On keeping a wide horizon

by Bertrand Russell

⟨*"On Keeping a Wide Horizon" is a fine example of Russell's fundamental normative ethic popularly expressed. Two related concepts, central to that ethic, can be seen at work. One is the thrust away from self-centredness; the other is the expansion of the scope of one's interests. This summary of what might be called Russell's "impersonal ethic" of generosity in thought and feeling has been previously published as "A Philosophy for You in These Times", in* The Reader's Digest, *39 (Oct. 1941), 5-7. Its publication in that form, however, was radically different from the text Russell submitted. In fact, there are three texts: Russell's original typescript, the much altered version prepared by the* Reader's Digest *editorial staff, and the published version (which is very different again). Mr. Kevin Holland, a good friend of the Russells, kindly sought out the typescript in the* Digest's *files. The original version is here published with the* Digest's *permission. In reconstructing Russell's original typescript from the available papers, I have made no alterations except for those in editorial brackets and the correction of the faulty numbering of Russell's suggestions of ways in which individuals can help create a better world–all of which were omitted by the* Reader's Digest. *– K.B.*⟩

IN TIMES SUCH as that in which we are living, it is difficult to avoid becoming discouraged and hopeless. The world is full of things that are almost unbearably painful—wars, persecuted populations, and vast organized cruelties. The level of moderate happiness and well-being that had been achieved is lost in a welter of destruction. Throughout a great part of the earth's surface, humane and rational ways of thinking are being stamped out to serve the purposes of brutal tyrants. The hopes for mankind that were universal when I was young have come to seem illusory; instead of progress, there has been a revival of ancient savagery. And the only way to combat this growth of evil, it seems, is war, prolonged and terrible, and im-

measurably destructive even if it ends in victory. Appalling doubts raise their heads: is cruelty the very essence of life? Is violence and strife so deeply ingrained in human nature that nothing better can long endure? Is all hope for human happiness and improvement mere self-deception? I do not think so, but I do not think the answer is easy.

Some people are able to avoid despair by living a purely personal life, deriving their happiness entirely from private affections and instincts. They live to keep themselves and their children alive and comfortable, and to enable their children, in their turn, to rear further descendants. But it is not possible to isolate ourselves sufficiently to make even our personal happiness secure; parents are willing to run the risk of their children being killed in the war, and whoever supports the war is committed to the view that there are things of more value than keeping alive, for the sake of which we must be prepared to sacrifice ourselves and our children if necessary. And in any case, mere living, by itself, is not an adequate purpose for any reflective person. What is the use of caring for children if the world is to be such that existence is intolerable for them? If I had no hopes for the world, I could not be satisfied to shut myself up in a little private circle. Sooner or later, the evils without would come crashing in, and in the meantime I could not wish for the insensitiveness that would make a momentary selfish contentment possible in the midst of ruin and destruction. It would seem ignoble to achieve happiness by forgetting, even if it were possible when so much of what has made the very texture of daily existence is being destroyed. If there is to be any way out of despair, it must be by remembering more things, not fewer, by enlarging our horizon, not by narrowing it, by being more aware of what is good, not by shutting our eyes to what is bad.

If one is to keep sane and balanced in times of disaster, it is necessary to remember constantly what is good in the world as well as what is bad. Side by side with the evils in the world, there are other things, so different that it is difficult to imagine them parts of the same universe. In the non-human world, there are the stars and the sea and the wind in trees, summer rain and the song of birds in spring. It is necessary to remember that the human race, with all its tumults, is only a part, and a small part, of the vast universe. To me it is very consoling to sit and look at a mountain range, which took thousands of ages in the building, and to go home reflecting that it is not after all so bad that the human race has achieved so little in the paltry six thousand years or so of civilisation. We are only at the

beginning. In the busyness of everyday life, each minute is important to us, each year is so crowded with events, that our imagination almost ceases with our own lifetime. We ought to say to ourselves daily that the largest star measures six hundred million miles across, that the light from the great nebula in Andromeda takes nine hundred thousand years to reach us, and that beyond that, the most distant object visible to the naked eye, as far again and farther, there are other suns and other moons, other worlds, and perhaps other living creatures, superior to us. Everyone agrees that we should not be self-centred, relating everything that happens to ourselves, making ourselves the centre of the universe. But it is also, to a lesser degree, a defect of imagination to make mankind the centre of the universe, or to attempt to measure eternity with a clock. We should not always think in terms of years,

"Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time".

Even in the human world, there is not only cruelty and suffering. There is poetry and music, rising triumphant over pain, not ignoring it, but transmuting it, showing us how splendid man can be at his best, and inspiring us to live up to what is noble in humanity, turning away from what is petty and mean. There is impersonal intellect, which has discovered what we know of the ways of nature, and has enabled us to contemplate the slow procession of time, in which the eddies of the present seem of small account. There is heroism in the service of mankind, and there is endurance and courage in many millions of human beings. I am thinking not only of courage in war, but also of the doctors and nurses who expose themselves to infection in dangerous epidemics, of scientists who sacrifice their health in dangerous experiments to save others suffering, of firemen and lifeboat crews, of gallant rescues, of facing unpopularity for a cause, and innumerable other forms of bravery. The human race is a strange mixture of the divine and the diabolic, both equally real, making both good and evil inevitable. Complete despair is no more rational than blind optimism. There have been, in history, good periods and bad periods, but neither have been lasting. It is our misfortune to live in a bad period, but it will end, and it will end the sooner for our keeping hope alive. When the barbarians overran the Roman Empire, the world seemed at least as hopeless; but the dark ages that followed did not last for ever.

I cannot tell what methods other people will find most effective for keeping hope alive. For my part, I find courage in things remote from human passions, such as the waves on a rocky coast, or the silence of

mountains; also in those human things that approach them most nearly—the music of Bach and the poetry of Milton, for example. Coming a little nearer to what is difficult to bear in the present, I find assuagement in the contemplation of long periods of history, and the emergence of long buried human achievements after centuries of darkness. By such means, when they succeed, the sharpness of present pain is changed into the larger emotion of tragedy, which is more bearable because the evil become⟨s⟩ part of a long process, not all of which is futile. For example, if your child dies of meningitis or your wife of cancer, it helps you to bear your grief to think of the long and patient struggle carried on by man against disease, a struggle in which every year is marked by victories.

All this may seem too remote and impersonal to be of use in the life of every day, but I have not found it so. There are different ways in which one may attempt to meet the large impersonal evils. One may try to become completely frivolous, or so busy with some business as to have no time to think or feel. But I cannot believe that it is right to forget, and even if it were, forgetfulness can never be complete. Memory will come suddenly, with a sharp stab, perhaps in the middle of the night, perhaps at a busy moment in the work that was intended to be a opiate; and this sudden memory is all the more painful for the previous effort to keep it at bay. The only adequate way of enduring large evils is to find large consolations, which must be as important as what they have to counteract. And the consolations must not end in emotion; they must lead to work that is somehow connected, however indirectly, with the creation of a better world.

What is needed is something in the nature of religion, not in any dogmatic sense, but as a source of serious and determined effort towards something better than the present. Fanaticism, fascist and communist, has generated immense dynamic forces tending in directions that we think evil; we cannot combat these forces without something equally dynamic and at least as resolute—something more than the defence of the status quo. There must be the hope of a world with less cruelty and injustice and suffering than men have inflicted and endured hitherto, and a firm will to do whatever is possible towards bringing it into existence.

It is necessary to combine consciousness of the good that is possible with the belief that each individual can contribute in some degree to its existence. You may say: "I quite believe that the good things I desire are possible, for I know that they have existed: but what can *I* do to bring them about?" It seems conceited to suppose that one

individual can do anything towards so vast a result. But this is a fallacy. A good society is produced by good individuals, just as truly as a majority in a presidential election is produced by the votes of single electors. Everybody can do something towards creating in his own environment kindly feelings rather than misery. The sum of such actions makes the difference between a good and a bad world. If you are an eminent statesman, your environment is large; if you are obscure, it is small. In the one case you can do much; in the other, little; but you can always do *something*.

The contemplation of large events is apt to produce a paralysis of the will, from the feeling of the minuteness of the individual and the vastness of the community. People do not feel this where there is organization: a soldier in an army, or a member of a political party, feels that he is doing his bit, and is justified in feeling this. The matter is more difficult when there is no organization, or when we do not know the other people who feel as we do. But even then it is still true. Every parent who brings up a child in such a way that he becomes rational and kindly is achieving part of what must be done to make a happy world. Everyone who resists the temptations to intolerance which beset us all is helping to create a community in which differing groups can live side by side in mutual amity. One man can do little against a vast evil, but vast evils arise from adding together many little evils, and vast goods arise in the same way. You may say: "What can one man do against a world?" But if you were wicked you could do equally little for evil. Good and evil alike, however vast, spring from the efforts of individuals—not only of eminent individuals, but of the ordinary men and women of whom communities are composed.

Indeed, as private individuals we have it in our power now to do, each of us, the one thing that the world most needs: to obey the text "Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil". The evils that we have to contend with are great mass movements in which millions of people sacrifice their conscience and their intellect and agree to believe what they are told. Never before in the history of the world has the independent thought and conscience of every human being been so necessary and important. The democratic nations have been obliged to unite against a united enemy, but the fight will be useless if we do not also carry on the struggle against nationalism and intolerance in our own lives. It is after all in private life that we can do most.

We can set our faces against intolerance, prejudice, falsehood, and cruelty. We can try to combine with the loving kindness of Christianity the respect for fact and evidence that science has taught us. It is

not enough to go about overflowing with vague benevolence. The world is full of kindly feeling, but a great deal of it is ineffective for lack of other and more difficult virtues.

Here are a few suggested ways in which individuals, whoever and wherever they are, can help towards the creation of a better world:

1. Never acquiesce in what you believe to be wrong: protest against it, even though your protest may seem useless. Failure to protest in time has put whole nations of well-meaning people in the power of a few wicked men. For example, if you are at a party where someone begins to disparage the Jews, or any other race, do not let them get away with it. Remember that it is from such small beginnings that terrible persecutions grow.

2. If you share such a prejudice, struggle against it. It is very easy to become infected by racial prejudice. Hitler has already won a victory in making us all more or less race-conscious. If we meet someone whom we dislike who happens to belong to another nation or race, it is very hard to prevent ourselves saying, or thinking, that he is unpleasant *because* Jewish or Irish or German, or whatever he is; but if we dislike someone of our own kind we think he is unpleasant *although* he is English or American, which is obviously unfair. We never condemn the whole of our own group, even though there may be hundreds that we dislike: but we are only too apt to say airily "Oh I don't care for Czechs (or Poles or Jews)", if we are treated badly by only one of them. If you have such a prejudice that you are unable to conquer, at least keep it to yourself. Remember that other people less responsible than yourself may think dislike a reason for persecution.

3. Do not be credulous. It is difficult to avoid believing anything that we hear often enough. The totalitarian countries have introduced advertising methods into politics, where their evil effects are obvious. But in small as well as great affairs we should remember to ask for proofs and arguments before believing anything at all.

4. Don't be lazy and shirk your responsibilities as a citizen. If there is some evil that you know of in your immediate surroundings, such as a corrupt administration in your city, don't think it is a great pity but not your affair. Go round worrying your friends about it until they are willing to join you in a movement against it.

5. Don't be afraid of making a fuss. There is a foolish idea that it is "in bad taste" to call attention to the existence of something unpleasant, or to express open disagreement with some⟨one⟩ else's opinions. If by saying what you think you provoke a scene, that will be regrettable, but not nearly so regrettable as allowing error or falsehood to pass unchallenged. Moreover, people who make a habit of speaking out, if they are otherwise kind and jolly, often come to occupy a position of special affection and respect.

6. It is easier to get away with speaking your mind if you can believe that people you disagree with are not wicked but mistaken. At the same time you should do everything you can to convince them of their mistake. (This is perhaps the most difficult rule of all, and one of the most important).

7. Don't be too easily satisfied. Nothing human is perfect, and particularly when we have to defend our country we should guard against thinking it is faultless. Mere defence cannot prevail against those who think they have something new that is better than what already exists. Democracy, for example, is not like something that can be kept in a safe; it must be a living force, an aspiration as well as something partly possessed. The more ardently we strive to perfect freedom and justice at home, the more effectively we shall be able to resist tyranny and injustice abroad.

And so, to the man tempted by Despair, and to myself in moments when the world becomes unbearable, I say: Remember the serenity that is not trivial and not based on forgetfulness of evil; when you have filled your mind with the contemplation of what is great, remind yourself that the world is what we make it, and that to the making of it each one of us can contribute something. This thought makes hope possible, and in this hope, though life will still be painful, it will be no longer purposeless.