard to think in the right way and to eliminate prejudice from their lives are likely to be impatient with those who lag behind them.

Being tolerant means that we should not expect too much of other people. Our viewpoint will not always appear reasonable to others, and we will save ourselves many disappointments if we do not demand that others see things from our point of view.

Discretion in our thinking will lead us to discretion in our contacts with people. An Eastern legend says: "In making genius, the fairies left out one essential gift, the knowledge of when to stop." So, while we adopt the tolerant way of life for our own sake, we stand in danger of losing all we might gain if we insist too strongly upon having others conform to it.

Understanding

There are few gifts that one person can give to another as rich as understanding. Understanding is a disposition to recognize sympathetically the beliefs of others without necessarily embracing them.

But armchair philosophy is not what the world needs. The valuable thing is not to know what virtue is, but to do it. It is not necessary to know what bravery means, but to be brave; nor to give a dictionary meaning of tolerance, but to be tolerant. And if we are going to be tolerant, we might as well go the other step: tolerance is better than intolerance, but charity is better still.

This is all simple, practical, possible for everyone: and attractive, too. Removal of prejudice and the cultivation of tolerance mean much in deciding the fate of humanity and the happiness of individuals. It can bring beauty into our living.

ALSO AVAILABLE IN FRENCH
AND IN BRAILLE