



# THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA MONTHLY LETTER

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## *How Much Should You Know?*

A MAN NEEDS at least some degree of intelligence to be able to notice that there are things he does not know. From there on, he decides what he is going to learn and how to go about getting the knowledge he needs.

What to know and where to find it are key guides to living today. Imperative questions are: where are we? where are we going? what is best to do under these circumstances? Everyday matters for study at the same time are: how to earn a living, how to get along with people, and how to make a contribution to life.

Our environment is very much what we choose to learn about. We may be high or low on the happiness scale according to what we put inside our heads that gives us comprehension of life. It is not easy to say as yet what will one day be evolved from this chaotic period in human history, but we are part of the unfolding picture. We can make new conditions easier to live with if we detect and follow their development.

Outside one's chosen field of work, where one must be up to date in detail every day, there are many opportunities to broaden oneself. Only by getting to know more about many things does a person become aware of the full extent of his abilities and the opportunities open to him. Only then can he profess to think, debate and perform with satisfaction to himself.

The feeling of inferiority that occasionally afflicts all of us is not abnormal and should not perturb us. It is out of such feelings that there is born all improvement in the lives of individuals and the hopes of mankind. It is by detecting a deficiency in knowledge and looking for enlightenment that the triumphs of science and of people have been attained.

Professor Edgar Dale wrote in the *News Letter* of Ohio State University: "That knowledge is of most worth which enables a person to do the best that he can, to be fulfilled, to achieve a sense of his identity." If you are short of ideas about what you would like to know in order to fulfil yourself it may be because you have allowed circumstances and happenings and other people to draw your life map. Perhaps the time has come to take pencil and paper and start a plan of your own.

### *What do you know?*

An Arabian proverb says: "He that knows not, and knows not that he knows not — he is a fool, shun him." Confucius advised: "Know what you know, and know that you don't know what you don't know — that is characteristic of one who knows." As to what these things are that men do not know, the Voice out of the Whirlwind in the Book of Job describes a hundred areas in which we are ignorant and can learn.

Nearly everyone will admit that certain of his views of the world and its doings have been glimpsed dimly through lace-curtained windows, resulting in partially-true appraisal and partially-right action. The outcome is often a mediocre sort of life, without vitality and substantiality. As a Greek playwright put it: When you have a clear view you may rejoice or weep according to what you see, but before you know for certain what do you gain by grieving?

Knowledge enlarges life and sets one free from small thoughts and small spaces. This does not mean that we need to know all about everything: the geography of the Orinoco River, the niceties of algebra, the names of the muscles in your body, the four essential components of the space missile or the title of the best-selling novel.

The amount of knowledge you need about something depends upon your interests and your point of view. People associate different ideas with the same thing, the moon for example. To the ancients the moon was a goddess; to the nursery rhymist it was green cheese; to a forlorn lover, it stirs thoughts of lost love; to a marine scientist it is connected with the ocean tides; to the astronauts it is a place to go for a walk. To specialists in these areas one is ignorant if one does not know what they know, but on the other hand one is perhaps wiser than they in knowing that all these points of view exist.

Obtaining knowledge about things does not of itself produce a well-educated man. It is not wholesome to become intoxicated by a general desire to accumulate a mass of information. That is like women who are passionately fond of clothes without having



any clothes sense. But getting to know things is beneficial when it enables a person to discharge fittingly his responsibilities as a parent, a worker and a citizen of Canada and of the world.

One's sense of values is the ultimate guide. There can be no virtue in learning unless one has a scale of values. It is according to this scale and one's conception of what the good life should be that the search for knowledge is guided. The most satisfactory kind of learning is consciously directed, activated by interest, controlled by intelligence and sparked by pleasure.

### *Wide interests*

With this in mind it is evident that as a starting point one will seek to broaden one's outlook toward the infinite instead of reducing it to the vanishing point of his own private affairs. If one is content to wrap himself in a cocoon and remain in the larval stage of development, he had better, as James Reeves says in his poem recently published in *Subsong*: "Close the book and say goodnight, when nothing moves you much but your own plight."

It is possible for anyone to enjoy so many interests that the vexations of daily life come to seem trivial. Having some familiarity with the important fields of culture — literature, fine arts, history, music, religion and philosophy—gives one this liberalizing potentiality.

Interests can be as varied as the stars in the sky. Ask a man "What do you really like?" and he will answer differently every few years and yet be telling the truth every time. Our interests change. They require new data and new fuel. We need to rotate our minds just as a farmer rotates his crops to get better yield.

One's knowledge and views are relative to other knowledge and other views. The habit of segregating knowledge in sharply defined categories has its attractions and uses, but it is a false way to look at life. Life is filled with overlappings. Every aspect merges with another: music and mathematics, art and philosophy, history and politics, science and religion. Cross-fertilization of ideas in all these is the breeder of wisdom.

When we spread our interests we extend the landscape in which we feel at home. We gain perspective. We move among the many realities of life less awkwardly, and we provide ourselves with more options. We become qualified to make comparisons, and this is the basis of acuteness of judgment.

Success in our search for knowledge depends, of course, upon our not looking only for what we wish to see, but for what is. Even if we are not keen about studying the opposite side of a point in dispute, we need to know what it is so as to strengthen our own side.

Having knowledge fosters activity of the mind, helps one to think constructively, and gives intelligence the material with which to work. This results

in good understanding, which is not, as some suppose, an automatic gift to age but the outcome of thinking.

### *Use discrimination*

What you know should be the best knowledge available to you. To learn what a thing is, look at the object itself instead of turning to others to know what they think of it. When you are looking up something that you wish to know accurately, do not depend upon your own notes or the glosses of other people, but go as close to the source as you can get.

It is more exciting and more fulfilling to get information from primary sources than from secondary. It gives exact knowledge and builds self-confidence, because you are dealing with facts through your own perception and not that of someone else.

Ask of any source of information: does this man know what he is talking about? Make sure that he has learnt the facts in one of the ways in which it is possible to acquire real knowledge, as opposed to belief and opinion.

Approach biased sources gingerly, and check their opinions against either an impartial source or one influenced in a contrary direction. The question to ask is: Does this particular writer or publication throw authentic new light on this specific subject, or merely express opinions?

To discriminate in your search for knowledge is to think about the significance of things instead of playing about with an imposing array of desiccated facts. One should read choosingly, not wasting time on things that have no enduring importance. The burning popular issues of today are likely to become the forgotten trifles of tomorrow.

Put aside the temptation to indulge in particularities. When studying the natural history of the oak tree one does not need to tabulate how many oak trees there are in the maritimes or in central Canada or on Vancouver Island. In searching for information you do not have to read every word of a book or report. You choose what is pertinent and go after it doggedly.

The fact-hunter's tools are readily obtainable. Books on all topics are at hand in public and school and church and special libraries. A private library, which every family should have, even a very small one, will provide answers to many questions. Handbooks are printed on nearly every subject you can think of. They may be obtained, according to your interest, from booksellers, your trade association or union, municipal, provincial and federal government departments, international agencies like the United Nations information department, the Queen's Printer in Canada and the Superintendent of Documents in the United States.

You do not have to start with something difficult. Find a book you can understand, and go on from there. Every child learns that the best way to untie a bow-knot is to pull on the end that comes easier.



Quite often something you read will stir you to seek supplementary enlightenment in your already well-stocked mind. This is an urge that should not be resisted, because it is the source of new ideas about things. Sit back and let your mind wander over and beyond what you have read.

The pleasure and added ability arising from learning things can be yours as a leisure time activity. Full use of evening time will quicken the life of the whole week, add zest to it, and increase the interest you feel in living. It is astonishing how far even half an hour a day will carry a man in making himself master of a subject. If he can make this getting to know things a family enterprise he has assured himself of the bonus of living in an intellectual community where he feels always at ease.

### *Making facts your own*

The true spirit of learning about things asks: "What are the facts?" Any conclusion about the efficiency of a tool or the pertinence of a piece of information depends upon its being in harmony with what is so.

Facts are not only the brick and mortar out of which judgments are built, but serve as spring-boards for creative thinking. When he was asked which are the more important, facts or ideas, Alfred North Whitehead replied: "Ideas about facts."

No adjective like "true" or "real" should be necessary to emphasize that "facts" are statements of things that are accurate. A date in history that is ten years off, the sum of a column that is ten cents out, the name of a person with one letter wrong: these are not, to the careful person, trivial mistakes but altogether zero on the scale of truth.

Facts are learned through asking questions. Knowledge is not the product of passive acceptance. It has been said that the question mark is shaped like a hook because it is designed to catch information. The man who has lost the pleasure of fishing for answers or exchanged it for the enjoyment of dogma, which is the pleasure of answering, is already beginning to stiffen. He is developing a closed mind.

Take nothing for granted when dealing with important issues. Churchill pointed this up in his self-criticism over the fall of Singapore. He had not been told about its defencelessness. He said: "I ought to have asked. The reason I had not asked . . . was that the possibility of Singapore having no landward defences no more entered into my mind than that of a battleship being launched without a bottom".

The maddeningly persistent question of young children is "Why?" In asking it they provide us with an object lesson. We do not understand a phenomenon unless we probe its causes. A matter may appear clear when looked at casually, but when you ask "Why?" you discover that the surface simplicity hides many a feature worth looking at.

This question is the key to problem-solving. We can straighten out most of our problems by using: (1) clear-

eyed analysis; (2) straight thinking; (3) common sense, and (4) unsparing frankness and honesty.

Analysis is the foe of vagueness. It helps you to separate and appraise ideas which have been casually slung together and to reassemble them meaningfully. It enables you to stand back and view the whole structure and function of your individual life against the broad background of what is happening in the world at this time.

Even people who complain about the number and complexity of the problems they are called upon to solve will boast about those with which they grapple successfully. The developing human mind is delighted to come up against a problem if it knows the right way to go about finding the solution.

Define the problem precisely. What is it? Young people are not a problem, but certain things involving young people are problems. It is these things about which we desire facts so that we may apply our skill where it is needed.

### *See things whole*

After taking information apart so as to examine its elements, we must think about the parts in their relationships. We add some new fact, and we integrate it with what we already have stored in our minds, and thus upgrade and enrich our knowledge. This implies an enormous self development.

There is a satisfying wholeness to what is acquired in this constructive way. William James pointed out in his *Psychology* that "something may have unity, reality, externality, extent, and what not — *thinghood* in a word, but thinghood only as a whole."

It is helpful to make a digest of new information, perhaps putting it into capsule form in the shape of maxims which are handy things to have around. They can be used as ready-to-hand guides out of trouble, or as high pressure thoughts to push us into rewarding activity.

Not much equipment is needed to store facts and ideas. When Mrs. Einstein was shown the giant telescope at Mount Wilson Observatory they told her it was used to find out the shape of the universe. "Oh," she said, "my husband does that on the back of an old envelope."

You can start a small file in a recipe box. Put at the top corner of every 3-inch by 5-inch card the key word, like "music", or "philosophy", or "moon". When you read something along the lines of your interests, mark the place in your book, and write enough on your card to guide you to the source. Then you will have, in a few weeks, references by which to check new information and the substance of addresses or the "few words" you are being repeatedly asked to say at community, school, service club and church gatherings.

Take soundings periodically to learn whether you are accumulating the desirable depth and breadth of knowledge about important situations and events. It is



our business to keep pushing back the boundaries of what we know, lest we fall into the habit of living by outworn notions and being misled by misconceptions of developing trends.

If your first judgment about a desirable bit of knowledge is that it is impossible for you to get it or to understand it, look closely at your use of the word "impossible". Nine times out of ten you will realize that what you have been thinking about is merely "difficult". When you take the first step toward learning you find that the lure of the chase makes the exercise pleasurable and easy.

It is well, of course, to know when to stop. What is worth doing at all is worth doing only as well as the situation requires. It would be ridiculous to expect to understand everything — for example, another person's nightmare.

The saying "a little learning is a dangerous thing" is true only when the owner of it does not know or admit that his knowledge is little. Blaise Pascal, the 17th-century mathematician and philosopher wrote: "Since we cannot be universal and know all that is to be known of everything, we ought to know a little about everything. For it is far better to know something about everything than to know all about one thing."

### *What is education ?*

Our explosive introduction to the Space Age has brought us face to face with the equally explosive realization of the importance of learning about what is going on. Obviously, what today's adults were taught at school and have since picked up from newspaper headlines does not go far toward helping them to feel at home in today's world.

There are some things for which we may be thankful. When the harassed mother of three children was told that the knowledge in the world is doubling every ten years, she exclaimed: "Thank heavens the multiplication table doesn't change! It is the only thing a mother knows that is the same as when she went to school, and which she can speak about without being corrected."

To educate ourselves into a new sort of life consistent with the spirit of science, touched with its excitements, while retaining the fundamentals of humanity and its ideals, is the most pressing social obligation of today.

This demand rests upon three reasons. Every man has the right to the most complete education obtainable so that he may find enjoyment in living. All his fellow-citizens have the right to have him educated, so that they may live comfortably and enjoyably with him. And all the children yet unborn have the right to be guaranteed an intelligent and refined parentage.

It is commonly thought that people become set in their ways in middle life and almost impervious to new ideas. But if they do stop learning it is by their own choice, not because of a law of life. A person of fifty has greater richness of experience upon which to

draw, a wealth of knowledge to which to relate new facts, and a clearer appreciation of what is good and worthwhile, than he had when he was twenty. He can be constantly at work on his own enlargement, and his love of learning derives fresh vigour from his enjoyment of it.

One sign that a man is grown up and is no longer a child is that he does not regard learning as work. Whatever his age, he continues as a student finding doors that open upon new vistas. Benjamin Franklin had less than two years of formal schooling, but he kept on getting to know about things; Samuel Pepys started to learn the multiplication table when he was 28 years old; John Knox was 50 when he learned Hebrew; Goethe entered upon the study of oriental literature at 66; George Cruikshank, the English caricaturist, was 60 when he started to attend the drawing classes of the Royal Academy.

It is well to cultivate "sticktoitiveness" when resuming learning after a lapse. Do not be discouraged if no sudden flash lights up what you are studying. Darwin accepted revelation tardily and gradually and cautiously; his dawning vision came only as the result of years of study.

### *A pleasant domain*

When we learn something we have never known before we enter a pleasant domain. Digging for information and learning things gives pleasure in itself aside from the results; as Dr. Hans Selye put it in *From Dream to Discovery*: "like that of a rose, a song, or a beautiful landscape."

Learning leads to serendipity, the gift of finding unsought treasures. The word comes from a fairy tale, "The Three Princes of Serendip", who were always discovering, by chance or by sagacity, things they were not seeking.

Learning is an antidote for anxiety, which is often the result of not knowing. We all realize that we are affected by the threat of nuclear war, but there are many other causes of anxiety: for example, not knowing what role to pursue in our lives, what principles of action to believe in and stand up for, and how to keep our balance amid conflicting patterns of behaviour. All these anxieties can be lessened as we obtain knowledge about them and their causes.

The person who learns to derive gratification from great pictures, great poems, great faiths and great literature, lives on a high plane and with a wide span of happiness. He has within him what is necessary to take delight in life.

In one of the detective novels written by Agatha Christie, Hercule Poirot is asked by a teen-age girl whether there is such a place as the "brave new world" hailed by Miranda in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. "There is always a brave new world," he replies, "but only for very special people. The lucky ones. The ones who carry the making of that world within themselves."