



# THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA

## MONTHLY LETTER

HEAD OFFICE: MONTREAL, FEBRUARY 1953

### THE CREATIVE URGE

**B**USINESS has progressed and the material needs of people have been met because men and women were obsessed by a creative urge.

Behind material civilization are initiative, enterprise, the impulse to make things, to improve things, and to move forward. Progress is the result of inventiveness, and behind inventiveness is imagination, a special quality of the human race.

Every method we use in production of goods, in distribution and in selling, was at some time or other new to the world. To put them into use there had to be daring men and women, people who saw visions and attacked problems with ferocious determination.

Theirs were creative efforts, whether they were building businesses or bridges, inventing mechanical devices or discovering elements, writing books or composing poems, sculpturing statues or painting pictures or erecting great buildings. In whatever state of civilization he has lived in all ages, man has had the creative urge, to put into form in word, colour, sound, or stone and steel, thoughts and ideals and aspirations that were in him.

All individuals are not equally creative. Some do not replace old expectancies with new ones year by year. But the great new forms of democracy and industrialism were evoked by the creative work of those who saw life not as a having and a resting but as a growing and a becoming.

It is not necessary to think of creativeness on a high intellectual plane. The man engaged in some plastic art finds the physical handling of materials a sheer joy — the shaping of wood or pottery or plastic or metal into graceful or useful form, the cutting and sewing and embroidering of fabrics into clothing or slip covers or drapes: no matter how lowly his position in the social world, the man who realizes that he is making things is rich in experience.

#### *Creativeness in Business*

New methods, invention, and discovery have played a constant part in the rapid development of production and distribution of commodities. Old theories have

been abandoned for new ideas. Both business and science realize that there are no final truths in material civilization. The building of a new business or of a new type of business organization exhibits creativeness of a high order.

Wagner and Leonardo da Vinci and Edison and Eaton all had this in common: each one had made a notion that was new to his time and place a fundamental part of his thinking power.

Had these men believed the adage "You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear" then Wagner would not have stirred generations of people by his great operas, Leonardo would not have delighted and puzzled four centuries of people with his "Mona Lisa" or inspired them with his "The Last Supper" or set so fast a pace with his excursions into mathematics, engineering, and architecture; Edison would never have attempted to bring light out of the end of a couple of wires, and Eaton would not have introduced the cash sale principle of economical merchandising into the retail business.

The power and tendency to move of themselves, instead of waiting at a dockside for a tug to pull or push them are evidences that today's progressive business men have creative minds. They will not allow their initiative to be strangled by a noose of red tape nor will they be stopped by signs erected by well-meaning people: "No thoroughfare: it can't be done."

Initiative — getting things started — is an important part of creativeness. Doing, even if what is done turns out to be unsuccessful, is the way of the creative man, rather than spending time wondering what to do. A man who sees a dozen possibilities in a landscape, in a business situation, in a natural resource, or in a political or social situation, but who has not the initiative to act on any one of them, is not creative.

#### *Adventure in Creation*

The people who are frequently bored, and find life wearisome, are people who have not realized the joy

of devising and making things. They are the people for whom commercial methods of killing time have become big business.

The others, the unboreable, know that life evolves by being exposed, not by being protected. They are not afraid to try something that is not in the book of rules. Fish colonised the land, not because they were pushed out of the sea, but by a sort of imaginative vital force akin to our own inventive and creative drive.

That is the spirit of progressive business: adding action and work to ideas. The Duke of Edinburgh said in a speech to British business men: "If we are to recover prosperity, we shall have to find ways of emancipating energy and enterprise from the frustrating control of constitutionally timid ignoramus."

The adventure into creative thought and action leads to constructiveness. First, a man has an idea that seems like something from a fairy tale, requiring magic for its making. Then he pictures his idea as reality, and devotes his mind and effort to thought and work to make it come true.

The creative person is not aimless. His brain has not calcified, but is living, flexible, and able to modify itself so as to accommodate new thoughts and give expression to them. Dr. H. Stafford Hatfield, the distinguished British scientist (he was one of the select few taken by the Admiralty into the Back Room during the war) puts this point in a picturesque way. He says in his Pelican book *The Inventor and His World* that craft afloat on a river are of two kinds, those with means of propulsion and the lighters which must be towed. Then he goes on: "Mankind is divided into the same two classes, except that a considerable percentage of human lighters possesses engines rusting from lack of use, but often capable, when rocks and rapids are sighted in the tideway, of being started up and averting shipwreck."

There is no automatic force in the nature of things which will carry us forward irrespective of our own efforts. Active thinking has been one of the strongest forces in bringing man to his present position of supremacy in the scale of animal life.

First came man's effort to improve his physical environment, then to improve intellectually, and finally to improve emotionally and spiritually. He has repeatedly broken with the pattern of the past, seeking a better way, instead of the customary way, of doing things. Churchill remarked with confusing logic: "There is nothing wrong in change, if it is in the right direction."

### *Natural Endowment*

Creativeness is a personal but not a private thing. It requires communication to other people.

No amount of musical education will enable a person who is not endowed with creativeness to compose a single original melody, and no quantity of business schooling will help the uncreative man in

business to build commercial success. Without facility in expression and a knowledge of the techniques involved, a man may have great tunes playing in his head or great business opportunities at his fingertips, but he cannot become a creative person.

This is far from saying that techniques alone will produce music or big business, but they do enable the creative person to break the new ground he sees lying fallow.

Creativeness and invention are not merely adapting things to new uses. In inventing, man the thinker combines scraps of his knowledge of nature to form some new substance or object that previously did not exist, or to formulate a principle in some hitherto chaotic area.

Creation is not by chance. If all Shakespeare's words were written on pieces of paper and put into a lottery drum, and drawn one by one, it is possible, but extremely improbable, that they might yield a sonnet or a play better than he ever wrote.

The scientist does not create the facts which he discovers, any more than the business man creates the state of the world in which he does business. But every important step in science or in business involves the creation of the means of discovery. A man must make a hypothesis to be his guide, and conduct experiments to test it. There must be an idea, and an urge to make the idea come true.

Given that, the act of creation may proceed by little and by little. "I can compile a whole dictionary by writing two pages a day, or paint my fresco by concentrating on 4 square inches of it at a time," said Ernest Dimnet, French abbé and author. All valuable processes in physics and chemistry started with small laboratory experiments.

### *Poesy and Preparation*

The creative urge comes to a man from all over the place, from the sky, from the earth, from a scrap of paper, from a snatch of conversation. Then he strives to unload himself of the vision he has seen. The greatest works of art and the most magnificent achievements of men in practical affairs have arisen from experiences in everyday life amid everyday people.

It is probably disastrous, in whatever sphere of life one moves, not to be a poet, not to be receptive to the radiance of inspiration that gleams at some time on the dullest existence.

The imaginative aboriginal never built a hut but it was the visible embodiment of a thought of his, any more than the writer of a book or a poem or an essay can produce a line of writing without an outpouring of something that is within himself — not merely the flow of ink on paper.

From poet to business man may seem to some to be a far reach, but the same principles apply. Only our works can reveal to us and to others the self-consciousness that dwells in us and render it articulate.

But both poet and man-of-affairs need nourishment. Superiority in creative ability is not accidental; it rests upon a solid basis of preparation. Variety of life is important to the person with an originative mind. All our great advancement industrially has been preceded by our increase in natural knowledge. Without wide experience, our creation will be limited.

No one can construct something out of nothing. Creative thoughts do not come at random: they proceed by a law of association which enables us to unite former images with our ideas and thus create novel results.

The wise man, whether writer or office manager, factory worker or painter, makes sure that his imagination receives plenty of material. Its storehouse must be kept filled. Then, under the influence of creative excitement, that material will be brought out and amalgamated with new thoughts to produce something that is unique.

Somerset Maugham commented on this point: "The author does not only write when he is at his desk; he writes all day long, when he is thinking, when he is reading, when he is experiencing; everything he sees and feels is significant to this purpose . . . he is forever storing and making over his impressions."

This is good advice to men in industry, to teachers, to women in the home: to everyone who is not content to stand still.

### *On Trying Again*

Creative work has this in its favour: when it goes well the work is pure delight, and when the task becomes hard the holder of the whip is still oneself.

The person urged on by the creative impulse soon finds virtue in the discipline of finishing what he starts. Careers have begun brilliantly, but ended like starshells, bright but unlasting. Loss of interest or difficulty of achievement kill off the efforts of those who are insufficiently inspired.

To the inspired person, being licked is all part of the game, and the experience is counted toward final victory. Even a genuine accomplishment is not accepted by the creative-minded person as a finality, but as something enclosing a jewel for future finding. It is the search that counts, not the finding.

William Bolitho, author of *Twelve Against the Gods*, put it cogently when he said: "The most important thing in life is not to capitalize on your gains. Any fool can do that. The really important thing is to profit from your losses. That requires intelligence; and it makes the difference between a man of sense and a fool."

Success in any field of human endeavour is a history of recommencements. Every great canvas has the story behind it of innumerable sketches and trials, of study and disappointment. The thing is for the man with a creative idea to keep putting it back on the easel.

Victories in the arena of creative endeavour will prepare us to cope with the unexpected and the unpredictable in life. We learn to discard innumerable

details, to reorganize the elements, and to extract from a situation what is essential to our creative purpose.

### *Imagination*

To discriminate properly, one needs imagination. The most degrading poverty is poverty of the imagination, because without it there can be only animal-like or mechanical recording of sensations conveyed by the senses.

Imagination is the difference between creative and routine living.

But imagination, the spark plug of creative activity, needs to be dominated by reason — at least, it must never wholly escape from it. Constructive imagination has a definite and even vital place in human life. It is imagination with a purpose, imagination that is selective, imagination which is aided by the thinking power.

In the first volume of the Alexander Hamilton *Modern Business* library it is said: "No man of feeble imagination ever achieved real success in business. By imagination is meant the mind's ability to recall past experiences — sensations, emotions, feelings, perceptions — and to cause them to reappear in the consciousness in infinite variety."

We have not yet developed into a sort of purely logical animal. We have within us a whole region which responds to some different appeal, which is preparing for the surprises of the future. Planning for that future, how we may convert chaos into order in our own lives or in the lives of others, is in itself a creative act, part and parcel of the accomplishment.

There is no time limit to this activity, because we are always at the beginning of a new period. Aristotle, who flourished in Greece around 350 B.C., is credited with the first organized scientific inquiry in the world. He had 1,000 men collecting material for his natural history. But still the search goes on, with more thousands than ever before probing the secrets of the earth in physics and chemistry, the secrets of stars it would take years to reach at the speed of light, the secrets of the human mind, and mysteries unthought of by Aristotle and so unknown to him.

Neither is there a special time in history allotted to each discovery and invention. Galileo dropped heavy bodies from the top of the leaning tower of Pisa, and demonstrated that bodies of different weight if released together would reach the earth together. So far as experimental skill and delicacy of apparatus were concerned, this experiment could have been made anytime within the preceding five thousand years. But no one thought to do it.

### *Ideals and Achievement*

What sustains the creative person in the fine arts or in the practical arts is an ideal, a vision, a sense of what might be. Modern plumbing has been of little value in solving mankind's real problems, but the spirit that begat it is the only spirit that holds out hope, in a material way, of reaching solutions.

While today's world may have lost belief in ideal conceptions, it remains true that every man's ideal is the highest product of which his imagination is capable. So long as he can conceive new ideas in art, in plumbing, in manufacture, in literature, in distribution, or in any other intellectual or practical sphere of human life and hope, even if the ideals are not immediately attainable, man is a creative being.

Every achievement is first of all an idea; every visible success is first of all an invisible thought. It is the expression of an idea in the life men lead that satisfies their cravings. By it they are inspired to further thoughts and actions: reaching a goal of finished accomplishment would only mean entering upon a life of mindless action.

This is well illustrated by a scene in James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*. When the plane-wrecked party topped the mountain pass, there was spread before them a marvellous view, with the monastery snuggling on the slope of the Valley of the Blue Moon. The hero of the story, Conway, felt that he had reached at last some place that was an end, a finality.

But Conway found that it was not a finality. At the lamasery he learned that they were collecting the art and literary treasures of the world. The High Lama hoped that when the passions of men had spent themselves in futile strife the world would find preserved there all the culture it had discarded. Even Shangri-La is an unfinished story.

### *Inspiration*

Much is made in talk about creative work of the word "inspiration." Perhaps inspiration is not altogether intuition. It may be the ability to seize and express an inrush of thought. What comes to a creative man with baffling altogetherness has to be spread out in sequence and put into words and actions.

The something that comes may come from far away, beyond conscious thinking. It may be great in itself, but it will remain only an unshaped kind of something until it is given worthy expression through a creative process.

To give it expression may be hard work and painful. George Sand said Chopin's inspiration was miraculous, coming on his piano suddenly complete or singing in his head during a walk, but afterwards "began the most heartrending labour I ever saw. It was a series of efforts, of irresolutions, and of frettings to seize again certain details of the theme he had heard. Chopin would shut himself up in his room for whole days writing, walking, breaking his pens, repeating and altering a bar a hundred times."

Perhaps the way to become inspired is to gather all possible data and add one's own ideas, experiences and memories, and then move them about until one feels the "click", the spark, that gives the sensation: "That's it!"

This is as close as we can come to the essence of creative achievement. Dr. Hatfield pictures it this way: "We need a mind possessing very fully the aptitude for a certain general notion. Moving along the highway of established method, it comes across a hole, a

bad spot. The journey is interrupted, and the deficiency is examined in all its bearings with the most intense interest. And then, out of the depths of the unconscious mind comes a suggestion, a vision, of a new form."

When is the time of life for creative activity? No one can say with surety that youth or age is preferred. One of the factors is a common requirement whatever the age of the participant: work. Idleness is incompatible with creation. Creation is over-work. The steady grind of a seven or eight hour day simply does not produce it. It needs sweating and worrying.

One thing is certain: the impulse to create must be seized at the vital moment of its appearance. The ray of sunshine is on that bough for only this point in time, the leaves are a shower of silver pieces, perhaps for the last time this summer, the weather may change tomorrow, the inclination of the sun will have changed in a week: to the landscape artist these things mean that now is the only time, for things will never be quite the same again.

It is no different in other fields of creative effort. The work may go in a humdrum way for days or weeks with black days of complete unproductiveness and discouragement: but when the desire and the idea are there the creatively-minded man must seize the moment and persevere to completion of his idea.

### *Qualities for Creativeness*

The creative person combines several qualities. He must be in love with progress generally and in some specific field of activity. This does not mean merely an eager-beaver effort to construct things, but faith in the values that lie behind progress.

He needs a thorough grasp of the fundamental facts in the special field in which he is to exercise his creative powers, sufficient education to understand the principles, and imagination to see the hitherto hidden possibilities.

It will help the creative person if he cultivates ability to look at his environment and his work objectively, so that he can consider without heat and bias the pros and cons of a problem and its solution. In all but his own specialty (where he will be content to stand alone) he will conserve his energy by conforming to custom and accepting the judgment of other specialists.

Creative activity is an antidote for escapism. It leads a man away from trash into a search for truth. It causes discontent, it is true, discontent with present performance in machinery, in art and in business practices, but this is accompanied by a vision of achieving something better.

There are three aspects of the creative urge: dreaming of something that might be better than what we now have; imagining how it is to be brought about and planning how to do it; and work. The way to make the creative urge effective in life is to combine these three basic things with patience, persistence and endurance.

This is still the sort of world where a good idea, properly developed, can go places.