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Discipline in Life

ONE of the most important needs of young people going out into the world from university and high school is discipline.

We need to know about discipline because we simply cannot get along with other people without it. By the time we finish our formal education we have become persons, with status in a group entitling us to rights and imposing responsibilities.

Some acts are commanded or forbidden by the general opinion of humanity. The discipline of law is the good man's defence against the unjust actions of other men. Other areas in life are governed by rules agreed upon so that people can work and play together: the rigidity of the squares and the moves in chess, the rules of a trade union, the by-laws of a corporation, for example, and the regulation of traffic.

There are other activities in which discipline plays its part. It was Cromwell's discipline of his army that broke the cavaliers; it was Thomas Aquinas' personal discipline that enabled him to write his magnificent summations of duty and responsibility; it was the discipline of a great cause that took the little ships to Dunkirk with nothing more to guide them than directions scribbled on the back of an envelope.

We are troubled today because disciplines to which we became accustomed through the ages are coming into conflict with new customs in a changing society. This is a confused period, when many people have lost or have thrown overboard the old standards without acquiring new ones. We fear that we may be shaken loose from our moorings in respect to marriage, economics, politics, government, freedom, democracy and a host of other things we have cherished.

This is happening in a time when we have achieved material certainty such as we never before enjoyed. Her Majesty the Queen said in her Christmas Day broadcast: "It is not the new inventions which are

the difficulty. The trouble is caused by unthinking people who carelessly throw away ageless ideals as if they were old and outworn machinery. They would have religion thrown aside, morality in personal and public life made meaningless, honesty counted as foolishness, and self-interest set up in place of self-restraint."

Nature's discipline

Everyone who has studied mathematics, physics and chemistry has learned about the systems and disciplines of nature. He found that a leaf, a drop of water, a crystal, a moment of time — all these are related to and are part of the perfection of the universe. Nature is a discipline. As Confucius put it: "Order is heaven's only law."

What we admire as order and beauty in the final form of any natural manifestation is the product of the measured discipline of its development, like the ebb and flow of the tides, the systole and diastole of our hearts. Without these disciplined motions there would be no growth, no achievement, no thought, nothing.

We must beware of thinking that discipline means fixity. A wave pattern is pleasing by its rhythmic alternation of dark and light, of high and low, but we know that every wave, viewed at close range, will show differences that will never recur in quite the same form. Nature is not so regimented as to make no allowance for some degree of latitude for the individual creatures within it.

One advantage of having life run along in good order or pattern is because good order tends to get the most out of things with the least labour. It is 2,300 years since an Athenian writer gave as an example of disorder the actions of a farmer who threw into his granary barley and wheat and peas together, and then, when he wanted barley bread or wheaten

bread or pea soup, had to pick them grain by grain, instead of having them separately laid up.

Discipline helps us to establish a pattern. Deep in us we dislike chaos. When we succeed in forming a pattern, it becomes familiar and comforting. By following it we find that we can solve more problems with fewer false starts. We learn the pleasure to be found in a symmetrical life.

Social discipline

Like nature, society has its discipline, a sort of standardized manner in which groups behave.

The discipline of society may be thought of as something in which one must qualify if one is to become mature. Society has certain common expectations, upon the basis of which people are able to co-operate and regulate their activities.

It is obvious that society can continue to exist only under certain conditions. New-comers, like young people who leave adolescence behind them and step into the world "on their own", must learn and carry on the techniques and rules of the society. Just as in the class-room the students act in expected ways and the teacher has a different kind of activity, so in the wider environment different people have different tasks but all must act within a discipline that gives society an orderly form.

There are few fixed social levels in Canada. A person finds his own place in the social structure according to his capacities and energy. In striving toward his ideal he needs to keep in mind that customs and laws are not obstacles to be crashed through or hurdled or evaded. They are to be respected as conditions of the vital functioning of society. They are conditions of freedom, because the only alternative to the rule of law is the tyranny of the strongest. Hendrik Van Loon said bluntly that we obey the law because we know that respect for the rights of others marks the difference between a dog-kennel and civilized society.

Compulsion in social discipline gets its influence from long acceptance of it by the majority of the people concerned, but regulation by the *Criminal Code* has for the average individual less significance than a host of the less formal controls which surround him.

Sophisticated people are more influenced by custom than they like to admit. They do not think of these customs as being part of social discipline. Yet nine-tenths of what we do in all our waking hours is done in unconscious conformity with group habits, standards, codes, styles and sanctions that were in existence long before we were born.

Self-discipline

In the turmoil of today, wrote Lord Beaverbrook in his book *Don't Trust to Luck*, man "can only keep his

judgment intact, his nerves sound and his mind secure by the process of self-discipline."

We go a long way toward maturity when we substitute inner discipline for outer. Two men of different skills, more than two thousand years apart in time, agreed on this. Socrates, the Greek philosopher, taught self-discipline as the first virtue, saying it is necessary to make the other virtues avail, and Charles Darwin, author of *On the Origin of Species*, declared "The highest stage in moral culture at which we can arrive is when we recognize that we ought to control our thoughts."

It is not necessary to think of self-discipline as something like self-punishment. We do not need to walk through fire or sleep on nails as certain sects in the East do; we don't need to go around with our noses in statute books or treatises on ethics as certain reformers in the West do. We see self-discipline in the boxer who halts his blow in mid-air at the sound of the gong, in the office manager who reflects before censuring a worker, in the mother who refrains from punishing her child in the heat of anger.

The man who gives in to the enjoyment he finds in flying off his control centre, who cannot discipline his own stormy moods, will find opportunities for advancement eluding him. He may be endowed with great ability and he may have developed this by intensive study, so as to be capable of great things, but he is like Napoleon, of whom Sir Walter Scott said: "the wonderful being who could have governed the world, but could not rule his own restless mind."

Minds which have the greatest natural power have most need of training, just as the most mettlesome horses need schooling to make them useful.

But, says someone, what about our liberty, in which we take so much pride? Discipline is not antagonistic to liberty. License of behaviour is not a proof of freedom. The test of greatness of liberty is the extent to which we can be trusted to obey self-imposed law.

It is not true that we have no choice except between lawless exercise of private licence and the strait-jacket of conformity, with no leeway for the exercise of responsible judgment and the freedom of decision that goes with it. As we found in discussing the disciplines of nature, life is order, but order with tolerances.

Self-discipline means that we do not act according to our likes and dislikes, but according to principles of right and wrong. It gives us freedom within the law: responsible freedom to move within an orbit as wide as, but no wider than, what is in harmony with preservation of the overall order on which survival and effective living depend.

Hence arises the virtue in moderation, the avoiding of extremes, the putting of all things in their proper place. Ambitious young people will show themselves worthy

of the advantages they enjoy by the moderation with which they use them.

Finding one's identity

Identification of one's self with established duties and rights is part of the process by which a person attains social personality.

The problem of duty may be summed up in this way: the worst reason in the world for not doing something is that you don't like to do it. The important question is: should you do it? The person who follows only his likes and dislikes has not grown up.

To help us find our way toward doing our duty, society has evolved morals and conventions. These are traditional generalities concerning right, wrong, duties, totems and taboos. Some have been made formal in commandments and codes of ethics. They lay hold of raw, uncultivated man and smooth his surface and help him adjust to social living.

It is evident, then, that there are two sources of discipline: one that is outside the person and another inside. Social pressure is concerned with the regulation of conduct and manners; the inner discipline urges us "to thine own self be true; thou canst not then be false to any man."

Our personal standard is kept in line by conscience, which may be thought of as the human mind applying the general principles of good behaviour to individual actions. It is our personal judgment on acts about to be performed.

There is a great area of life in which there are no "must" signs, a place wherein we recognize the sway of duty, fairness, sympathy, taste, and all the other things that make life beautiful and not just ordinary.

Lord Moulton described this area in a picturesque way. It is, he said, the domain of obedience to the unenforceable; the obedience of a man to that which he cannot be forced to obey. It is no mere ideal, but is strong in the hearts of all except the most depraved. In illustration, Lord Moulton cites the sinking of the Titanic, when "the men were gentlemen to the edge of death." Law did not require it. Force could not have compelled it. The feeling of obedience to the unenforceable was so strong at that moment that all behaved as, if they could look back, they would wish to have behaved.

It may be a great part of the richness of our Western culture that we have so many areas in life subject only to the urge to do what is right and fitting, without compulsion. True civilization may be measured by the extent of this land of obedience to the unenforceable.

Family discipline

When we see someone away off the beam socially or personally it may mean that he did not come up

against the discipline boundary line at a time when he could have learned without hurt.

Since ages before history began to be written the hearth has been the symbol of family life. The human emotions and customs formed there are the most important and abiding features of life. In all the essential human traits the person is the product of the family group and its mode of life.

Every parent knows that the natural tendency of children is to do what they like and to avoid doing what they do not like. The first everyday problem of every parent is to teach his children to do the things they should do, whether they like them or not, and to avoid doing the things they should not do, even though they like to do them.

Discipline is necessary to daily life in the family, not only for health and safety and tranquillity, but also to produce the habits of social behaviour which avoid perpetual quarrelling. Children must be taught certain fundamentals like respect for other people's property and rights, and esteem for others as individuals. They need to learn, if they are to fit happily into society, to live within the law and to be honest and wholesome.

Children owe duty and loyalty to their parents. E. W. Scripps, the hard-headed newspaper publisher, declared flatly: "There has never been a time when violation of the fifth commandment has not produced a tragedy."

The truth is that children believe in parental discipline. A survey of 96,000 high school pupils in 1,300 schools in the United States revealed the clear-cut opinion that parents should carefully restrict their teen-age sons and daughters as to hours, frequency of dates, places of amusement, choice of associates, smoking and drinking. In Canada, fully three-quarters of the public think, according to a Canadian Institute of Public Opinion poll, that home discipline is not strong enough.

The responsibility of family nurture is not one that can be passed on to other institutions. The school, the church, and various societies have their proper functions, but no institution can fill the place in education and discipline that rightly belongs to the family.

Parents need standards. The secure child is the child who comes to know what his parents stand for, and that, as Dr. Henry C. Link writes in *The Way to Security*, they cannot be shaken from these standards by arguing or wheedling. Where the parents are sure of their principles, the child will be sure of his parents.

There are two main road blocks in the way of realizing perfect parenthood. Many parents in this scientific age have lost the convictions of their grandparents and have not been able to replace them with a

set of their own; others are trying to live out their own frustrated wishes through their children.

Discipline in school

Good discipline in school requires that we establish and maintain wholesome conditions for learning.

Teachers cannot be expected to transform children who are spoiled at home into orderly, well-balanced human beings. The school can impose no stronger discipline than the parents exercise or will support. "How can you work with a youngster in school," asks an article in *The Educational Record*, "if he hears at home that the school is no good, the teacher doesn't know what she's talking about, and the principal had better watch his step?"

Discipline is needed in school, not only for the better management of classes and study, but also because of its value as a habit in later life. We all have to meet standards in adult life; it will be easier to do so if we learn to toe the mark during school-days.

Some teachers try to be "pals" to their pupils, but the children have friends their own age and look to the teacher for something different: leadership. That leadership needs to be positive. It does not demand an assault upon the child's will, but it means persuading his will to desire the right things. The principles implanted through school discipline will be based upon pleasure in growth and achievement, not upon extremes of repression or leniency.

In office and factory

Like every other activity, business is carried on in a complicated social setting where habits, customs, conventions and laws blend together to determine daily procedure. The office and the factory must have discipline, and giving force to that discipline is the responsibility of management.

Workers must pull together if their group effort is to be effective. Every person must do his fair share of the work, contribute to order and efficiency, and be considerate of the feelings of his fellow-workers.

The duty of maintaining discipline is one of the hardest functions to get foremen and managers to discharge. Discipline is not so simple today as it was a half century ago. Then it was mostly a matter of imposing the will of the boss by main force of voice, fists and the threat of dismissal. Today, leadership of the human type is gaining ground rapidly. It requires knowledge, tact and integrity. The foreman who wins the respect of his workers has practically solved the problem of departmental discipline; he has secured their willing co-operation.

The ideal sort of discipline is not gained by posting rules and regulations on a notice-board. The more rules a manager imposes upon his men, the more he raises

their resentment because of the implication that they are incapable of self-direction. But a certain minimum of regulation is necessary to efficiency, safety and smooth operation.

Consistency

Whether in the family, school or factory, consistency in discipline is vitally necessary. Rules that only threaten, and are not enforced, are like the log that was given to the frogs to be their king. At first they feared it, but soon scorned and trampled on it.

Consistency starts with clarity. Let your rules be clear. Tell the reasons on which they are based. Announce who is responsible for their enforcement.

The rules being made known, it is unfair to the working force to allow one or two persons so to conduct themselves as to hinder the efforts of the rest of the group. Leniency is cruel, not only to the group as a whole but to the offender. He who has been forgiven a hundred times learns to believe that he has no real faults to be forgiven.

Be consistent, too, in enforcing rules even when infraction of them has not resulted in material damage. Historians tell us instances from the long-ago past, three of which will illustrate the point. In war, the Romans inflicted punishment more often on soldiers who attacked contrary to orders than on men who had abandoned their posts when pressed by the enemy; a Greek general was awarded a garland for his victory, but fined a thousand drachmas for going out to battle personally unarmed; a ruler enacted a law that no one might possess over 500 acres of land, and was punished according to his own law when it was found that he owned more.

Self-respect

Our reward for self-discipline and the acceptance of social responsibility is not necessarily money or power, but self-respect and the respect of others. To have control centred in us does, at the very least, preserve us from being dragged through life like slaves.

If a man is not the sort to seize upon discipline as something contributing mightily to his life happiness—a constructive force, a protective force — then he just must bear with it, for he cannot escape it.

It is better to make discipline something that will help us to get what we want out of life than to be driven into accepting it as a pitiless force.

Discipline has a happiness value. It will not save us from having to make choices, and therefore of sometimes making mistakes, but it will help us to assess the chances and choose more wisely. Quite often we shall find that the stern thing which discipline orders is the wisest, the best, thing.