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On Coping with Change

HUMANITY has always lived in a time of change, sometimes slow, sometimes fast. It was a time of speedy transition when Adam and Eve moved out of fruit-picking into agriculture.

During the past sixty years the conditions of life have been more altered than they were in all of the previous two or three thousand years.

Today, men everywhere are living through a change in the human scene that challenges many ideas and institutions inherited from other days. Their awareness of their natural environment; their relationship with other men; and their sense of the possibilities in human life: all these have been transformed.

The world is passing through a period of unsettlement due to automation, computerization, the population increase, pollution of air, water and land, and the rising expectations of people in the developed as well as in underdeveloped countries. At this moment we are groping as if we were wearing new bifocals, not quite sure of how far away the ground is.

We are engaged not only directly with the machine and the computer and their complexities, but also in painful conflicts between science and faith, between industrialism and social reform, between art and artiness, between ideologies not efficiently thought out and the desire to wring the greatest possible pleasure out of life. We are confused by a surfeit of theories about our thinking, so that the chances seem dim of a human being surviving a combination of complexes, reflexes, glands, sex and traffic.

Longfellow tells us in his poem "Tale of The Birds of Killingworth" how the ". . . thrifty farmers, as they tilled the earth, Heard with alarm the calling of the crow, That mingled with the universal mirth, Cassandra-like, prognosticating woe." But there is no need for us to give way to despair. There are some principles and practices that will help to soften the hardship of change and lessen the fear of the unknown.

Changes will come, and to dread or resent them renders us less practical in making the necessary adaptation to them. Instead of allowing the prospect to make us nervous, high-strung and tense, we can analyse the situation, recognize the worst that can happen, and try at least to improve on that worst.

At one time inaction may have had a purpose. When immature man was capable of no other defence, it was best for him to "play dead" to deceive whatever threatened him, to do nothing to attract attention. This does not hold good today, because we have the knowledge, the thinking capacity and the means to overcome practically any sort of threat. We develop a neurotic pattern and reduce our physical and spiritual resiliency if we do not face up to the fact of change.

One simple answer is to learn to understand this new era and to start promoting it. Study the changes that are taking place so as to use them to advantage. Get to know about what is going on, and join in it.

Resentment and confusion

Once a thing has become a custom, some people suffer emotional disturbance when it undergoes change. Some believe that anything that has not been done before is unnecessary, and they are just as troublesome as those who believe that nothing should be done except for the first time.

No age is all golden. Our present-day confusion is due in great part to the fact that we do not feel any certainty as to where we are going or ought to be going.

Many intellectual, spiritual and political things have shifted from their old assigned places. Many dubious ideas are disporting themselves in the attics of our minds and in the council chambers of the world. It is a hopeful sign when we recognize this state of affairs, because this awareness is the first step toward driving out what is destructive and establishing what is beneficial.

This is not so difficult as it may be thought. No great learning or sophisticated apparatus are needed. Simple measures are often effective. In Uniacke House, in Nova Scotia, visitors see holes that were drilled in the clothes closet doors so that cats could get in to chase the mice.

People who are not constantly replacing old ways and expectancies with new ones are in a sense ceasing to live, because not having and resting, but growing and becoming, are the chief ingredients of life and culture. Change from ignorance to knowledge, from clumsiness to skill, is a delightful experience.

Satisfied people do not get things done. They have reached their goals, if they had any. They do not consider new ideas on their merits but with reference to beliefs which are in part a survival from primitive civilizations. They are afraid of innovation, and think up twenty objections to counter every suggestion for advancement. They have not grasped the fact that the greatest part of human enjoyment arises out of joys which are lovable because they are changing: children, forest trees, garden flowers, and cloudy skies. Music, for example, is a delight because of its rhythm and flow: the moment you arrest the flow and prolong a note or a chord beyond its time the melodious movement and the beauty are destroyed.

Irresponsible change

There are, of course, fanatical people with dreamers' eyes who desire change for the amusement they find in pulling things to bits. They make a pandemonium and call it progress.

Society is satiated with quacks and their quick cure-alls, and with "reformers" who boast of their "realism", which has become widely identified with sensualism and vulgarity. Their "realism" stems from their attitude of mind, and has no attribute recommending it as a guide to happy living.

There is nothing wrong with being a reformer. In his *Apology* Socrates shows that he was a reformer, but his was an appeal to reason, to fair play, to justice, to conscience, and to man's dream of a better self and a better world. That spirit of seeking change is vastly different from the appeal to envy and hatred, to prejudice, and to the baser instincts.

Judgment about a proposed reform should not be arrived at on the word of a man because in another department of knowledge he has some eminence.

People may be apparently rational in one thing and foolish in others. For example, Pythagoras used his reasoning faculty to develop the theorem that in a right-angled triangle the square on the side opposite the right angle is equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides, but in another compartment of his mind he believed that it is wicked to eat beans.

Nor should intelligent people be swayed by fluency of talk. As the wise man who wrote the Book of Proverbs said: "The simple believeth every word, but the prudent man looketh well to his going."

The person who protects himself against advocates who have not learned to think, and is himself free from bias and prejudice, will accommodate without discomposure to changing conditions. Canadian society, which has citizens of more than thirty ethnic groups, is being enriched by the cross-fertilization of many different minds seeking enlightenment as to how all our people can attain happy participation in the good things of life.

The place of youth

Countless young people find themselves confused. They see an apparent disintegration of hitherto solidly established codes and traditions. They sense that their elders are bewildered and perplexed.

No one has ever been young before in such a world. Both young and old wonder what brought about the present state of things, and the young have an itch for activity that will make the future brighter. Some give way to what is called in medicine athetosis, meaning involuntary squirming movements, but the great majority of young people show an awareness of what is going on and an understanding that is mature.

The crisis in human affairs that confronts every generation anew is never as new as it seems to that generation. There were equally spectacular political, economic, and social changes, and equally showy transformations of dress and manners, in other ages, some long past.

People talk about new generations as though they were separate waves, but they are not. They flow into each other, and have a lot of good qualities and thoughts to exchange where they overlap and merge.

Every period of life has its problems, but their solution and the advantages which follow, are available only to those who are pliable. As Richard L. Evans, who delivers the "Spoken Word" part of the Salt Lake Tabernacle Choir and Organ broadcast, put it: "Old or young, we have to keep flexible in living life: not flexible as to principles, as to things of eternal truth, but flexible in our reactions to environment, to people and places, to the going and coming of friends and family, to changing situations and circumstances."

As part of this flexibility, the solutions to problems proposed by young people should be given consideration. Family relationships are not what they used to be. Old people are no longer the undisputed heads of well-knit households of three or four generations. They need to remember that notions and practices inevitably change in the face of changed conditions of life. They should remember, too, that youth has not yet learned the finality of tombstones, of which the old are very conscious. Youth is looking to the future, seeking to make sure that it shall not be a waste land.

Warm and sound human relationships can be enjoyed if both young and old seek understanding rather than domination. This can be achieved in a spirit of kindliness and civility, allowing one another time to mentally digest what is proposed or desired.

Progress is necessary

Constructive progress is always the result of some-

one's being willing to break with the pattern of the past. We need to take old ideas that are good and shape them to meet today's circumstances and to pass on to new experiences. Tennyson wrote in one of his poems that we may use the position we have attained today as a stepping-stone to higher things. If, instead, we use it as a pedestal on which to pose we alienate ourselves from life.

Some people go so far as to idealize conditions in "the good old days." A century ago a workman in a Canadian village produced what he wanted for his own family and a little over to be exchanged for what a workman with different skills had made. A couple on a hundred acres brought up their children. They lived well as to food, adequately as to clothes, even though they used flour sacks to make some of them, the children had public school education, and they enjoyed amusement centred around their own skills and gifts.

But this century came in with a rush. More education was necessary in order to win the new jobs in factories and offices, so the children went to high schools, and some went to university. Their horizons were widened.

In the home, new things became necessities of life: telephone, bathroom, radio, electric light, television, fancy foods and fashionable clothes.

In most parts of the world industrialization has meant an advance in material civilization, a rise in the standards of living, better health, longer life, improved education, and greater leisure. All this should, theoretically, make the people of the world free to change from lives of drudgery to engage in the pursuit of happiness.

It is said by some that industrialization has condemned masses of workers to a life of dull, monotonous and irksome toil. This lament tends to be overdone. Simple mechanical or stitching operations are no more monotonous, no less purposeful, and certainly less tiring, than carrying pails of water from a well, washing clothes on a scrubbing-board, milking cattle, hand-hewing beams for a house, or sawing logs in a saw-pit.

Science and technology

Science has been like a magician, producing more and more white rabbits out of top hats, and technology has been putting the rabbits to work. The comforts of today would not exist except for the work of inventors and the builders and operators of machines who have in their way created new ways of life.

The demand for men and women skilled in handling the new implements is increasing with lightning rapidity, and some occupations are becoming outmoded. Norbert Wiener, the distinguished mathematician who did so much of the conceptual thinking that underlies the new technology, has predicted that automation will lead to "the human use of human beings". He believes that man will use his specifically human qualities, his ability to think, to analyse, to decide and to act purposefully, instead of doing the dreary work that machines do better.

The need for trained and educated people means an upgrading of the labour force in terms of skill and opportunity. As Herbert A. Leggett, Vice President of the Valley National Bank, Arizona, said in one of his essays: "In a world of quiz programmes, space ships and mechanical mastodons, heaven help the illiterate. Even electronic brains require a higher order of intelligence to operate them." There are always going to be cases when robots will run into trouble and men will have to get them out of it. The most elaborate computing machine does not look around for problems to solve or ask questions.

There has been a speeding up of all aspects of living. Life is not attuned to the old measurements: lifetimes, generations, years, seasons. It is geared to the speed of the computer. Every moment is filled with something that must be done or seen or said or planned.

This change in speed has taken us unawares. For hundreds of years before the beginning of the nineteenth century there had been little speeding up. Julius Caesar could send a letter practically as fast as Napoleon. Then came changes in the technology of distance that revolutionized all of the components upon which economic and human contacts depend: travel, transport and communication.

Today a business man can leave Toronto in the morning, do a day's business in Vancouver, and be back in Toronto the next morning — 5,000 miles travelled between offices without losing any business time, and with only one night sleeping elsewhere than in his own bed. We have, in fact, nearly reached the stage where an airplane will require landing clearance at Montreal airport before it takes off from London.

Prepare for change

It is more comfortable to prepare for and accept change than to wait until it is forced upon us.

The changes that we get peeved about are generally things that we have not anticipated in our thoughts. We could adjust to them, or mould them to our needs, if we took the trouble to examine them in relation to our lives. We need not abandon old practices, methods, and hopes, but merely revise them. By making small revisions day by day we avoid the upsetting experience that occurs when an accumulation of stresses suddenly breaks upon us.

Men have the wit to cope with changes. The animals have to await, unconsciously, their adaptation to their changing environment in the course of an evolution spread over numberless generations. Civilized man may, in some measure at least, consciously adapt

himself to change, and may even change the environment.

Active adaptability is essential to survival. The only alternative is flight from reality, which results in damage to the personality.

This requires continuous learning. Education will help people to adjust constantly to new mechanical devices and new ways of doing things. You cannot ignore what is going on, so get to know about it.

Observe what is happening and ask "Why?" The great advances in understanding often begin when people ask questions about things which up till then they have taken for granted. One who accepts a label without questioning the thing's validity has ceased to learn.

Patience is needed under change. Patience is a very great word, implying maturity and mental health. It is typified in Paul's statement: ". . . and having done all, to stand." When we have done what is necessary and then let inessential things pass, we find that much of the irrelevance of human behaviour fades away into a natural unimportance.

Principles and purposes

Where there are great and rapid changes it is easy to lose sight of basic values. While it would not be wise to try to turn back the clock, it is essential to hold firm to certain fundamental truths that come to us from the past if we are to prevent the crumbling away of all that up to now has composed the essence of social, religious, political and economic life.

We need a point of reference, a standard of excellence, or we cannot tell whether a proposed change of course is beneficial.

There are people who would throw aside in contempt a valuable haystack in their search for a paltry needle. They do not perceive the loss involved in depreciating such primal things as patriotism, religion, authority and responsibility.

Man has learned to dominate his universe; now he must learn to control his own actions and thoughts. Dr. Salvador E. Luria, the 1969 Nobel Prize winner in medicine, put it this way: "For the first time in his history, man has learned enough about his environment, with which he is engaged in an unending game, that he may deal his own hand. But he has not learned enough about himself."

Sensible people do not want the innovations they made yesterday to end in themselves. What seemed like fixities then were merely the seeds of what we have today. Yet there is a common inclination to rest on what has been attained and take things easy. As Milton said in *Paradise Lost*: "Ease would recant vows made in pain."

Long-run successes cannot be assured by short-term changes. There is a tendency in mankind to see only the immediate effects of a policy, or the effects on a special group or situation, and not to inquire into the long-run effects.

Consider the consequences

Before committing ourselves to anything, even when there is promise of great gain, it is well to stop to consider all the consequences. The woman Tarpeia betrayed Rome and asked as a reward "the things that the soldiers wear on their left arms." In addition to the golden bracelets she coveted, they heaped upon her their shields, which they also carried on their left arms, so that she was crushed to death. More recently an Australian artist did a large mural for an office building, 66 feet long and 12 feet high. Now it is not possible to get a view of the entire painting, because another wall has been built facing the mural only 30 feet away.

It must be admitted that the changes brought about by scientific research, the development of technology, and our new affluence, have produced a host of problems. We cannot enter the new era as upon a highway free from bumps and pot-holes.

The history of change shows that when conditions get better people become more openly dissatisfied. The disparity between their lot and that of others becomes more evident, and they do not give thanks for the distance they have advanced so heartily as they urge the distance they want to go.

The notion of progress consists in change from the worse to the better, and successful progress creeps from point to point, testing each step.

In the midst of the critical times in which he lived, Lincoln said: "The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty and we must rise to the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew." But the President also gave a warning: if we would supplant the opinions and policy of our fathers we should do so upon evidence that is conclusive and argument that is clear.

The present is again a period of social change. In 1971 and every succeeding year we shall be called upon to face novel situations which have no parallel in our past.

We need not only eyes and ears to learn what is going on but minds to understand what the effects will be, and stout hearts to resist where principle tells us to, and the sensitivity to give in when the change is not harmful.

If we are convinced that the present is on the whole better than the past, and that the future may be better still if we make the effort, we may change with confidence. Neither stability nor change has any intrinsic value. The worth of stability is the goodness it preserves; the worth in change is the goodness it brings about.

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