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Our Habits Make Us What We Are

A SIGNIFICANT side-effect of our "permissive society" is erosion of discipline that develops good habits and squelches bad ones.

John Dryden is credited with the profound statement that "We first make our habits and then they make us."

An extreme example tells of a truck driver who was en route to a certain address when he encountered a "One-Way" street against him. He circled the block and came from the other end. Only then did he realize he was on foot.

Scientists don't seem to be certain whether habits of being early risers or late sleepers are part of our nature or merely habits, but the traits seem to be firmly fixed just the same.

The practice of lateness is similar. Some people are prompt, a few rise early for appointments and a considerable number habitually are late. This has been diagnosed variously as a desire to "make an entrance," to attract attention, laziness, selfishness or a permanent case of "jet lag."

In any case, habitual lateness frequently results in waste of time for some or all parties concerned.

The ability to remember names, places, dates and facts is largely a result of the habit of paying close attention. What we may remember of the many things we hear, read or see depends upon our habits. It might be chit-chat about people, financial data, sports or politics. We retain what interests us.

Our habits also determine what we think about. Thomas A. Edison, the most inventive American, said: "My business is thinking." As a result he had a habit of producing useful, original and profitable ideas that improved human life and made him wealthy.

Courtesy is a habit but only for those who have learned it by observation or training. This excludes many of the younger generation and some older people. Those gentlemen who have a habit of holding doors for others, who help women get seated and who remember to say "Thank you!" do so in spite of "equal rights."

Friendliness is a good habit and those who have it always seem to have more friends than those who don't, regardless of other sterling qualities. People vote for politicians who act friendly, whether they may be competent or incompetent, honest or crooked.

Our intake of information is determined by our habits. We allocate time for reading books, magazines or newspapers, for conversation with family or friends, and for watching television, or other activities. The ratios of time used for each are important.

Habits often lead to addiction. This is especially true of alcoholic beverages, tobacco, drugs, gambling and over-eating.

Not all habits are good or bad. Take the case of a Minnesota farmer who had a habit of saving twine taken from baled hay. After nearly 30 years he had rolled it into a ball more than 12 feet high and weighing 10.5 tons. It probably didn't hurt anyone but all he had was a big ball of twine and a habit.