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Lifelong Learning

EDUCATION is a lifelong pursuit. Whatever a person does in life demands preparation, and since every day is a new day with new requirements he needs to face every dawn with renewed qualifications.

Education is not something that goes on for a certain number of years until it is capped by a graduation ceremony, whereupon it ends forever. That would be to let your mind die. An advertisement for Great Books has an illustration representing a gravestone on which is inscribed: "Here lies the mind of John Doe, who at age 30 stopped thinking."

Education in school has provided many tools of thought and some guides to action. It has led the student to recognize certain basic principles. To say at this point "That is it; I am educated" is merely another way of saying "I have stopped learning."

Every person has to live all his life with himself. He should, then, for his happiness' sake, make himself an informed, reasoning and interesting companion.

This *Letter* is not an attempt to revise the educational system, but a reminder of the lifelong nature of education. Many people have ideas about changing the system, but they are careful when it comes to making proposals: they recall that Socrates was invited to drink the hemlock because he attempted to reform the university curriculum of his time.

Continuing education may be obtained within organized educational programmes or by our own initiative and design. Its purpose is to help us to make the most of our good points and to turn our deficits into assets. It keeps our perceptions sharp. It gives us the capacity for self-renewal.

Continuing education is essential if one is to be an efficient person, home-maker, and citizen. It enables one to grow and to live significantly as youth, parent and worker, and as a citizen of the world.

Today's dilemma

One of the central dilemmas of today's overlapping generations is how to keep informed amidst the dizzying succession of discoveries and events.

Educators have drawn inspiration from Plato, but since his day there have been three new influences affecting education: the vast accumulation of knowledge, the need to earn a living in a competitive world, and the growth of applied science.

Continuing education enables us to re-evaluate our habits of thought, concepts and ideals in the light of these changing times. It prepares us to face any change or chance, so that we are not easily thrown into a panic. It assures us of where we are, indicates where we are going, and tells us what we had better be doing under these circumstances.

Part of continuing education is to keep us alert to the possibility of the unexpected, and with minds open to meet it. Thus we avoid the embarrassment that overtook Dr. Lardner in London in 1836. He published a pamphlet in which he proved conclusively that a steamboat could not cross the ocean: the book came to this continent on the first steamboat that came across the Atlantic.

Continuing education, conditioning us for the march of progress and preparing us to enjoy life fully, is possible and desirable for everyone. We may call as witnesses to the need two eminent men whose ability and common sense no one will question. President Abraham Lincoln hesitated about visiting Europe where great statesmen were eager to give public recognition to his fame. He told the senator who suggested that he accept: "As you know very well my early education was of the narrowest, and in the society in which I should move I should be constantly exposed in conversation to have a scrap of Greek or Latin spoken that I should know nothing about." And Sir Winston Churchill said in a speech in Boston: "I have no technical and no university education, and have just had to pick up a few things as I went along."

To be educated

Dr. Nicholas Murray Butler, president of Columbia University, cited these aspects of education: correctness and precision in the use of one's mother tongue; refined and gentle manners; the power and habit of

reflection; the power of growth; efficiency — the power to do.

To these qualities other people have added: a set of values and the courage to defend them; an understanding of society; the ability to look squarely at the world and its problems.

It is not enough to accumulate facts. To be educated is to have acquired knowledge that has certain attributes. It should enable us to answer these three great questions: Is it right or wrong? Is it true or false? Is it beautiful or ugly?

Continuing education does not provide a tourist's guide to life, but a scale of values by which to regulate living. It offers these benefits: it enables us to learn what thoughts and acts we should avoid and what we should pursue if we are to be happy; it shows us how to inquire into the reality of things so as not to be deluded by surface appearances; it helps to free us, on the one hand from the ghostly drag of superstition, and on the other hand from the arrogant assertion of dogmatic opinion.

Freedom is one of the great benefits conferred by education. It enlarges the scope of a person to enjoy the good things of life. Stephen Leacock said in *Humour and Humanity* that he found written over the portals of the library of a great university the legend: "Learning maketh a full man." He thought that was a very stodgy conception. "Learning," said Leacock, "ought to make him light as air, able to hop like a humming bird among the flowers of scholarship."

Continuing education should be a progress from lower to higher stages of understanding. This is not to say that continued learning will make you as carefree as Leacock's humming bird appears. It makes you sceptical toward statements for which no evidence is presented, and disdainful of insincere promises. It acts as a sort of balance wheel, giving you poise. It enables you to keep your head when people all around you are losing theirs.

Communicating ideas

It helps, too, in understanding and communicating ideas. Most persons in Canada have worthwhile thoughts they would like to pass along to others, but they have not the knack of putting their thoughts into words. Continuing education will enable them to turn their collection of random and disconnected ideas into an integrated and understandable communication.

Continuing education enables one to meet and converse with all sorts of people. The business executive may talk with the labour leader and the scientist with the philosopher, and each recognizes that the other is an educated man, though the area covered in their collection of knowledge is widely different and the centres of their interests are far apart.

The characteristics of good communication can be learned by every person of fine sensibility and reasonable industry. That attainment alone makes a continuing education worth while.

This education is not formal schooling. Mature people are not confined to some prescribed curriculum. They may explore what interests them: words to express their thoughts; fields and woods to learn about nature and ecology; the causes and effects of things that are happening around them. There is something to interest every sort of person, something in which to make discoveries and develop ideas.

Continuing education means using your own brain to supply a theory of life fit for you, based upon knowledge of life's possibilities and limitations. It means knowing the validity of the great things we treasure: justice, liberty, loyalty, truth and duty. It stimulates your imagination, creates perspective and breadth of outlook, and presents the challenge of judging between this and that. Devotion to this sort of learning produces a scholar in the truest sense of the word.

The need for knowledge

Many of the world's ills are due to ignorance, confusion and the misinterpretation of cause and effect. This is not merely because many people are illiterate, but because so many people who are literate ceased learning too early in life. They did not keep up.

Education continued into maturity keeps us supplied with many points of view from which to survey and appraise events and movements. One mark of the educated person is the degree of his openmindedness. He is opposed to dogmatism, intolerance and smugness. No one can pursue education without widening his views and changing his mind.

Consciously or subconsciously everyone knows that he needs a comprehensive view of existence if he is to integrate his values, choose his goals, plan his future, and maintain the coherence of his life. Therefore he is constantly pushing back the boundaries of his knowledge, not seeking to prove some notions he has, but searching for the truth about them.

At every turn in the journey of life the need for knowledge urges itself upon us. Whatever advance we make in our working or private life is due to the increase of our knowledge and our urge to push upward to superiority.

When a person asks himself: "Do I know enough about this matter to express an opinion or to take action?" he is giving evidence of being educated. Saint Thomas Aquinas, known as the Angelic Doctor, wrote: "An angel perceives the truth by simple apprehension, whereas man becomes acquainted with a simple truth by a process from manifold data."

Knowledge is the sure base for speculation about events and the only safe foundation upon which to build dream castles. It opens the door to valuable states of mind. It helps to remove fidgety anxiety about happenings. It gives us the edge when we come up against a problem for the solution of which we have not been specially trained.

To be educated you must keep your knowledge up to date. As an example, consider the big library of a medical doctor. He had hundreds of books bulging in their binding because of pieces of paper inserted in them. The doctor subscribed to medical journals, clipped out the technical articles and slipped them into his textbooks at appropriate places. He had, then, the basic principles about disease and treatment together with the latest word about discoveries and new techniques. He was up to date. He was educated. No matter how high he climbed in his profession (at one time he was chief of a hospital) he never became top-heavy, because every expansion of his duties was matched by expansion of his base of knowledge.

Much knowledge comes from observation. Literacy does not consist in having the ability to read the instructions on a medicine label, a tin of soup or an electric drill. It is the power to absorb observations, make analyses and reach decisions. It is the capability to know how to find out the answer to questions.

The art of reasoning

From acquiring knowledge we proceed to reasoning. The quality that sets mankind apart from the lower order of animals is that of thinking. Activity of our minds is the thing needful if we are to be fully human.

As Alfred North Whitehead wrote: "The art of reasoning consists in getting hold of the subject at the right end, of seizing on the few general ideas which illuminate the whole, and of marshalling all subsidiary facts round them." To think is to compare things with one another, to notice wherein they agree and differ, and to classify them according to their agreements and differences.

In doing this you will benefit by the academic habit of disciplined and objective thought. There is an austere beauty in precise thinking, and great satisfaction in seeking and finding answers. A character in one of Sophocles' plays said: "'Tis no disgrace even to the wise to learn, and lend an ear to reason!"

To put education to its best use you need some guides such as those given by René Descartes, French mathematician and philosopher and father of the modern science of thought. The starting point of his philosophy was the famous phrase: "I think, therefore I am." He proposed these principles: 1) Evidence: do not accept anything as true until you recognize that it is indeed true; 2) Analysis: divide up problems into many parts and solve them one by one; 3) Synthesis: put things together, thus mounting in stages to the most complex knowledge; 4) Control: make your surveys so wide as to ensure that nothing is omitted.

Close upon the heels of educated reasoning comes wisdom. When you gain and practise scholarship, that gives you a fierce resentment against pretense and bluff, against shoddy thinking and jerry-building. Wisdom sees the fitness of things and grasps the logic of events. It makes a person's mind fit, as Charles

Perrault wrote in the dedication of his book of fairy tales: "to rise to great things and stoop to small ones."

Finally, the person who is continually learning reaches philosophy. That begins when he is wise enough to question his cherished beliefs, and ask for the truth, and demand an answer to "why?"

For mature people

Continued learning assures that the accumulated wisdom of advancing years will be strengthened by a growth in attitudes and concepts suited to changing social, economic and political conditions. It enables a person to adjust constantly to changes in his individual situation and to the demands and expectations of society.

Learning throughout life fits one to rise above average. Enthronement of the average is one of the pitfalls facing a democracy, and the one way to avoid this pitfall is a lively recognition of excellence wherever it appears, and cultivation of the urge to reach it.

Mental stagnation is the most greatly-to-be-feared fate of encroaching age, whereas a human mind continuing to grow and to develop throughout a long life is a splendid and impressive sight. Continuing education enables a person to keep busy at his highest natural level, and sometimes to rise above it.

Age is not a genuine handicap to learning anything you want to learn or need to learn, but in the second half of life one does not belong in a vast educational institution: one is an individual on his own.

Upon retirement, many men and women return to education as something that holds the assurance of a better way of life and a path toward self-fulfillment. How different is that effort to adjust so as to get the best out of life from the attitude of those who are content upon retirement to idly repose, like emancipated slaves content with their freedom.

How to do it

Studying to broaden your horizon is not something to be attempted in the atmosphere of frenzy that marked the busy days when you were trying to clear up a backlog of work in your office or factory. Opportunity to continue learning consists in arranging circumstances so that study is possible.

We are reminded of the newly-retired Mr. Crombie in Edward Streeter's *Chairman of the Bored* (Harper & Bros. 1961 and Pocket Books of Canada, Ltd. 1962). He said to his wife at breakfast: "Last night I worked out a schedule for myself. If you don't have some kind of a systematic plan you never get anything accomplished." "I thought you told me we had all of eternity to get things done." "That won't be long enough if we don't get some order into our lives."

There will be days when your primary objective is to keep afloat, and others when you look at the neatly arranged list of things that you planned to do and

find that you don't want to do any of them. These are natural occurrences, and they need not be fatal to your desire to study. Like Dorian Gray in Oscar Wilde's novel you may be "far too wise not to do foolish things now and then." But you will return to your purpose and your plan, probably refreshed by your vagrancy.

Some may carry on their continuing education alone. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his journal: "I feel a joy in my solitude that the merriment of vulgar society can never communicate." Nearly every home can be made to provide a den or a quiet corner where a person may sit with a book or with his thoughts. The smallest cubby-hole becomes a spacious study when a person's mind walks up and down among the thoughts of others.

For those who like to do things in company, there are courses for adults in universities and schools, the Great Books groups, and groups which study any subject in which members are interested. Whether alone or in company, you find pleasure in exercising your mind.

Have a shelf of books

The easiest way to extend education, and indeed the only way open to many persons, is by reading books. There is no mood of mind to which a person may not administer the appropriate nutriment or medicine at the cost of reaching down a volume from his book-shelf.

Instead of reading about weak, disorganized and mixed-up people, unhappy, blundering and defeated, seek intimacy with great minds. Plan to absorb the results of other people's thinking and add your own thoughts. It is quite possible for a person to acquire such a general knowledge of the laws of nature and the facts of history and the bases of science that every great advance made in any department shall be to him both intelligible and interesting.

One may have books that he has never read and never will read, but possession of them is education in its own way. One knows that all he need do when he is lonely is reach out his hand and grasp that of a friend, or if he wants to know something, turn to his books and ask. Everyone should have a few feet of shelf marked "books suitable for reading on deserted islands." That will be the section to which you will turn when life seems empty of interest or when difficulties pile upon you.

The fruits of education

The fruits of continuing education include the development of ideals, the setting up of a sense of values, the acquisition of a feeling for beauty, and the experience of adventure.

The ideal life would be the fullest development of your highest powers in education and art, and growth in religious, moral and intellectual awareness. There

is an innate satisfaction in looking for the true and the noble, whether the search be among ideas or men and women. As your education progresses, you develop a philosophy that demands the first-rate.

Find out what things are worth bothering about. It is a great advance toward happiness when we learn what things are in our power and can be changed, and what things are not in our power and therefore must be adjusted to.

The time of retirement, when a person has leisure to think about things, often reveals that the working days have been lacking in the perception of beauty. To cultivate appreciation of beauty is an essential part of continuing education. Dr. Albert Edward Wiggam wrote in *The Marks of an Educated Man* (Blue Ribbon Books, 1930) "I feel sorry for the man who has never gone without his dinner to buy a book of poems, a ticket to a concert, a little statuette or picture, or a pretty rug or chair for his home, or even a pretty hat for his wife."

Last but not least is the excitement of discovery. When you see an analogy, a connection between events or thoughts, which no one has seen before, you experience the thrill of discovery.

André Gide, the French novelist and critic, Nobel prize winner for literature in 1947, wrote "The wise man is he who constantly wonders afresh." When we find something in a book that causes surprise or admiration, or that adds to our knowledge of the universe, we are released, for the time being, from the choking grip of sophistication and the dead hand of cynicism.

To be educated means that you have learned what to do with an idea that enters your mind. You know how to take it apart to see what it is made of, how to develop it into something useful and pleasurable, and how to bring the idea to life. When you do that, you are qualified to enjoy important adventures of the mind and the spirit.

Living significantly

Only through lifelong education can a man or a woman continue to live significantly. Such a person is at work on his own enlargement. He takes as little as possible for granted. He will be repelled by the suggestion that he accept inert ideas. He will want to test, to use, or to throw into fresh combinations the ideas that come to him. He will reject the ready-made opinions of others in favour of a blank sheet of paper on which to develop his own thoughts.

There is much talk about "rights". Every person has the right to become all that he is capable of becoming. To him, education is attractive and worth while, and it is attainable at any age. It is a continuous growth of the mind and a continuous illumination of life; an eternal becoming something better.

Seneca, the Latin philosopher and dramatist, tutor of Nero, wrote "As long as you live, keep learning how to live."