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Our Misunderstandings

MORE DISAGREEMENTS between people and between nations can be traced to misunderstanding than to any other cause. The bitterest conflicts within families and within offices and workshops have not been waged for great ideals, but for one opinion against another.

If, as has been said, life may be defined as the continuous adjustment of internal relations to external relations, then here is an area where we may contribute greatly to our peace of mind.

Adaptation implies tolerance. Intolerant people have a limited outlook in an age which demands that we take wide views. Their intolerance shows itself in many ways, from simple withdrawal from society to "Hate-garbled features, twisted by passions as old as mankind," as a newspaper reported a race riot in the United States.

The argument against intolerance is not only a moral argument, but rests solidly upon two simple considerations: (1) it is not humanly possible to know all the facts, or even all of any one fact; (2) we live in a tense age in which the overmastering need is to accept the rights, duties and privileges of individuals regardless of their family, church, political and national background and environment.

Open-mindedness

A closed mind is merely a machine, automatically churning over and over again the little that is in it, believing always whatever it now believes. It is prone to exclude, whether neighbours from a country club or books from the library.

The open-minded person has a question which he asks regularly in order to prevent misunderstandings: "How does this look from where he stands?" It applies to members of his family, to a neighbour, to those who live in another city or province, and to those whose homes are at the far ends of the earth.

When you look at the spectrum you see the colours, from violet to red, side by side but shading into one

another with no boundaries to indicate precisely where one colour ends and another begins. That is the way to look at people, too. There is no such thing as a life that is all black or all white, all indigo, blue, green, yellow or orange, although one or another will predominate at one time or one place.

The Athenians gave us the first example of the explicit recognition of the importance of social tolerance. They had minds open to new ideas and thoughts. We recall that on his journey up and down the coast of Asia Minor Saint Paul was mobbed and imprisoned and ridiculed and beaten, but when he came to Athens they brought him to Mars' Hill, their highest court, and said: "May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is?"

Open-mindedness is not empty-headedness. It means having a desire to learn as well as having freedom from prejudice, partisanship and other mind-closing habits. If you have an open mind you are not content to uncover errors: you go a step farther in an attempt to establish true opinion to take their place. And when you come upon something excellent you like it, no matter whose it is.

Some causes of misunderstanding

It will help us to avoid misunderstandings if we know some of their causes.

There are many sparks which set misunderstanding ablaze, and since they are of about equally frequent occurrence there is no better order in which to mention them than alphabetically from anger to pride.

Trader Horn, the earthy philosopher in Mrs. Lewis's story, said: "There's nothing brings us closer akin to the apes than the tantrums we get into." When we lose our tempers we offer humiliating spectacles, with dignity, common sense and justice thrown out the window.

The causes of anger may be brought under two headings: fear and mortification. When someone lets

us down at work or in society the emotion of anger arises instinctively. We fear the outcome of the person's blunder or we are humiliated because he did *that to us*. We get so worked up that like Aase, one of the characters in Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* we "could make a meal of flints."

Then, forgetting that it is our reaction, and not the affront, which counts, we lose control of the situation. We write a snarling letter or speak a growling word. Our emotion, without the curb of our brains to guide it, leads headlong into a major misunderstanding.

We need to recognize the fact that we have control only over our own reactions. In our daily contacts with people we are like the lowly amoeba, unable to push others around but only to withdraw or flow past them.

This is why the man who seeks to avoid misunderstandings flies into a great calm instead of into a great rage. His calmness offers nothing that another can grasp; it disarms his opponent; it heightens his own stature.

A man is as big as the things that make him mad. It is said that Sir Lancelot had several sizes of spear, and would call for his Great Spear or his Lesser Spear as occasion demanded. It is wise, in our own interests, to err on the side of gentleness.

Anxiety is a frequent cause of misunderstanding. It results from the clash of desire and fear. In this country, where an outstanding job has been done in the way of decreasing deaths from many diseases, we have an increasing number of people who find life miserable because they are torn by anxieties.

Many of our anxieties are out of all proportion to the real dangers of the situation. Propagated as they are by the methods of news distribution which pursue us throughout our waking hours, and nurtured on our ignorance of the many facets displayed by life today, these anxieties become mothers of evil broods.

Dealing with criticism

Criticism is a fruitful source of misunderstanding. We must be careful not to chill our friends' and our workers' lives by faultfinding.

It is well when examining a piece of work submitted for approval, or considering a project brought forward by one of your family, to look first for its good points and comment on them. Begin with praise and honest appreciation.

When the situation to be criticized is of a social nature, like the behaviour of someone, recall that he who points one accusing finger at another is pointing three fingers at himself. Robert Burns covered this situation in his poem "To the Unco Guid":

"Ye high, exalted, virtuous dames, Tied up in godly laces,

Before ye gi'e poor Frailty names, Suppose a change o' cases."

But what about the reverse, when you are the object of criticism, perhaps unjustly? Your best defence is threefold: consider whether there is truth in the criticism, and if so admit it at once; consider whether you can profit by the criticism so as to make your work better or your life more happy; consider whether the person has the right to criticize, and if he hasn't then undeceive him gently.

In giving or taking criticism, recall that a fly, alighting on Parliament Buildings or on the Arch of Triumph, is able to declare, with its half-inch vision, that here is a blemish and there is an inequality in the workmanship. Criticism based on limited vision, uninformed about the whole picture, should be brushed off.

The blight of envy

No man who is superior in any particular escapes envy. People think in terms of comparison. If he has a better garden, he is envied by neighbours; if he gains promotion, he is envied by workmates; if he copes with events so as to live happily, he is envied by failures. Envy is the one revenge of mediocrity.

The range of envy has been greatly extended by the instability of social status and the equalitarian doctrines of democracy. The ancient lines of separation have been erased, so that the envious man begins by asking "Why should not I enjoy what others enjoy?" and goes on to demand "Why should others enjoy what I have not?" Instead of deriving pleasure from what he has, he is pained by what others have.

A classical example comes to us from ancient Greece. In 1932 an archaeologist unearthed tablets of 2,400 years ago voting ostracism for a man called Aristides. He was banished from Athens without fault being charged against him, but merely because people hated him for being so much better than themselves. The story is told that as Aristides was walking toward the voting place he was accosted by an illiterate voter who asked him to mark his tablet in favour of banishment. When Aristides asked: "What have you against Aristides? What has he done wrong?" the voter replied: "Nothing, but I'm tired of hearing him called 'the just'."

Indeed, as the proverb says: "Wrath is cruel, and anger is outrageous, but who is able to stand before jealousy?" Probably the only way is to walk along serenely with Aristides, leaving the envious to stew in their own juice.

Gossip is vicious

Gossip drives many people to distraction and causes more hard feelings in a community than does any other vice. The gossipy person hits at everyone and

everything that is not to his taste. His own merits he believes to be great and obvious, but with regard to others he lives in a strange twilight land of half-truths and perverted truth. He misrepresents zeal as impatience and bossiness, temperance and discipline as harshness, justice as cruelty, and religious faith other than his own as superstition.

There are people who, being driven by slanderous reports and unjust suspicions, have become enraged to the point where they decided to strike at the gossip who was wagging a sharp tongue, thus doing themselves irreparable damage.

A hardy man will perhaps confront the gossip in the presence of a friend and demand that the slanderous statement be retracted. Less resolute people will bear with the gossip and depend upon truth to sway the judgment of those whose opinions they care about.

Trivialities sometimes pile up to the point where they cause an outbreak of ill-will. A husband and wife may start discussing their family budget, swing over to arguing about the rent a neighbour pays for his flat, and end up in a flaming row over something that is totally irrelevant.

In no other area than that of small things is it so true that we behave at times in ways too foolish for a tear and too wicked for a smile. We dispute tediously about the abstract truth of unimportant things, and we cling tightly to positions we have taken regarding trifles. The cure, of course, is to listen, think, be moderate, give the authority for our beliefs, open the door so that the person with whom we are talking may come to our side of the house, and drop the matter.

Many things enter into the making of a successful politician, business man, parent or lodge member, but perhaps the most necessary is the capacity to put up with the cross-grained humours of fellow-men and colleagues. While most of us can bear great griefs with dignity, we resent little provocations.

The things that we get peevish about fall into two classes: those we can do something about and those we cannot help. Herein we might take a lesson from a swordsman: when he cannot parry a thrust he takes it on his shield. Or from the Eastern philosopher who, when kicked by a mule, overlooked the insult on considering its source.

Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross, was of that sort. When a friend reminded her of a particularly cruel thing done to her years before and asked: "Don't you remember it?" Miss Barton replied: "No, I distinctly remember forgetting that."

Prejudice and pride

Prejudice is made up of misunderstanding and has no trouble in causing it. Voltaire called prejudice "the reason of fools." It is a cherished belief based on hearsay or tradition which blocks free inquiry. It is,

in the words of H. L. Mencken, made up of "the idiotic certainties of ignorant men".

Prejudice means prejudgment. When you encounter a person who has his mind made up before learning the facts necessary to an intelligent conclusion you have run into what has been called "the law of prior entry". It operated in the case of Anytos, the hide merchant who led the persecution of Socrates; it operated in the case of Caccini and Lorini who were responsible for the tortures Galileo endured; it operates in the case of the person who arrives at a committee meeting with unbudging demands, of the politician who conducts a filibuster in support of his private desires, of the medicine man who beheads a missionary in protecting his privileged position.

It is not at all easy to find out what our personal prejudices are. We have become so accustomed to them, allowed them to become so much a part of our thinking, that we have to search deeply and honestly for them. But they are worth rooting out, both for the help their destruction will give us in our relations with others and for the clean feeling we shall enjoy within ourselves.

Pride often propels people into situations which result in misunderstandings. They seek to establish a privileged status for themselves or their families, and then they feel compelled to defend that status.

What is pride? It is pride when we believe that the fixed stars were only made to twinkle for us; it is pride when a business man refuses to accept something new unless he himself discovered it; it is pride when a politician, exalted by the votes of the people, loses touch in his new grandeur with those who elevated him.

The arrogant man invites misunderstanding, and at the same time he makes himself ridiculous by affecting to be what he is not. Like rooster in the play, he comes to think that the sun could not rise without his crowing.

To avoid misunderstanding arising from this cause it is necessary to be courteous, gentle, magnanimous and polished, while allowing to everyone else the honour due to his attainments.

Avoiding misunderstanding

The great wisdom in avoiding misunderstandings consists in this: use your grey matter to focus on the clarifying process. Define problems, solutions and the words used. Some of the greatest disputes would cease in a moment if one of the parties would put into a few clear words what he understands the argument to be about.

Every difficult situation we have to deal with is mixed, not clear. It is mixed in the causes that brought it about, and it is mixed in the emotions it stirs within us. We should recognize, then, that two or even three apparently contradictory view-points may be true, or partially true.

The next thing to do is debate the points in shared, side-by-side inquiry. No one has a right to call himself civilized who cannot listen to both sides of an argument. A debate is where you tell your thoughts, your opinions, and your judgments, admitting other people to your mind, and exploring their minds. It is not a place for double-talk to make a point, but for sincere speaking sparked by straight thinking.

The old-time debating contests so common among young people before the First World War gave splendid training in examining all sides of a subject. Whether for the affirmative or the negative, the debater had to make himself acquainted with the opposite arguments in order to be ready to meet them.

It is useful when each side in a controversy comes to see that the other has only the normal share of human wickedness. If only each side would preface its judgments with such a phrase as "it seems to me" many misunderstandings and conflicts would be avoided.

Kahlil Gibran, the well-known Syrian-American symbolist poet, told a parable about four frogs. They were sitting peacably on a log when it became caught by a current and carried into a swiftly flowing river. One frog credited the log with having life; the second said that the river, walking to the sea, carried the log on its back; the third frog said that neither the log nor the river was moving, but the moving was in the frogs' thinking, for without thought nothing moves. The fourth frog said: "Each of you is right, and none of you is wrong. The moving is in the log and the water and our thinking also." None of the first three was willing to admit that his was not the whole truth and that the other two were partly right. So they got together and pushed the fourth frog into the river.

A changing world

It is said that the Chinese have a proverb: "Nothing is permanent in life except change". Change is part of a law of life. We must grow physically from childhood to adulthood, and mentally from ignorance to knowledge, and emotionally from insecurity to stability.

We must grow, also, in keeping with our environment. Complexity of living has come upon us with our progress in science and technology. We cannot close our eyes and ears to changing facts, basing our actions on the ideas already inside our heads.

In fact, it is well to have a cleaning out every once in a while. We can add many hours of peace to our lives if we are willing to throw away some old ideas and let bygones be bygones. We invite worry when we dwell upon the past, reproduce old differences of opinion, and painfully retrace the steps of an ancient quarrel.

A man who is obstinate in a changing world is not showing signs of will-power but of vanity and self-conceit. He makes himself a nuisance by carrying his

firmness beyond the dictates of reason or right. He is bound to feel himself misunderstood.

Compromise is necessary in nearly every area of life. It does not mean gaining a victory but reaching an agreement. As Andrew Fairservice put it in Sir Walter Scott's novel *Rob Roy*: ". . . the tane gies up a bit, and the tither gies up a bit, and a' friends again."

He who seeks to avoid misunderstanding will concede as much as possible without putting his principles in danger. He will give as a matter of course what the knights expected in tournaments: a fair field, and equal partition of sun and wind, and whatever else appertains to a fair combat.

The Golden Rule

In the whole history of humanity there has been voiced only one rule of conduct of the slightest value as a standard for behaviour: "As ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise."

The Golden Rule seems misleadingly simple. In reality it calls for a little working at. It is not merely sentiment, but reason backed by a sense of justice. It requires an act of will, to suppress the special pleading of your own private desires. It calls for mental flexibility which enables you to move over so as to see the situation as it appears to others. It must experience shared feeling. Dante, in his *Inferno*, describes the condition of a soul in one of the lower reaches of hell as being capsuled in ice, never to feel any more. Coldness of heart does not go with the Golden Rule.

Given reason, will-power, mental suppleness and fellow feeling, the Golden Rule will work constructively to avoid misunderstandings.

It has, in fact, been said by statesmen and philosophers that in the new world which is coming into existence application of the Golden Rule is not only a moral duty but an indispensable condition of survival.

The only way to prevent misunderstandings and thus to avoid many of the bad things that occur is by positive action. We need vision to see the best, courage to face the worst, adaptability to change, resistance to hatred and jealousy, and we need the Golden Rule.

To seek understanding is nobility's true badge. Instead of weighing in grudging scales the good and the bad we see in those around us, we need to keep in mind that they, like us, have difficulties, sorrows, and wants, and that they are fellow-actors with us on the stage of life.

We often hear people talk about the "imperatives" of life. What was the categorical imperative, the unconditional command of nature, formulated by Immanuel Kant, the German-Scottish philosopher? It might well have been designed as a means toward ending our misunderstandings: Act so that the principle of your action could be made a universal law.