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Adult Learning is Necessary

AN INTELLECTUAL REVOLUTION is needed among adults. Not so many years ago they could coast along very well on what they had learned in school, and whatever they did in the way of further learning was by way of being a hobby. But things have changed. Continued education is now necessary to life.

There are at least four influences contributing to this state of affairs. (1) What is going on in the world has implications for every individual, not merely for nations, statesmen, and politicians; (2) Automation demands wide knowledge, resiliency, and adaptation; (3) The social flux has taken adults by surprise, and their unpreparedness embarrasses them; (4) Increased leisure threatens to ruin the essential humanness of human beings.

It takes wider knowledge and deeper understanding to live happily in the modern world. Applied science has revolutionized personal attitudes and beliefs. Without up to date knowledge, we are plunged into fear-ridden confusion.

Instead of putting periods here and there in life, as at the end of school days or the end of bachelorhood or the end of employment on going on pension, only commas are allowed before branching out into a more spacious version of life.

Continued learning carries us beyond the easy judgments and superficial training of youthful immaturity. It builds qualities of the mind which enable us to understand responsibilities and to detect opportunities and to build a philosophy which becomes a part of life. It is a continuing initiation in the art of living everyday life.

State of the world

Nothing other than adult learning can build the wisdom indispensable to the preservation and strengthening of our society. In a democracy like Canada, the basic social power has been entrusted to the people. Therefore the people must continue their development so as to be able to judge new ideas, assess happenings for their significance, and judge the purposes and effects of legislation.

This constructive approach to life is an essential of enduring freedom. We need straight thinking, disciplined creativity and responsible co-operation. Such qualities as sound values, understanding, and sympathy which only develop in an environment of knowledge. All these combine to qualify us to exercise the rights and meet the obligations of freedom. John Dewey, the United States philosopher and educator, suggested that "we are free in the degree in which we act knowing what we are about".

It is not to be expected that individuals in any nation can solve world problems, but there is no need for us to feel baffled. We can learn about the national aspect of these world problems, do our own thinking about the issues that confront us, and then take positive steps to promote the solution of the problems through the democratic process. Every kind of knowledge, every acquaintance with nature and art, every new understanding of human ways, helps toward a comprehensive understanding of life.

It is undeniable that our state of confusion came upon us unawares. Young people are growing into the new ideas and new ways of life: their parents were pushed into them and are still sputtering. We expected to live all our lives in the world into which we were born, but that world changed and is changing. Now we must develop a capacity for self renewal in this new environment.

It isn't enough to hold ground: we must make progress. The world will not wait until a new generation takes charge. It is adults who make the homes, the churches, the schools, the communities. It is adults who determine policy on our political, economic and social fronts. It is adults who have to cope with the dangers and opportunities of every pressing day.

Men and women must act while their children are preparing. Their decisions will create the world the children inherit. As C. Scott Fletcher, President of the Fund for Adult Education, said a few years ago: "However fervently all of us may hope that our children and their children will exceed us in ability

and judgment, the fateful decisions of the present and the immediate future will be made by those men and women who are now mature. In continuing liberal education they have a means for endeavouring to make these decisions in the wisdom of reflection and with the courage of examined beliefs."

This involves effort

Alas! at the same time as this need is pressing upon them, men and women are enmeshed in a mood of the age which worships leisure. Some are content to breathe, thinking that is living. Some know no other pleasure but gratification of the senses and the delights of society, leaving their minds unenlightened and their faculties unused. Some indulge themselves in the conceit that they are making good use of free time when they are only employed in the humbler occupation of killing time — of which perhaps the best that can be said is that it keeps them from doing worse things.

When Dr. Wilder Penfield was asked what he would teach adults, he wrote: "Constructive use of idle time".

Nearly everyone has had the experience of sitting on the bank of a slow-flowing river with the feeling that it passes unceasingly "without haste and without rest". That is not the way to look upon life. We need to look upon it passionately, as if every drop and every eddy were important.

The boredom that a man feels when he is doing necessary though uninteresting work is as nothing in comparison with the boredom that he feels when he has nothing constructive to do with his days. And boredom is like the ancient water torture: the minutes fall drop by drop on the mind until sanity trembles.

He is wise who avoids boredom by keeping his mind wide open and responsive to what is going on around him, but this involves effort. We can no longer acquire knowledge under the guise of amusement as we did in elementary school, but if we are persistent in trying, then the energy to proceed will become habitual.

It is, in fact, by work that we attain our best sense of achievement, of recognition, of personal worth. It is by properly directed effort that we rise above mediocrity.

On the cover of one of its "Values in Education" booklets the Sun Life Assurance Co. of Canada quotes the late Dr. M. M. Coady, noted for his leadership in the co-operative and adult education movements centred at Antigonish: "The man who has ceased to learn ought not to be allowed to wander around loose in these dangerous days".

Have many interests

To live fully and discharge one's responsibilities as an adult it is not necessary to be an intellectual: one need only be an appreciator of life. Broad, multiple, interests are insurance against cracking up, and they

open the way to a fullness hitherto unimagined. The more interests a man has, the less he is at the mercy of fate, because if he loses one thing he can take up another.

This is not to say that we should be busy about a multiplicity of trivialities that occupy without enriching the mind. It does mean that we should not become overcentred on anything, pleasure or pain, garden or grandchildren, politics or golf, thus becoming single-tracked. It is an interesting experiment to try becoming interested in something new once a month. It may be merely hanging a new picture on the wall or potting a new plant or walking through the office asking "Why do we do this in this way?"

Interest in things is first of all interest within ourselves. Even a faked interest is useful, because it heightens your perceptiveness and starts lights glowing in your mind.

Too often, we have flashes of ideas which we fit without consideration into conceptions already in our minds. We do not allow them to start new lines of thought, nor do we embellish them with thoughts from the past. We just put down mental ditto marks. Herein lies an opportunity for expansion. Seize one of the ideas and consider alternatives, start a hare and have fun chasing it.

How do you find new interests? Think of all the many things in which other people are interested and consider your own bent. Or look inward for a vacant space in your life, find a vacuum and expand into it. Have you neglected an area of reading in which you might find value and pleasure? Is there room for music or art or writing? Combine curiosity with energy and you will be pleasantly surprised by the liveliness life takes on. The Irishman, when asked if he could play the piano, replied: "I don't know, I never tried".

Keep moving. Some composers of music work up to a colossal climax and then blast away at the same chord over and over again. They ruin the effect by being reluctant to move on. Get as much variety as possible into life. Try inventing things, contriving for the joy of contriving, not to save money or to add to your possessions but just because it is fun to be original.

Don't be held back by lack of experience. It was not the makers of lenses in a city famous for its optical craftsmen, but a dry goods clerk, who made the first really good lens for microscopes and was the first to see the teeming world of life in a drop of water. The incandescent lamp was not the invention of lamp-makers, but of the former telegraph operator, Thomas Edison.

Choosing what to do

You cannot expect attractive occupations to come rapping insistently at your door. You may have to

chase them to their lairs, developing a nose for interesting things as hounds smell out rabbits. That, too, is zestful.

Most people are capable of keen interest in something or other, in the doing of which forgotten or unknown skills show themselves. Edgar Dale wrote in one of his Ohio State University *News Letters*: "The saddest of all obituaries might well be: 'His hidden talents were never discovered'."

Take a blank sheet of paper and write down three column headings:

What if? How about? What else?

Then write under them what your imagination prompts you to write. "What if I took up study of the earth?" A man visiting the Royal Ontario Museum felt frustrated by his ignorance when he toured the geological section, so he took up the study of geology with pleasure to himself and possible benefit to the science. How about learning another language? A young couple looking forward to touring Europe started a year ahead to learn, one French and the other Italian. They enhanced the pleasure of their trip, learned things unknown to one-language travellers, and brought home memories that would never have existed but for their imaginative foresight. What else? What else can I do with my colour slides besides looking at them? A man who was a photographer of nature subjects made up an illustrated talk which he gives to Boy Scouts and Girl Guides, school groups and community hall audiences.

Here is another approach to finding out how you can fix upon some activity that will add relish to your life. Ask yourself: "What interests have I that I can pursue alone? What interests have I that will involve me in group participation? What interests have I indoors? outdoors?" This little quiz helps toward diversification.

Or try the nostalgic approach. Write down the things that interested you when you were young, like playing the piano, collecting butterflies, building model trains. Write down the ways in which you have earned a livelihood: clerking, baby sitting, typing, selling. Write down the things in which you were interested as you moved from adolescence into adulthood: Scout or Guide leader, Sunday School teacher, camping. Write down the odds and ends that occupied you at various times: whittling wood (perhaps you would enjoy carving); collecting stamps (there are variations today which make this hobby constructively interesting); writing letters, poems or a diary (you may find that your talent has developed to the point where you can produce items that will be published).

Your investigation may not lead directly or at once to a decision, but you are on the right track, you are finding out, and that in itself is fun. You will be sur-

prised in two ways: by the number of options that are open, and by the qualities you have for making life interesting.

Having arrived at a tentative list, sample the things on it. Try this and that for a fair length of time and with some enthusiasm.

Encourage your imagination to suggest additions and variations. If you take up botany, in addition to studying what makes the flowers grow get acquainted with the little light elves that come every night with their tiny buckets to sprinkle dew on the petals.

You may have tried to develop interests, and failed. That does not mean that you cannot develop interests, but that you were trying the wrong thing.

Don't be in a hurry for results. When nature wishes to grow an oak she spends a hundred years doing it; only little things like radishes can be grown in three or four weeks.

Keeping up with the world

Most of this has had to do with making pleasurable use of free time, but a great many people would like to go a step further: they would like to devote their free time to keeping abreast of the world not only in knowledge but in understanding also.

It may have been true once upon a time, but it simply is not true today, that we can make our way through life subsisting on what we stored in our minds during our school days. We have to add new facts and to rethink old thoughts.

The Canadian Association for Adult Education and its French-language counterpart, Institut Canadien d'Education des Adultes, are the national organizations concerned with the entire field of adult learning. They are the agencies for communication between individuals and organizations, private and public, local, provincial and federal, and for their co-operative action. There are 120 national and provincial agencies which co-ordinate their work through the C.A.A.E.

Scores of thousands of young adults take courses provided by the Y's or Women's Institutes, by municipal school boards, provincial education departments, university extension staffs, social welfare agencies, trade unions, church groups, and industrial concerns.

These are people who recognize that continued learning is an urgent social responsibility as well as being good for their peace of mind. They have found that when they left school or college there was a vast range of things they did not know, and that many of the things they did know have changed. Today they are picking up what they missed and looking at things that have changed, and considering them thoughtfully and reasonably in the light of present times.

Discussion groups

Some people enjoy the challenge of working alone, of seeking out knowledge without a teacher and exercising their critical ability. Most people, however, appreciate the stimulating experience of joining others in search of principles.

The Fund for Adult Education, which gives its support to agencies of adult learning in both the United States and Canada, says it "believes that the most satisfactory means for the liberal education of adults is individual study combined with the small discussion group. In such a climate each person may learn to think for and express himself, and because no authoritarian methods are applied, a good discussion group represents democracy at work."

A discussion group is not a place where the conversation goes round in circles, revolving upon trivialities, but a place to stimulate thought. Ideas which might be fragile in the mind of an individual take on robustness and suppleness when brought out into the open and given exercise.

Study-discussion programmes are aimed at improving the ability of participants to make independent judgments on critical issues, to develop their intellectual faculties and aesthetic sensibilities, and to encourage sustained intellectual curiosity.

What is this liberal education sought by men and women who read great books and join discussion groups? It is not directed toward specific improvements in techniques or raises in salary or gratification of physical yearnings. It is a continuous growth of the mind, shedding a few beams of light on our lives and on life itself.

Liberal education does not mean possession of the mere materials of knowledge, but the gaining of wisdom and understanding. It goes beyond the protected harbour of formal schooling so as to provide a man with navigational equipment for the wide sea of life. It enables him to use what he knows with judgment and discrimination.

Does age matter ?

None but the frivolous or the indolent will say "I am too old to tackle that sort of thing". It isn't one's age, but one's attitude to life, that counts toward serenity. Every plateau in life, including the threescore-years-and-ten plateau, is connected by steps to a higher plateau.

The Michigan Employment Security Commission quotes Dr. Harry Meyers in one of its booklets: "If you think you know all about something, you are old. And if you believe you are now doing something as well as it can be done, you are old. But if you are glad to admit that you know but little about anything, you are young".

It is obvious that anyone fifty years old has more richness of experience upon which to draw, and a greater appreciation of values, than has a person of twenty. Instead of sinking into a near-vegetable state requiring only food and drink, clothing and a roof, he can actually renew his youth by using and expanding his thoughts.

Adulthood — whether we mean age 21 or age 48 — is an ideal time of life. Youth and its conflicts and uncertainties are over, and it is time to expand into the fullness of life.

Continued learning gives us more understanding of things as they are, more foresight of things as they may become, and more insight into our own place as connecting links. It helps, too, when the time comes to retire from active business life, because with it we may retire forward. Dr. Penfield said in an article: "The time for retirement should be reorganized and renamed. It is the time for embarking on a new career."

Getting ready for retirement is not merely a matter of laying up money resources, but equally important of laying up mental resources so as to regard retirement as a chance and a challenge rather than as a finale.

What is learning ?

It becomes obvious, then, that education is not merely to fill the mind with other men's thoughts and to be the passive recipient of their impressions of things and the acquiescent concurren in their judgments. The purpose of learning is to enlarge our individual intelligence: we do not wish to copy a master's work, but to express our own thought and feeling.

Learning is not something to be worn on one's cuff, for display. There were wise, valiant and true-hearted men bred in England long before literacy became the vogue. Magna Charta was secured by men who signed the deed with their marks, because they could not write their names. Though altogether unskilled in the art of deciphering the literary signs by which principles were spread upon paper, they yet understood and appreciated, and boldly contended for, the things themselves.

To some, exhortations toward continuing education may seem visionary, but in the conditions of modern society they become a requisite of survival. Life offers no higher pleasure than that of mastering difficulties, passing from step to step, forming new wishes and seeing them gratified. That frees men and women from insignificance, from the sense of being powerless, from being lonely.

Such study will not guarantee happiness, but at the least it will improve your bargaining position with Fate. And, at the end of life you may be able to say with Richter, the German novelist known as "Jean Paul": "I have made as much out of myself as could be made of the stuff".