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What Can a Person Do?

HUMAN IMPULSES have changed over the years along with the changes in human environment, but one impulse has remained constant: the desire to do something to make things better.

The question is on everyone's lips often: "What can I do? What can I do to acquire knowledge and develop wisdom, to cope with change and the disarray of life, to get along with people, to learn how to solve problems, to serve my family and my country, to become a better person, to grow old happily?"

Everyone likes to think he is in charge of his own life, but that belief is modified by the fact that he is part of a great universe. Mr. Satterthwaite summed this up in Agatha Christie's stories about *The Mysterious Mr. Quin*. "You say your life is your own, but can you dare to ignore the chance that you are taking part in a gigantic drama under the orders of a divine Producer? Your cue may not come till the end of the play — it may be totally unimportant, a mere walking-on part, but upon it may hang the issue of the play. If you do not give the cue to another player the whole edifice may crumble. You, as you, may not matter to anyone in the world, but you as a person in a particular place may matter unimaginally."

Everyone is a person in a particular place, with opportunities to contribute his or her part to the emerging pattern of human life. When desire to accomplish something is harnessed to a sense of the first-rate, expressing basic ideals in terms of today's environment, one is playing his part effectively.

Thinking big

Men and women have gone by many ways to seek a happy life. Some have failed because they set themselves no definite goal, but drifted here and there always hoping to come upon the land of their vague dreams. Anyone who values present comfort more highly than the attainment of a purpose is contributing to disillusionment and disappointment, because it is uncomfortably true that no person ever passes his self-imposed limitations.

One must think big. It is deadly dull to be mediocre.

In business it is the person with a big view, comprehending not only his own job but all the surrounding jobs that contribute to it and stem from it, who becomes a superior person.

Ambition to accomplish something does not mean the same thing as competing for a quick getaway when a traffic light changes. It is a positive, purposeful, creative aim; an urge to do something definite.

What one can do is governed by an orderly mind that appraises the possibilities, analyses the difficulties, and controls the execution. One must be a dreamer to think of the destination, a planner to map out a path, and a drummer to set the marching time.

It is not necessary to have a great quantity of physical equipment in order to do something worth while. Aristotle was an astronomer without a telescope, a biologist without a microscope, a chemist without a laboratory, and yet for 2,000 years his conception of natural phenomena ruled science.

The person seeking to be somebody must occasionally escape into the land of dreams, having taken care to plan the return journey. A day-dream can be refreshing and inspiring if one remembers that one must come back to translate the dream castle into stone and mortar.

The person trying to do things will encounter difficulty, but that is all to the good. When a task is troublesome, it gives the worker a chance to show his capability: when a decision is perplexing, that opens the way to display superior judgment.

Look for a vacuum

In seeking to find a line of activity it is a good rule to look for a vacuum and expand into it. There are many desirable things that have been left undone, many machines not yet invented, and many social ills for which a cure has not yet been found. These opportunities have to be looked for. Chance and luck are ineffective substitutes for active seeking.

Doing things is what counts. A career is made by doing something, not merely being something. Some have thought that Aesop's moral of the race between

the hare and the tortoise might have turned out differently. What if the hare, instead of sitting down on a soft bank to rest had sat, instead, upon a thistle? Some sting is needed by many sorts of people to get them going.

What can a person do? The first thing is to try to do something. It is only by trying that you will find out the stuff you are made of, and become aware of your possibilities. The next thing is to apply craftsmanship to whatever you are doing. That means doing habitually well what has to be done. The third thing is to use courage to surmount difficulties and ingenuity to get around obstacles.

By applying these guiding principles you become fully alive and you are responding in a positive way to life's challenges. How different that is from the stunted life of someone who asks: "Why should not I enjoy what others enjoy?" without doing what is necessary to earn that enjoyment.

Performance is what counts. The person who never shoots cannot carry off the marksman's prize; he who slinks away from a battle cannot be a hero; the person who is satisfied with paper plans does not attain success. Someone is always offering in an advertisement an easier way of getting on in the world than by study and work, but the people who make their way from obscurity to *Who's Who* do so by using intelligence, initiative and energy.

Working with people

The person who wishes to do things needs to learn to walk with people. He cannot live as a hermit does, even though his opinions differ greatly from those of the men and women who surround him.

People who go through life with granite-like convictions on every subject under the sun lead a cheerless existence, and are unlikely to succeed in attaining desirable objectives. They miss the thrill of exploring, the challenge of debating, and the excitement of finding out new things that help them to reach their goal.

Learning to like people and to get along with them by looking for the good in them is a satisfying way of life, and it wins friends. Xenophon saw the advantage long ago: "It is far less difficult to march up a steep ascent without fighting than along a level road with enemies on each side."

It pays to be considerate of others in little ways, to treat every person with such thoughtfulness that his memory of you will be pleasant. When you take pains and some trouble to see that others are not neglected; when you make sure of doing nothing that will cause others to lose face, you are contributing a plus value to mere courtesy, and you are building support that will help you to do what you wish to do.

Getting along with people entails communicating with them, and this is a two-way street. When we are tolerant of other people's opinions we win indulgence for our own. Canada has staked its future upon the

belief that in the free market-place of thought, by the matching of ideas, truth has a better chance of winning than by any other method known to man.

Spell out your purpose

What can one do toward presenting ideas in such a way that they will be understood and win attention? Here is a rough draft that you may use in preparing practically any communication, written or spoken. (1) Show that a problem exists or that a situation needs correction; (2) explain the essential elements of the problem or the various aspects of the situation; (3) tell about the failure of previous attempts; (4) show why your solution is the best one; (5) picture your solution in operation, including the benefits it will give to others and the satisfaction it will give to those who join in reaching it.

Be specific: tell in definite terms the nature, place, time and method of the response you desire. It is possible to fail by not having clear in your own mind exactly what you wish to communicate in order to get action.

Anyone who seeks to do something beneficial must pay close attention to the audience. A glance at our environment will show that our high standard of living, brought about by our mastery of science and technology, will be menaced by the faulty use of signals between people, between ideologies and between nations. By misinterpreting signals (which is all that words are) we create disorder in human affairs.

Whatever you are trying to do can be done better when the purpose and methods have been openly and minutely examined. This eliminates the danger inherent in the all-too-common human tendency to see whatever we wish to see, to define right and wrong by what we would like to be right and wrong. Speak about your proposal with conviction and sincerity, but make allowance for another point of view.

Dialogue is necessary to attainment of any purpose. It explores problems by attacking and defending all positions until the false are cancelled out or the differences are reconciled. There is no problem, from writing a constitution for a nation to designing a new office form, that cannot be solved by discussion around a table. Without an interchange of views the human mind would still be sitting in primitive darkness.

Keep on learning

To initiate reform of any kind you need to be an intelligent, educated, informed citizen, acquainted with the values, privileges and responsibilities of our Canadian way of life.

The person seeking to do things needs more than a surface knowledge of what is to be done and the method of doing it. He has to go into the woods to scratch the bark of trees as well as to stand off to view the forest in perspective. Both background knowledge and intimate acquaintance are necessary in the process of reasoning.

Intelligence adds to knowledge by giving us the ability to discern relevant things, to put together things that ought to be joined and to keep distinct things that ought to be separated. Unless we know precisely what we are thinking about we cannot discriminate. If we are incapable of distinguishing the wonderful from the impossible, the true from the false, how can we choose between them?

When questioned about your project, never say "I don't know." Say, rather, "That's an interesting question: I'll find out." This is an attitude that has enabled people of only ordinary education and qualities to succeed in putting across their ideas.

It is unlikely that you will have at your finger-tips all the facts about the proposition you are promoting, but you should know what facts are missing so that you may make allowance for the gap.

No preparation, no planning and no strategy can guarantee the success of what you are attempting, but only make it possible. You have thought of a desirable end, your imagination has played with possibilities, you have considered ways to overcome the obstacles: these mental pictures of the territory help you to find your way through it. You have not eliminated all risks, but you have reduced their number.

Patience and responsibility

Patience is a virtue greatly needed by those who attempt great things. It is not always wise to wait and see, but it is desirable to have the courage to wait if it should become advisable.

Ella Wheeler Wilcox remarked wisely in one of her poems: "The fault of the age is a mad endeavour to leap to heights that were made to climb." You need to control the fretfulness that arises when your projects are delayed, thrown off the track or botched.

A big-souled person knows that anyone is only as good as his performance proves him to be. Some day your hometown may erect a statue to you, but, as Aunt Em said to the farm hand in *The Wizard of Oz*, "Don't start posing for it now." You have work to do, and probably more work and planning are spoiled by impatience than by any other fault.

It is not a sign of doubt when you re-examine things in a spirit of making sure. A person who boasts of lifelong consistency to ideas picked up in childhood is confessing that he has learnt nothing in the school of experience.

If it is your desire to be a leader in introducing new ways of thinking or acting, you need to take account of the responsibility you assume. All the shades of words and phrases are flattened out when the summons comes to stand up and be counted. The spirit of private adventure in introducing some new thing matures into the feeling of being responsible for its results.

The great number of people who have been acknowledged as leaders were people who had them-

selves learned the art of obeying. To be a good follower is a step toward being a good leader.

"What can I do under these circumstances?" is a question that must be answered with reference to your capacity, your strength of purpose, and your zeal.

The best measure of our success in life, said H. G. Wells, is the ratio of our accomplishments to our capabilities. Abraham Lincoln put it this way: "I am not bound to succeed, but I am bound to live up to what light I have." Lincoln's story is one of endless recommencements, of the dispersal of doubts, and of the need, every once in a while, to examine whether he was measuring up to his own standards and those set for him by society.

To live in that way requires boldness. As soon as you become preoccupied with the idea of security the scope of your life begins to be diminished. Many a brilliant plan has come to nothing because the person who thought it up lacked the courage or the zeal to put it across.

Be hopeful and expectant. Any rational view of life which promotes optimism is better than one which, however logical its quality, leads to pessimism and leaves you without hope. Optimism does not mean shutting your eyes to the realities of life, or peering into a crystal ball looking for a rosy future. It means living with a sense of expectancy and doing what you can to make your hopes come true.

As a citizen

If what you want to do has reference to the government or management of the country you need to test your purpose in this way: does my purpose concern what people would like to have, or what people can manage to get, or what the State thinks it can safely allow them, or what people must have in order to function effectively and freely as citizens? Being a citizen implies the possession of an ideal, a sense of values, and a theory of what life in Canada may become.

This is a land where every man and every woman can find a place in society suited to his or her inclinations and capabilities. It is a country where the ordinary citizen has a chance to better his life. But he must accept the significance of our institutions. It is upon observance of the spirit of the laws and customs by which we live that the worthiness of our citizenship and the virtue of the causes we sponsor are judged.

We have assembled in Canada the adventurous spirits of numerous races in surroundings favourable to the creation of a great citizenship. They have brought with them vivid ideas and principles a thousand years old. No commonwealth ever wished for more ideal conditions than are provided by the contribution all these people can make toward the good life.

At heart, most Canadians share the same values. They live under a constitution that is the eighth oldest written constitution in the world, the second oldest of

a federal nature, and the oldest which combines federalism with the principles of responsible government.

But Canadian life is flexible, and there is room for those who wish to show their initiative in protecting its values and extending its well-being. Through its membership in the United Nations — it shared in drawing up the charter in 1945 — this country has taken an important and sometimes distinguished part in United Nations deliberations and purposes, thus opening the way for citizens who wish to participate in world-wide humanitarian activities.

Many Canadians believe passionately that Canada has a great contribution to make to the welfare of mankind. We are still turning pages in our history, and every new page offers opportunities to people who wish to do something of significance. We have not yet reached our fullest development in art, religion, education, and intellectual growth. There are opportunities for constructive thought and action for everyone who chooses to use them.

There are things that can be improved, such as law enforcement, the relationship of capital and labour, the propagation of health, and advancement of our native people. These can be done within the framework of democracy by people who care enough to do something about them.

Cope with change

Good judgment in public life is particularly needed in these days. For the first time in our history we have to share political and economic action with people who have a bewildering array of levels of knowledge and civilization, and at the same time we are undergoing a technological revolution at home. No people in history ever had to cope with changing life on so many fronts, and these changes offer prospects for beneficial activity to those who are alert.

True patriotism is not the emotional luxury of vanity showing itself in flag-waving, but a sentiment that expresses itself as a share in collective life. It asks "What can I do that will add to the welfare of the country?" The essence of citizenship is found in its values, its moral commitments, its deep loyalties, its conception of the good life, its teaching regarding the things for which and by which people should live, and the efforts of the people to attain the best possible.

A citizen must do what all good people are expected to do, and then he must do what his own particular status in the world demands of him and puts him in position to do. We have obligations, many or few, high or low, according to our talents and resources.

What we can do depends in large measure upon the strength of our inner discipline. Two men of different skills, more than two thousand years apart in time, agreed on this. Socrates, the Greek philosopher, taught self-discipline as the first virtue, saying it is necessary to make the other virtues avail, and Charles Darwin, author of *On the Origin of Species*, declared:

"The highest stage in moral culture at which we can arrive is when we recognize that we ought to control our thoughts."

As family people

There is much that we can do as family people. The general stock of ideas and sentiments picked up by the hearth-side affect thought and action throughout life. Statesmen and financiers, educators and artisans, men and women in all activities of life, are influenced in their decisions and actions by the intangibles absorbed in their home life.

Here is a sphere of undoubtedly worthwhile effort. We should see to it that the family preserves itself, in spite of all change, as a group united by agreement as to the things they love, a group in which personhood is conferred and responsibilities taught.

We may measure the success of parents very largely by their willingness to work out approaches and to give training that will provide young people with the necessary guidance in arranging their lives so that they attain the greatest possible happiness.

Integrity, which means "uprightness, moral soundness" is learned in the family, so that people habitually discriminate between just and unjust, good and bad, noble and disgraceful, and follow the better path. It is there that we acquire a scale of values.

Be forward-looking

Be heartily in earnest, believing in what you are doing. Persevere in spite of hindrances, discouragements and impossibilities. Add resolution and concentration to your natural ability.

Anyone who asks "What can I do?" is forward-looking. He does not start counting his years of age or his years of service as assets until he has nothing else to count. The life of accomplishment does not beckon alone to youth. It is for people of all ages. The happy life will grow upon us when we answer the question by asserting: "I will do *something*."

Many will agree that the very finest way for men and women who have had some measure of success in the world to discharge their debt to society is by passing back their knowledge to those who are coming along in their footsteps.

It may be said that there are five components of the happy life: health, work, interests, friendships and the pursuit of an ideal. It is necessary that you realize yourself as a whole, not in just one or another of these parts.

The person is fortunate who keeps his mind sensitized to the beauty and excitement of living, and is urged by his inner self to ask "What can I do?" The great thing is to advance, so that you feel at the end of your career that you have in some measure fulfilled the potentialities that you believe yourself to possess.