



THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA MONTHLY LETTER

VOL. 51, No. 11

HEAD OFFICE: MONTREAL, NOVEMBER 1970

On being Community-minded

COMMUNITY IS THE REALM within which the life of an individual is realized. We are nonentities at birth, and we only become persons when we acquire status in a group and a conception of our place among our associates.

The good community is one which provides an environment permitting and encouraging and making it possible for the individuals composing it to grow to full maturity, and one which puts to use for social betterment the maturity available in its ranks.

St. Augustine's definition is brief and comprehensive: a group, large or small, of people united by agreement as to the things they love. Such a group will set up standards to be aimed at, choose leaders to give point to its actions, debate plans, collaborate, co-operate and participate.

One great benefit in belonging to a community is that we are not alone. From the beginning of life the human being seeks to belong, to be enfolded, accepted, made a member of. Though a man were so self-centred as to seek only his own good, he must admit nevertheless that the interests of the community are his own interests.

Even Henry David Thoreau, sometimes extolled as an example of a man living alone, needed help. A neighbour loaned Thoreau an axe with which to cut trees for the house he built on another man's land; some loaned him tools to mortice and tenon the logs; others helped him to raise the frame; another gave him seed corn for his first planting; he "dined out occasionally" with his neighbours.

What is a community?

A community may be briefly defined as a society in which the ideal life of all its members is promoted as efficiently as possible. It is a way of life, not merely houses, stores and streets. Its people enjoy feelings of security, pride, self-respect and hope. It has many different interests: spiritual, cultural, political, business, industrial, educational and social. It may have a number of problems, like shabby housing, inadequate street lighting, overcrowded schools and

hospitals, and low health standards, but the good community is correcting these through re-development, conservation, industrial expansion, rising standards of living, racial harmony, and ever-widening ideals of what may be. It takes the wants and aspirations of its people and writes them in terms of action.

What is needed to build a community of this sort? People must be eager and willing to work co-operatively toward solving their common problems; they must make use of the potential resources existing in the community; and they must learn together how to use these resources to their greatest advantage.

Being community-minded is not a folksy experiment. It is mature collaboration with like-minded people who are determined to lead happy social lives.

There is no fact in life more definite than this: man is a gregarious animal, dependent for life and well-being upon mingling with others of his kind. This need is met in various ways, in the family, in the apartment building, in the street of adjoining houses. In a small way, the community spirit is displayed by the children who do not care who is marble champion of the world but are excitedly interested in who is the best marble shooter on the block.

There is real personal meaning to be found in community activities like meetings that get things done or provide information, sports or crafts groups that provide an outlet for skills, study programmes that enlarge minds and broaden horizons, and special events that help people to know their neighbours better. In a community you learn the fun of living a normal self-expressing life, and you do not feel the need for jet-set jollities.

A sense of progress

A healthy community does not remain static. Changes in environmental conditions, changes in aspirations, and changes in the people making up the community require modification of plans and sometimes change of objectives. "One of the things that you learn from history," said Frank Underhill in *Values in Conflict*, "is that every generation of men

is always going through a period of painful, critical, and destructive transition." The art of community living is to maintain a basic code and to be fearless in revising it so as to serve enlightened reason.

People who are wholly absorbed in maintaining a status they believe is necessary to their lives do not contribute meaningfully to community living. They are, like hens, too busy observing the pecking order in which each bird is pecked by those above her and pecks those below.

Social status in a community is a crude measure by which to judge the worth of citizens, and no one should be distressed by its shallow appraisals. We recall the advice of Epictetus: "Is anyone preferred before you at an entertainment, or in confidential intercourse? If these things are good, you ought to rejoice that he has them; and if they are evil, do not be grieved that you have them not."

To belong to any class, to move in any rank of life, is not a very exclusive distinction or test of refinement. It is well if a man can enhance his reputation by the splendour of his house, but the master ought to bring honour to his fine house, and not the fine house to bring honour to its master. Ideally, the community will judge a person on his individual accomplishments, his demonstration of responsibility, and his personal worth.

Enterprise is needed to build and preserve the community in which people can realize their highest ambitions. The quiet, stable pattern of the small community has been severely shaken by the increase in mobility and the expansion in communication. The back-and-forth tide of hundreds of thousands of persons to work makes people discontented with the emptiness of life aboard commuter trains and buses and in crowded streets and buildings. But in his community a man leaves the anonymity of the city and becomes a person, intimately associated with his neighbours and keenly sensible of his dignity and worth.

Community problems

There are some disruptive problems that interfere with good community living. Many of these have not yet made themselves felt in Canada, because our citizens realize that the Canadian people have come from many different lands, and that the future of Canada as a good place to live depends upon all of them working together.

People who are making the most of community living will have respect for human personality unprejudiced by qualities of race, colour, class, creed or national origin. The same yearning is expressed in the folk and patriotic songs of all the more than thirty ethnic groups represented in Canada's population: for peace and for better living. The words and music may differ, but the longing for personal fulfilment and the desire for rewarding association with neighbours run through them all. Every one has something to contribute to the enjoyment and cultural development of all.

Why should not every community have flags of all the nations from which its residents come, to fly at the municipal hall on anniversary days? This would recognize the diversity of the contribution made by all citizens, Canadians now, but with varied backgrounds.

Social control

It is not sufficient that the members of the community be conscientious in seeking to do what is right: there must be rules clearly defined and well observed. The exhortation "Love thy neighbour as thyself" is so broad, and is apt to seem so vague, that it has to be supplemented, for practical daily living, by more particular rules of conduct. If certain laws were not spelled out and enforced, society would soon revert to the jungle and anarchy.

The essence and foundation of the community is the fact that every member voluntarily renounces his freedom in certain directions in return for the advantages which he expects from association with the other members of his community. He joins with his neighbours in appointing judges, policemen, and others as if to say: "When I am difficult, please kick me into line."

Laws are necessary so that people can live and work in reasonable harmony and gain the benefits of cooperative action. Citizens have rights, but every right brings an obligation with it. This is true not only in the obvious sense that when one man has a right other men are under an obligation to respect it, but also in the more subtle sense that when a man has a right he is thereby laid under obligation to employ it for the general good.

In a paper entitled "Defiance of Law", Leonard E. Read, President of the Foundation for Economic Education, New York, has this to say: "Man is a social as well as an individualistic being. An agency, representing the social side of man — government — is, to my way of thinking, an absolute necessity. It is unthinkable that the social phase of human beings can be attended to by each individual acting as his own gun-toting constable, each a law unto himself, nothing over and beyond personal caprice. . . . I have been cast into a dual role, an individual within society, be that society good, bad, or indifferent. And its problems are no less mine than anyone else's. To run away from social responsibility is as devolutionary as to renounce self-responsibility."

Community institutions

Social control is exercised by numerous agencies whose chief object is other than to regulate society generally. They help to fashion ideas on social matters and to mould the lives of people according to patterns that are generally approved. In this list we find families, churches, lodges, clubs, and countless others. These institutions furnish the individual with a routine of life, patterns of expected behaviour by which he will

be judged, and objectives and ambitions toward which he may strive.

Members are usually attracted to an institution because its stated objectives have meaning for them. Any institution will function effectively only in so far as it provides the possibility of participation by individual members and the possibility that they may experience some satisfying consequences of their own action through group participation.

The institution of the family has undergone change in recent years as more and more of its functions have been taken over by groups outside the home, and the diversity of interests increasingly available leads parents and children in different directions. Yet the family unit still provides the opportunity for sharing a wide variety of experiences and for developing the discernment of values and the sagacity that children need as they widen and diversify their contacts in the community.

Our religious institutions are powerful forces for developing goodwill in the troubled world. All the great faiths teach the dignity of the human soul and set up ideals which profoundly influence people and help them to practise the simple virtues. Their beliefs and their emphasis upon trust, hope and love are strong assets toward the development of good citizenship.

In addition to law and the institutions we have convention and custom to make life comfortable. The effective functioning of a community depends upon the presence of patterns for reciprocal behaviour between individuals and groups. Good Canadianism includes the practice of the simple courtesies, those social amenities which make life run more pleasantly; those niceties which enable us to show respect, deference, appreciation and goodwill.

Conventions are traditional generalities concerning right, wrong, duties, privileges and taboos handed down in society as an aid to living comfortably together. There is a fable about certain porcupines who huddled together for warmth on a cold day, but as they began to prick one another with their quills they were obliged to disperse. The cold drove them together again, when just the same thing happened. At last, they discovered that they would be best off by remaining at a little distance from one another. In human society, those who transgress the code of politeness and fine manners are told to "keep their distance."

About participation

One of the finest experiences in living is liking people and wanting to share actively with them in the human enterprise. When we worship with others, or feel compassion for others; when we meet to enjoy music; when we join with neighbours to reason things out, to pursue ideas, to help the weak, to honour the noble, to co-operate in building a better world, our behaviour is worthy of our status as human beings.

The most useful community activities are those which keep individuals in the stream of life. This stimulates continual learning, so that the accumulated wisdom of advancing years will be strengthened by a growth in concepts suited to changing social, economic and political conditions. It is the horror of emptiness, of lack of purpose, far more than any economic privation or political injustice, that drives people to seek revolutionary change.

One way to pool the experience and thinking of citizens is to gather them together to explore possibilities and discuss plans. Those who participate and make suggestions will feel a responsibility to ensure appropriate action. But the proposed programme must have a purpose clearly stated and understood. Only people who feel involved will give up their favourite television programmes to attend a meeting.

To be effective, a community-building meeting must make sure that it gives justice and courtesy to all who participate. It must show willingness to consider the point of view of minorities while having respect for the decisions of the majority. To discuss a thing means more than just talking about it. It means to examine it in detail, to debate, to sift. Tossing an idea around in group discussion helps to formulate it clearly, so that the group can decide with some assurance whether this is a solid project for the community, whether it can be handled at this time, whether the citizens can deal with it or should refer it to some authority, and what its priority is.

Every project needs a leader, and everyone in the community has a practical stake of the most concrete kind in whatever leadership exists. Ideas about leadership have become blurred because so many people insist on accepting the superficial signs of leadership rather than the proved evidence of ability. They take the pompous manner, the blustering voice, or other platform trappings, as evidence that the possessor of these characteristics has the more basic requirements also. Competent leadership raises group thinking to a level above the average. Its true function is to bring out people's best thought and effort, and to unite their activities in a common purpose.

Co-operation

To accomplish anything worthwhile, people must work together with similar principles and objectives. Marcus Aurelius, the philosopher-king, wrote: "We are made for co-operation, like feet, like hands, like eyelids." True co-operation is such harmony as makes all the particular parts, different as they may seem to us, to concur in the general welfare of the community.

Discussion and planning lead to action. Man's mission is to live with all the ardour of which he is capable.

Action is expressed along many lines. It may foster and aid movements which aim at enhancing culture; it may stimulate a genuine spirit of democracy and tolerance; it may give to youth the hope and confidence

in life that have been shaken by the present world disorganization; it may restore the sense of belonging to people who live in an age of specialization and consequent isolation.

At the heart of the small community are the many voluntary organizations which devote themselves to service. Their members are inspired by the maxim that life means contribution. They believe, with Dr. William W. Mayo, that a man with unusual physical strength or unusual intellectual capacity or special skill owes something to the people. He should put at his neighbours' disposal the fruits of his knowledge, the results of his studying, his talent and his skill.

In a large society many people are going to get hurt through no special fault of their own, and it is a duty, not a charity, for the more fortunate to do what they can to help. There is something valid in *noblesse oblige* — "my position demands it of me". No worthy citizens wish it to be asked of them accusingly in the words of the prophet Jeremiah, "Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by?"

The good citizen

Membership in a community involves a measure of commitment. We can never escape from our role as members of the human race, not even by pleading helplessness; not by saying that nothing we can do will make any difference; not by pleading that our moral responsibilities are limited because after all we are only the evolutionary culmination of a line of apes that chanced to descend from the trees; not by moping in our private corner as Homer tells us in the *Iliad* that Achilles did, sulking in his tent until a battle was nearly lost and his friend had been killed.

If the risks of becoming involved in action for the community welfare are great, so are the rewards, for it is one of the basic facts of human life that the un-given self is the unfulfilled self.

The good citizen will get to know his neighbours and take part with them in the life of the community; while aiding and supporting the religious institution of his choice, he will give people of another religion the same consideration as he expects; he will have self-respect, and will live in such a way as to enjoy the respect of other people; he will get to know the important problems that face his representatives in municipal, provincial and federal governments, and use this knowledge when he goes to vote; he will try to make his home a credit to the neighbourhood.

Citizen knowledge, interest, and action are the life-blood of our democratic society. A well-informed citizen will not be misled into supporting shoddy causes; he will avoid the credulity and short-sightedness of mob thinking which are the beginning of mania, panic, fanaticism, delusion and violence.

Those in authority in the community and its institutions owe it to the citizen to provide him with information about their purposes and plans. It might be feasible to transplant the Ombudsman idea to the

community by setting up a central service providing information about where to apply for help in solving problems, coping with crises and starting something designed to improve the community.

The schools could be made centres of intellectual stimulation. Adult education should be one of the chief interests of every community. It will enlarge the thinking ability and the capacity for rational action of citizens. It will give them a realistic understanding of what the Canadian way of life is and how it can be lived in such a way as to yield the greatest benefits.

A citizens' council has been found by many communities to be an effective instrument to provide a way for citizens to participate in the shaping of community life, to promote co-operation among organizations and institutions, to enable the entire community to marshal all of its forces toward confronting and solving problems, to interest, develop and prepare citizens to take their place as community leaders, and to provide the machinery through which people can speak out for constructive change.

The good community

The good community is more than the sum of its members. It can be the author of ideas that the same people acting alone would never think of. Members of the good community develop sympathies with one another. They weave together many small threads of interest in a fabric of relations which tends toward the ideal life for everyone.

Here are some points by which to judge whether a community is fulfilling its function with respect to the individuals in it. If it is failing in any, that gives the good citizen an opportunity to initiate a movement toward improvement. The community structure should provide: the possibility for personal development; the certainty of a reliable environment, free from anxiety and menace; the opportunity for a citizen to extend the range of his experience through co-operative effort directed toward the better life; and the assurance of the respect and affection of neighbours.

There is no doubt concerning the trend toward disintegration of modern society. It is assailed on one side by all sorts of ideological propaganda, while on the other it is unsure of itself, vague about its goals and uncertain about how to go about remedying the situation.

As the atomic scientists have told us, it must be one world or none. It must be a peaceful world with people helping one another or it will eventually cease to be a decent place in which to live.

The world community is the sum of all its small communities, and it cannot be created unless we conserve the values of the intimate neighbourhood.

These values include the affection that comes only with the intimacy of working together in a good purpose, the appreciation of personality, the supremacy of integrity, and the sense of interdependence.