



# THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA MONTHLY LETTER

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## *What Do You Want Out of Life?*

EVERY NEW YEAR people all over the world think of what they want the next twelve months to bring them. Some people merely make wishes, but many make resolutions to regulate their daily living so as to increase their prospect of happiness.

Just as the date of the beginning of the new year differs from continent to continent, so the things that people desire differ. Human nature is subject to whims, adaptable to good or bad influences, and swayed by many cultural patterns.

The answer to the great question of life: "What do you want?" will change, too, as a person progresses in age. Nobody is too old to revise his opinion about what he wants out of life and work toward getting it.

The personal Utopia toward which everyone is sailing is one for which no passport is needed. You write your own ticket and plan your own itinerary. It starts, therefore, as a thought within your own mind, and the desire you develop will give direction to your decisions and your actions, and will determine the firmness with which you carry out your programme.

There are two approaches to the shaping of a utopia or to making our lives happier in the next year. As Lewis Mumford wrote in *The Story of Utopias* (Peter Smith, New York, 1941): "The genuine alternative for most of us is that between an aimless utopia of escape and a purposive utopia of reconstruction."

Our wants for a happy life are of several kinds: physical, social, spiritual and inner-self, and each of these has several aspects. One person may value the ethic of work; another may look upon work favourably as a way to get what he wants; another may hate work as an affliction and want only to be free of it.

Every person differs from all others in the nature and the relative intensity of his wants. It can be said, however, that every person wants satisfying mental and physical activity; the feeling of having mastered something; and the assurance that he is of consequence.

### *Utopia is necessary*

Because of the universal desire among human beings in all ages to change living conditions for the better,

many wise men and women have written plans, referred to as "utopian". Utopia, of course, is an imaginary State, perfect in its living conditions for every citizen.

Anatole France, the French man of letters, wrote: "Without the Utopians of other times, men would still live in caves, miserable and naked . . . Utopia is the principle of all progress, and the essay into a better future."

Some learned writers have thought that the ideal State would be brought into being by politics, others put their trust in religion, others believe in education as the wonder-worker, others advocate work, or liberty, or co-operation.

These utopias represent ideas of the Good Life as it was pictured at the time. Today, utopia regarded as a plan for improvement is as essential to progress in individual and national life as are blue-prints for building your home.

Every man's utopia exists just as really as North and South exist. Mumford says: "We can never reach the points of the compass, and so no doubt we shall never live in Utopia; but without the magnetic needle we should not be able to travel intelligently at all."

### *What are "wants" ?*

Today's utopians are vastly diversified in their recipes: they write, make speeches and parade in support of such individual wants as peace, equality, security, education, social welfare and higher wages. If one could grant the assumption that the particular change they advocate would bring the total satisfaction they proclaim, their conclusions would be magnificent. The truth is that Utopia will require a little of many good things.

Utopia involves the satisfaction of wants, but the wants of man are insatiable. One want supplied gives rise to two other wants, a characteristic which distinguishes man from the other animals.

The "practical" wants may be divided in this way: economic security, opportunity for advancement in living standards, facilities for cultural enlargement and physical relaxation, and education adapted to



satisfactory living. In recent years a want which did not before make itself felt is that associated with the use of leisure time.

Wants are not always straightforward things, but may be complex in the same person. Suppose a man to be in the real estate business, the father of children, the chairman of his suburban playground committee, and a member of a conservation association. When he comes to appraise a piece of real estate for sale or for use he has four possibly conflicting wants to cope with.

Another person may feel that all he wants is to be left alone, particularly by public authorities and the tax collector. But most hermit-minded people yearning for the isolated life of a Robinson Crusoe would wish to be *cultivated* Robinson Crusoes, surrounded by books, a television receiving set, a gramophone playing well-chosen records and a tape recorder on which to immortalize their hermitage soliloquies.

### *Wants versus needs*

It seems to be part of human nature that when a person's needs are satisfied he must develop wants or he would die of tedium. Merely keeping alive is not enough. Everyone has the instinct to survive, but he has also ideas about how he would like to live.

People's ideas of what material things would help to make them happy are no longer incidental to life; they have become a dominating power in human activity. Many are of a ceremonial character, things to show rather than to use: status symbols. The up-to-date furnishings and the television set, the washing machine, the refrigerator, the automobile and the wall-to-wall carpeting are not merely desirable because of the comfort they provide, but necessary in order that we may hold our heads erect in company.

There is no more common cause of distress among otherwise mentally bright people than the urge to be on top, to be highest scorer on the team, to trump the Joneses with some new gadget or an art treasure. They fail to be happy because they are not satisfied to be the best that they can be. They are all tied up in the minutiae of status.

In childhood, life has a sort of completeness. Children accept their environment and make the best of it. It is without doubt true that many adults would be happier living in simplicity than they would be if they were surrounded by everything advertised in a day's newspapers and an evening's television shows. Henry David Thoreau carried this to its extreme in his book, *Walden . . . or Life in the Woods*: only those persons are rich who have all of which they have real need.

People may be rich because they want little and at the same time poor because they possess little, and yet happy because they are not slaves to circumstances but so direct their lives that circumstances satisfy them.

It is a comforting exercise to make a list of things one does not want, that would be no good to him if he had them, or would be hindrances to satisfaction

of his real wants. Often when Socrates was looking on at auctions he would say: "How many things there are which I do not need!" When Alexander the Great, King of Macedonia, went to visit the Greek philosopher Diogenes, he asked if he could do Diogenes any favour. Diogenes replied: "Yes, just move out of my sunshine."

### *A standard of living*

Developing a standard of living is a powerful breeder of wants. It makes people seek to raise their level of living to match the ideal they set up.

A good standard of living does not depend upon status, wealth, and ease, but is a guide to happiness arising out of the wise choice you make from among the services and goods offered within the limits of your time, energy, interest and the money you have to spend.

The peoples of the earth differ greatly in living standards. A plot of land may yield a Chinese family a living which to them seems bounteous; it may yield a fair living to a family in one of the new African states; and it may yield no living at all to a family of Canadians.

In order that life may be rich, full and significant, one must choose and balance one's possessions and activities. This means assigning values to things and projects.

Every person's experience of life enters into his sense of values. This accounts for our revision of things we value as we grow older. The baubles of adolescence no longer dazzle us. The tempests of youth enter a temperate phase. Every year sees changes in the material conditions around us, and these impinge upon and modify our ideas of values. "The value of a thing," said Karl Marx in *Capital*, "consists solely in its relation to our wants."

### *Seeking the Good Life*

All people want the Good Life, defined according to their special interests. No one wants life to be flat and tasteless.

In *Man's Quest for Social Guidance* (Henry Holt & Co., 1927), Howard W. Odum wrote: "The Good Life may be interpreted as being the result of the individual's harmonious development of his whole personality and his satisfactory adjustment to his fellow man and to his physical environment."

If you bring together a dozen men and women, say for an evening to read one of the great books, ask them: "What is your idea of the Good Life?" These friends have read the best books of some of the greatest philosophers, religious leaders, scientists and politicians. They know the chain of reasoning by which the ingredients are measured, but there will be twelve variations on what makes the Good Life.

Arthur E. Morgan puts his finger on the great fault that many earnest people have in seeking to better



their own lives or the conduct of society. "One of the commonest defects of utopias," he says in *Nowhere was Somewhere* (U. of North Carolina Press, 1946), "is the habit of selecting certain elements of a good society and of magnifying them and centring the attention on them to the neglect of other values no less important." They try to make one good stand up as the whole of goodness.

Whatever their individual measure of goodness may be, few men or women wish to be regarded as negligible ciphers in life. What they want is not wealth or pleasure as such, but the opportunity for rich activity. The worst that can befall anyone in the next twelve months is that he shall fail to attain the satisfaction of having done something self-expressive.

The exhilaration of achievement, of doing things, of self-realization: this people want as a natural expression of their individuality. Professor Odum wrote: "To grow into the maximum of personality, character, adaptation, achievement, perfection of normality, is the supreme process of the race."

### *What to value most*

There are three qualities one must carry with him in his search for happiness through self-fulfilment: intellectual awareness, social sense, and cultural appetite.

We must not let our minds get out of breath in trying to keep up with our speeding technological development, nor should they get so out of harmony with significant current realities as to stand aloof: as did the scientist who had a lot to do with producing the atom bomb and then recited Hindu mystical poetry while the first explosion occurred.

It is reasonable to want to enjoy both technical benefactions and intellectual aspirations. This age, which seems so disharmonious, may produce rich, balanced personalities, through whose lives there will arise, as Walter Pater wrote in *The Renaissance*: "a movement in which the love of the things of the intellect and the imagination *for their own sake*, the desire for a more liberal and comely way of conceiving life, make themselves felt."

Keen practical intelligence need not be divorced from the practice of the humanities. While developing intellectual curiosity about a variety of subjects, we must share everyday life with a number of people. Human wants include social objectives.

All great moral teachers have said that many deep wants will be satisfied within the person who does something to make life a bit better for others. The five books of the Old Testament known as the Pentateuch give instructions as to the dealing of man with man, and present a social code not far short of utopian.

Co-operation in community, fellowship and working groups is essentially a device of collective want satisfaction. By sharing society's institutions, religious, cultural and educational; by behaving harmoniously, displaying the decent graces of civilized life; and by adapting where necessary while improving where

possible, we will find society responsive to our social needs.

To be cultured is to live as whole men. Without literature, art, and music we deprive ourselves of the lively, profound and indispensable interests of a humane life. Being cultured does not mean acting like the teachers of English mentioned by H. L. Wilson in *Of Lunar Kingdoms*, who justify their love of Shakespeare by investigating him with scalpels and all the latest tools of science. It means enjoying his plays and poems for their interest, appreciating them for the skill of the master in composing them, and admiring the word-deftness that has never been excelled and has made Shakespeare the most-quoted writer. This is the appreciation made up of good taste and discrimination.

### *Ambition is needed*

Being ambitious means having an end in view and devising means for attaining that end. A general hazy yearning will not carry a person far into the new year. Hendrik van Loon wrote in the introduction to a book: "It does not matter so much where we are going, as long as we are making consciously for some definite goal."

If it were sought to write in a short paragraph an aim for any person who wants to live happily, it might say: live according to nature so as to be healthy; get to know your qualities so as to enlarge them, and your failings, so as to reduce them; find out what you can do best, so that you may fulfil yourself in doing the work you have the greatest capacity to perform; construct a moral ideal, for without it life will be void of satisfaction and material gains will become dust and ashes.

An aim need not be dizzily ambitious. It can be modest but intense; directed earnestly toward accomplishing something, and within the realm of possible attainment. Of all the hurdles we build up for ourselves, self-arrested development is one of the hardest to overleap. Our minds tell us that there is more to life, but our inertia holds us down.

The remedy is to seize upon every idea for a new line of action, and plant it in your mind as a seed thought. Tend these seeds patiently, sprinkle them with your interest, and when one sprouts encourage it with your enthusiasm.

### *Making resolutions*

Great resources of knowledge and understanding have been acquired by the time we reach middle age, only needing to be tapped so that they may bud and blossom like the dry staff in the lyrical tale of Tannhäuser.

If the mind has been allowed to run to seed during the past year there is some clearing up to do, and this starts with a resolution to set things right and get back to good gardening.

Tepid and half-hearted resolutions seldom move us



forward an inch toward the things we want. We need to use our imagination as the transforming power that will enable us to refine and enlarge the design and beauty of our lives.

Using the imagination does not mean weaving strange fancies or building quaint conceits. It is thinking of something better than we have now. Then we look around at our environment and seek the practical means to attain what we want.

We must be in earnest. The carrying out of a good resolution is not menaced so much by ridicule or difficulty as it is by dilution. Occasional and small deviations are indulged in, and the spirit of improvement becomes weakened.

Our instincts are not a sure guide in grading our wants in order of their importance to us. All primitive urges are subject to fading. The evolution of those instincts took place under conditions that required their use in utterly different proportions than those required today. The proportion of our requirement for physical self-preservation has decreased, while the proportion needed for social well-being has increased.

Primitive desires must be made to conform to the new environment in which we try to satisfy them, because the world is being visibly made over. Human intelligence is useful where there is change and need of change. This intelligence may show itself in man through one of three acts: if he is not hitting it off with his environment he may get into step, change the environment, or get out of the environment.

Big and sudden changes are not necessary. The desired way of life can be reached by the gradual introduction of new and useful elements. In fact, the slow and easy way may be best. It is necessary at times to conform to unexpected occurrences, just as when out driving you take a roundabout road when you come to a "detour" sign.

### *The need to plan*

The prospect of success by unplanned effort is remote. A person without a plan is nothing but a drifter, waiting for his life course to be dictated by events as they happen.

When an architect designs a great building like the Head Office of this bank on Place Ville Marie he is creating something the exact like of which has never before been seen. His plans must be right to start with, because he has no second chance. He has to take into account experience in the building of other structures, the principles of architecture and construction, and the strains to which the building will be subjected. So with an individual's plans for his future.

Getting what you want out of life is not something to be talked to death, but something to do something about. John Dewey, the Vermont philosopher, wrote in *Human Nature and Conduct*: "To a healthy man inaction is the greatest of woes."

On New Year's Eve we may enjoy a spot of wishful thinking, but next day we brace ourselves for the effort to make our dreams come true.

Most of us do not need sheer originality in our resolutions, but just to start by adapting what we have to the plan of action we believe will bring us happiness. Our analysis will have shown us that many things we worried about inwardly are not really important, or are things like a crack in the plaster or a smidgen of worn-off paint just requiring that we get off our chairs and do a little work.

In whatever undertaking that emerges from our yearning for a brighter future, the support of members of our household is important. A lone effort runs the risk of foundering on the rocky disinterest of other family members. It is obviously desirable that there should be affectionate understanding, a bond of reciprocal aid, and a sense of unity of purpose.

### *A Canadian Utopia*

When Plato described his ideal community he did not set it on a mythical island as some other utopians did. He put it right in his own country, with the economic and social features of that environment. The future of Canadians is in Canada. It is here that they will work out their happiness and find self-fulfilment.

We picture to ourselves the political, social, and technical conditions under which we should like to live, and at least in some small degree we try to bring those conditions into being. This is a country in which everyone is free to try to fulfil his wants in his own way; it is also a country which gives him the opportunity to contribute toward building the environment that he considers desirable for this purpose.

People as individuals have various ideas about what they want. Nevertheless, there are ideas in common which can benefit all. To "mind your own business" is a good rule insofar as it keeps us from meddling in things that do not concern us, such as the acts of people which are within their own control with relation to affairs which affect only them. But the business of governing the country affects everyone, and everyone should participate in it according to his capability.

### *It means work*

We have staked out a plot in life and now it is our job to build something on it that will give us the sense of having achieved our potential happiness.

These days, full of wearisome problems, fragmentary knowledge, and conflicting passions are not the culmination of man's capacity for reaching the Good Life. Everything has not yet been tried. There is room for new ideas and for the improvement of old ideas, but men and women must go in search of them and make use of them. The world is not going to seek us out to serve us a platter of the things we wish for.

The greatness of the success we enjoy in supplying our desirable wants depends upon our thinking soundly, planning well, and working to develop ourselves to our possible excellence, while coping with the restrictions and seizing the opportunities that we encounter in our environment.