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What Use is Education?

An Ontario schoolgirl wrote to the Chairman and President of The Royal Bank of Canada asking him: "Why do you think I should continue school and get an education?"

This Monthly Letter is his reply, expanded so as to be of use to all young people in Canada's public and high schools, business colleges, technical institutes and universities.

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YOUR letter is one to which I am happy to reply, for two reasons. The first is that I hope I can help you and the second is that I commend your teacher's enterprise in suggesting that you ask your question.

The commonplace thing for me to do would be to enlarge upon the material aspects of a good education, and to tell you that the principal benefit is in helping you to get a good job, etc. I am sure you already know about that. A boy or girl who does not make the best of all the learning opportunities of school years will be at a disadvantage in competition with others in later life.

I am not going to suggest to you that you should fill yourself chock-full of information, for the real benefit of your education will be knowledge and understanding and not a long list of memorized facts. The main purpose of education, as I see it, is to teach one to think.

It is only by learning how to think, and by learning how to sift out things worth thinking about, that you can put yourself in the best position for enjoying a happy life. This is a very important reason for wishing to continue at school and get an education. Education, when of the right sort, helps you to see things clearly, to distinguish between the essential and the trivial, and to give you a frame of mind and system of thought and judgment which will fit you into your place in life.

Without education (1) you could never hope to really understand the world or its people or what goes on in it; (2) you could not handle yourself graciously and with ease in an environment that is not always so well disposed towards you as your home and your

school; (3) you could never relate yourself properly to the problems of others nor achieve the peace of mind and understanding which one must have to support one through the crises that come to try all of us.

I believe it is very much worth while for you to study and I hope that you will pursue your education so successfully that you will have a very happy life. You will realize, I am sure, that everyone faces problems and difficulties at some time or other and suffers distress and sorrow. These seem to be inescapable. But the boy or girl of education is in much better position to cope with these things, to solve these problems, and to master some of the difficulties, and thus in the end be less disturbed and grieved by it all.

An educated boy or girl is, I think, entitled to count upon life holding out prospects of achievement and security — not the kind of security that is dependent upon what someone else does, but the security that comes from within one's self, based solidly upon one's ideals, capability and understanding.

What I am trying to say is that education is absolutely essential but I am not referring to a mass of what, in an old-fashioned way, we called "book learning" and nothing else. What we are after is the education that will teach you to think and reason, which will improve your material prospects, which will add to your poise and deportment, which will develop your judgment and which, all in all, will round you out for a fully successful and happy life.

That is the kind of life I wish for you.

Chairman and President

A sense of values

One of the most frightening things in our world is ignorance; not merely lack of knowledge, but more than all other the ignorance that consists in not knowing that there are better things, better ways of doing things, and a social responsibility to try to see and do these better things.

Education will help you to think clearly and reach good judgments about the relative importance of the various kinds of activity that make up human life. What are these activities? There are some that minister directly to self-preservation, like obtaining food and keeping healthy; others are concerned with the raising of offspring; some have to do with social and political relations; and there are activities associated with the leisure part of life.

All of these clamour for attention, effort and time. The value of any of them exists for you in relation to the values you give the others.

An ancient Greek philosopher said the purpose of education is to persuade you to like what you ought to like, and to dislike what you ought to dislike.

Education will open up to you the opportunity to follow the true, the beautiful and the good, to avoid vulgarity and false sentiments, by providing you with standards by which to judge values. It will enable you to decide what will contribute toward your happiness in life. Without education, how can you discern what is good for you? what is right or wrong? what is true or false? what is lovely or ugly?

This changing world

We in Canada are very conscious of our natural resources, because our economy is founded on them — our forests and our farm lands, our minerals and our water-power, our fisheries and our wild-life. But all these resources are useless without one other: the intelligence and the initiative of our people.

And where do we get these personal qualities? From the accumulated intellectual talent of our race given to us through the discipline of education.

We need knowledge and enterprise more than people ever before needed them, because we are living in a period of the most profound social and cultural transition. Young people of today do not realize it, for this is the only sort of world they know, but during the past forty years our world has become increasingly strange and frightening.

Less than two generations ago normality was the life of ordinary people. Crisis was something that came only once in ten years, like an earthquake or a political joust about tariffs or a spot of sabre-rattling — and these were handled with dexterity and aplomb by experts.

Today, we live with crises at home and abroad, and not only the catastrophe-relief people, the politicians and the military men are involved: we are all in it. That is why we need education, to gain knowledge and attain wisdom.

We cannot estimate with any certainty what changes may be brought about in the lifetime of you who are now youthful: changes due to medical science, inter-planetary communication, atomic energy, increasing population, exhaustion of certain natural resources, conquest of the polar and tropical regions, aggression by despotic powers. You cannot face these prospective changes with intelligence or serenity if you have only the education that was adequate a quarter century ago.

Scientific technology has broken up the placid life familiar to our grandfathers. It has converted the man of general competence into a specialist.

Our ancestors were content so long as they were just one potato row ahead of starvation; tomorrow, science will have moved forward another step, machines will run machines, labour will be up-graded in terms of skill, and there will then be no appeal from the judgment that will be pronounced on the uneducated man.

What is education?

Education should be useful. We don't mean useful in the sense of making us adept in manipulating gadgets. Every youth reading this letter wants something better than that. You wish to be fit to perform justly, skilfully, magnanimously and with personal satisfaction all the offices of life.

Learning sheer fact is not all of education. The three R's do not constitute education, any more than a knife, fork and spoon constitute a dinner. Some of the greatest bores are people who have memorized a great deal of information and love to talk about it.

The aim of an educational institution is to give students a living fund of knowledge from which they may generate ideas. When you can bring relevant background to bear on a problem, assemble pertinent data, grasp relationships, appraise the values involved, and make a judgment: when you can do that you are an educated person.

Then you need not fear becoming bewildered by change or thrown into a panic by misfortune, because you will be able to determine three vital things: where you are, where you are headed, and what you had better do under these circumstances.

In seeking that education, be imaginative. The first ten or twelve years of your life were its romantic stage. When you looked through a telescope to study the stars you saw not lumps of matter floating in space but the glory of the sky. In secondary school you pass through the age of precision. You must learn things correctly, exactly and completely, because these things form the

bank account on which you will be drawing all through your life. After secondary school you enter the period of generalization. You will begin to apply what you have learned, transferring particularities of knowledge to the problems of general living. As one peak is climbed, farther ranges will appear upon the horizon, beckoning to you. You cannot climb them until you reach them, but there they are, eternally luring you.

But, you may say, "so-and-so made good in life without having had an extensive formal education." Quite true. Many men and women did not have the opportunity that is open to every boy and girl in Canada today. They left school and went to work before completing high school; some did not go any further than public school. But they continued to learn while they worked.

They succeeded in spite of handicaps and not because of them. They had a *daemon* in them that prodded, and a vital energy that strengthened them to attain education by home study, or in evening classes, or in other ways. Sir Winston Churchill, who has contributed so greatly to the world in war and in peace, told an audience in Boston a few years ago: "I have no technical and no university education, and have just had to pick up a few things as I went along."

Young people in Canada today need not endure hardship and suffer delay. So far as is in their power and so far as their knowledge carries them, people of the older generation have made it possible for young people to become educated to the utmost extent of their capability and their desire.

Don't expect — and don't desire — that education shall be poured into you. You will see more interesting and useful things when you look for them yourself. You can't profit by accepting facts without questioning, by accepting words instead of trying to understand things. You need to explore the many sides there may be to a question.

If you walk all around the opinion of a famous man, question it, and, then embrace it, the opinion is no longer his but yours. When you learn how a danger occurs, you may take steps to avoid it; if you want to escape being fooled, find out how the fooling is done; go behind the puppet show to see with what skill the little figures are manipulated.

Special training

Choosing a career today is not the docile following in father's footsteps that was common a half century ago. There are attractive professions and businesses and crafts that were not heard of, some not imagined, when today's university graduates were born.

It is not desirable that you should pursue technical education to the exclusion of general or cultural education. Foremen will tell you that a worker who has

had practice in learning at school usually turns out to be better at learning in a factory. He catches on more quickly, not only to the "how" of his job but to the "why" of it. He has a quicker and surer grasp of problems. He is more likely to think up time- and labour-saving ideas. He has the broad outlook and the capacity for straight thinking that are essential to promotion and advancement.

The earth-worm has not only digging skill but a sense of the principles involved in digging a good hole at the proper depth and in the right direction. We, on a higher stratum of the animal kingdom, need no less. It is principles, and not mere data, we need if we are to find our way through the mazes of tomorrow.

If you are going in for commerce, do not imagine for a moment that all you need is training in reading, writing and arithmetic. Even the addition of book-keeping, shorthand and typing is not enough. You need an intelligent knowledge of the realities of modern economic life.

Business men believe that more attention should be given in schools and colleges to the art of communicating ideas. There is not much prospect for advancement in commercial firms unless you can express your thoughts competently. You cannot buy or sell, give instructions to subordinates, make a report, win friends or influence people, unless you can say clearly and appealingly what it is in your mind to say.

If you are going to learn a trade, don't be satisfied to become a specialist in "know-how" rather than in knowledge. The sort of person you are to be is more important in the long run than the sort of skill you acquire.

Really useful training in a trade will provide you with some general principles and a thorough grounding in their application to certain concrete details. It will give you a base on which you may build a bigger and better job. It will habituate you to use of all your brain instead of just the fragment that directs your fingers.

Should you be going on to university, you need to know that the function of higher education is two-fold: to disseminate knowledge already stored up, and to spur the student to acquire new knowledge. What training there is in a university is directed toward conditioning the mind to think; to push back the barriers of the past and extend the boundaries of what is known; to discover problems to be solved.

Seek broad horizons

You need to cultivate your imagination. You must know the mechanical facts of what you are dealing with, but to be a real spark plug you need also to have imagination and to take chances.

Behind all mechanical training stands liberal education. It tells us what people have been, and hints at

what we may become. It helps us to formulate responsible judgments about our problems.

A liberal education helps us to be many-sided and to take large views. It provides us with powerful tools by which we discover and handle facts. Beyond this, it enables us to transcend facts and to deal with the larger questions of purpose and meaning.

When we asked Dr. Sidney Smith, President of the University of Toronto, for an expression of his opinion, he wrote this: "People have said that training for a vocation is useful, but that liberal education is not useful. That is nonsense. All education is useful.

"Huck Finn lost interest in Moses when he found out that Moses was dead, because 'I don't take no stock in dead people.' Today, many 'don't take no stock' in dead languages, or even in living languages apart from their own. Latin, French and German are academic and useless; but English is practical and useful. Then teach English, they say. Don't teach literature — Shakespeare and Milton are useless. Don't teach grammar — gerunds and participles are only for the pedant. Just teach English!

"But it is the student of useless languages and literature who can use his own language with precision and imagination. Useless algebra, history, philosophy and physics produce useful powers and resilience. The usefulness of liberal education is to develop useful, independent citizens, and in this process the longest way round is often the shortest way home. Education should enable a person to earn a living and to live a life."

Courage, work and discipline

We must beware of inert ideas. Some people find it easy to memorize whole pages of textbooks, like jackdaws storing away glittering objects. That may win prizes in a quiz contest but not in the exciting adventure that is life. Education is barren without action based upon it. You must put your knowledge to venture.

Then: work. To be fully prepared for life you must learn to work. Someone has said that idleness is the nurse of naughtiness: at any rate it is the death of progress. Life is not a thing of ease. Maybe it ought to be, and perhaps some day it will be (though such a life has no attraction for progressive-minded people), but it never has been and it is not now.

We should not try too hard to make education easy. There are difficult things that must be done, whether we like it or not. Education should prepare us to face difficulties courageously, to persevere steadfastly, and to work conscientiously — three virtues that apply as much to success in business and industry as to success in science.

Third in this list of requirements is discipline. We cannot imagine useful thought or creative ideas arising in other than a disciplined mind. And what, pray, is discipline? It includes the habit of cheerfully under-

taking imposed tasks, the obedience to rules whether made by others or by yourself, objectivity in approaching contentious matters.

The last point about what you have to do in seeking an education is this: don't scorn examinations. They are essential in our scheme of things. They give you a check on how you are getting along, and they show your teachers where you need special attention to strengthen your weak spots.

Don't be discouraged if your best effort fails to win the highest marks. The results of examinations may be deceptive. If you are nervous, you may do yourself less than justice. School examinations are not an end-all: they are merely indicators along the road.

But examinations are useful as part of your training for living. Every day in adult life you will be taking examinations. Why not practise for them as you do for a football match, a hockey game or a school play? Hour by hour, sometimes minute by minute, a business executive finds himself at his desk passing examinations. The fact that he does pass them may be attributed to the fact that he has had practice.

And after school . . . ?

Is it better to be educated to some extent than not to be educated at all? You will, of course, agree that it is. Then is it not still better to have a better than average education?

No one can pack enough into his mind during school-days to last his lifetime. None of us is too old to acquire knowledge, but any of us can reach a deadline if we cease to learn. At 45 we are still able to learn more than we could before we were 14, and even at 65 we can absorb knowledge as fast as we could when we were 25.

Education ends only with one's life. What you learn at school is something to which you must add, year by year, and pass on to others. "Thus," said Einstein, "do we mortals achieve immortality in the permanent things which we create in common."

It is astonishing how far even half-an-hour a day, regularly bestowed on some object, will carry one in making himself master of it. It is easy to fall into the habit of dawdling away time, but it is easy, also, to acquire the habit of putting every moment to use.

To get the greatest value from education, set up for yourself an habitual vision of greatness. Your pursuit of education will lead you into something that is not easy, but in these days of world uncertainty it is an advantage to have something significant to do at the expense of thought and energy.

And, finally, do not be content with half measures. A writer of forty-five years ago said: "The good is the enemy of the best." Let's not be content with a second-best, though it be good.