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Life Without Literacy

Illiteracy is a scourge of humankind, breeding misery and detracting from justice and democracy. Can we continue to underestimate it and not do all we can about it, in Canada or wherever it blights peoples' minds?

Imagine what it would be like if every fifth person on earth were afflicted with a disease that left him or her permanently disabled. Obviously the media would be full of news and comment about it, researchers would be working tirelessly to find a cure for it, funds would be pouring forth to aid victims of it, and mammoth international information campaigns would be launched to check its spread.

Well, according to Federico Mayor, director-general of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), upwards of 1 billion adults are unable to read or write, which handicaps them just as surely as if they had a physical impairment. The reason this scourge does not provoke more action is that it is not readily visible. Instead of restricting the use of peoples' eyes, ears or limbs, illiteracy restricts the use of their minds.

A billion is a difficult number to digest. It represents 40 times Canada's present population. The immensity of such a figure robs it of its meaning in basic human terms.

No long row of zeros can convey the hopelessness of an intelligent young man in a Third World country who pushes a hand cart in a bazaar, and knows that he will continue to push a hand cart until he is immobilized by age or illness. His inability to read disqualifies him for anything but the most punishing kind of physical labour. He has no time to learn to read because, merely to subsist, he must work 14 hours a day.

The UN's estimate that more than 100 million children are without access to schools is another figure too enormous to contemplate unless it is reduced to the personal level. It is natural for parents anywhere to want the best for their children: think of never being able to give a child an education because no school

is available, and not being able to teach that child at home because you cannot read yourself.

Of course illiteracy is considered normal in many parts of the world, but that does nothing to relieve the desolation of talented and spirited individuals who are intellectually imprisoned by their surroundings. Boys and girls growing up in Third World villages have their dreams like their counterparts in more affluent environments, but without the essential tools of education and communication, there is little chance that they can ever come close to making those dreams come true.

Millions upon millions of people are caught up in class and caste restrictions which make reading and writing seem irrelevant. It is taken for granted that people are born to follow their parents' and ancestors' occupations. They usually start to work at an early age without ever entering school.

In economies where the bulk of the work is done by hand and trade is spread over a multitude of small-scale artisans and merchants, it is possible to at least survive without reading or writing. To an outsider, the unlettered classes in underdeveloped lands may appear to be quite contented. Why then attempt to promote literacy in places where it is not among the highest priorities?

Perhaps the simplest and yet strongest reason was expressed by the 19th century British writer and statesman Thomas Carlyle: "That there should be one man die ignorant when he had the capacity for knowledge, this I call a tragedy." People are bound to remain ignorant if they cannot read and write, because literacy is the key to learning almost any subject beyond a rudimentary stage.

This means that illiterates are prevented from making the most of life, since education sets a person free

to seek self-fulfilment. More important, it means that they are blocked off from contributing a full measure of their intelligence and talent to the general good of their communities. In cultures which discourage education among females, half or more of the people are disallowed from doing all they can to benefit their fellow human beings.

When one considers how many advances in civilization have been made over the centuries by the tiny minority that traditionally could read and write, one wonders just how far the human race might have

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progressed by now if most of the earth's inhabitants had possessed the faculty to cultivate ideas through reading and express them in the portable and lasting form of writing. How

many potential Platos or Shakespeares or Einsteins might be living at this very moment amongst what the pioneer literacy advocate Frank Laubach called "The Silent Billion?" Is there a boy or girl somewhere out there where there are no schools who might have the ability to find a cure for cancer — or for hate?

We shall never know what might have been accomplished if the great bulk of the human race had not been shackled by an inability to absorb knowledge and communicate ideas. What we *do* know is that this mass intellectual handicap exacts a terrible price.

"Illiteracy kills," as the head of the Organization for World Literacy, Carlos Murtore, recently said. The transmission of AIDS and other contagious diseases, disease-breeding insanitation, unproductive or destructive agricultural practices, overpopulation — all these blights on the underdeveloped world are perpetuated by the inability to communicate effectively with people who cannot be reached by written words.

The havoc wrought by illiteracy normally comes in a round-about way, but it can sometimes be grimly straightforward. For instance, India's Central Road Research Institute has traced a high proportion of the 40,000-plus fatal traffic accidents in that country every year to the fact that approximately 99 per cent of Indian truck drivers cannot read traffic signs.

In declaring 1990 International Literacy Year, UNESCO's Mr. Mayor called it a "collective shame" that so many people should be consigned to the darkness of ignorance in the closing decade of a century which was supposed to have been enlightened. The shame is compounded by the fact that illiteracy is not inevitable: it is a preventable and correctable state.

Given the opportunity and motivation, the vast

majority of the world's illiterate people could be taught to read, write, and do arithmetic. Thanks to modern teaching techniques, even those with learning disabilities can become fully literate and "numerate," meaning being able to count and calculate.

Why aren't they, then? The excuse most often offered is that resources are scarce: there are not enough teachers, not enough classrooms, there is not enough money. The horrifying thing is that, while there is never enough money to educate people, there always seems to be plenty of money around the world for arms to kill and maim them. In some places, youngsters are likely to pick up a gun or a fire bomb before they ever pick up a book.

Nevertheless, Third World nations do face barriers to general literacy which are embedded in economics and political and cultural tradition. In a relatively rich and advanced country such as Canada, there is no excuse at all for widespread illiteracy.

Yet shockingly enough, well-grounded research has shown that the incidence of illiteracy in this country is approximately the same as the estimated world average — at least one in every five adults. An extensive study by the Southam News group in 1987 revealed that a minimum of 24 per cent of Canadians aged 18 or over were functionally illiterate in English or French, and/or unable to do simple arithmetic.

This was more than double previous estimates by the federal government, which assumed for official purposes that anyone with nine years' schooling or more could read, write, and count adequately. If that assumption was ever correct, it certainly is no longer: more than one-third of the illiterates turned up by the Southam survey were high school graduates.

The survey recognized that literacy is a relative state: greater knowledge is required to get along in the sophisticated milieu of Canada than in places where there is less call for reading. It concentrated on the ability to use written material effectively enough to function in Canadian society today.

Researchers interviewed a cross-section of some 3,000 Canadian residents in their homes and gave them a test which included such seemingly easy acts as finding the correct dosage on a cough syrup bottle, circling the expiry date on a driver's licence, picking out the long distance charges on a telephone bill, and calculating the change on a restaurant bill. When the results were projected

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into the total population, they indicated that at least 4.5 million Canadians, and possibly as many as 5 mil-

lion, lacked the language and numeracy skills necessary to keep up fully with the demands of everyday life.

The Canadian statistics, like those of the world as a whole, blanket a great deal of individual misery. Again and again, the people interviewed said that no fully literate person could imagine the frustration and humiliation that goes with not being able to read, write or count. It often results in abject heartbreak. One woman blamed her divorce on the gap in understanding between a husband who could read and a wife who could not.

For most of us, living as an illiterate person in a developed country today would be like having a nightmare, groping in the dark, running smack into walls, being convinced that everyone around us is sneering at our clumsiness and confusion. Illiterate men and women have trouble doing things which most of never give a second thought: finding addresses, looking up telephone numbers, paying bills, taking buses, shopping. Asked why he didn't get a job, one man explained that he couldn't read the help-wanted ads in a newspaper. If he did find an opening, he said, he couldn't fill out the application form.

Illiteracy in Canada is a more painful condition than in less-developed societies because here, it carries a social stigma. It is commonly seen as a mark of laziness or stupidity in a country where, theoretically at least, everybody has a chance to attend and stay for a reasonable length of time in school.

In fact, the disgraceful illiteracy rate in Canada owes much to a significantly higher drop-out rate than in comparable countries like West Germany, Sweden and the United States. Almost 30 per cent of present-day Canadian youths never finish high school, roughly twice the percentage in the U.S.

More than half of a representative group of Canadian drop-outs aged 18 to 24 said in recent interviews that they had quit school out of lack of interest in education, a desire to take a job, or boredom. Apparently it never occurred to those who left without adequate reading skills how boring it would be never to read an entertaining book.

Those who do drop out before they learn to read soon find that the society treats them at best as clowns and at worst as pariahs. To Canadians in general, being illiterate is something to be embarrassed about, like having been in jail.

Illiterate people therefore go to strenuous lengths to hide their disability. They get friends and family members to look up information, fill out forms and so forth. They resort to subterfuges like pretending they forgot their glasses at home when faced with having to read something, and always ordering "the spe-

cial" in restaurants without knowing what it is.

A fair percentage of Canadian illiterates have learned to cope so well with these stratagems that they see no need for remedial training. But the time when an illiterate person could expect to lead a fairly untroubled life is fading fast.

Reading is becoming "a must" in more and more occupations, from farming to working in a laundry with computerized washing machines. Industry has become the domain of the written word, whether on computer screens or paper. Every time a modern industrial worker turns around, it seems, there are more manuals to scan, more electronic "prompts" to respond to, more notes to write, more forms to fill out.

Along with outright illiteracy, semi-literacy has become a matter of growing concern among Canadian employers. They find that high school and university graduates cannot write simple memos or work with alphabetical files. This is happening at a time when Canada has never had more need of an alert, adaptable, and thoroughly competent work force to hold its own in the free-for-all of international trade in the age of high technology.

Functional illiteracy is estimated to cost Canadian business \$4 billion a year in errors, retraining, work-related accidents, and foregone productivity. Every time someone mistakes the meaning of an instruction or botches a shipping order, our international competitiveness suffers just that infinitesimal little bit more.

In the interests of competitiveness, Canadian industry has been re-equipping with ever more advanced technology. As a result, the number of jobs for skilled and educated workers is rising, while the number of jobs in which workers are not expected to read is shrinking drastically.

The instinctive reaction to Canada's poor performance in the international literacy stakes is to blame the educational system. But it must be remembered

The only permanent defence is to create a 'literate environment'

that schools today play a non-educational role imposed on them by society. Youngsters who years ago would have been held back a grade because of language deficiencies now qualify for

"social promotion" so that they can keep up with their age group. Schools are expected to deal with motivational and behavioural problems which were formerly addressed in students' homes.

The problem is not so much one of education as of attitudes, habits and values. "Literacy is something



that begins at home," Lynn McAlpine, program director of adult education at McGill University, said in a recent interview with the *Montreal Gazette*. "If children don't see reading at home it becomes part of the school culture, not the home culture. It isn't a natural part of living." The best advice the experts can give to parents who worry that their children might grow up with inadequate language skills is to read to them and read along with them. That way, they are introduced early to the delights of reading. They see it as a pleasure, not a chore.

If Canada is to face up to the stern demands of the competitive age, the cultivation of literacy must spread through the culture in general. The only permanent defence against illiteracy is to create what one expert calls "a literate environment," in which reading and writing are prized not for economic reasons, but for their own sake. Just as we aim for a high standard of living, so we should aim for a high standard of literacy. The two, after all, are connected to a large degree.

The low value hitherto placed on literacy in this country has serious implications politically and socially. In effect, the illiterate portion of our citizenry is deprived of an effective voice in the democratic process, simply because people who cannot communicate on paper are unable to promote their own best interests politically. Illiteracy also breeds grievous social problems. Those knocked out of the mainstream by their disability are more likely than most to turn to drug and alcohol abuse and crime.

The public perception of illiteracy is crucial to efforts to grapple with it. It is not true that illiterate people are necessarily lacking in intelligence or industriousness, meaning that they are unwilling to take remedial training.

We are all too quick to say, "it's their own fault" when people cannot read and write, whereas they may be victims of circumstances. Dozens of factors can contribute to illiteracy. One woman told a magazine interviewer that nobody ever read in her childhood

home because her mother was very neat, and didn't want a lot of paper cluttering up the place.

By saying "it's their own fault," what we are really saying is: "It's their own problem." When its economic, political and social depredations are taken into account, illiteracy clearly becomes a everybody's problem, because the whole country's social progress and prosperity is at stake. Illiteracy represents a serious drain on our national pool of brain power. In the sophisticated global economy that is growing up around us, brain power is fast becoming the main commodity a developed nation has to sell.

Fortunately, illiteracy is not one of those things the average citizen can do nothing about. On the contrary, anyone with a good grasp of language and numbers may volunteer as a tutor with community literacy groups (to find your local group, check with the United Way or other central volunteer agencies in your area). Anyone who is personally acquainted with an illiterate person can gently urge him or her to take part in remedial training.

Half the battle against illiteracy is against the stigma it carries. Men and women who are reluctant to come out of the illiteracy closet must be persuaded that they are capable of learning to read, write and count; that, whatever age they are, there is always another chance.

As for the governments from which so much of the funding for literacy training comes, they must be convinced that illiteracy is a national issue which citizens are seriously concerned about, and wish to be placed high on the list of policy priorities. The same applies to the scourge of illiteracy worldwide. We must demonstrate to our leaders that we consider illiteracy a leading global problem, and that we want Canada to join wholeheartedly in the fight against it in cooperation with other nations.

We must make it clear that we do not want those who represent us to stand by while illiteracy continues to work its insidious evil on mankind's capacity to live in health, safety and justice. Much more should be done about it, and much more *can* be done.

New Look, New Paper

This edition of the Royal Bank Letter introduces a new graphic design intended to make it visually easier to read and give it a more contemporary appearance. Also in line with contemporary trends, the Letter will henceforth be printed on recycled paper as part of the Royal Bank's commitment to environmental conservation.

