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The Social Challenge of Old Age

A new problem in human experience has appeared in our Western World: the rapidly growing number of older people in our population. So far as is known, no culture in history has ever had such a high proportion of people past middle age.

The problem is made up principally of four factors: economic, social, medical and personal.

Every one of us desires to live long, yet not to be old. But aging is inseparable from life. The process has been taking place within our bodies from the day we were born. It is gradual and continuous, though we do not all age in the same way or equally fast. As in a steeplechase, the horses are nicely bunched at the starting gate, but during the second lap those that have not yet fallen are strung out in a line.

This *Monthly Letter* is not concerned with prescriptions designed to lengthen life, but with what can be done toward making fullest and happiest use of the years that we have.

Every announcement about the increased span of life has significant personal meaning for us. Only total lack of imagination can excuse us if we fail to identify our own future fate with the present fate of the aged.

There is imperative need for social recognition of the problems presented by our older population. But relative to the research and tender care lavished on infants and adolescents, appallingly little has been done.

The killers of youth, the contagious diseases, have been largely eliminated, only to be replaced by a set of chronic or degenerative diseases for which few specific cures have been found. Mental diseases, which seem to multiply with age under the stresses of our civilization, are not sufficiently cared for by present rehabilitation centres, nursing homes and home care plans. Unemployment problems, which hardly existed in our century-ago world, are pressing upon thousands of persons who still have years of satisfactory work

within their power. Socially, the aged are estranged. They are no longer the heads of households of two or three generations. Family organization today leaves no room for them.

How old is "old"?

Before deciding where we can draw the line at which old age starts, let us look at the chronological ages of Canadians.

The Biblical figure of three score years and ten was an enormous life extension figure in that era when average life expectancy was not more than thirty years. A century ago (in 1840) the life expectancy of an infant was about 48 years. A recent estimate of the life expectancy of males in Canada was 67.6 years, and of females 73 years.

As to the future, interesting figures are given in the study made by the Royal Commission on Canada's Economic Prospects. In 1955 there were 1,730,000 persons in Canada aged 60 years and over: it is estimated that by 1980 the number will be 3,345,000, an increase of 93 per cent.

There we have the cold statistical figures. In twenty years we shall have 1,615,000 more men and women aged 60 or higher than we had five years ago.

But when we are dealing with human beings we cannot depend wholly upon statistics. Dependence upon strict chronological age can have no real meaning. All that can recommend it is the administrative convenience of its application.

The question "How old is 'old'?" should be rewritten: "Old — with respect to what performance?"

Our difficulty is that many of the adjustment problems of aging result not from declining capacities but from social rules requiring the individual to give up certain forms of participation when he reaches a prescribed age. He is expected to behave in terms of what society has defined as proper for his age-sex category without regard for his needs or capacities.

If we are to handle the new problem of age so as to do the best for people and for society, we need to use common sense in our rule-making. To point up the matter lightly, consider that there may be forty or fifty years variation in being "too old to work" depending on whether the person is a prize fighter, a ball player, a piano tuner, a company president, a lawyer or a plasterer.

Age is a condition that is not measurable by years, but by attributes. A life should be appraised on the level of attributes — what qualities has a person — rather than by the crude quantity measurement of the calendar — how long has he lived. A survey reported in *Industry* a few years ago pointed out that 64 per cent of the world's great achievements have been accomplished by men who had passed their sixtieth year. Johann Von Goethe, who was 20 when he started his great dramatic poem and 83 when he finished it, put these words into the mouth of Faust: "I am too old to trifle, too young, no yearning wish to nurse."

There is ample evidence that the years have little enough to do with initiative, determination, daring and accomplishment. Not rarely the triumphal course of a man starts at an age when the average person retires from business into idleness.

Brains that are used hourly in creative activity associated with business building or scientific research or the development of society do not deteriorate. Many of them give proof that intellectual power can be intensified and energy increased as the years pass.

The value of older persons

One of the problems of an aging population is to retain in the stream of economic productivity and scientific discovery those men and women whose wealth of knowledge, wisdom and constructive work can contribute so greatly to the welfare of Canada. As Schopenhauer put it in his essay on "The Ages of Life": the first forty years furnish the text, while the remaining thirty supply the commentary without which the text cannot be properly understood.

Even if the circumstances of a man's employment make it impracticable for him to remain in his job after pensionable age — for example, because some younger men are coming along behind him — that need not mean the end of the road for him. There are many jobs available to experienced men — jobs where the pressure from younger men seeking promotion is not felt.

The cult of youth

But, generally, our society as it is today does not award age the credit due to it.

This is a time of the cult of youth. On the whole, our society on this continent is organized to satisfy the wants of the young, and makes relatively little provision for meeting the needs of the aged.

In our literature, our advertising, and most other sectors of our culture, youth is looked upon as the golden age to which all else must be sacrificed. This, in addition to threatening to pamper youth into unripe manhood, creates undue hardship for the aged. The old are sometimes tolerated, but too seldom valued. They are pushed off the bustling main road, and find few side roads provided for their happiness.

With the heavy accent on caring for children, there is slight emphasis upon any reciprocal obligation. Parents are reluctant to assert demands even when urgent need arises. Children are completely unaware of any obligation; indeed, their upbringing leads them to think of older persons as existing only for the satisfaction of the needs and wants of young people.

Learning to grow old

For their own good, as well as for the happiness of those who are now aged, young people should start learning how to grow old. There is no season of life for which preparation is more necessary. There is no preparation that can be more rewarding.

Every phase of life is a making ready for the one which follows it. Just as what we learn during childhood determines the success or failure of our adulthood, so does our development in middle-life decide the nature of our old age.

In the realm of the physical, repeated insults to the human machine in earlier life, such as infections, injuries, strains, chronic malnutrition, alcoholism, drug addiction, obesity, shock, and emotional turbulence, cause changes in the body cells which are conducive to aging.

In the realm of ideas, education continued year by year will tend to limit the wrong thoughts, the unhealthy prejudices and the wild cravings that wear out or warp the mind.

And in the social realm continuous learning about aging will give us understanding about those who are already aged, so that when our turn comes we shall be fit and ready.

We need a programme for continuing education, beginning in public school and carrying on through adulthood: education that will help us to find new and pleasant things to do in widely separated areas of life. It will keep our minds supple, learning to live in accord with the changing social, economic and political times. It will train us to weigh relative values, so as to get the best return for our time. Continuing

education will enlarge our capacity to find our place today and tomorrow, to win the right to prolonged participation and recognition.

On acting your age

There is a very fine saying of Voltaire's to the effect that every age of life has its own peculiar mental character, and that a man will feel completely unhappy if his mind is not in accordance with his years.

It is true that if we do not wish to feel the weight of our years we must look forward instead of backward. It is silly to try to continue acting as we did five years ago. All living implies a growth, then a peak, and then a decline. The change from one stage to another makes certain types of behaviour impossible or inadvisable if life is to be maintained. Every period of life has its own emotional experiences. There are times of depression, just as there are times of elation, which it were foolishness to dwell upon.

The hardest part of aging is adaptation, we are told; adaptation to the changes in our individual situations and to the expectations of society.

To keep step with the progress of the years and to accept each phase of life as it comes is to live in harmony with nature. The great scientists, historians and philosophers agree that life on earth has always been and is one continuous, never-ceasing, process of readjustment.

What are the distinguishing attributes of various age groups? Youth is marked by resiliency, strength and mobility. Maturity shows balance, precision and achievement. The good qualities of old age are thoroughness, steadiness, dependability and wisdom.

One thing remains irrevocably fixed: our allotment of time at 65 is just what it was at 15 — twenty-four hours a day. It behooves us to use every twenty-four hours in accord with the wisdom we have picked up along the way.

The wants of life

The wants of life differ at various stages of the journey. A youth wants employment, knowledge, power, wife and children, honour and fame; he has spiritual wants, aesthetic wants and civil wants. One by one, day after day, he learns to coin his wishes into realities. Insofar as he succeeds, he enters old age without ferment, serene of thought and behaviour.

Youth is not a wholly happy time. Youths live amid a rabble of passions. They are tormented by the want of correspondence between things and thoughts. Michelangelo's head is so full of conceptions of gigantic figures that he is fiercely unhappy until his chisel can render them out of marble.

In late life the excitements have waned and the arduous have cooled. We seek physical health and comfort, affection, recognition, a chance to express our interests, and emotional security.

Were these wants easier to satisfy in bygone years? In a patriarchal society the old fitted into the picture almost perfectly. They were able to perform necessary services, such as caring for the flock or herd, fashioning utensils and tools, spinning and sewing. Their hands retained their cunning to the end. Their skill and counsel helped in the struggle of the family and the tribe for the good things of life.

We cannot hope that our surroundings should be as they were yesterday and that they should remain so. With the heightened tempo of life, the growth of cities, and the swift plunge from an economy based on agriculture to the factory system and mass production, the aged have been made more economically insecure. Questions which did not even arise in a Canada of large families have become pressing problems in our metropolitan apartment-house civilization. The trained aptitudes of youth have, very often, put on the shelf the skills of the aged.

We may hope that the disregard seen in our society for the health, social and economic demands of life in its later years is a temporary, transitional phenomenon. It will be so if people now in their middle years see to it that the young are educated in understanding and sympathy, and that what can be done by church, community, industry and government is done at once to meet the needs of our aged people. By proper means, earnestly pursued, society and machines can be adapted to gray-haired men, and gray-haired men and women can be adapted to society and to machines.

Interested imaginative effort is needed, worthy of the best thought of our institutions, our parliamentarians, our social workers, our service clubs, and everyone who considers seriously his own well-being, the welfare of the country and the development of our culture.

Making the best of today

That is all very well for the future, some may say, but we have many thousands who have already entered upon old age, which should be a golden age, and have found it a dark age. Their children — and other young people — talk "over" or "through" them as if they aren't there. They are taken for granted.

Life is intensely real to the aged. The fictions are gone. They want, above all, to know where they stand. Dr. J. L. Gillin remarks in *Social Pathology*; "As one grows older, the craving for response formerly satisfied

in friendship between those of the same sex, and love between the sexes, changes to a desire for gratitude and love from one's children or from those who owe something to one's efforts. How many are the tragedies of the old which grow out of the failure to secure such a response!"

These are not days in which the generality of humanity indulges liberally in service to others. We blame the pace of life, the shortness of time, the demands of duty, and other things, for our neglect of the samaritan acts really natural to us, but suppressed.

Here is an opportunity for those advanced in years. Dr. Hans Selye says wisely in his book *The Stress of Life*: "neither wealth, nor force, nor any other instrument of power can ever be more reliable in assuring our security and peace of mind than the knowledge of having inspired gratitude in a great many people."

No longer hurried and confused by the headlong rush of life, we are able to look around and distinguish the real from the artificial, the excellent from the customary. Now is the time to put into personal practice all that you have learned about how to live, and to express in a continuing way your goodwill toward others. By putting into daily practice the basic principle of the Golden Rule you will find that you have not merely alleviated a present ill, but have transformed it.

This does not mean that one should go around the family or neighbours giving advice. Lord Chesterfield cautioned his son in words like these: "Wear your learning, like your watch, in a private pocket, and do not pull it out merely to show you have it. If you are asked what o'clock it is, tell it; but do not proclaim it hourly and unasked." Don't brag about what you did when you were young, or boast about what you would do today if you were not old.

If there is one quality more than another that marks maturity, it is the quality of awareness. You will, when you are on the lookout for it, sense the moment when your advice and counsel would be fitting and useful; you will be aware, too, of the times when the weight of your years' experience would be a strain on good relations.

Take it easy: don't quit

The time has come to lower sails and gather in the lines. When the sheet is slackened, the ship loses way, fails to maintain its speed, and so takes more time to finish its course.

A clumsy sailor, of course, may "slack off the sheet" too soon. The easy chair has become a source of calamity for people past sixty. It requires no effort to become a sitter. We readily get into the way of shunning exercise.

To "kill time", said Abbé Ernest Dimnet, is the most sacrilegious phrase in modern languages. There are still fine, strange things to be found, and regardless of what is found the search itself is fun. Think up something you want, or want to know. If you are at a loose end for interests, do as a child without toys does: make some. Pitkin advised men in that state to write down a dozen things they had thought of at various times in their lives that they would like to do, and then to try them one by one insofar as their strength and funds allow.

The wisest investment of time lies in creative activities. Hobbies can be boring, transient, things if they do not involve imagination and doing. To design and build a doll house for a granddaughter out of an orange crate; to make a railway system for a grandson out of wire soldered on ties cut with a penknife; to write the story of your life as an inspiration to your children and their children; to prepare an anthology of the great thoughts that you have come upon; to teach Boy Scouts or Girl Guides what they need to know in order to earn a proficiency badge in your profession or trade: these, and hundreds of other activities such as church work, community service, coaching in drama or art, managing a team of boys or girls in a sport you know and like — all these hold out promise of full and happy years.

Keep an open mind

The most difficult thing is to keep the mind from slowly going closed in the face of every-day undramatic happenings. Mental rigidity and stagnation are not the fated conditions of old age. Alfred North Whitehead said "I would make some of this advanced education compulsory, and keep up the process of education to the age of ninety".

To make it possible for older people to keep on learning is the job of those who govern our educational institutions. Schools can go some distance in making buildings and facilities available for the use of older people. Adult education can attune itself, not to filling in gaps in education, but to opening opportunities for self-expression and self-realization, while giving people guidance so that they can steer through the shifting currents of changing times.

Youth is a heap of beginnings; age a handful of achievements; but age gives us no time to dote or dream. Life is still a grand adventure, a fine show. The trick is to look at it and play in it at the same time.

The vital secret of happiness in old age is to keep moving. And, who knows, some work of noble note may yet be done. Do not forget the hands of the aged: they have touched much of life and have become sensitive and sympathetic.