



The Strength of Enthusiasm

Enthusiasm is that "ecstasy of mind" in which anything appears possible. It must be cultivated if it is to be kept alive — and keeping it alive has now become vital to our whole society . . .

□ The Greeks, as they say, had a word for it. They called it *enthousiasmos*, roughly meaning being possessed by a god. In our more prosaic age, we have settled for blandly defining it as eagerness, or a strong excitement of feeling. Which leads to the conclusion that the fathers of western civilization in ancient Athens had a better idea of what enthusiasm is all about than the people who wrote the dictionaries of today.

For enthusiasm really does have an Olympian dimension to it. Again and again, writers searching for analogies to help in describing this mysterious force have found themselves reaching back into classical mythology. Edward Bulwer-Lytton was one of these: "Enthusiasm is a true allegory of the tale of Orpheus; it moves stones and charms beasts," he wrote. Under its spell, ordinary mortals rise to the level of the gods, going beyond apparent human capacity. It was not technology but enthusiasm that accomplished the Herculean feat of lifting a man to the moon.

Still, the notion that enthusiasm is divinely inspired is somewhat misleading. It implies that only the gods can bestow it, and that they bestow only on those they choose. In fact, anyone can have it, and anyone can pass it on to others. If enthusiasm seems to be confined to a chosen few after the first blush of youth, that is because they work at keeping it alive while others do not.

We all have it while we are young, of course. In the springtime of life, enthusiasms grow in profu-

sion. One burning passion follows another — for ambitions, hobbies, sports, members of the opposite sex.

Nothing could be more natural. Youth is a process of sorting out preferences until one arrives at the elements of a permanent identity. The trouble with some people is that they never do decide which enthusiasms to cultivate and which to eliminate. In the end their interests die like flowers in a garden full of weeds.

Looking back on our lives from a certain age, most of us recall our youthful enthusiasms with rueful amusement. How many grand designs have we left by the wayside; how many wild geese have we chased! Taking experience as a guide, we might be inclined to agree with Bishop Warburton's description of enthusiasm as "that temper of mind in which the imagination has got the better of judgment." Or with the anonymous (but obviously experienced) lexicographer who called it a state of "the predominance of the emotional over the intellectual powers."

Anyone past the age of 30 can bring to mind youthful enthusiasms which pushed him or her over the brink of disappointment. This is especially so with the schemes we once hatched which seemed at the time guaranteed to lead on to riches and fame.

Because enthusiasm is such a heady and captivating feeling, it takes little account of reality. In the eyes of the enthusiast, obstacles and pitfalls look small, while opportunities look enormous. This

leads to a crossing of the line between confidence and rashness — and rashness, more often than pride, comes before the fall.

“He who has burned his mouth blows his soup,” as the old German saying has it. People who frequently suffer disappointment are unwilling to let themselves in for more of it. So, without being especially conscious of it, they become wary of feeling overly enthusiastic. They try to fight it off when they feel it coming on, like a virus. If it overtakes them anyway, they try to dampen down their spirits by conjuring up negative considerations. This is called “facing the facts,” though often the objections are actually suppositions, not facts at all.

*Without it, no idealism; and
without idealism, no progress*

Instead of seeking reasons not to be enthusiastic, they should perhaps be seeking the reasons why they were disappointed to begin with. It is not hard to see why enthusiasm lets us down with such a thump. Under its influence, anything looks easier to do than it is in reality. In this, it resembles intoxication. To be wholly enthusiastic is to be like a drunken man who thinks he can dance like Fred Astaire, and winds up flat on his bottom on the floor.

When we find that the object of our enthusiasm is harder to achieve than we believed, we are likely to drop it and move on to another interest. Again like liquor, enthusiasm lends itself to waste. We spill it, and we imbibe it too liberally for essentially frivolous purposes. We indulge in it past the point where it is doing us any good.

In its physical manifestation, enthusiasm is a form of excitement. It releases adrenalin into the system. It makes one “high.” If, in a spurt of excitement, you expend too much energy all at once, you are likely to be exhausted. So it is sensible to try to exert a degree of control over enthusiasm if you want it to be sustained.

Real accomplishment only comes through knuckling down to hard work or study when that first spurt of enthusiastic energy is over. When you get

down to the tough slogging, your ardour can quickly evaporate. Oddly enough, though, it can return just as quickly when you see what you have achieved. Enthusiasm feeds on achievement. Doing things well is one sure way of experiencing its energizing touch over and over again.

By focussing on a goal and struggling a bit to reach it, you are less likely to suffer disappointment than if you hop from one thing to another. Even if you do not reach your goal, you have gained some very valuable knowledge. You know what you are capable of at your best, and where your limitations lie. And you may discover that you have a lot fewer limitations than you think.

Unaccompanied by purpose and a will to work, enthusiasm does not necessarily do any good for anyone. Indeed, even when it has a purpose, it is not necessarily a good thing. It can be directed towards some very evil ends. Some people can be wildly enthusiastic about stealing or defacing property, beating their dogs, or slandering their neighbours. Enthusiasm in its collective form has led to some of the lowest points in history: There have never been more fervant enthusiasts than the Nazis when they set out on their march over Europe. The cultists, bigots and terrorists of today are enthusiastic to a fault.

*Some have only one object
of enthusiasm — themselves*

At the same time, it is impossible to argue with Ralph Waldo Emerson’s statement that “every great and commanding moment in the annals of the world is the triumph of some enthusiasm.” Without it, there could be no idealism. Without idealism — or at least the conviction that the world really can be made into a better place — the human race would slide backwards into the barbaric ooze.

So enthusiasm is a neutral source of energy that can be applied for good or ill. In some cases, it may seem to be applied for neither. Much of the energy it creates is simply dissipated to no particular end.

For example, tremendous enthusiasm is expended in supporting athletes for no apparent reason other than pleasure. Among the players

themselves, however, enthusiasm generates a certain synergy, making each member of a team play beyond his or her natural ability. The team also absorbs extraordinary energy from the enthusiasm of its fans.

Still, the obsession some people have for their own sports and hobbies seems a bit of a waste. If it becomes an obsession, even as innocent a pastime as golf sops up time and talent that could be put to better use.

"I take it as a principal rule of life not to be too much addicted to any one thing," the Roman poet Terence wrote. Work must be included among such possible addictions. An intense enthusiasm for one's job is no doubt a leg-up on the ladder of material success, but work addicts are neither very fulfilled nor very companionable human beings.

There are also those who evince a great enthusiasm for work, but who at bottom are enthusiastic strictly about their own egos. Work is merely necessary to their aggrandisement. Enthusiasm is closely akin to infatuation, and there is no infatuation quite so powerful as that with the image one sees every day in the mirror.

It is ironic that people start out in youth with more enthusiasms than they can accommodate, but may end up with too few to make life fulfilling for themselves and those around them. Plato's admonition to "take charge of your lives" implies a balancing of your interests with your capacity to make something of them — to do a few things well.

Following too many interests will make you into the kind of dilettante who knows a little bit about everything and everything about nothing. Following too few may make you into the kind of specialist who keeps learning more and more about less and less.

Some amazing persons are able to master a tremendous number of subjects and maintain an avidity for all of them. One thinks of Sir William Van Horne, who was an artist, art collector, fossil collector, amateur geologist, musician, magician, horticulturalist, horse breeder, poker player, card trickster, gourmet and probably a few other things. He also found time to build and run a railway and several other companies in sundry industries. Most of us simply do not have that sort of stamina. There is no "right" number of interests for any individual.

It all depends on how many things you can do, and do with a reasonable degree of skill.

Having either too many interests or too few is likely to run down your store of ardour, the first because you know too little about a subject to make it engrossing, the second because repetition becomes boring to all except a few obsessive fanatics. The question for people who become jaded in this way is how to maintain enthusiasm, or how to revive it when it has been lost.

The secret of keeping it alive seems to lie in giving service

One answer might lie in the observation that the most enthusiastic people of any age in any community are those who are most active in community service. The well-springs of enthusiasm appear to be fullest when one is helping others and not always helping oneself.

This is particularly true of community activities having to do with youth, because young people are so naturally enthusiastic. At the height of his phenomenal mental powers, the great Dr. Samuel Johnson said that he liked to be in the company of young people because it tended to keep him from thinking and acting like an old man.

In the workplace, the senior people who maintain the most constant interest in their jobs are those who act as mentors to their younger associates. The most valuable employees in any organization are the senior persons who apply their experience to find realistic ways of putting the big ideas of their younger colleagues into practice. They are also the happiest employees.

Conversely, the most demoralized and least productive units in any industry are those that have fallen under the deadening influence of jaded old hands who spend their working hours thinking up reasons why something can't be done.

As it happens, the young these days have more need than ever for parents, teachers, community workers and other mentors who can cultivate their natural ebullience and direct it into purposeful channels. We live at a time when scepticism, if not outright cynicism, has a heavy influence on the popular mentality. We do not have that faith in the

goodness and ability of man that people had when they were less meticulously well-informed.

We are surrounded by those who "think it vulgar to wonder or to be enthusiastic. They have so much corruption and charlatanism, that they think the credit of all high qualities must be delusive." The English poet Samuel Brydges wrote the above-quoted words in the 1820s, but they could have been written yesterday.

The negativism in the air has had its disheartening influence on the thinking of the young, who after all will be in charge of the future. They may be exceptionally hard-boiled for their age, but they are no less impressionable than any other generation before them. It is therefore important that adults with a positive view of the world do all they can to encourage their ideas, hopes and dreams.

To tap potential creativity is all-important these days

Anyone in the position of counselling the young is capable of either turning on or turning off the energizing force of enthusiasm. Too often, adults may inadvertently turn it off by a careless word, a discouraging example, or an apathetic attitude.

In this age of the put-down, special care should be exercised not to put down the heady aspirations of youth — or of people of any age, for that matter. Better to err of the side of expansiveness when applying the leavening of experience to ambitious ideas than to take the chance that those ideas will never see the light of day.

Senior people in secure positions should also guard against smugness. As the Scottish religious philosopher Thomas Chalmers has pointed out, "enthusiasm is a virtue seldom met with in seasons of calm and unruffled prosperity." It is most in evidence when people have to roll up their sleeves and start building. There was no lack of it in West Germany and Japan as they rose Phoenix-like from the ashes of defeat in World War II to the economic pre-eminence they now enjoy.

Collective enthusiasm of this kind is known as *esprit de corps*. According to no less a military authority than Napoleon, it is the biggest single factor in winning battles. Military units offer an interesting study in the way enthusiasm binds people together and sets them working towards a common objective. It is, of course, highly contagious, and spreads like wildfire through the ranks. Unfortunately, its opposite, demoralization, is just as virulent.

In broad social terms, it is when people share a purpose and work together to fulfil it that progress is made towards providing a better life for the citizenry. These days, progress depends on ideas — on having them and carrying them into effect.

It is almost a cliché in Canada that we can only continue to offer a good life for all of our people through entrepreneurship and innovation. Without a climate of enthusiasm, new enterprises and new ideas are likely to be stillborn.

"To give a fair chance to potential creativity is a matter of life and death for any society. This is all-important, because the outstanding creative ability of a fairly small proportion of the population is mankind's ultimate capital asset, and the only one with which man has been endowed," the historian Arnold Toynbee wrote. Creativity cannot flourish without that extra boost to confidence which enthusiasm provides.

We never know what we can do until we try, whether as individuals or as a society. It is enthusiasm that gives us the energy to try. If people are ever to overcome the immense problems of the world, they must first believe that they are able to do so. Instead of fighting off enthusiasm, we need to fight the power of negative thinking. We should be wary, not of being enthusiastic, but of being cynical. For cynicism has always underestimated the potential for improvement among human beings.