



THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA MONTHLY LETTER

VOL. 53, No. 2

HEAD OFFICE: MONTREAL, FEBRUARY 1972

The Dynamic Family

TODAY'S FAMILY has the greatest opportunity the family ever had to act significantly so as to assure the continuance of all that makes people human — the virtues of justice, freedom, love, prudence, and courage.

Novels of home and family life have been on the best-seller lists ever since fiction started to be written. They told enchantingly of homely characters and incidents, pathos, humour and love affairs, and they added a touch of melodrama when the outside world impinged on the moral and affectionate life of the family circle.

Today's novels run on more bumpy roads. The social map has been torn up, the tribal totems and taboos have been discarded as being old-fashioned. People must make decisions about how to manage their lives while they are being bombarded with many new psychological, economic, social, educational and political theories.

In the old days families moved through the years in customary grooves, the momentum and direction carrying over from generation to generation. Today they are compelled to select new paths, broaden their responsibilities, sharpen their thinking, and develop power. The dynamic family will be like a great machine in having purpose, plan and driving force.

Parents are greatly concerned about preparation of their children for graduation into maturity. This is fit and proper, because it is in the family that a child develops his attitude toward life, and it is the family that determines the way he measures up to challenges and the degree in which he lives successfully and happily.

But parents given to much worry about their children should consider whether the worry is out of proportion to the cause. Look at it in this way: not every young person who appears to be different, queer, or uncouth is mentally or morally warped. Behaviour which perplexes a parent may be the normal response of a healthy full-of-life human being to some situation which from his frame of reference seems to be intolerable.

These young people are in a transition stage from

adolescence to maturity made difficult by social change and world upheaval.

Overlapping generations

In the story of life there are many chapters. Every chapter may flow calmly, recording the life of a generation. But where the chapters overlap there are likely to be blots and scorings-out and revisions, because at the overlapping of two generations neither is quite sure of its standing in the mind of the other. Each was raised in a different environment at a different stage of society's development.

Dramatic social and technological innovations have altered the structure and style of our way of life. Parents brought up in the pre-technological society do not, unless they have kept up with events, see with the same eyes as their children.

There is no crime or folly on either side if the children's opinions are sparked by expectation and their parents' assuredness watered down by experience. The urge toward change can be healthy, as in the Renaissance with its new art, its broadened views and its constructive energy, or it can be diseased, as when it tears down before it plans what to build, or alters without thinking of results. Both young and old need to study so as to learn how to use change to make it contribute to their welfare.

It may be worth while to apply some old-fashioned beliefs and methods. A cartoon in *The School Guidance Worker* shows an automated teaching machine applying for a job at an employment office for teachers. The machine says: "I was displaced by a little old lady with a piece of chalk."

The excellent family

Conferences and discussions show that there is nothing upon which the conscience of our time is more determined than that the family shall be preserved.

A study guide to the Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, a booklet entitled *What's in It?*, published by The National

Council of Women of Canada in co-operation with La Fédération des Femmes du Québec, says: "Although other agencies have taken over many of its functions, the Commission concludes that marriage and the family persist as a valid institution. Human beings, whether children or adults, need to 'belong' in a close social relationship with others."

It is not enough to watch television together. To sit in a circle in the dark, eyes glued to the bright screen, is hardly the best arrangement for enjoying one another's company or exchanging ideas. Far better is the family meal, an occasion to be together in comfort and relaxation. If dinner is "at all hours", or if parents and adolescents dine at different hours or in different places, family life becomes not only emotionally but dynamically impoverished.

It is through the exchange of ideas in such a family circle that excellence is born and bred. What goes on in that group determines whether those who sit there shall become first-class men and women, with active brains, disciplined imagination, sensitive feelings, and dynamic aims.

Much of today's unrest may be traced to lack of a sense of quality . . . aesthetic quality, humane quality, and moral quality. The family provides a background that will enable young people to perceive qualities and discriminate so as to seek excellence.

Most to be feared is a moral vacuum. A person may be ignorant in politics, literature, psychology, and many other sciences and arts without hurting society materially, but if he is ignorant morally he taints society.

Where else is a child to learn virtue than in the family? "Virtue" is a word too seldom used. It can be applied to many thoughts and deeds that go to make up everyday life. Some virtues contributing to mastery of life and happiness in it are: justice, frugality, industry, sincerity, moderation, humility, discretion, courage, wisdom, fortitude, and honesty. These are features that cannot be ignored by any creed or cult or movement without damage, and their nurture is an undoubted duty of the family.

The parents' part

Sparked perhaps (say some psychologists) by the guilt feeling aroused by World War II, there has been a swing toward making things easy for young people.

It is a mistake, injurious to himself, to allow a youth to evolve in a vacuum of non-resistance. Because his opinion and his wishes have never been opposed, he develops a massive belief in his own wisdom and a one-track faith in his own authority.

To build a dynamic family by following a rule book would be difficult. A babble of advice is useless. Children are not phenomena to be investigated, analyzed and treated as "cases".

A family is a collection of human beings acting together, but they have not the rigidity of form or the

foreseeable effects on one another that the gears, brushes and magnets of a dynamo have.

Parents need to be sensible, discreet, reasonable, sensitive and co-operative. A rational man and a woman did not take each other in marriage merely as agreeable companions, to be good-humoured together, patient, and entertaining. They assumed duties, one of which is toward their children.

Mothers seem to adapt to the bewilderment of parenthood more easily than do fathers. This is sensed in some of the "Nativity" paintings by great artists, Filippo Lippi's, for example, in which Joseph has a puzzled expression that is both pathetic and amusing. But in a dynamic family the father does not leave responsibility for the children's upbringing to the mother. His obligation does not end when he supplies shelter, clothing and food.

United, the parents need to display emotional maturity. Their major function, after providing materially for the subsistence of their children, is to give compassionate, supportive, personal warmth. They inspire and guide. They give advice based upon the present state of the evidence as they see it.

Every parent must be prepared for surprises, like a naturalist seeking wild flowers on a mountainside who comes unexpectedly upon the den of a grizzly bear. In such an upsetting situation the parent will not work himself into an emotional state, but ask what he can do about it and then start doing the wisest thing he can think of.

Some ingredients

Some of the ingredients of the excellent life will be in stock in every family: others need to be restocked. Those most urgently needed include personality, a sense of values, tolerance and discipline.

Here is the great problem facing young people: they are required at a certain stage of their development to commit themselves to something and to assume responsibility for the consequences.

At that point it is essential that they should know themselves, and it is part of the family function to help them toward a truthful and helpful self-evaluation. The parents' job is not to protect the child from stress and the need for effort and thought, but to help him to develop inner strength and competency so that at the crucial moment of take-over he will have confidence in his ability to cope.

The dynamic family will turn out young adults who are of a stature equal to the challenges of their environment.

If parents believe it to be their duty to carry all their children's problems, the children are not being given a chance to tune themselves for this change in their life course. They will remain infantile or they will rebel against the nothingness of their existence.

Dynamic parents will construct in their home those ambitions and interests needed to prevent a vacuum

forming inside their children, a space that may be filled with futile and demeaning activism.

Young people, whatever label they may put upon it, are in search of happiness. They can be helped to make sure that their sets of values fit together to form a model of what will be for them a happy state, free from mediocrity and pretense.

A person becomes mature by developing a philosophy of life, based upon knowledge acquired, a clear-eyed view of today and tomorrow, and expectation. These are the virtues needed if one is to contribute something worthwhile to the advancement of humanity. They do not exist in the same mind with half-truths, false labelling, or muddy thinking.

While providing security, sympathy and sociability, the family should also provide an environment of tolerance. It is in the family that a child picks up the elementary lessons in getting along with people and the virtues of love, pity, and concern.

A parent has done something of great worth when he can say: "I brought up my children without prejudicing them by precept or example against any other children on the grounds of colour, race, religion, social status or intellectual capacity."

Discipline

In a good family there are always present, without being obnoxious, the curbs and controls that constitute the essence of good government. Discipline is necessary, not primarily for its contribution to family harmony but because it must be learned as a quality essential in all walks of life.

Discipline without love begets resentment: it is the devoted and skilful blending of the two that develops children into adults able to cope with the environment in self-reliance, self-mastery and courage.

Rules are necessary in the family, but they should not be so many as to be oppressive. The steadfastly-enforced rules should be those that relate to the cardinal virtues: justice, prudence, temperance and fortitude.

Is it ever necessary to take the velvet glove off the iron fist? Indeed it may be. Honeyed words are not always the best means to instruct or guide. A pat on the back does not always substitute for a strong push.

The intelligent use of compulsion is preceded, ideally, by persuasion. An attempt is made to arrive at agreement about what is right, but the pressure of an enforcement agency is as necessary an element in the home as in the community.

How do you persuade a child about the wrongness of an action? You present the facts as you see them, tell the benefits of doing things the right way, and add a suggestion for compliance. And having made the point by persuasion or compulsion, forget the transgression: dip the fault in your affection and wash it out. The grace of forgiving is a necessary partner of the power to discipline.

Dynamic living

The family is the place where, more than in any other, the art of co-operative living is learned. Here are generated and cultivated mutual confidence, fair play, a sense of belonging, a sharing of goals, team-work, comradeship and trust. In a word: morale.

Parents and children will benefit by working together on problems and projects that affect the home. Give the children a genuine and useful function in the household, not a made-up job to paint a false picture of participation.

Let the children have a say in assigning the tasks. If some parents still shy away from the family council in which all members discuss family matters, they must concede the advisability of consulting in advance any member of the family about matters which affect him.

One of the most useful functions of the parent is to encourage children to express themselves, to tell their hopes, desires and fears. This cannot be done in an occasional confrontation in which we urge junior to tell all. It is an ongoing thing, a day-after-day conveying of our belief that the child is one of us, with things to say that are worth listening to.

It is arrogant to demand that one's ideas be accepted without fair debate. Even John Milton in his *Areopagitica* — that great outburst of splendid anger in the cause of freedom — did not go further than to demand a hearing.

Listen obviously and attentively. Avoid the patient sort of listening that lets what is said in one ear and out the other. A textbook on the art of counselling says with wisdom: "Reserve at least two thirds of every hour for talking on the part of the counselee." And do not treat a child's idea, even if it seems to you to be a silly one, with contempt. Take time to discuss it, thereby building the child's sense of being a person.

Praise and credit

William James, eminent United States philosopher, said: "The deepest principle of human nature is the desire to be appreciated."

A compliment is an effective way of raising a child's ego, and it is one of the greatest stimulants to renewed effort. It is mean to be niggardly with praise in the fear that it will "turn the child's head". G. B. Shaw wisely remarked that "to withhold deserved praise lest it should make its object conceited is as dishonest as to withhold payment of a just debt lest your creditor should spend the money badly."

Upon being shown a piece of work done by a child — a few inches of embroidery, a toy made at the workbench, or a page of homework — look for something to praise. There are no more destructive people alive than those whose first aim is to find fault.

Practise diplomacy. No two or three people can live together without disagreeing now and then. Diplomacy provides a technique, a sort of code of good manners:

it is also organized good sense. For every trick that is taken by screaming, three are lost that could have been taken by diplomacy.

Mediation between warring children is not attained by acting as a sort of peace-keeping force. It is brought about by a careful discovery of the rights of the question and a steady adherence to the precept that what is right and fair ought to be done.

A very positive way in which to prepare children for life is to keep their sights high with regard to the friends they make. Parents find it fitting to encourage the friends to come to the house. When a welcome is extended and a suitable place assigned for the young people to study together, play games, talk, or make music, the parents need not be haunted by the thought of secret or street-corner meetings. Give the child a chance to experience the pleasure and learn the rites of hospitality, not just at once-a-year parties but as a matter of course.

The areas needing parental attention cover the alphabet from "A" for amusement to "W" for work. In his early school years the child begins to be aware of the world of work. What he hears at home about his father's and his mother's work will influence the direction of his thoughts and beliefs. If they are constantly complaining about the hardships of work the child will come to hate the idea of work; if they show a confident attitude toward work as a way of life the child will look forward to having the opportunity to contribute his own work . . . and all work is a contribution to society.

The boy or the girl may grow up to work in an occupation not yet invented. The best a parent can give him in preparation is a set of principles, good in whatever environment he finds himself.

Youth's responsibilities

All the responsibility for enjoyable and invigorating family living does not rest upon the parents. Young people, in fact, play a big part in adding dynamics to the family. Participating in the benefits bestows upon them the right and the privilege to contribute.

Parents should not have to become accustomed to being the forgotten people. They gave many years of thoughtful care to their offspring, and common courtesy — even in the absence of affection — requires that they and their interests be remembered.

The notion of duty, the joy of helping those we love, appreciation of the old folk who once forgave us our trespasses and turned the other cheek to our impudence: all these are likely to be labelled "sentimental". But, in the words of the late Fulton Oursler in *Lights Along the Shore*: "The ancient Commandment still thunders from Sinai, telling honourable men to honour parents, even if, sometimes, they seem unreasonable."

Young people are ready, when allowed, to take up the challenge. In the midst of a hullabaloo about the ways of youth it should be noted that most young

people in Canada are adjusting well to their approach to maturity. The enthusiasm with which they take up good causes is a dynamic quality that they should try to carry into family life: for here, surely, is an honourable and good cause.

There is a lot of talk among young people these days about human rights, and it is a proper subject to consider, but does anyone need to be reminded that the Golden Rule cannot be surpassed as the greatest declaration of human rights? It does not start with parades and campaigns, but in the quiet stillness of people's minds. It blossoms in the nourishing environment of the family.

The responsibility of young people in any situation — in the home, in school, on the playing fields or at work — can be simply stated: they are responsible for doing their best.

A child may have in him the making of a gifted student capable of being enrolled with the top one per cent: the stratum that gives us our poets, philosophers, scientists, statesmen, industrial leaders, musicians and artists. If something enters the mind of such a child so as to cause him to waste time in school, or drop out, all the world loses something valuable.

In a dynamic family the parents will intimate, without pressing, that they expect their children to do their best. A survey in secondary schools in Toronto about 1955 showed that parents of underachievers "tend to exhibit a neutral or uninterested attitude toward education, to be over-anxious, over-solicitous, or inconsistent in their attitude toward the child."

Being gentlefolk

"Gentlefolk" is an old word, unused today, but it is a good word to describe those in the ideal family. They are "persons noble in character, manners and behaviour, destitute of harshness". Dr. Johnson, in his dictionary published in 1799, describes gentility as "elegance of behaviour".

To be gentle in family life means simply this: one is not mean or little, one never takes unfair advantage either of his power or his weakness, one does not mistake sharp sayings for arguments, one may be strong in his opinions but he is not unjust, one is thoughtful for others, generous in his judgments and modest in his manner.

We can find in the family the harmonious integrated unit which holds out hope of escape from the direction in which society as a whole seems to be drifting, a direction which leads to a terrible, if not completely disastrous, conclusion. To rescue the family, and make it the dynamic centre of improvement in the world, is a cause big enough to enlist the most enthusiastic thought and work of both parents and children.

The effective family is not passive, merely existing. Everyone in a dynamic family has something and someone to think about besides himself. Instead of watching a family drama on television, to play a part in it is a hundred times more interesting.