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On Having a Sense of Values

A SENSE OF VALUES is needed in private life as well as in the market place. All our lives we are exercising choices, preferring this to that, deciding between better and worse.

Life would be uninteresting and drab if we did not set for ourselves certain goals and commit ourselves to some method for keeping score.

The things we want take many forms. Professor E. J. Urwick, who was from 1925 to 1937 on the staff of the University of Toronto, wrote about some of them in *The Values of Life*, a book in which he discussed values related to ideals, friendship, wealth, progress, knowledge, labour, simplicity and other desirable things.

As a result of the massive accretion of knowledge in the past hundred years, many men and women, even those who are well-educated, are compelled to admit: "I don't know what to think." Living in a democracy, we cannot ask that a committee of philosophers shall meet behind closed doors to decide for all of us the moral and aesthetic values that are to guide our hopes and dictate our actions. We have to face the questions personally, because what we are deciding upon is the kind of life we individually would like to live.

We have been relieved of the economic and social pressures which plagued our forefathers; now we need to stand on guard against being satisfied with shoddy and sham experiences. Our lives, like history, turn upon small hinges. Our day-to-day decisions about the things which we shall allow to matter add up to the value or worthlessness of our existence.

These are years when we are exposed to apathy and cynicism. Some critics are uneasy because they detect a lack of purpose in the things we do, a trend toward conformity, passive comfort and unintelligent pursuit of ease. They fear that even young people have lost the fondness for adventure which was once the symbol of youth.

It was not toward an age of submissive easiness, growing a fatty tissue around values, that men struggled through the ages, but rather toward broadening horizons. This is a time of exciting achievements,

but its great events and great promise can be seen only by those who stand on a level with them.

The things we value today are built upon the wisdom and work of many centuries. There has been little change in us physically — the handle of a Bronze Age sword fits our hand as well as it did the hand of its original owner. And even though our social environment has altered a great deal, the conservative structures and functions that were so useful in the past are the framework around which new social order is built.

Everything that exists is in a constant state of becoming something else. Human life is like a journey on which every step brings us to a different view. We are part of a stream flowing from the first germ to the remote and unknown future. Our sense of values will enable us to make sure that it is a flow from minus to plus, from mediocrity to distinction.

Change of thought or activity or direction is not naturally acceptable to all people. Those who do not expect change are frightened by it. Wise people make allowance for it. Alfred North Whitehead gave sound advice to newspapermen, advice which is applicable to all of us: "You can append notes at the bottom of your leading articles explaining that this is what looks true today, but that tomorrow it may be something quite different."

A good sense of values does not keep company with a hardened sense of consistency. Thinking must be an active process if it is to keep up with a world that is moving, and enable us to cope with the fact that the inconceivable of one age becomes the commonplace of the next.

Increase in knowledge

Look at the record of the increase in knowledge during the past century. A hundred years ago the Smithsonian Institution, probably the world's largest museum, catalogued 46,000 objects; in 1952 it had 33,184,494. In 1850 the British Museum added 14,266 books; a hundred years later the comparable figure was 51,419.

Of course, we cannot be as sure as we were once that all change is progress. We are quite right to modify the ideas in our minds, just as we replace the furniture in our offices and homes, but we ought not to throw out ideas merely because they are old. A hundred firmly-held concepts about nature were altered by the experiments and expeditions of International Geophysical Year, but when a man fell and broke his leg near the South Pole the geophysicists did not try to change the law of gravity.

Every business man knows that change in values is one of the components of commerce. An editorial in the *Harvard Business Review* said: "The executive must be continually and instinctively making order and relation out of unrelated ideas. Meanings are the executive's stock in trade. The most important aspect of his job is to operate in terms of values."

Every business decision requires judgment based upon a deliberate choice between values. For example, if a man doesn't know the relative strength of varying values he cannot compute the process and effects of advertising and selling.

There are two sorts of value in economics: value in use, which is utility, and value in exchange, which is what one gets for what one has to dispose of. Commodities such as bread, air, and water, which have the greatest value in use, have often the lowest value in exchange. Commodities which have the highest value in exchange, such as diamonds, curiosities and pictures, appear to have the lowest utility.

Most of the science of economics seems to be made up of attempts to reach a satisfactory balance between desirable ends and the price to be paid for them. In all other regions of life, too, men show their order of values by what they are willing to pay for what they consider the greater good. To many men, for example, wealth is not worth the price, because sometimes fine things must be sacrificed in getting rich.

What are values?

Our individual values have been formed little by little, like a coral reef. In childhood our values are dictated by our parents; in youth we learn what teachers and leaders think is good for us; in our adult lives we are subject to the pressure of public people, the writers of newspapers and magazines, the selectors of the "best" books. Without tests of value of our own we are at the mercy of every wind that blows.

We need the courage to ask and answer the question: "What are *my* values?" An anthropologist has said that the two most productive areas for investigation of the history of man are his garbage dumps and his burials: in the first we find what our ancestors discarded as useless, in the other their choicest and most characteristic offerings.

A poll revealed that these are among the principal things believed to be of value today: new experiences,

recognition, security, health, something to do, a sense of gladness, peace of mind, a centre of gravity, friends, satisfaction in work done, zest. A writer put some of these together and suggested four essential values: to feel happy and at peace with the world; to feel worthy and noble; to feel effective and equal to events; to feel significant as a co-worker in the great ongoing processes of life.

It is essential that the values we adopt and hold should allow for expansion. What matters in the history of the human race is essentially a progress to higher values. It is by this standard that we judge our forefathers, and, when the time comes, that our age shall be judged.

We need, then, to keep asking questions about our values until we arrive at rock bottom. Building a set of values demands that we go behind the slogans and the easy phrases of quack reformers and look at ourselves as we are and not as we wish we were. Learning the truth will not destroy or impair values that are worth investigating.

If the task of developing our sense of values appears to be at times tiresome or irksome, we may remind ourselves that we are in quest of something momentous, something beside which all other quests seem small, but something which, when found, will make all other quests significant.

Not absolutes

This is not to say that we should become intense about the task. Look at the paintings of the Masters, who often found themselves under the necessity to put a window or an open doorway in the background of their pictures. A true sense of values will give its possessor the ability to avoid imprisoning his life within blank walls.

Our search for values is not a search for absolutes, which are unattainable. Nobody should expect to be perfect, or unduly troubled by the fact that he is not. It is true that our tradition calls upon us to measure ourselves by a standard which far exceeds our powers to fulfil in life, but perfection would be a completion, without possibility of growth.

Vague people sprinkle their conversations with absolutes: "I want 100 per cent of the best; I am a 100 per cent Canadian." But as Sidney Hook wrote in his survey of *The Hero in History*: "There is no such thing as absolute health, absolute wisdom, absolute democracy, an absolutely honest man — or an absolutely fat one."

This does not mean that our values should not be set high, but that our ideals must be adjusted to the capacities of our human nature. It is a dangerous ardour which, urging us to the absolute heights of perfection, carries us also to the brink of precipices. There was a saying in ancient Rome: "It is not far from the Capitoline Hill (where consuls took their vows) to the Tarpeian Rock (from which criminals were thrown to their death.)"

We should not neglect a value because we despair of attaining its highest degree. After all, we do not play a sonata in order to reach the final chord, but to enjoy the music along the way.

Harmonious balance enters into every sense of values: balance of thought and spontaneity, balance of the aspirations and qualities that constitute an all-round man.

The value in happiness

Does good value consist of happiness? The answer must be that happiness is a real value only when it is made up of things indisputably good.

People who live on the surface place their happiness in things external to them, in property, rank, society and the like. Their centre of gravity is not in themselves, but is constantly changing its place with every whim and desire.

The ancient Greeks found happiness to be what they could put into life and not what they could loot out of it. Socrates exclaimed, when he saw articles of luxury laid out for sale: "How much there is in the world that I do not want!"

Those who base their happiness on work, interests, friendships, the pursuit of an ideal, and health, are in position to anticipate the simplest pleasures with passionate expectation. They have an honest purpose in life, a just estimate of themselves and others, and they obey rules they know to be right.

Such men and women have learned the art of renouncing some things in order to possess more securely and fully the things they value. They know their powers and limitations, and find satisfaction in a line of activity which they can do well. They know that values are not in things, but in their thoughts about things. When life seems to have lost its meaning it is because something has happened in the valuer, because values result from valuing.

Ambition can be treacherous to the man pursuing happiness. It may demand some deviation from the basic standards of value; it may cause sorrow, if he has not realized that some achievements bring with them a load of care. If his ambitions are too embracing, he will suffer confusion, as if someone had got into a department store and mixed up the price tags.

It is easy to be led aside after trifles. The ambition of a man with true values is not satisfied by granting audiences, being invited to receptions, or being elected to boards. Many novels remain unwritten and many business deals fall through while men make the round of visits designed to curry favour with critics and executives.

Trifles are relative. An Einstein could pass an entire lifetime without bending his powerful mind to the problem of making his bank book balance against his cheque stubs, because in his world, where $E = mc^2$, a personal budget $= 0$, but a man contemplating

business expansion or the buying of a house must pay attention to the figures in his bank account.

What is needed?

These things are needed by the person seeking a good sense of values: health, education, some idealism, a set of principles, to think things over, and patience.

It is with good reason that we ask after his health when we meet a friend, for good health is fundamental to the enjoyment of life. When you are suffering from a toothache or seasickness a profit on the stock-market is no more important than getting a seat on a bus.

Education should instil in us an active faith in the vital values which make our lives worth living. Choice of values is narrowed by ignorance and closed-mindedness.

There is today a mountain of knowledge which did not exist when our grandparents sat at school desks. Out of all this knowledge we must extract the values that have most relevance to our lives. It is the task of education to improve our judgment about values, so that we keep the useful ore and throw away the slag.

Education tells us how human and social problems were solved in other ages. Upon this knowledge we may base our working out of the solution of personal and social problems which are new only in the modern costumes they wear. It is saddening to see how many persons, mature in age, lay aside their books just at a time when they are best qualified to read them with alert judgment and polished taste.

When one becomes able to deal with facts and ideas thoughtfully and reasonably, then one becomes greater than one was before. This may be thought of as being idealistic, but we must have values that are somewhat idealistic or our thoughts tend to become earthbound, caught up and entangled in material things. Materialism leads a person to try to explain one of Tchaikovsky's symphonies by tracing the pedigree of the catgut in the violins.

It is true that imagination and idealism serve no useful purpose unless they are bridled and guided by common sense. But we cannot establish values for ourselves unless we look outside the mundane practicalities of life.

Values are like a compass

A sense of values enters into, or becomes, a life philosophy, something that gives stature, something greatly needed in these days, when many people have thrown over the old standards without acquiring new ones. They come up against crises new to their experience and have no set of values and no habits of thought suited to the new situations. Instead of getting what they like, they are compelled to like what they get.

That is one great virtue in having a sense of values: you have a compass you can trust. When Francis

Chichester crossed the Atlantic in mid-1962 he was alone in his 28-foot sailboat, and all around him the sea met the sky in an unmarked horizon. But he was not lost. He had a compass; his course was charted; the stars were overhead.

No two days start alike or are exact counterparts, but with a compass of values one knows in which direction to sail in order to reach the desired port. The compass is a principle, made up of underlying ideas and controlling concepts. As Sophocles put it: "Not of today nor yesterday, but from all eternity, these truths endure."

Principles are not gathered from the thin air, nor are they wrought out by the sweat of daily chores. A value-seeking person must allow himself time for spells of solitude in which to mull over in personal reflection what his mind has gathered. Prince Philip put it this way: "I have had the opportunity of wandering over the hills and also of doing some fishing. These pursuits, with the moments of solitude and reflection which they give, are invaluable to any man who is trying to keep a balanced outlook in the midst of the furious activity of modern life."

It is probably necessary for everyone, prince or workman, to spend a little time once in a while re-assessing his life and the values by which he lives it. We should not forget that a photograph plate, passive in itself, can find — with its face turned in the right direction — stars which no telescope can see.

Meditation may be a re-energizer, too. When we withdraw into ourselves to think things over we often gather our energies into a tight coil, ready to be unleashed in self-expression.

The person who takes time to meditate may not comprehend everything fully, but he will enjoy the thrill of reaching the point where there seems to be only a thin veil between him and the reality he is seeking. His choice of values made on the mountain will serve him well when he returns to the valley.

This state is not reached overnight. Besides courage to face the issues there is needed patience to work out the answers. Patience is a very great word, because it includes maturity of thought, mental health, and the refinement of judgment which takes account of the consequences of actions.

In a world in which there are so many good people and institutions and nations fighting not for something but against something there is great need for the dignity of being positive. To take up simply the attitude of defending something holds out no hope of improvement, but if we make a habit of seeing the positive possibilities in every situation we shall gain zest for doing significant things.

There is room within this positiveness for the opinions of other people. While we must commit ourselves, believing strongly in our values and judgment, our sense of chivalry should lead us toward open-mindedness. This will give us moderation in our

thoughts and actions. We will recognize the undoubted fact that no opinion is completely right and none is completely wrong. Our world is full of middle roads.

Living effectively

How effectively we live is the expression of our sense of values. Every man is worth just so much as the things are worth with which he busies himself.

We should expose ourselves to a context of values in which high performance is encouraged. It was said sadly in the report of a special study by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund Inc.: "If we ask what our society inspires in the way of high performance we are led to the conclusion that we may have, to a startling degree, lost the gift for demanding high performance of ourselves. It is a point worth exploring."

This carries our thoughts back to the inscription on the temple wall at Delphi: "Know Thyself."

The cultivation of excellence, the pursuit of achievement for its own sake, is a latent force in nearly everyone. Bringing his sense of values out into the open part of his mind is one way to make the latent urge effective in action.

Test tubes and text books have not yet made life something to be taken like a doctor's prescription, a mere following of instructions. Everyone has individual talent, but he can give expression to it only through initiative, enterprise, energy, and invincible optimism. He must come out of his emotional shell if he is to satisfy the something within him which is unappeased, if he is to be himself and not a pale reflection of other people.

This self-fulfilment is not selfishness. To say that we should seek within ourselves for the values that will give us happiness is not to say that we should descend to self-centredness in an animal sort of way. Part of our sense of values must express itself in making our contribution to society. We cannot realize high values if we are content to exist as nonparticipating spectators.

Values are lived, not talked about. A good actor does not pause in the middle of a scene to describe the mental agony of Hamlet or the jealousy of Othello, but simply conveys it.

This brings us to a crucial point in the discussion of a sense of values. There is a time for meditation, but there is also a time for action. We must attend to the job in hand and work at it calmly, vigorously, without distraction.

We may be affronted by the reception given our sense of values, or disappointed by our failure to realize our values immediately, but these worries and burned fingers and disappointments are trivial in view of our goal. Our real business in life is to find something that is true for us, and to live by it. Our scale of values provides us with a bench mark from which to measure our progress, and a point to which we can return for fresh starts.