



THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA

MONTHLY LETTER

Vol. 58, No. 11
(First published: May 1952)

HEAD OFFICE, MONTREAL, NOVEMBER 1977

The Beauties of Learning

LEARNING never ends. Continuing education is one of the most important needs of our day, with the most far-reaching consequences.

Life is not simple. The number of things that we modern people would have to know in order really to understand what goes on around us has increased more rapidly than the number of things we do know. How can we take our bearings? What are the landmarks which will enable us to find our place in our own time and with reference to other times?

So long as we were slaves to nature, we could allow ourselves a workhorse mentality, and leave to nature decisions which now must be ours.

The significance of continuing education is that it rescues men and women from slave-like insignificance, from the sense of being powerless and alone.

Too many, alas! rely wholly upon science, the marvel of this age. Science cannot, by itself, solve our major human problems. It can not impose upon people the co-operative, give-and-take relations we should like to see between individuals and between nations. What we need, in continuing education, is ennoblement of individuals through philosophy, the arts, religion — what we refer to usually as the “humanities”.

This brings adults into the education picture. It is adults, not children, who set the tone of a community. Adult-hood is the significant period toward which life leads. It is a stage of life which has a meaning and an importance that no other stage can possess.

It is not enough to have learned to read, write and figure. Canada has so few illiterates that they are not worth counting at census-time. Skills do not give wisdom, though they and science, technology and business management do prepare the way toward wisdom.

There is no easy formula by which we can suddenly grow mature in matters of the intellect and the spirit. Every year that is given to the effort after graduation is well worthwhile in the return it gives us in happiness, satisfaction and achievement.

Continuing education

The title “adult education” doesn’t at all describe what is meant by “continuing education”. There is something attached to “adult education” which conveys to the popular mind a catching up with arrears, a making good after forty, or some such notion.

The truth is that the person who quits learning upon leaving university or school is giving in to an idea of limited usefulness, limited satisfaction and limited happiness. He is contributing to his own bewilderment and feeling of insecurity in a fast-moving world.

All sorts of definitions have been devised for “continuing education”. They range through preparation for service to the State, promotion of virtue, gaining dominance over things, obtaining satisfaction of wants, and developing social efficiency.

These things may be incidental, but isn’t the real purpose of continuing education self-realization? This requires good human relations, economic efficiency and civic responsibility.

It has to do with the conditions of life, and the art of living in such a way as to obtain the greatest return. It takes note of personal abilities, aptitudes and desires. It serves needs which are inexhaustible.

What does a sincere attempt to widen our education entail? It is not enough to seek skills in this or that, or to become expert in something or other. Continuing education leads us to know something of the other person’s job, so as to appreciate the part he is playing in life; it provides us with reasonably founded opinions instead of unclarified passions and sentiment.

Our continuing education qualifies us to bring relevant background to bear upon a current problem, to gather information that will be pertinent to the question in hand, to grasp relationships between this state of affairs and another, between this person’s action and his social environment; and — this is the aim and object of it all — to make judgments in the light of our clearly defined values and the information we have.

A feeling of significance

Continuing education will, as a matter of course, give us a feeling of significance, a sense of creativeness, and a knowledge of our purpose as citizens in a political society. It demands our fullest possible intellectual development, and that means awareness of our personal responsibility in the life of the world and in our fellowship with the whole of mankind.

There are obstacles in our way: otherwise the effort would not be worthwhile. We may find it difficult to establish the right habits of attention; we may be tempted to procrastinate; we may be held back by lack of knowledge about where to begin; we may be ridiculed as being old dogs trying to learn new tricks.

These need not deter us. We are not taking up a course of study to keep our minds busy. What we seek is not to escape boredom but to do notable things. We want to progress beyond the education that was given us at school; beyond half-baked adulthood; into the creative surprises of an adulthood that is truly maturing.

There are no external compulsions upon us, but plenty of inner voices telling us not to quit learning. We are moved by curiosity, the desire for new experience, the wish to get along with people, and the need to be ready with wise judgments about social, economic and political issues.

Progress poses problems

Seen from the point of view of no farther back than fifty years ago, the point we have reached in ease of living today is astonishing. But we should not be confused by the advance in material prosperity and material knowledge. The high tide of advance made by science, with its increase in creature comfort, raises a very real danger that the more spiritual, the only lasting qualities, may be submerged.

Living and moving as we do in a world of gadgets, we need to remember that truth, loyalty, courage, and faith are the realities that set men apart as creatures that live in the fullest sense, and these come only to people who seek them.

As science broadens our knowledge of the material world, we can keep our significance by continually developing our peculiar talents and gifts as men and women.

This age will be remembered more by the sort of people we were, rather than by the things we did. It is by our attainments that new things are wrought. This thought reminds us of the exclamation by Miranda in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: "O, brave new world, that has such people in't."

Using the gadgets provided by our advanced technology, even without knowing how they work, should give us time to learn the how and the why of human

behaviour. This may be said to be the backbone of continuing education.

Adult education

No farther back than a hundred years ago, education was regarded as a dangerous explosive to be kept under guard. When the battle for popular elementary education was won, there still lingered prejudice against continuing education. In fact, the Canadian Association for Adult Education is only a little over forty years old. It was in June, 1935, that a constitution was drawn up and a council elected. A year later Dr. E. A. Corbett began to devote his full time to the affairs of the association as Director.

By 1946 the association was ready to state its goal, and a committee under chairmanship of Professor H. R. C. Avison, of Macdonald College, drew up an explicit statement. Ordinary men and women, said the committee, have within themselves and their communities the spiritual and intellectual resources adequate to the solution of their problems. Adult education should awaken people to the possibilities and dangers of modern life; it should deal with the actual and living concerns of actual and living people.

There are, of course, stages in this continuing education: youths leaving school may study the same subjects as their aging grandparents, but not from the same point of view. The disastrous thought for anyone to have is that his present store of knowledge, at whatever age, is sufficient.

It would be a mistake to idealize immaturity, to look upon childhood as the most happy time and youth as the radiant age. In reality, maturity is the golden fleece we seek. The child lives in the minute, the youth in the day, the instinctive man in the year, but those who attain a measure of maturity see themselves in relation to an epoch or even eternity.

About maturity

We need to mature our mentality so that it catches up with our techniques, instead of getting along with a way of thinking and feeling that were appropriate in a technically simpler age. Only thus can we hope to pass through the middle years of our lives without the sense of frustration and failure that is all too common among middle-aged people.

It is not in terms of years that maturity is to be measured, nor yet in terms of knowledge. To be mature is to use knowledge wisely.

Mature persons have learned and are learning; they have experienced and are daily taking note of their experiences; they have achieved the ability to weld these two, knowledge and experience, in their own minds and to produce judgments and plans.

This is a far cry from the artificial life pictured by some utopians. Theirs is a realm into which they escape, a sort of childish world where things are provided with

ease, if not free, and where some benevolent power looks after every want.

To be a mature person means accepting responsibility for one's own part in the world. It is true that much of what we are came down to us from our forefathers, set in motion or completed long before we were born, but there is left to all of us a margin for initiative.

In some way, big or little, we can contribute to the world's progress. H. A. Overstreet says in his helpful book *The Mature Mind* that the sum of our mature acts, in each of us and in all of us, may make the difference between a world headed for destruction and a world headed for creative fulfilment.

Even in our later years we can continue our exploration of our potentialities, and develop our place as constructive members of society. The person who has kept the fire of learning alive will experience a full and wholesome old age, still nourishing his mind and seeing it grow year by year.

Seeking culture

It is only natural that much of the learning of early years should be devoted to making a go of practical life. Parents sacrifice their selfish interests to provide their children with the best education in preparation for making a living. But there is also, even in elementary school education, a sort of knowledge that does not contribute to making a living but to better living. This is the door through which we enter upon a kingdom of beauty, literature, art, and culture.

To go on learning past the school-day period is to continue developing taste and enjoyment. We train our eyes and our ears and our judgment, so that we awaken the spirit of fine perception of beauty, of generous admiration for what is noble and true.

There are many definitions of culture, but the sort of culture we have in mind includes three attributes.

It trains workers to have better understanding of the ins-and-outs of their jobs, so that they know how they fit in with the laws of production and consumption. It helps workers to develop their true selves through intellectual or manual activity.

Culture qualifies everyone to assume responsibilities as a person and as a citizen, not only in the workshop, trade union and family, but also in the community and in the world community. It makes freedom more real by increasing its scope.

Culture enables people to develop, to the utmost of their desire and ability, fullness of living physically, morally, intellectually and artistically. It helps them to weed out the non-essentials, to cleave to the significant in knowledge, and to think clearly. It enables them to become all that they are created capable of being.

We seek principles

We seek, in our continuing education, principles. They are hardy, convertible and profitable. Principles do not change from year to year under the vicissitudes of life; they can be applied to different situations, and add their measure of judgment to our thinking; and they give satisfaction because we feel that, having added a principle to our stock we have gained something of great value.

Good books broaden our horizon, fill our minds, enable us to continue growing in knowledge and wisdom. They may not teach us to make atomic bombs or more money, but they will help us to understand the problems of war and economics. They will show us the puzzling questions associated with good and evil, love and hate, happiness and misery, life and death — these have not changed very much over the ages. What the writers of good books said centuries ago may be the very thing to help us find serenity today.

The voices that speak to us across the birth and death and rebirth of nations touch every emotion of our generation. They provide us with a sense of proportion, a standard of values, and a profound respect for the truth.

Some advantages

Out of continued learning there come advantages not to be otherwise gained. One that will commend itself to many is the ability of self-expression. Another is skill in doing things in a creative way. These — self-expression and making — are ways in which we can in some measure discharge the obligation we feel as debtors to life.

Of greatest importance, perhaps, is the ability that continued learning gives us to think straight. We are apt to drift into a way of thinking with our hopes and our fears and our ignorance.

Straight thinking is based upon knowledge. How can a man think if he doesn't know? Dr. W. E. McNeill told at the Autumn Convocation at Queen's University how Charles Darwin gathered biological facts for twenty years without seeing any binding relationship. Then, said Dr. McNeill, while Darwin was walking through an English country lane the idea of evolution came to him suddenly. That's what thinking is — the flashing emergence of an idea after facts have been mulled over a long time.

Intellectual curiosity can be satisfied only by continued learning. When we learn progressively how to detect fallacy, how to rise above superstition, how to discern what is relevant, how to discriminate values, and how to brush aside cant and propaganda, then we are taking long steps in continued learning.

We become more skilful, too, in solving problems, or in discriminating between problems we can solve and those that must be left to some other power.

Many of the vexing questions of today grow out of world situations. We need to judge their significance, decide how far we shall allow them to penetrate our spirits, and accommodate ourselves accordingly. Life becomes inexhaustibly interesting, instead of just perversely frustrating, when we continue to learn about it.

Democracy is conditioned by the learning we do. Democracy depends for its life upon the fact that every man will make all the judgments he can as wisely as he can. Democracy's only authority is reason, and its great attraction for thinking people is the opportunity it gives for making choices.

To make choices wisely we need abundant growth of learning, participation in community, school, church and social affairs, an attitude of free inquiry, and the love of beauty, peace and kindness. Upon this base, continued learning will enable us to adapt ourselves intelligently and purposefully to social change.

A philosophy

Out of continued learning there is bound to grow a better philosophy than we should be able to base upon immature thought. We need philosophy, if for no better reason than that things are happening politically, economically and socially which we must take into account. No mere star-dust hope will serve.

It may appear strange to talk of philosophy when every day is so crowded with doing and with talking that there seems to be no room for contemplation. But adult people who seek to be mature must make time to search their hearts and minds if they are to find any meaning in their lives. The alternative is to drift aimlessly, buffeted by every shifting wind.

What is meant by philosophy involves many things, such as seeing beyond our immediate tasks and gaining a sense of life as a whole; making ourselves richer in thought and feeling and beauty by drawing on our cultural heritage; taking up as our own the good things from our rich tradition.

As Hayward Keniston said in an article he called *The Humanities in a Scientific World*, it is only in the realms of philosophy, art and religion that we may hope to find salvation for the human spirit. Man must have faith of some sort if he is to live as happily and as nobly as he might.

Possible for all

The sort of continued learning written about in this *Monthly Letter* is possible for everyone in Canada. No matter how little school education one may have, or at what age this continued learning is taken up, the joys and advantages of further learning are available.

As long ago as 1928 a book was published, called *Adult Learning*, in which there was knocked down once

and for all the old idea that childhood is the time for learning and adult-hood the time of having learned. Since then it has been said by eminent psychologists and educators that it is a threat to our whole society to have people stop learning and sit back in complacent unchangeability in a world that is constantly changing.

Continued learning is essentially self-teaching. There is no compulsion except the compulsion of one's own spirit and the desire to participate usefully in society.

Many persons who cannot study in solitude will find it easier to join in study groups where members raise questions, define them, explain their elements, and try to solve or at least to understand them. Some will find a varied programme desirable, ranging through poetry, history, economics, psychology, philosophy and all the other branches of knowledge.

One group read *The Teachings of Epictetus*, a chapter a week, followed by discussion and an attempt to apply what was learned from the Stoic philosopher's ideas to today's world. Another group selects a topic a week, such as "sympathy" or "honesty", and brings to bear upon it all that members can contribute to clarify it and show its place in everyday life.

When larger groups are desirable, we think of the lighted school. There is no reason, it is often said, why schools should be unused in the evenings if there are adults eager to learn. Public libraries in some centres are used by discussion circles. Churches, too, are using their halls for this continued learning by adults.

Don't procrastinate

To continue learning is important enough to demand top place when we are planning how we shall use our time. We are in danger of putting off until some tomorrow the very thing that will make tomorrow worth living.

We are so much on the go, with this and that demanding attention, that we fail utterly to gain the serenity that should be ours, the serenity that comes of feeling significant because of some grace or quality or knowledge we have acquired.

We are not self-sufficient. Our physical survival depends upon constant access to material resources outside our bodies. In like manner, our growth into spiritual individuality depends upon our keeping ourselves linked in one way or another with our spiritual sources.

We must not throw up our hands in the face of events or of pressure, and await with stoicism some impending cataclysm to which our civilization may at times appear to be rushing. No one need feel powerless, if we will take the trouble to continue learning about mankind and broadening our vision. In fact, if we learn soon enough, adversity may not fall upon us, and the future of mankind may be happier than any part of our past.