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WHY FOLLOW PRECEDENT?

ADVENT of a New Year for some reason has the effect of throwing our minds backward in time. In a burst of making up for the sorrows of the past and smothering the memories of its mistakes we indulge in a brief orgy of fun. Then we get down to the somewhat more grim business of looking ahead.

This Monthly Letter is frankly a plea that we stride into 1950 with our faces forward, instead of backing into it with our eyes on the way things were done in the past.

Our inclination is (we might as well admit that we are lazy-minded people) to follow precedent, to do what's been done before.

But lots of people in the past decided not to, and that's why living is so much better today than it was 40, or 4,000 years ago. That's why we have gadgets and jigs to make work easier, books to make learning easier, motorships and automobiles and planes to make it easier to go places, and electric calculating machines to add up the cost and profit of it all.

The sad thing is that precedent often gets to work before its coming is recognized. There are parts of our human makeup which lean toward habits; we are lazy about the reworking of a problem once solved, and we do our utmost to make an old solution fit a new problem. We are fascinated by the prospect of saving time and energy and thought by doing tasks in a routine way. We like the "security" (as we call it) of being able to predict from past precedent just what will be done next.

On Following Cow-paths

It is amazing to the observant person to see what reverence we give a well-established precedent. Many of our cities are snarled in traffic jams today because we are following crooked paths made by cows centuries ago.

As the result of too much precedent worship, staleness sets in. Repetition produces a gradual lowering of our vividness of appreciation. Life becomes dull.

Our spirit of adventure dies. We are willing to hear only what we have always heard, so our thinking processes wither. We bring old age upon ourselves prematurely.

There remains, fortunately for the human race, a tiny creative minority that refuses to turn aside from the task of building usefully. They are not particularly popular, because they disturb the slumber of the great mass of people.

The truth is, as was so well stated by Professor A. N. Whitehead in *Adventures of Ideas*: "No static maintenance of perfection is possible. Advance or Decadence are the only choices offered to mankind."

The belief that things have been already settled for us on lines surviving from primitive civilizations is an enemy of true progress. People who try to decide a question today by trotting out a precedent from the long-ago past are acting just about as sensibly as the man who, when trying to sell his house, carried a brick in his pocket as a sample.

Masters of our Fate

The Greeks and the Romans at their best period were taken by modern Europe as the standard of civilization and culture. It was a procedure that served Western races well, but the world has passed into a new stage of growth. New knowledge, and new technologies have altered the proportions of things.

And (let us be forthright about this) the Greeks themselves were not backward-looking people. They were, in their day, notoriously speculative, adventurous, eager for novelty. They were not copyists. Why should we assume that progress stopped with them, or at any other point in human history?

We need to reason upon today's cases themselves, in today's surroundings, and draw fully upon today's knowledge and facilities. Take into consideration, of course, cases in the past which seem similar, but take them as helps only, not as laws.

As Cassius told Brutus in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*: "Men at some time are masters of their fates: the fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings." Any man can become master of his fate insofar as he is able to adapt himself intelligently to the conditions which surround him and turn them to his advantage.

This will seem to some like harking back to the Horatio Alger tradition, but we are not laying down a law that everyone who follows the Alger pattern will become a successful big business man. It is merely suggested that the outlook is a more healthy one than the too-prevalent outlook of the satirist, the person in our midst who holds up to ridicule all our strivings and hopes in which by his nature he can have no part. Satire, says Professor Whitehead, is the last flicker of originality in a passing epoch as it faces the onroad of staleness and boredom. Freshness has gone; bitterness remains.

Don't Despise History

There is no intention to suggest in this forward-looking article that we should cut ourselves off from history and enter upon a kind of collective amnesia.

Precedent-following can be a snare and a handicap, but — and this is an important *but* — precedents are not to be ignored. Only use them as stepping-stones to walk on, not as mill stones to hang around your neck.

There are great fundamentals which shall stand for ever: the foundations of religion, the facts in mathematics, and such abstract emotions as affection (though this may differ in strength and mode of demonstration from age to age, from nation to nation, and from person to person.)

Young people need to think of what they would be like if they had been through what their parents have experienced — the economic vicissitudes, the dangers, sorrows and emotional surgings of wars, the anxiety about their children. Young people are likely to end such thinking in a chastened mood.

Grownups can benefit by another kind of transposition. Let them imagine themselves brought forward from their youth to become part and parcel of today's younger set, with today's changed modes and amusements and speeds. They are likely to come out of such a session with less vinegar in their attitudes.

It is a duty to learn from those who have gone before us on a road which we too must travel, and to gather the store of experience their lives built up. Oldsters of today complain with some justice that the youngsters have not read the minutes of the last meeting; the youngsters retort that they are going to conduct this meeting their way. Both are right. Amidst the babble of tongues and the clatter of printing presses today the trick is to think things out for ourselves, using whatever of precedent is useful and appropriate to the improvements we are imagining.

In planning our lives, in conducting our businesses; in medicine, education, law, or ministering to the

souls of men, wherever our daily work lies, the acuteness of our judgment and the worth of our effort depend upon the width of our knowledge. The more comparisons we are able to make, the more qualified are we to speak and to lead.

This is what makes history important, because history is the base of knowledge. Not the history of battles as battles, or of kings as kings, but the history of events and thoughts that affected the current of human life. History is not a precedent to be followed, but a light to illuminate the present.

Union of Past and Present

Canada will preserve her vigour so long as she encourages a real contact between her history and her present, and combines this wisdom with the nerve to adventure beyond the safeties of the past. Otherwise we shall decay.

The union of past and present is illustrated in a way by the colour film which won first honours in the Canadian Film Award for 1948. *The Loon's Necklace* takes ancient West Coast Indian masks from the National Museum of Canada, subjects them to modern colour photography technique, and turns out something to stir 1949 Canadians as the originals stirred Canadian Indians of many years ago.

We talk of succeeding years and succeeding generations as if they were separate waves. They are not. Nineteen forty nine flows into nineteen fifty as closely woven as is the fortyninth foot of a ship's anchor rope with the fiftieth foot.

What is the philosophy that comes out of this discussion of the union of past and present? "Philosophy" is a word far too little used in business life. A philosopher is not necessarily a man who sets himself up to be wise, but one who is a lover of wisdom. Philosophy does not refuse to gather knowledge, but is engaged in penetrating to the principles and meanings of things. And surely these are qualities useful to any man in business. They do not live in a man who is everlastingly sure that his way is the only right way, but they enlighten the life of the man who has learned to doubt his cherished axioms and to question the wisdom of following his ancient precedents.

There are more points of view than one. Let us take two simple things, like soot and flour. Mix them, and you obtain a grey powder. No human being will see anything else except grey, unless he uses a microscope. But put an insect into the mixture, an insect just the size of one of the grains of soot or flour. For him there is no grey powder, but a multitude of black and white boulders. From our point of view the thought of boulders is absurd; from his point of view the thought "grey powder" does not exist.

It is our duty, whether we are men and women in business or men and women trying to live sociably with our neighbours, to see the other person's point

of view. Those who are richest in wisdom will be prepared to abandon their position on a disputed point when evidence is produced to move their reason.

A Better Way

If we are agreed that precedents are good things to have as a base from which to work, so long as we don't let them hold us in thrall, it is time to suggest that the New Year is a good occasion to ask: "Can't I find a better way of doing this?" Let's not judge ourselves, life, or the future by the way we dealt with trouble and problems yesterday, but try a new way, selecting from the past what we believe will be helpful, and keeping on toward betterment.

Our most important task at this moment is to build castles in the air, to decide to try the untried ways. If our airy plans for 1950 are made with the realities of our environment in mind, it will be easy enough to place foundations under them.

Even if our present seems broken, there are fragments which can be worked into our new plans. And plans are important. Dr. Ewen Cameron reminds us that it is fairy tale plans about magic ways of spanning distance and time, of making things, of plenty and of health, *that we work at and make come true* when we grow up. Perhaps not in the exact way that appeared in our fairy tales. When Columbus sailed he was dreaming of the Far East; instead, he found America.

We all desire to express ourselves. There is no self-expression in using hand-me-down procedures just because they conform to precedent. Instead, we need imaginative thinking, and that often starts as "an unshaped kind of something" that just appears.

The most degrading poverty in a human being, and the greatest hold-back of a business man, is poverty of the imagination. No man of feeble imagination ever achieved real success in business or in any other human effort. It is imagination that uses the past properly, to recall sensations, emotions, feelings, facts and experiences, and to apply them to the present, and to combine them in infinite variety to suit the future — or, indeed, to *make* the future.

There is a delightful fantasy in Maurice Maeterlinck's fairy play *The Blue Bird*. A little visitor to the Kingdom of the Future finds himself in the midst of all the children who are not yet born. He sees a crowd of children sleeping, and he asks his guide: "Do they do nothing?" The guide says: "They are thinking of something." "Of what?" asks the visitor. "They do not know yet; but they must take something with them to earth; we are not allowed to go from here empty-handed."

That is a splendid aim for Canadians entering a New Year: not to do so empty-handed. Guided by what we know, we can enter it searching for what we know not. We can add truth to truth as we find it. We can work to make life in Canada emerge into ever fairer and nobler forms.

Let's Praise Ourselves

We in Canada are too smilingly tolerant of other people's claims to fame, and too critical of our own people. And critics, as Alec Waugh reminds us in his book *Hot Countries*, "are never happy till they have qualified their testimonial."

Canadian genius may be held back seriously by what may almost be termed a national inclination to deprecate anything that is at once imaginative and Canadian. Examples will make this clear.

After praising the film referred to earlier, *The Loon's Necklace*, for its "brilliant presentation of an old Indian legend" a Canadian magazine published under direction of a board on which the National Gallery of Canada is represented proceeds to demolish the credit by directing attention to "a few passages where painted backgrounds, rather too obviously mannered in style, of wilderness landscapes, have been introduced."

On the next page is a particularly exasperating example. The very first animated film using puppet figures and paper cut-outs for its entire action (which is an achievement, even if only medium success were reached) is knocked down in a second breath criticism that it "was full of too unrelated a variety of graphic devices to be called excellent throughout." A full-length fictional film, "thoroughly Canadian in atmosphere, scenery, acting and story" is found to be erratic in pace, and "it does have some tedious moments."

These examples are taken from the art world because artists, poets and prose writers find it hard to win attention in Canada. Is it any wonder, when their efforts — real achievements for a youthful country like this — are met with such half-hearted praise and such whole-souled deprecation in comparisons that are made with attainments in other countries? It is ridiculous, but there it is.

As the General Manager of this Bank said in his Annual Address early this year: "I would go so far as to say that we Canadians might appraise ourselves and our possibilities a little higher than we are inclined to do." And, it might be added, we might spread our praise of Canadians' achievements, or even of their efforts, much more liberally.

Boldness is Needed

Besides having imagination within us to make the best success of a new year, we need boldness. Man would never have stood erect had he not shattered the shackles of precedent in a great experiment.

The stream of experience has changed its course again and again when men stood like rocks, steadfast to ideals and ambitions. Speaking of rocks reminds us of a fine lesson from Sir Walter Scott's *The Lady of the Lake*. Everyone will recall the scene in the wild highland glen when in response to the outlaw's whistle there arose from every clump of heather a Highlander with pointed spear or drawn claymore. The King, who was travelling as a humble knight, put his back against a great rock and threw his challenge in their faces: "Come one, come all, this rock shall fly from its firm base as soon as I."

He was exemplifying the kind of spirit a man needs to enter a new year in conquering mood: self-reliance, action, principles, courage in the face of overwhelming odds, and (a good thing psychologically) a bit of swagger.

The Past Year

We never do anything consciously for the last time without regret, even though we are looking forward to something more pleasant. The man going on retirement — what a pang it is for him to put his pencils into his desk drawer, and close the drawer.

The end of a year catches us all like that. We are retiring. The year is done, with all its opportunities of good neglected, its hours squandered upon trifles, its great plans unattempted and its great attempts unfinished.

What we are going to do is, properly, of much more importance than what we left undone. There are, of course, some people who find satisfaction in making the worst of a bad job. If their first twenty or forty or sixty years of life have provided them with things to complain about, they would be irritated if 1950 should turn out to be a sunshiny, pleasant kind of year. This article is not intended for them.

We believe in the simple things. We believe that men and women will lead more healthy lives, physically and mentally and spiritually, if they approach the New Year in hopeful mood, like the little crinkled hands of children held out for mother's gift.

H. G. Wells wrote a memorable line: "Man lives in the dawn forever." Our past had no other mission than to equip us for the present and the future. It and its precedents should not be allowed to divert, at this moment, one particle of our energy that could be devoted to constructive advance.

On Making Resolutions

The part of us that generates and encourages hopes and fears is still pretty much of a child, and it responds best to dramatic methods. That is why it is a good idea to make resolutions.

We suggest a few which may appear strange and new. That is as they should be. What profit is there in fiddling around with little resolves, such as to cut down smoking, drinking, driving fast, staying up late, and such things which should be relegated to the care of our plain common sense? Let's tackle instead the realities of the spirit and philosophy of life.

After having swept the debris of past mistakes into the fire with appropriate ceremony, our first resolve should be to think only constructive thoughts. One business man we know has as a paper weight the three little monkeys, one with its hands over its eyes, the middle one has its hands over its ears, and the other

has its mouth covered. This, we are told, is a reminder to see no evil and hear no evil and speak no evil about people.

In making plans we should consider the factors taken into account by the architect who is designing a building: site, purpose, environment, cost. If we cover these four points our plans will very likely succeed if we proceed with them, or the dangers will be revealed before we commit ourselves. Just a little imagination is needed to translate the architect's points of judgment into criteria for our own diversified projects.

Let's resolve to choose our precedents and adapt them to suit our needs, while we leave the mossbacks to carry their own load of outworn precedents. There is always a better way of doing things, and the person who forms the habit of changing to better ways has fun.

We need practice in the art of daring; to win with pleasure and lose with a smile. We need what all great men, even the most adventuresome, have had: the art of self governance, that mind management of which we wrote a few months ago.

And leave room in your planning for spiritual moments. Time given to meditation is well-invested. Thought spent on deciding where you are going will return peace of mind a hundredfold. Time devoted to just thinking whether your thoughts are true thoughts and your goal the highest to which you might aspire is the finest kind of tonic. Resolve, above all, "I will not become *blasé*, but will keep my capacity to wonder."

The New Year

The future is as mysterious as unopened mail, but come to think of it, so is the past. As the poet-airman Saint-Exupéry wrote: "What a mysterious ascension! From a little bubbling lava, from the vague pulp of a star, from a living cell miraculously fertilized, we have issued forth and have bit by bit raised ourselves to the writing of cantatas and the weighing of nebulae."

In the face of what has been, we need not fear the future. We can enter upon it believing that our present epoch is a period of change to a new direction of civilization, bringing new blessings both material and spiritual to human kind. By contact with what is eternal, by devoting ourselves to bringing something of the divine into this troubled world, we add our contribution toward driving out the cruelty and strife that surround us.

None of us should enter with audacity upon the task of predicting what measure of success lies ahead. It would be a good thing for writers of essays like this to have an extra key on their typewriters. When we don't know what to predict we would hit that key, and it would make a blur that might mean anything. This would be one place to use it.

After all is said, the way to win success in the New Year was put as clearly as need be by a little boy. When he was asked how he learned to skate, he replied: "Oh, by getting up every time I fell down."