

The Betty Letters

My Dear Grandchild,

I wonder whether or not you try to reason with your young children when they make demands of you, demands that you cannot accept for one reason or another: Do you just say, 'No'; or, do you explain to the children the reason for your negative response? For most parents, I suppose they just tell their children that the demands cannot be met and that is that. It is a pity, really, that that is the way that so many of us, flippantly and without too much consideration of the child's drives, desires and sensitivities, make determinations in our best interests and, by so doing, disregard the interests and, perhaps, the aspirations of the child. Of course, I realise that a child, more often than not, is driven by unbridled passions in its early formative years, but, nevertheless, a child is very capable of being logical, given the opportunity at the appropriate time and venue. I was trying to talk to Bo-Bo, just the other day, about the state of some of his shabby clothes and, before I could finish my sentence, he was vociferously complaining about me, wanting to dump more of his favourite shirts and jackets. I, then, told him to sit down and to listen to me, just for a short time. (Men, rarely, are logical, but I thought that I would try to be quietly logical with Bo-Bo, on this occasion, as to the reason that I had made – not complained, mind you – some observations about the state of some of his clothes). I started off by explaining to him that there is a beginning and an end to everything. At this point, I had his undivided attention because he quickly jumped to the wrong conclusion about the words, 'beginning' and 'end' – stupid old frog! I, then, explained that I only wanted to make him feel good about himself and, by my taking an interest in the state of his clothes, I was, in fact, demonstrating, openly, my devoted interest in him as my lifelong partner – and adoring, and only, lover! I detected, at this point, that I had him, eating out of the palm of my hand, so to speak. He looked at me with that studied expression that I recalled only when he asked me to marry him those 'few' years ago. Then, he said: 'You are right. I am sorry! Forgive me, please?' Then, he gave me a little nibble on my cheek and, then ... it was back to the television set to watch some football match. But I had won the day! The point that I am making, My Dear Grandchild, is that words are powerful things. Because they are powerful, the person who is able to use them, persuasively, must be careful and he or she must realise that, with power comes grave responsibility.

Throughout the past 5,000 years or so when man learned to communicate, effectively, words have played a vital role in shaping the direction of humankind. When Thales of Miletus (625-c. 546 B.C.) made the observation that all things is water, it shocked the then civilised world. 'Water is best', as I recall was the gist of his philosophy. Thales, commonly regarded as the father of Western philosophy, came to this conclusion by the pure depth of his mental faculties. He was a mental giant. He was, even, able to predict the exact time for an eclipse of the sun on May 28, 585 B.C. And that was long before the founding of the first institution of higher learning. Prior to Thales, it was a commonly held belief that the universe was mythological. It was his concentration on the basic physical substance of the world that marked the birth of scientific thought. When Socrates (470 – 399 B.C.) employed solipsism as a method of arriving at truth, it was a most remarkable achievement of modern man. Then, there is, of course, Pericles (c. 495-429 B.C.), the Athenian statesman whose importance in the history of Athens is so great that the period of his rule is often referred to as The Age of Pericles. It could be held that Universal Suffrage had its roots in the thinking of this great politician and philosopher. In Athenian politics, Pericles sought to enable all citizens to participate in government. Payment of citizens for their services to the State was introduced, and members of the ruling council were chosen by lot from the entire body of Athenians. Does this ring home true? What about the following statement, credited to this great man:

'Our love of what is beautiful does not lead us into extravagance. Our love of the workings of the mind does not make us weak.'

And this was penned more than 2,500 years ago!

The words of great leaders of yesteryear resound, today, as they did when they were first uttered. When Giuseppe Verdi, (1813-1901), Italian operatic composer, whose works stand among the greatest in the history of opera, introduced his opera, Nabucco, in 1842, the now famous chorus, 'Va! Pensiero' was taken as a metaphor for Italy to cast off the yoke of oppression and to seek independence from foreign powers and to unify the country for ever. So powerful were the words and melody of this chorus that even to this day, when Nabucco is performed, at the end of 'Va! Pensiero', people stand to applause in appreciation of this great piece of work.

In more modern days, who could forget the immortal words of that British statesman, Sir Winston Churchill, who said, among other things, on May 13, 1940:

'We have before us, an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us, many, many long months of struggle and of suffering. You ask: What is our policy? I will say: It is to wage war; by sea; land and air; with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us: To wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask: What is our aim? I can answer in one word: Victory – Victory at all costs; Victory in spite of all terror; Victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without Victory, there is no survival. Let that be realized; no survival for the British Empire; no survival for all that the British Empire has stood for, no survival for the urge and impulse of the ages, that mankind will move forward towards its goal. But I take up my task with buoyancy and hope. I feel sure that our cause will not be suffered to fail among men. At this time, I feel entitled to claim the aid of all, and I say: "Come, then, let us go forward together with our united strength".'

And then, on June 18, 1940, Sir Winston penned one of his most remarkable speeches of all times:

'We do not yet know what will happen in France or whether the French resistance will be prolonged, both in France and in the French Empire overseas. The French Government will be throwing away great opportunities and casting adrift their future if they do not continue the war in accordance with their Treaty obligations, from which we have not felt able to release them. The House will have read the historic declaration in which, at the desire of many Frenchmen – and of our own hearts – we have proclaimed our willingness, at the darkest hour in French history, to conclude a union of common citizenship in this struggle. However matters may go in France or with the French Government, or other French Governments, we, in this island and in the British Empire, will never lose our sense of comradeship with the French people. If we are, now, called upon to endure what they have been suffering, we shall emulate their courage, and if final victory rewards our toils, they shall share the gains. Aye! And freedom shall be restored to all. We abate nothing of our just demands: Not one jot or tittle do we recede. Czechs, Poles, Norwegians, Dutch, Belgians have joined their causes to our own. All these shall be restored.

'What General Weygand called the Battle of France is over. I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin. Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization. Upon it depends our own British life and the long continuity of our institutions and our Empire. The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be turned on us. Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. But, if we fail, then, the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age, made more sinister, and, perhaps, more protracted by the lights of perverted science.

'Let us, therefore, brace ourselves to our duties and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say: "This was their finest hour".'

Had not Sir Winston uttered those immortal words, I shudder to think what could have been the consequences. He, single-handedly, by his sheer rhetoric, rallied Great Britain and all its peoples to stand up to a foe which appeared, in 1940, to be almost invincible.

Words, My Dear Grandchild, the very foundations of our civilisation, which, when put to good use, can alter

the direction of the world for the all times – as history has proved. Use them sparingly and carefully and be not a spendthrift for the sake of sophistry. The real power in this world, the power to shape it for all times, lies in the persuasiveness of words. Force cannot match its power. Men will rise to doff the chains of oppression; their strength will come from the power of the pen, not from the power of the most lethal destructive device, created by man for man's mass slaughter.

I wrote this little poem which I think sums up some of my thoughts. What do you think?

Learning to Live

*Too fast does the future fade;
Too fast comes the evening breeze;
Too quickly does the sun descend;
Too short is man's love of a friend;
Too fast does our youth fly;
Too fast forgot, a mother's kiss;
Caring: Too oft so fleeting.
Ah! Lovers' lips: Too short a-meeting.*

*Too fast do the days fly by;
Too fast comes the grey of hair;
Too quickly cools the sun's rays;
Too short are man's creative days;
Too fast do coloured birds fly;
Too fast comes the winter's snow;
Loving: It is life's only true rhyme.
Ah! Lovers' arms: Always entwine.*

*Too fast are the lines of life writ;
Too fast springs life anew;
Too much new technology runs ahead;
Too little knowledge of humanity, breeding bred;
Too quickly do the drums of life roll on;
Too quickly do we judge another;
Learning to love: It must be the only right.
Ah! Lovers unite: Be one, during the day and the night.*

*Shall man ever hear the chimes
Of the bells that rang out at his birth?
Shall man ever learn to live as one,
As do bees, when foraging to feed their unborn young?
Shall killing stop and love pervade, forever,
As Nature intended at life's dawn?
Shall man admit: I have been wrong; and, still do wrong?
And shall he state at the end of day: Let love and loving be my Armageddon.*

*Enough of words! I ramble too long. Here comes my fat frog of a husband, looking for something to eat.
Talk to you next week.*

Chief Lady

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