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Safety is a Personal Thing

IN A WORLD where international discussion is on the level of hydrogen bombs it is difficult to focus attention on personal survival in the home, at work, and at play. Yet the danger of death and disablement resulting from everyday accidents is real and immediate — and every person can do something about it.

Safety is a personal thing. The very simplicity of this fact makes it necessary to repeat it often.

Most accidents are caused by ignorance, carelessness, selfishness or impatience, and all these accidents can be prevented.

There is no immunity from danger: the thing to know is how to meet it. They are unfortunate people who imagine that life can be wholly secure and certain. Man has been living on the earth for perhaps a quarter million years, and during almost all of that time his life has been one continual struggle to keep himself alive and to bring up his children.

Self-preservation is an instinct in all animals. It dominates the bird that alights on your bird bath just as it does the antelope that tremblingly approaches an African water hole and furtively drinks. A few seconds of inattention may mean that the bird falls prey to a cat, or that the antelope is killed by a lion. Nature holds all creatures accountable for their involuntary as well as their voluntary behaviour, and man is no exception.

Instinct alone will not save us, although it does wonders. Under the pressure of necessity it has the big advantage of not stopping to deliberate: it acts. But instinct should be our last defense. All that we can do to meet danger should be planned in advance. This is a personal responsibility from which we cannot escape.

It is not enough to put a guard around the physical hazards. We must put a guard around our thinking also. Consider our emotions. Even if the conduct of other people has been the cause of our emotion, it is really we ourselves who have created the resulting danger by the way in which we have reacted. When we

see a car weaving dangerously on the highway we don't say "that car is behaving dangerously", but "that is a dangerous driver." Our best guards are between our ears.

These guards must be kept alert. Safety cannot be taught in two or three lessons and then neglected. Some safety measures can be made into rituals which we follow without conscious thought, but we need to be on the lookout for little deviations which introduce new dangers.

Safety versus bravado

He is a silly person who raises his feeling of courage by the ill-considered acceptance of any and every risk. Most of us have to guard against this temptation. We may be driven by inner compulsions to indulge in dangerous practices. A feeling of inferiority may break out in a determination not to let another driver pass us on the road. We may know ourselves to be timid, and do rash things to show our friends that we are not cowardly. The dread of humiliation is a strong force propelling us to do unwise and dangerous things.

We are subject to a constant conflict between self-realization and self-preservation. A soldier wants to preserve his life, but performs daringly because he wishes to be respected by his comrades. A woman inclined to put on weight will diet dangerously to keep her figure slim. Physical damage and mental upset are often the result.

What shall we do in the face of emotional urges that drive us into danger? Pay attention to the alarm bell; appraise the risks; take the measures necessary to eliminate the danger, or at least to minimize it. As Shakespeare put it in *Twelfth Night*: some people are wise enough so that they can play the fool — they know how far they can go in dangerous situations.

The time to be afraid is before the thing happens. A wholesome fear will make us attentive to safety measures, and when we have taken these precautions our minds will be clear to cope with the situation.

But we cannot allow carefulness to paralyze us. If we wait always until the outcome of our movements is certain, we will never move. We must know how to take chances intelligently. There are times to take risks; there are times when we must take risks; but these should commend themselves to the rational man as being worth the chance.

Irrational fear returns injury with compound interest. Fear of being told he has a disease prevents a man from visiting a doctor; fear of death prevents a man from making a will; fear of a noise kept the diarist Pepys shivering under the bedclothes while he imagined his gold was being stolen. We can't go far in life if we row with one oar in the water and the other on the shore.

Another sort of panic terror is that in which the victim has no clear notion of any definite danger. This anxiety neurosis feeds upon itself, makes existence miserable, and frequently shortens life. It is an old saying that if gravestones told the truth, nine out of ten of them would bear a line to this effect: "This man's life was shortened several years by the fear of bad developments, most of which never occurred."

Fear, then, while being a healthy safety device when kept within bounds, can in itself become a menace to self-preservation if allowed to run wild.

How to be safe

Most accidents may be avoided or prevented by the exercise of ordinary common sense.

There are people who profess to scoff at safety measures. Some drivers scorn the "stop, look, listen" signs at level crossings. Some home workshop people read only so far as to learn how to start and stop a power tool. Some office workers go probing around a stalled electric typewriter with a metal paper knife.

Education in safety begins with study of responsibility — responsibility for preservation of our own lives and the lives of others. It doesn't cease with stopping and looking and listening — it goes on to think. People who refuse to think about safety are setting the stage for tragedy.

The pity of it is that dully ignorant or actively careless people do not harm themselves alone. There is no such thing as an isolated human being. Our highways and our waterways are dotted with the bodies of men and women and children who were the victims of fool-hardy people.

Laws are not enough to preserve society. The desire for safety is the background from which has sprung some ninety per cent of our criminal law. The Roman law said: "The safety of the people is the supreme law." But until we desire to live safely the law cannot be effective.

Those who are interested in educating themselves or others in living safely will find many sources of information and inspiration open to them. Free literature on the prevention of accidents is available from provincial departments of health and from the Department of National Health and Welfare, Ottawa. *The Government Insurance Agent*, published by the Saskatchewan Government Insurance Office, Regina, devotes many pages to practical tips on staying alive and preserving property from fire and other hazards. *The Safety Counselor*, Edmonton, Alberta, gives current news and ideas about safety. If enough residents in your area are interested, they can arrange for a first aid course to be given them by the St. John Ambulance Association. Or they may organize a Local Safety Council — an excellent public service activity to be sponsored by town councils, service clubs, home and school associations, or other public-spirited organizations.

The adoption of "Safety" as their "good turn" in 1958 by the Boy Scouts of the United States probably grew out of a movement started in Saskatchewan some years ago. A report of the Saskatchewan project, involving 8,000 Scouts and Cubs and 3,000 Guides and Brownies, was published by the National Safety Council in Chicago.

But the Canadian Boy Scout plan for safety education is a continuing one, attempting to teach safety through skill. Boys studying for proficiency badges learn safety rules under such headings as "water safety, winter scouting, swimmer, venturer, pioneer, pilot, pathfinder, mountaineer, marksman, forester." For his first star the Wolf Cub must show that he understands the highway safety rules of his province in relation to pedestrians. This could be extended usefully if the Cub were to pass on the knowledge to his car-driving parents.

Education in safety will help us to adapt to new danger-bringing circumstances in our environment. We are masters of our fate only in so far as we are able to fit ourselves intelligently to conditions.

Safety in the home

Because so many accidents which result fatally occur in the home, the greater part of this *Monthly Letter* will be devoted to the challenging problem of safeguarding parents and children in what could be made the safest place in the world.

It has been said by authorities that at least three quarters of all domestic accidents are preventable. That places the responsibility squarely on the senior members of the family, not only to remove all possible hazards but to secure family participation.

Good housekeeping — cleanliness and orderliness — is a fundamental of accident prevention in home, office and factory, and on the farm. It prevents accidents by removing their causes.

In well-kept homes, offices and factories, there are no loose objects on stairs, floors and landings; no articles that can fall from overhead; no wet or greasy floors; no projecting objects in hallways or aisles; no exposed nails or sharp pieces of metal; and no sharp utensils or tools lying where they may be inadvertently touched.

Here are some facts gathered from the records of many thousands of home accidents.

About four out of five home fatalities occur inside the house, and more than half of these happen in a bedroom. While more men are hurt on stairs and steps, more women are injured in bedrooms. Causes of bedroom accidents include: loose rugs; smoking in bed; leaving clothes, dressing stools, chairs and other objects where they may be tripped over; careless handling of electric plugs; leaving doors partly open.

Having a handrail on every stairway is a safety "must". When someone leaves an object on the steps, or there is a broken or odd-sized step, or if the carpet is torn, or when someone slips, many accidents on stairways could be prevented if there were something to grab quickly. The lighting of stairways should be good. Rugs should be well anchored.

Electrical hazards must be guarded against. Don't break through or saw through a wall without turning off the electricity at the main switch; you may strike a wire cable with fatal results. Don't leave a fan, a radio, or a heater where it may fall into the tub when you are bathing; don't forget that even with the plug pulled out your television set is dangerous, because the rectifier tube stores up and holds high electrical energy; don't leave bare wires, empty light sockets or defective appliances where they can be touched by chance.

Among danger spots in the kitchen are the stove, of whatever sort; knives; electrical appliances carelessly used; lye, ammonia, and cleaning fluids; open cupboard doors; slick waxed linoleum; careless climbing to reach high shelves; and pots left on the stove with their handles pointed outward.

In the safe home the bathroom is kept clear of loose razor blades and safety pins. Medicines are in a high latched cabinet. More than six hundred deaths due to accidental poisoning of children are recorded in the United States every year. It was said in the *CIBA Clinical Symposia* in midsummer 1951: "The number of children who have been accidentally poisoned as a result of parental carelessness is truly tragic." In Canada, more than 3,000 persons died in ten years as a result of accidental poisoning.

What to do about it

Here is a programme of action. The home in which it is followed will be by a big percentage less likely than others to suffer deaths and pain and the cost of accidents.

It requires only a little time. The action can be made a game, with everyone taking part. It does not demand money expenditure, but it does need leadership and the overcoming of listless inertia.

Let's start by making a job study in the home. What does who do where? Is the environment safe? Are the tools as safe as they can be made — properly sharpened, properly set up, properly guarded? Is the worker well-instructed in safety procedures and conscious of the danger element?

Some factories have safety committees: why should not every home have one?

What is needed in both factory and home is co-operation. The only effective way to bring a factory or a home through a year without serious accident is to have everyone become part of a co-ordinated effort to apply thinking, experience and ability to the problem.

Such a committee in the home could be fun. First of all, brainstorm the project: gather the family together and throw on the table the problem: how can we avoid accidents?

If you are lucky enough to have a daughter who is a stenographer, persuade her to take notes of all the dangers mentioned, and give her time to add her own suggestions. If you have no stenographer, do the best you can to put down in writing all the ideas that are proffered by your family. Do not leave out any, however trivial they may seem to you: these are danger spots perceived by others.

Then, when everyone has exhausted his stock of thoughts — ranging from the menace of that rotting tree branch in the garden to the danger of parking a mop on the cellar stairs; from the hazard encountered in walking across a newly-waxed floor to that of using a makeshift ladder to put up storm windows — then turn everybody loose on the constructive correction of all unsafe conditions. Give everyone a sense of personal responsibility for the safety of everyone else. Give everyone something worthwhile to do.

As part of the project, draw a diagram of your home showing the accident danger spots. Mark in red the places where accidents have already occurred. List the safety precautions already observed in your home. Have you safety gates to protect your young children, a firm stepladder, a rubber mat on which to stand when working with power apparatus? Are all your extension cords in good shape and well placed?

There should be a continuing function for this home safety committee, which should be a "committee of the whole". Here are some suggestions:

Meet regularly. Put the date on the family slate or diary. Discuss the near-accidents that have occurred; consider new hazards that have arisen through the

purchase of new equipment. This rallying round to ensure the safety of everyone is the backbone of a family safety programme.

Inspect the home regularly. The committee of the whole will tour the house and garden to find dangerous conditions that have developed. What about that tin of naphtha dad got for his blow torch: is the garage a safe place to store it? Should the stair carpet be moved so that the worn spot falls on a place where it is not likely to catch a spike heel? Try out the child's swing: is it well-secured and are the bolts still unruined and strong and the rope not frayed? Look at the lighting: has someone hung something in a place where it throws a shadow on a treacherous step? Ask your provincial or municipal health departments for a safety check list.

Investigate accidents. Every accident is the result of someone's carelessness. It is important to find out why it happened so that a similar danger may be avoided in future. Did someone throw a paring knife carelessly into the dishpan for the dish-washer to grasp? Did someone put a carton on the cellar steps, meaning to carry it down, and then forget it? Did someone neglect to wipe up that grease spot on the linoleum?

Sponsor first aid treatment. Part of a kitchen drawer can be set aside with profit as a "first aid centre." Have in it always the things that are needed for quick treatment of burns, scalds, cuts and poisons. Everyone in the family should know what to do in emergencies, the amount of knowledge being relative to age. The telephone table should have, prominently displayed, the telephone numbers of doctors to call in emergencies.

Advertise safety. You can get small attractive posters from the Industrial Accident Prevention Association, Toronto, and similar organizations in other provinces. These apply mostly to factories, but many are equally suitable for homes. Post these, or home-made posters, at potentially dangerous places: the ironing centre, the pressure cooker cupboard, the workshop power saw or drill, the power lawn mower.

Plan special features. For example, once a year make a square foot by square foot examination from attic to basement to discover developing hazards before they reach a dangerous state. This, done in the right spirit, can have all the interest and excitement of a family Easter egg hunt.

It seems, somehow, that people on farms look upon "clean up days" as something exclusively for city dwellers. But the dangers we have referred to can be just as fatal in the country as in the city.

Safety of children

In our way of life a child's world should be a place of comfort, love and happy security, a good place to live in.

It is a fact, shown by statistics, that we are saving children from smallpox, pneumonia, scarlet fever, and other epidemic diseases that used to ravage them, only to lose too many of them through accidents.

It is a tragic irony that accidents, largely amenable to control, outrank by a wide margin every other cause of death among young children.

Christian Smith, Director of Health Education in Saskatchewan, says: "In the ten years from 1947 to 1956, almost 20,000 Canadian children lost their lives in accidents. Conservatively, we estimate that 1,500,000 children were injured in non-fatal accidents. The yearly toll of children's lives runs close to 2,000."

Besides the family sorrow that loss of these lives causes, it is a national calamity.

Today's child, whether in the city or in the country, is surrounded by lethal weapons, and we cannot escape the charge that four-fifths of all accidents to children under five years of age are due to errors of omission or commission by adults.

During the baby's first year, outright protection is the only course to follow, but education against accidents should begin just as early as possible, and should progress year by year. When the child reaches school age he must be safety-minded enough to take care of himself in a world that can be very dangerous. This education must anticipate, rather than follow, disaster. One of the best booklets on child accident prevention yet published on this continent is called *The Vital Role of Obedience in Your Child's Safety*. It was distributed to physicians and others interested by the American Academy of Pediatrics, Evanston, Illinois, last year.

Look forward

When a man has escaped injury in an accident he should take time to analyse what happened so that he may avoid the same danger in future. How much did he contribute to the dangerous situation?

The first question that should spring to our minds when we become involved in an accident is: "How did it happen?" It doesn't matter whether the accident is a little one, like a cut finger, or a big one, like a fractured skull — find the answer to "how" and you are fore-armed against a repetition.

Let's give over preaching safety in a broad, general way, and pinpoint it as a personal obligation.

In the midst of our machines, our household appliances, our poisons, our fires, and all the natural forces which we have brought under partial control, we risk our lives every hour of the day. It is only good sense, in this environment, to become not accident fearing but safety conscious, remembering that our safety is up to us — a personal thing.