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This Matter of Judgment

NONE OF US goes through a day without making judgments. Always there are many things to be considered, evaluated, and decided upon.

Business executives and housewives alike must be continually making order and relation out of unrelated ideas, comparing this course with that, and estimating consequences. They operate in terms of comparative values.

Judgment of this sort is among the most splendid of human attributes, and its development is of vital importance to our happiness. As was so well said by Edgar Dale, of the Ohio State University College of Education: "It seems to me that judgment is one of the key, critical goals of all education. No matter how much knowledge you have, if your judgment is bad you're a dead duck."

When we make a good judgment we realize the grandeur of the human spirit, but a moment of bad choice between alternatives may cause a lifetime of suffering.

How does one cultivate an understanding response to the challenges of life so as to make first-rate judgments? By studying models of excellence, by learning the art of discrimination, and by building integrity. Using knowledge without discrimination and integrity is dangerous and unprincipled.

"Integrity" means "uprightness; moral soundness"; it applies to the man who habitually discriminates between just and unjust, good and bad, noble and disgraceful, and follows the better path. It is summed up in an old and honoured tradition of British law that he who comes to the courts must come "with clean hands". It involves having standards and a sense of values by which we shape ourselves.

There are many occasions in life when there is no one to make us do the right thing. Then our good sense in passing on the quality of the act is called "conscience". In that private court we admit that we have all sorts of faults, but we know that there are things we would not do; our personal code puts them out of consideration.

When we think of formal judgments, as in public courts of law, we turn for inspiration to Areopagus, the most celebrated ancient court, which held its sessions on that hill in Athens where St. Paul was taken to expound the Christian religion. The court, composed of the wisest and best persons in the state, was so highly respected that other states and nations sometimes sent to it for settlement of disputes. It has some lessons for today.

The parties to a dispute had to "present the bare and naked Truth, without any preface or epilogue, without any ornament, figures of rhetoric, or other insinuating means to win the favour or move the affections of the judges." On occasion, the court sat at night to the end that having seen neither the plaintiff nor the defendant, they might be under no temptation to be biased or influenced by either of them.

Somewhat like this in its nature is the current representation of Justice as being blindfold. There is such a carving in the Loyalist Church at Clementsport, N.S. It came from the court house in Annapolis Royal, where the first court was constituted administering English common law in 1721.

These illustrations point up an indispensable condition of sound judgment: impartial and dispassionate deliberation.

On making choices

Judgment is essentially the choosing of one thing in preference to another. This exercise of choice is the crown of human intelligence. The more decisions a person is forced to make the more he becomes aware of the vital importance of that kingpin of liberty: his freedom to choose.

People's lives turn on small hinges. People make many decisions, some of seemingly little consequence, but the total of these decisions determines the happiness or misery of their lives.

Of all paths a person can take at any given moment in business or personal life there is a best path, and to

find it, and walk in it, is the one thing needful. When people err, it is often because of their faulty choice between alternatives. They may emphasize "bigger" rather than "better", the quantity rather than the quality; they may choose an immediate pleasure at the expense of a future benefit of greater importance. Though they may have all other perfections, if they lack discrimination in making choices they will be of no great consequence in the world.

Think things over

Wisdom in making a judgment is narrowed by ignorance, habit, obsession or prejudice. It is broadened by knowledge, open-mindedness, and meditation. To attain these, one must step a little aside, out of the noisy, pushing crowd, and take a prospect of all that is relevant to the matter that demands decision.

The word "contemplation" does not mean "dreamy, impractical". To go to a quiet place to think things over before arriving at a judgment divests the mind of old and worn-out thoughts and energizes it by giving new freshness to one's outlook. In this private fourth dimension we find an opportunity to understand things, to weigh interests, to estimate effects.

But where is one to get the material with which and about which to think? We live in an age of mass culture, with the loud-speakers of commerce and politics incessantly braying their material philosophies. They are not easy to interrupt, but interrupt them we must if we are to fulfil our hope of making wise judgments.

The first thing is to overcome the haste, so common today, to finish one thing in order to get on with another. Good judgment is not reached by feverish effort. We need to take time in which to gather information and gain inspiration.

Much that is of help in making judgments may be obtained by reading. The ideas and principles expressed by ancient and modern thinkers are more than paper-deep.

Information is the fuel behind all reasoning. To live at random in the hurly-burly of business or pleasure, without ever reflecting upon the past, or upon what is happening in the minds of people, is to have no clear knowledge of the sort we need for decision-making. A person who lives in this state will have chaos in his emotions, and confusion in his judgments.

Reading increases our ability to make definitions, so important in judgment-making. Unless we know precisely what we are thinking about we cannot discriminate between this and that idea. We are incapable of distinguishing the wonderful from the impossible, the incredible from the false, and how can we choose between them? When we read a book we have time to ponder, to assess, to amplify from our own experience. These do not come to us in casual conversation or in the heat of argument.

Common sense

Some people say that they judge by their common sense. But common sense is not merely a natural knowing. It implies discernment and prudence. Many people who are quite intelligent hold foolish beliefs and superstitions and commit foolish acts. Common sense adds practical sagacity to knowledge.

When we use common sense we are visiting the excellent treasury of our own minds, and are not swayed by the spouter of clichés and the echoer of empty dogmas. We are applying ideas we formed out of our experience of life. We are bringing together some fact, newly discovered, and a general judgment suitable for the purpose deposited in the archives of memory long ago.

Common sense helps toward straight thinking, but there are other things to assist us in avoiding illogical conclusions. Alfred Korzybski provided a sort of code. His massive book (806 pages) *Science and Sanity* is the textbook distributed by the Institute of General Semantics, dedicated to helping people to interpret faithfully what is happening around them, and to improving their judgment about things.

Some of the devices arising from Korzybski's teaching are useful to everyone. He pointed out that nothing is ever the same as anything else if we examine them closely, therefore he suggested numbering the articles we are comparing: pen₁, pen₂, etc. But there is more to this mode of identification. The pens have lost some ink, and so they are not the same today as they were last month, therefore we must think of them as pen_{May} and pen_{June}. The usefulness of this device in clarifying thought is obvious.

The process suggested for straight thinking is summarized by Stuart Chase (*Power of Words*, 1953) in this way:

Use warning signals:

etc., to remind us that some characteristics of the article or event have been left out;

index numbers, as in the case of the pens, to break up false identifications;

dates to remind us that articles are in a state of change;

hyphens to show that events are not isolated, but connected;

quotation marks to remind us that the term we are thinking about is not a thing but an abstraction, for example "democracy, leftist, appeasement, security, communist".

These devices will help us to overcome loose thinking, in which we form categories and then fit people and events into them. That is not good judgment. Politician₁ is not politician₂; foreman₁ has not all the characteristics of foreman₂; the student parade of protest in Paris is not the same as the student parade of protest in Toronto. We need to differentiate: many parades and demonstrations arise

out of people's convictions or their fleeting glimpses of what human life ought to be; others are merely the expression of youthful exuberance.

About gathering facts

Moral musings are not a substitute for the discipline of fact-finding when a matter comes to judgment. We cannot decide according to our wishes. The point at issue in any judgment is whether it is supported by facts. Poets are at liberty to substitute an image or an ornament for a fact in order to find a rhyme, but this poetic license does not extend to people who seek to make valid judgments.

Good judgment-making is impossible if you have made up your mind before learning the facts necessary to an enlightened conclusion. You cannot investigate searchingly a matter which is not openly examined. It is a capital offence to theorize before one has data, because we are insensibly inclined to twist facts to suit the theories we have formed.

We must be docile in the face of facts. Every man has a right to his own opinion, but no man has a right to be wrong in his facts. The difference is this: facts are subject to verification and will be the same no matter who quotes them, whereas opinion is a private thing in the mind of a person, and is not within the reach of proof.

When we get the facts we shall see that there are at least two sides to every question. If we wish to express vivid light we must get the shadows sharp and visible. Not until both sides are looked at can a judgment claim to be of real value. When a reader gave Apollo a caustic criticism upon a very admirable book, the god asked him what were the beauties of the work. He replied that he had only busied himself about the errors. Then Apollo handed him a sack of unwinnowed wheat and ordered him to pick out all the chaff for his reward.

We boast somewhat loosely about our objectivity in considering facts. The objectivity desired is not in the facts, but is an attribute of the judge's impartial relationship to the facts.

There is a false objectivity of which we must beware. It consists of keeping exactly the same distance away from each of two contrary opinions, regardless of the truth of either. This is a fatal flaw, because it precludes all judgment. Close comparison between contrary things is the basis of judicial reasoning.

Judgment involves informed choice between alternatives. It should avoid the common error people make in demanding absolutes: all or none; either — or; black or white. While there is a better and a worse in most matters about which we make our daily judgments, there is seldom an absolutely right and an absolutely wrong.

This approach requires that we keep our minds open on every question until the evidence is in, and avoid

the distraction of strong emotions such as hatred, love, or loyalty which tend to close our minds. The man of good judgment has an outlook that is widening toward the infinite rather than narrowing to the vanishing point of his own identity and interests.

Beware of prejudice

The only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing the whole of a subject is by hearing what can be said about it by persons who hold various beliefs. To understand what a man is thinking we need to get behind him and look the same way he is looking. Then our preconceptions will often reveal themselves as prejudices.

The word "prejudice" means to prejudge. A prejudice may be a cherished belief based on hearsay or tradition. It is what Voltaire called "The reason of fools." It is, at the very least, uncivil and annoying; at its worst it is fatal to good judgment.

Prejudice is insidious. We have great capacity for persuading ourselves to see whatever we choose to see; to define right and wrong by what we would like to be right and wrong. Then we become emotionally involved, and select instances favourable to our view while failing to notice anything that tells against it.

The facts we need for good judgment are not to be confused with opinions. Opinions of people may interpret differently the same body of facts, and every opinion may appear to be of surprisingly good fit. Our own opinions, and those of others, must be evaluated carefully to ascertain their bias and their content of truth.

This can be done by debate with yourself or others. The Greeks were the first people to use dialogue deliberately as an instrument for discovering truth. They would start an argument from truths already established, and carry it on according to sound methods of reasoning. They had the added virtue of following it through to its natural conclusion, however unwelcome that conclusion might be.

Dialogue is necessary to the solution of any problem between people. It explores problems by attacking and defending all positions until the false are cancelled out or the differences are reconciled.

The final act in judgment is making up your mind. Many people allow themselves to become reservoirs of indeterminateness. Good judgment is not a gem worn by the spiritless or thoughtless person. It begins with difficulties which force us to think, to recall, to project, to formulate an hypothesis, to test our assumption, and then to make up our minds. We need to formulate clear views of what is involved, what is going to be paid for it, and what the consequences of our decision will be.

This involves asking questions. They bring out facts and lead to discussion that clarifies the problem, thus qualifying us to draw conclusions.

Judgment is based upon simplicities. It seeks to separate the wisdom of today from the warped ideas, the prejudices, the humbug and the bunkum that accumulate in our minds. It seeks to pierce mist and obscurity so as to see things as they really are. It takes into account not only the act done or proposed but also the environment. We need to comprehend things in their relationships, to understand the conditions, to make allowances for the circumstances. If we change the circumstances of a virtue it may become a vice; if we change a vice in its circumstances it may become a virtue.

Judging others

When judging others, express your judgment gently. There is little virtue and little profit (except to authors of backbiting biographies) in pointing out how a strong man stumbled, or where a doer of deeds could have done them better. Who remembers today the name of the hide merchant who led the persecution of Socrates, or of the Dominican friars who were responsible for the torture of Galileo, or of those who attacked the greatest discovery in natural philosophy made by man, the law of the attraction of gravity, as being "subversive of natural, and inferentially of revealed religion"? They were nonentities judging greatness.

It is wise to be mild in our criticisms, because in judging others we are to an extent expressing our own standards. As the King says in Shakespeare's *King Henry VI*: "Forbear to judge, for we are sinners all."

As a modern example consider the field of conservation. It is commonplace to hear conservation-minded people criticizing our forefathers for the way in which they destroyed the forest and ploughed land not fit for agriculture. They ferret out, dust off, and point to the mistakes, and pass judgment in the light of modern knowledge which was not available a century ago.

Going back nineteen centuries we find the Stoic philosopher Epictetus saying: "Doth a man bathe himself quickly? Then say not 'wrongly', but 'quickly'. Doth he drink much wine? Then say not 'wrongly' but 'much'. For whence do you know if it were ill done till you have understood his opinion?"

Public judgments

Good judgment in public affairs is particularly needed in these days. For the first time in our history we have to share political action with people abroad who have a bewildering array of levels of knowledge and civilization. At the same time, we ourselves are undergoing a technological revolution at home. No people in history ever had to cope with changing life on so many fronts at one time.

There is a price to pay for our benefits and for our freedom. We need to develop a better understanding

of the device of democracy than we have had in the past, of its obligations, responsibilities and duties. We must realize that there is a great variety of possible choices in dealing with people and events, and have in mind the potential significance of an error in judgment.

Most people have a creative urge once in a while even though they may not be the intensive and compulsive inventors of things and writers of poetry. They wish to contribute something in this new century of Canada's existence. They are looking at the state of affairs today, but also at potential greatness of tomorrow. They do not wish to make wrong judgments about the relative value of things so as to bargain away, as Dr. Faustus did in Christopher Marlowe's play, his soul for twenty-four years of affluent life.

Time for re-appraisal

It is not a sign of shallowness to re-examine things in a spirit of doubt. A man should never be ashamed to own that he has made a bad decision in the past, which is only saying in other words that he is wiser today than he was yesterday.

The essence of scientific method is a willingness to change one's mind in the light of new facts. We need to move our mental furniture around, and to make room for new pieces. Merely because a problem of economics, politics, business or personal relationship has always been solved in a certain way is no reason to believe that the solution represents the best judgment.

Some people make much of consistency, but it is better to be right than consistent. A man who boasts in old age of lifelong consistency to ideas picked up in childhood or in his early business career is confessing that he has learnt nothing in the school of experience.

We recall St. Francis of Assisi, who, after living for twenty-three years a life of pleasure, made up his mind to aim at a totally different kind of life, and became a teacher, a lover of nature, and an apostle of poverty, linking his every choice to values which his world thought absurd.

One does not have to be so extreme. There is need for compromise, the object being to do what promises best in its effects on one's happiness.

The faculty for making wise judgment comes from all you have learned and all you have experienced: your disappointments and victories, your worries and your tranquillities, your burned fingers and your escapes, your fears and your hopes.

One thing learned out of all these is that a person who does not follow his best judgment will incur a penalty. His task is not to consider what is most expedient, but to find the truth and pass judgment according to it.