



THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA MONTHLY LETTER

VOL. 55, No. 11

HEAD OFFICE: MONTREAL, NOVEMBER 1974

On Being Positive

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE are words far apart in their meaning and implications. The territory between them is the jousting arena where the success or failure of every business enterprise is determined and the happiness or misery of lives decided.

Victory tends to favour the contestants who tilt under the positive banner. They are people who have trained themselves to think "What action am I going to take?" instead of "What is going to happen to me?"

Coping with the enterprises and satisfying the desires of your life involves finding out what you have to do in order to become what you want to be, and then doing it. You need to know what tools and skills you have and how to use them to the best effect. If fate has been unkind in failing to give you a high education, that need not keep you out of the business or social tournament: you will do the best you can with what learning you have, and brace yourself to acquire more. Such a positive attitude makes the difference between carrying off the prize and retiring to sulk in your tent.

Charles Darwin held the opinion, as the result of a lifetime of critical observation, that men differ less in capacity than in zeal and determination to utilize the powers they have.

Being positive is an element in initiative, which is the ability to think of and do new things. Some persons stumble over opportunities as if they were obstacles, but positive people seek the plus values.

An example of substituting a positive thought for a negative is provided by the discovery of penicillin. "Many bacteriologists had seen that cultures of microbes are spoiled when exposed to molds, but all they concluded was that molds must be kept out of such cultures. It took a stroke of genius to see the medicinal promise of the basic observation." This comment was made by Dr. Hans Selye in an essay on basic research in *Adventures of the Mind* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1959).

This example shows also that it does not take much to turn things in your favour. Noticing trifles, observing their nature, and connecting thought about them with knowledge already stored in your mind, produces new ideas. Shakespeare heard talk about a

small coral island, and on this hearsay erected his magnificent fantasy of *The Tempest*.

Enthusiasm is constructive

All of the progress of civilization is due to the constructive thinking of people. The record of history is brilliant with the deeds of men and women who said "I can", while it is silent for the most part concerning those who said "I can't". Positive people believe that it is better to fail in carrying out a project than to not fail because they have not tried.

Enthusiasm is a necessary ingredient in doing a job successfully. Great works are often performed not by strength but by perseverance. Ideally, the artist, the scientist, the business man, the inventor and the writer are moved by such an irresistible impulse to create something that far from striking for higher income and shorter hours they are willing even to pay for the chance to bring forth something new.

They know that taking the easy way of inaction is not nearly so interesting as tackling and conquering a difficulty. They examine very closely projects that people declare to be impossible. There are few triumphs so satisfying as to plan a piece of work that everybody says cannot be done, and then jump in and do it. Usually, one finds the power to accomplish any task of which one's reason approves.

Know your objective

Life will be drab and meaningless to those who do not set certain goals and commit themselves to seeking to reach them. If one takes a negative attitude; viewing life as a torrent without form or purpose in which one has no future, one has nothing to hope for or to work for.

We need to link ourselves to purposes which really attract us and are consistent with our abilities and our rules of conduct.

This requires that we pick the right thing in life as our measure of success. Then all else will be relative to it, plus or minus, positive or negative. We shall apply our thinking emphasis to what is important and

essential, and thus avoid substituting secondary aims for primary values.

The desire for something is more than simple willingness to receive. It is positive, purposeful, energetic and creative. It is powered by your initiative and energy and perseverance, and all these are positive forces. You keep your eye on where you want to go.

Wise people make their own future. They give themselves heart and soul to something beyond the satisfaction of today's wants. They do not give credence to fate and destiny and waves of the future. Those are abstract things. Instead, they consider the ways in which to determine their own future right now. A belief in predestination may be a cowardly escape from the responsibility of making a positive decision and doing a positive action.

Prudent planning

A design is needed. Without a plan, all our little bricks of reconstruction might just as well remain in the brick-yard. Chains of consequences do not always follow the pattern we lay out, but it is just as well to start them in the right direction.

Planning has preservation value. People who seem most balanced and most efficient in difficult situations are probably people who have figured out the very worst that can happen and what to do if it does happen. We should bear in mind Father Duncan's admonition in the Scottish historical novel by Elizabeth Byrd, *The Flowers of the Forest*: "Be prudent in your prayer lest it be answered."

A creative person does not follow rules slavishly, although he needs to know them. Shakespeare departed from the rules of drama and Tintoretto from the rules of art with some success. One must sometimes take a leap without seeing what is on the other side of the wall. That means saying: "To the best of my lights at this moment this is what I choose to do, even though I may know more and choose differently tomorrow."

Disorder in action or thought is a handicap to advancement and therefore negative. Keep simple everything that it is possible to simplify. Complexity of system or equipment is a minus quality adding weariness to work. Most practical business men will admit that bureaucracy has saddled them with too much paperwork. It remained for the President of Romania to show them the cure. He decreed a fifty per cent cut in paper supplies for offices.

Making a decision

A person may go through his allotted span of life without once being confronted by a large question the decision of which will change his future, but everyone is required to decide about puzzling matters every day.

There are options open. When you come to a fork in the road and must decide what to do you have four choices: you may sit down, you may step out on this

or that of the diverging paths, or you may turn your back on the problem and go home.

The thing to do is to find out enough about each option so that you are in position to reach a reasonable decision. Ask questions of whatever guide-books you have, of people who pass by, and of the data on the signboard. If you have your notebook with you, set out the "for" and "against" of each possible course.

On the whole (there are exceptions to every rule of behaviour) it is wiser to make decisions promptly and crisply than to linger over them and lose momentum. Holding up a decision while awaiting facts that are necessary to wise thought is different from indecision due to reluctance to decide. A scientist seeking the answer to a life-and-death problem may properly defer final judgment until all the evidence is in, but in the meantime he may tell his tentative conclusions based on the state of his knowledge.

No one can become dominant in his field unless he does independent thinking, comes to his own decisions, checks them for their accuracy, and acts upon them. People who hesitate between being positive or negative are in an unfortunate position. By remaining in the middle of the road they incur the danger of being run over by both lanes of traffic instead of by only one.

The person who wishes to make decisions with confidence needs to keep in mind the fact that knowledge is the bed-rock upon which judgment must rest. Skills in deciding are developed through practice and through relating things newly learned to one's acquaintanceship with facts and principles.

He is a fortunate person whose mind is filled with energizing high-pressure TNT thoughts, but they did not come by chance. He collected them or formed mental images of them, and put them into stock. One cannot apply techniques effectively while ignoring the more arduous task of acquiring facts and resolving abstract ideas into concrete examples.

Most people who are placed in positions where they must think judicially seek to find a specific rule instead of trying specific cases by general rules. It is an affront to use generalities when particulars are available, but a person will deal more constructively with individual cases when he is acquainted with general rules.

The first distinguishing characteristic of straight thinking is facing the facts. When you are explicit, and differentiate between what you know and what you do not know but merely take for granted, you avoid the vagueness in which many people live.

We are constantly urged to be objective in our thinking, but if we sit on the fence, never committing ourselves, and never giving a decision, we live an unrewarding sort of life. Doing nothing has consequences just as surely as doing something has.

Hopeful but discreet

We can never tell when Fortune is just around the corner, so why not live with a sense of expectancy?

In a chapter of *The Power of Positive Thinking* (Prentice-Hall Inc., 1952) in which he quoted a Royal Bank Monthly Letter, Dr. Norman Vincent Peale said: "No good thing is too good to be true."

A constructive attitude is needed. No bright idea and no good work arises out of a negative, fault-finding mind. The sad complaint is sometimes heard: "We can't change the world". That may be true (although we may be able to improve a small part of it) but we do not have to give in and join the deteriorating elements in it.

There is no satisfaction for a healthy mind in everlastingly denouncing things. As Confucius said, "It is better to light one small candle than to curse the darkness." A pessimist is one who takes delight in condemning what he considers to be undesirable without doing anything to remedy it. He makes negatives of his opportunities, whereas the optimist makes positives of his difficulties by asserting his dominance over them.

Of course, being positive does not mean rushing your jumps, expecting everything that is good to happen immediately. Patient people, and people who feel their way carefully, are positive so long as they are advancing even slowly. There are times to doubt: then the positive person investigates and by investigation comes to the truth.

It is positive action when you admit that something is strange to you and beyond your present understanding. Children provide us with an example. They accept many episodes in life as being frankly beyond them. They do not make a fuss or seek psychiatric aid when they fail to fit all that they encounter into accustomed categories of meaning and significance.

Time to think

In every person's career, a change, a pause, a break, is necessary from time to time, to enable him to understand his life, assess current happenings, and weigh his progress toward attainment of his long-term expectations.

Meditation has two aspects: it may be devoted to fostering an ideal that will transform and guide our lives, or it may be merely brooding on one's self as seen in the trivialities of day-to-day living. An ivory tower is a good place to go to prepare yourself for action, to think things through, to gather strength. What is saddening about the concept of the ivory tower is that it has become the symbol of withdrawal without return.

Retiring to a quiet place, free from distracting sights and sounds, may be made a source of directed energy. It was all very well to be told in our childhood years about sitting in front of the fire and imagining things and seeing visions, and having ideas. The trouble is that thoughts are likely to fly up the chimney and become lost. We find it more rewarding in these days to sit at a table with pencil and paper so as to trap our thoughts for examination.

Some concrete procedure is always necessary in the face of trouble. Common sense tells us to disbelieve in the commonly-held hope that if you ignore a problem it will go away. That is as silly as taking a candle to read a sun-dial at bedtime.

The positive person is one who not only senses when something is wrong but has the patience and fortitude to find the right answer to the problem, or perhaps even just a good answer, and give it effect.

We often talk about being caught on the horns of a dilemma. A dilemma is a situation entailing a choice between two equally distasteful alternatives. When so caught, analyse your situation. Are the alternatives mutually exclusive, and do they between them exhaust the possibilities?

To assume a negative attitude toward a problem that you have not yet examined in this way is unprofitable. Define the situation. Apply known principles and methods to the solution. Do not look for contradictions where there are none. Hot and cold, light and dark, good and bad, strong and weak: these are not opposites but degrees and varieties. Solution of a problem, settlement of an argument, and determination of a course are often found in the golden mean, "the happy medium".

There are people, many of them well-educated, who are constitutionally against things. The person starting some new thing or proposing some fresh way of looking at something may find the starch taken out of his effort by fear of what such people will say. Someone will arrive at a committee meeting with wads of paper covered with notes about why the change cannot be made or the new idea developed. Such critics are, as Professor Edgar Dale wrote in one of his Ohio State University News Letters: "Tied up in Nots". They have their minds made up before learning any of the facts necessary to an intelligent conclusion.

How often, when you ask a person what he stands for, he does not tell you affirmatively, but reels off a lot of things he is against, like bilingualism or unilingualism, fluoridation, smoking, highway speeding, the government, and the like.

It is sensible to be *against* things like slavery, pollution, disease and sin so long as we are *for* something that will make these things impossible or alleviate them.

Fear and frustration

Treat a fear positively. Get to know its cause: if it is real, do something about it: if it is unjustified, banish it. When people learned that the earth was round they ceased to fear falling over the edge.

One of life's great triumphs arises from the ability to meet fear and frustration positively. We must expect to endure our full quota of frustrations. They are a normal part of daily living, like sand traps on a golf course.

Making a mistake is part of the learning process, and everyone is wrong some of the time if he does anything at all. When you are wrong it is noble to admit it, to redress willingly and speedily what has been done amiss. Making excuses is an unprofitable occupation.

"If" is a negative word. We hear so many men and women lamenting their lack of progress and happiness by its use: "If I had a new car; if I were 20 years younger; if I had a better education; if I had a decent boss; if I had better health." They hope to weather their sense of failure by refusing to acknowledge that they have any responsibility for it.

Dealing with people

How much easier it is to reach agreement on an issue when we look for the similarities in viewpoints rather than the differences; the positives rather than the negatives.

Every person writing a business letter can profit by always putting statements positively. Make definite assertions. Avoid tame, hesitating, non-committal language. If you must deny something your customer says or refuse something he wants, do not merely say "no". You are under obligation to propose something to be substituted.

Before entering upon an argument, decide whether it matters. The positive approach to an argument is to think carefully about the end desired: listen, concede, be moderate, cite your authority, and leave the door ajar for your opponent to come over to your side without losing face.

Praise when possible. Appreciation and praise are positive values when they are real and hearty. It is an honourable thing, and just, to show appreciation of what someone has accomplished, and to commend him gracefully. It shows that you have learnt to know what is excellent.

There is a sort of hardshell "realism" which insists upon looking at the facts of life alone, taking no account of ideals or of the people involved. "It is characteristic of the barbarian," says Richard M. Weaver in *Ideas Have Consequences*, (University of Chicago Press, 1948) "whether he appears in a pre-cultural stage or emerges from below into the waning day of a civilization, to insist upon seeing a thing 'as it is'. The desire testifies that he has nothing in himself with which to spiritualize it; the relation is one of thing to thing without the intercession of imagination."

Having an ideal

An ideal is the highest product of the imagination. It may be out of reach: it is, nevertheless, a necessary point at which to aim. An illustration is: "Be such as you thought executives ought to be before you rose to this eminence."

Anyone's sense of what is good and valuable and desirable must take account of his environment and

his individual brand of human nature. A sense of value is a positive motive power. It is true that it imposes on life many labours, but without it we should sink back into the negativism of lower types which are given the right to live and desire nothing else.

To talk of "rights" is to talk negatively, for rights can only organize resistance. Duty is positive. Among the positive actions to which we are obliged to pay attention are: to maintain ourselves and our families in health and comfort; to pay our debts; to increase our prosperity by increasing our efficiency.

The person who practises this positive-oriented way of living is not accommodating himself to the ills of society, trying to make the best of them, but is constructing his life on a sense of values that places the trivia of daily life in manageable perspective.

Thinking and doing

One must think. It is better to be intelligent than clairvoyant. It is more intelligent to be guided by one's mind than by distant stars.

Only through thinking can you excavate your talent and put it to use. A man who was asked if he could play the piano was quite truthful when he replied: "I don't know: I never tried."

Positive effort and clear thinking can beget results that bear the mark of genius, which is the aptitude for producing excellent thoughts or things.

When thought has generated a reasonable plan, it should be carried into action. Men and women cannot save their humanness or contribute to civilization by existing as non-participating spectators of life. Passivity is negative.

A decision or a plan made and not acted upon is futile. Hesitation is the fatal flaw in the make-up of many men and women. Napoleon said that the reason for failure of otherwise good generals was their inability to seize the right moment for action. Even to make a small start is positively beneficial.

William James, psychologist and philosopher and one of the founders of Pragmatism, said: "If we wish to conquer undesirable emotional tendencies in ourselves we must assiduously, and in the first instance cold-bloodedly, go through the outward movements of those contrary dispositions which we prefer to cultivate."

Being positive means shifting your thoughts from the things that are against you and focusing them on the vast power that is for you. And having made up your mind to do something positive, spare no pains: do it thoroughly and well. It is the use we make of our capacities that determines the success of our efforts.

Give life to your positive ideas. Every person is, regarding his own life, like the leader of an orchestra: inspiring, guiding, restraining, co-ordinating, interpreting the manifold qualities of his being. He has stature. He believes in himself.