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In Praise of KNOWLEDGE

Getting to know a lot of different things is a pleasure in itself, which is magnified by sharing it with like-minded people. But knowledge also has a practical application in the search for a full and happy life...

Human beings normally embark on their quest for knowledge before they are out of diapers. Toddlers are keen little explorers, as parents know only too well. Their investigations of the fascinating world around them lead them to dismantle toys, dig up plants, rummage through drawers, and ransack closets and cupboards. Their seemingly aimless adventures are really a manifestation of one of the chief glories of mankind: the will to learn.

The genuinely great persons in history were those who carried that childlike curiosity to their death beds. If there is one thing that links such colossal figures as Aristotle, Leonardo da Vinci, Blaise Pascal and Albert Einstein, it is that they never stopped trying to find things out on a universal scale. Their restlessly inquiring minds reached into subjects far beyond their main fields of endeavour. They amassed vast knowledge, but they were never satisfied with how much they had of it. They added to their varied stock of learning all their lives.

Where has that wide-eyed sense of wonder gone among today's more ordinary mortals? In the beginning, it was probably squelched to some extent by parental impatience — "whatever you're doing there, stop it!" — or by unimaginative teaching, which tends to bridle free-ranging minds. Still, if we adults had the instinct to gobble up knowledge in early childhood, we must still have it deep down inside us. Unfortunately, all too many of us seem to feel that "deep down" is a good place for it. It might nag at us occasionally — "you really should know more about

such-and-such" — but it is easy to ignore among the less demanding distractions of modern life.

Then too, some people positively recoil from learning. That is because they do not want to be thought of as intellectuals, pseudo or otherwise. As a general rule, it is better for one's social life to be a seeming ignoramus than a perfectly nice person who knows a lot and shows it. Among the older generations, an intellectual is apt to be seen as a snob or a phoney; among the younger, as a faintly comic "nerd" or "brainiac."

A disdain for the things of the mind and the people who deal in them is perhaps natural in a society that places a higher value on physical than on mental qualities. In the monetary terms so widely regarded as the sole measure of worth, the beauty of a sexy rock singer or the strength and agility of a star athlete counts for a hundred times more than the erudition of a good professor.

One reason why people today make no special effort to acquire more knowledge lies in the common assumption that, once they have left school or university, they have completed their education. They feel that no informal studies are necessary after they have finished the last chapter of their last text book.

True, in these fast-changing times, they are often subsequently called upon to learn new things in courses designed to keep up with new technology and new methods of doing business. But the knowledge so gained is task-specific, as opposed to the general knowledge that gives people a fuller understanding of the world around them, or indeed of the universe.

A cynic might find it ironic to be told that he is living these days in "the knowledge society." On the contrary, he might say, western society gives knowledge, in the fullest sense of the word, a dismally low priority. It gets mixed up in people's minds with information, which is the kind of thing found in "how-to" books, CD-ROMs and videos. Information is what you need to know in certain situations at a certain time; it can be discarded after use like a paper towel. Knowledge is

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what you need to live up to your own intellectual capacity; it is something you keep, augment and relish over the years.

There is, to be sure, an enormous amount of lasting knowledge now in circulation, as a visit to any supermarket-type book store will emphasize. But our cynic would say that people are merely learning more and more about less and less. Their minds are becoming ever more tightly focussed on their occupations and leisure activities. A financial analyst might know the debt-to-asset ratios of every company in an industry and not know Rigoletto from rigatoni. A hockey fanatic might know the record of every top scorer since Newsy Lalonde and not be able to tell you which province the University of Saskatchewan is in.

And yet there are counter-indications that the innate desire to acquire broad knowledge is reasserting itself against the tide of wilful ignorance and specialization. Consider the raging interest in the Internet. People who "surf the Net" pick up a great deal of general knowledge on their cybernetic rambles, while other Net users are likely to absorb a broad range of facts in searching for information in data bases and web sites. Those who use electronic mail to chat with one another are essentially exchanging knowledge, however casually.

Learning as a pleasure

The popularity of the *Guinness Book of Records*, television quiz shows (notably *Jeopardy*), and the board game *Trivial Pursuit* confirms that people today enjoy seeking out knowledge and testing their stock of it in competition. Crossword puzzles, which countless newspaper readers do daily, are fundamentally a test of what they know.

The big question is whether what they know is worth knowing. It may be said that the heads of "knowledge freaks" are full of facts that mean little or nothing. They use their learning, such as it is, to retail gossip about people far removed from their own daily lives and to amuse themselves by exchanging bizarre snatches of history.

Eureka?

Actually, so-called trivia usually is not trivial at all; odd though it may be, it is solid knowledge which people simply like to have and to share among like-minded individuals. The fact that collecting it can be fun is likely to whet their appetites for more substantial intellectual nourishment. As in

other aspects of life, one thing — in this case one piece of knowledge gained — leads to another. And every advance into learning "opens new prospects and new incitements to further progress," as that classic thinker Dr. Samuel Johnson observed. As for seemingly frivolous facts, Dr. Johnson declared that "all knowledge is of some value. There is nothing so minute or inconsiderable that I would not rather know than not."

We have Francis Bacon's word for it that "all knowledge and wonder (which is the seed of knowledge) is an impression of pleasure in itself." Moreover, it is a pleasure that generates fresh pleasures the more the desire for it is exercised. There is a special joy in the serendipity of discovering small facts in the search for larger ones. Anyone looking for details on one subject is likely to pick up delightful tid bits on others. Digging for knowledge is like digging in a mine that yields not only gold, but valuable silver, nickel and zinc.

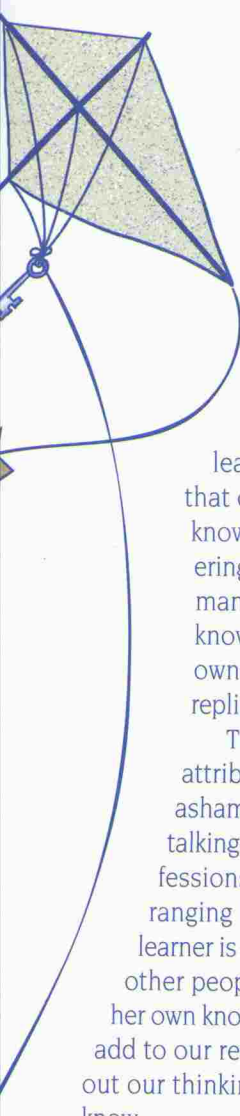
Knowing how little we know

The pleasures of knowledge are compounded when it is shared; but in the sharing, knowledgeable people should guard against coming across as know-it-alls. The urge to show off one's learning is dangerously strong. With his sure grasp of human nature, Mark Twain made self-deprecating fun of it: "Information appears to stew out of me naturally, like the precious otter of roses out of the otter." On another occasion he quipped: "I would rather have my own ignorance than another man's knowledge because I have got so much more of it.... The less I know about a subject, the more confidence I have, and the more light I throw on it."

The great American humourist thus put his finger on a basic point about people who bore their acquaintances with demonstrations of their supposed erudition: that they boldly mix speculation with whatever facts they have available. If they find themselves short of facts, they fabricate them as they go along. In contrast, men and women who really know what they are talking about treat the contents of their minds like the contents of their bank accounts — not to be put on public display, but to be used when need be.

"Knowledge puffeth up," the Book of Corinthians warns, but it will be found that knowledge is more likely to make its true devotees humble than conceited. For a strange paradox appears on the road to learning. John F. Kennedy put it succinctly: "The greater our knowledge increases the more our ignorance unfolds."





To know how little you know is the birth of intellectual maturity. The most cursory study of astronomy, for instance, is enough to rid anyone of the notion that human beings — let alone any single human being — can know even the most minuscule fraction of what there is to be known about the universe.

But our inevitable shortcomings should never stop us from trying to learn what we can; indeed, the humility that comes with an awareness of our lack of knowledge should act as a spur to the gathering of more of it. The story is told of a wise man who was asked how he had come to know so much. “By constantly realizing my own ignorance and trying to relieve it,” he replied.

The philosopher John Locke said that he attributed the little he knew to never being ashamed to ask questions. He made a rule of talking to all manner of people about their professions and pursuits to augment the wide-ranging learning he culled from books. A good learner is a good listener, more interested in what other people have to say than in flaunting his or her own knowledge. Conversation serves not only to add to our reserves of knowledge, but to straighten out our thinking about what we know — or think we know.

Liberating the mind

There is a common image of the hermetic scholar poring over books (or these days, a computer screen) late at night, cut off from society. And indeed many do go about learning in such a secluded way. Without contact with other cultivated minds, however, there is little chance of reinforcing one’s knowledge with additional facts, or of interpreting its meaning from all the angles. Hoarded knowledge has been compared to the water in a pool without an outlet, liable to stagnate unhealthily if it does not mingle with other streams of thought.

Nothing qualifies as knowledge in the strict definition of the term unless it is full and accurate. And it is so easy to go wrong. For if this is the age of information, it is equally the age of misinformation — of history artfully revised to fit political theories, of facts arranged in a certain order to make political or commercial cases, of deliberate seductive lies and half-

truths. Conversation is one way of testing the validity of our knowledge by pitting it against that of others with different viewpoints. We all see the world through a veil of unconscious assumptions and prejudices; a civilized clash of opinions among informed people helps us see it as it actually is.

In our efforts to learn whether the knowledge we possess is really true, we might take a page out of the book of scientists. They take nothing for granted, and systematically match known facts against hypotheses, rejecting anything that does not agree with what has already been proved.

“A fact will fit every other fact in the universe... A lie will not fit anything but another lie,” wrote Thomas H. Huxley, one of the most notable men of science in the 19th century. Huxley believed that scientific methods should be used to test every kind of knowledge for the good of everyone, “in the conviction that there is no alleviation for the sufferings of mankind except veracity of thought and action, and the resolute facing of the world as it is, when the garment of make-believe is stripped off.”

Verified knowledge is the enemy of doctrine and ideology. It only takes one fact that strikes a discordant note to explode a false belief propagated by those in authority to maintain their own power. In this context, a thorough and unbiased knowledge of history and public affairs is vital to a person’s role as a responsible citizen of a democracy. In a system where the voters have the ultimate say, a benighted citizenry is the natural prey of political tricksters and demagogues. It is impossible to believe that people who are individually ignorant can be collectively wise when they come to the ballot box.

Knowledge has the effect of freeing the mind from the brutal grip of bigotry. A knowledgeable person is unlikely to be intolerant, because if broad learning imparts any certainty, it is that men, women and children the world over are more similar than different under their variously configured and tinted skins. “To understand everything is to hate nothing,” according to the French writer Romain Rolland. Mutual knowledge among people of different backgrounds and faiths leads to mutual understanding, which makes a mighty bulwark against the tragedy of war or civil strife.

It was the above-mentioned Francis Bacon, a shrewd lawyer and politician as well as a moral philosopher, who first wrote (at around the turn of the 17th century) that knowledge is power. Leaving black-mail aside, knowledge of a certain kind can lend a considerable boost to someone climbing the ladder to

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To know...
is not to be wise;
but it is certain
that you can
never be wise
without a fair
amount of
knowledge of
all kinds.

success in business, politics, or the professions. For one thing, it forms the basis of judgment, because knowing what has been done in the past helps a person to know what to do in the present. A good stock of knowledge is replete with salutary warnings not to make the mistakes others already have made.

According to John Locke, "a taste of every sort of knowledge is necessary to form the mind, and is the only way to give the understanding its due improvement to the full extent of its capacity." In other words, broad knowledge is the food of sound reasoning. It allows its holders to evaluate things, and to make valid comparisons, which assist in clear thinking. It teaches that there are few absolutes anywhere, and so stops us from leading our own minds astray by seeing ambiguous questions in terms of black and white.

Knowledge makes for better parents, friends and mentors. The capacity to teach, if only in an informal way, is one of the most compelling reasons for responsible people to keep learning day by day. Considering all that knowledge-holders have to share with those around them, it is almost a duty for them to learn as much about as broad a range of subjects as possible. Passing on what they know brings all the rare pleasure of making a gift, and yet it costs nothing. Knowledge is the one precious commodity that can be given away without a loss.

Shedding light on our lives

"Knowledge is in every country the surest basis of public happiness," George Washington wrote. The father of his country was referring to generalized education, but it is just as crucial to the public good that learning be promoted in the home. The ideal society these days would be one in which an encyclopedia would be as standard a part of a household as a telephone. (Whether that encyclopedia should be contained in a computer is an open question. As long as the great mass of knowledge remains between the covers of books, it is advisable for parents to instil the reading habit in their children early. Books are

the most user-friendly of media. You cannot take a computer comfortably to bed with you, as you can a book; at least not yet.)

If knowledge makes for public happiness, then what about personal happiness, which is, after all,

the prime objective in life of each of us? Taking into account the wickedness and stubborn wrong-headedness of humanity, the poet John Keats took a minimalist view of the question: "An extensive knowledge is needful to thinking people — it takes away the heat and fever; and helps, by widening speculation, to ease the Burden of Misery." In a similar vein, a later English writer, H. G. Wells, believed that it is better in all cases to know than not to know, however disheartening the experience: "There is no way but knowledge out of the cages of life."

One point to be made about the effect of knowledge on personal happiness is that it sweeps away the nameless fears that go with ignorance. It has been said that knowledge is the only real antidote to fear. Ignorance is what leaves people in the dark in making personal decisions. "Man is more likely to lose his way in darkness than in twilight; in twilight than in full sun," as the 19th century English logician and theologian Richard Whately wrote. Highly knowledgeable people have (or should have) a heightened grasp of what they are up against. As a rule they are more at peace with themselves than most people, more confident that they know what they are doing at a given time. Also, an acquaintance with the virtues and follies of those who have gone before is likely to urge a person on to greater self-control, the lack of which is responsible for so much personal unhappiness.

Knowledge is perhaps the only source of satisfaction that grows with age, which is important in an era when people in the western world are retiring earlier and living longer than ever. At the same time, it is more accessible than ever, through the electronic media, especially the Internet and public television, and a proliferation of books and magazines.

Its steady pursuit is proof against the horrors of boredom as a person advances in years and becomes less physically active. And it might blossom some day into the crowning glory of age, the state of being wise.

Wisdom has been defined as the ability of knowing how to use the knowledge at one's command, and not everyone has that ability. To know, then, is not to be wise; but it is certain that you can never be wise without a fair amount of knowledge of all kinds. And if you finally do accede to wisdom, it will be worth every moment you ever devoted to learning. For you will then enjoy what the Greek poet Sophocles defined as "the supreme part of happiness."

