

REFLECTIONS ON A SAUSAGE MACHINE

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I recall when a little boy that I got off my bike on one of my forays into town to stop at the window of the butcher's shop. I watched thoroughly fascinated by what he was doing. The shop was shut. The day's work of selling had been done and he was getting ready for the next day. He was working away at his sausage machine. On one side of the table there was a pile of nondescript materials — since it was wartime, and who knew what went into sausages in wartime, indeed who knows what goes into sausages now? He was putting these into the machine, and, lo and behold, from the other side of the contraption out came these sleek looking productions, neatly encased in slim package, and ready for sale on the morrow. He had put in the odds and ends of meat and got out the saleable, spicy sausages which people would buy and would consume.

You put something in and you get something out. In the process something is going on which transforms one thing into another. X goes in and Y comes out. In between the machine functions to produce the transformation. Put in scraps and spices and get out sausages.

Mathematicians know about functions. You put a number in and you get a result out. An equation serves as a function. 'Square root' is a function. You put 4 in and you get 2 out. You put 100 in and you get 10 out. It can be very technical, but the principle is easy to grasp.

Any chance of us getting some enlightenment from all this? With a mathematical formula it's automatic what the result will be (if you understand the function). And people often think that way about what they do. You put something in and you're bound to get something out. It's inevitable, automatic! It's the sausage machine principle in real life. Then they find out that they are often wrong, and often make that discovery with dismay, becoming sadder and hopefully wiser.

What I mean is this. Take money for example. The idea is that if you put it in, you'll get what you want out. Put money in, get happiness out. We often think, don't we, when we can buy something the purchase will bring us happiness. It sometimes even leads to the idea that the more you have of it, that is money, the happier you will be. If only I could have had a more expensive holiday, or could have afforded a more expensive house, or bought a more expensive car, I would have been proportionately happier. If only I could have bought Mary or John a richer gift, it would have been so different. I should have been really appreciated. But we must sometimes say with emphasis: Not so! Not so!

Remember the story of the king who sent his servant to find a happy man, and to bring back to him the happy man's shirt. The servant travelled far and wide for many weeks and found no one happy, not even if they were rich. At last he came to a forest and saw a cheerful woodsman hard at work. He talked to him and decided he had found his man. But he had nothing to take back to the king, for the happy man was so poor he did not own a shirt.

Or take the attitude that if I put in work and more work, out will come success. Of course it is sometimes the case that if at first you don't succeed it is because you have not worked hard enough. So you have to try, try, try again. But sometimes we try for goals that are beyond our reach, or try for achievements which are unattainable when circumstances change. Then we can put the effort in and not get the success out. It is a hard lesson of life to learn that. But it is not made any easier by simply believing that if you put effort and work in you'll inevitably get success out. Often we must rest content with less than we would have liked to have achieved. Contentment is the key.

Take the attitude that if I put in love I can expect gratitude as the outcome. It is of course the case that it often happens that way. A parent loves a child all the days of its life, and the child becomes a grateful person. But it does not always happen. Someone said, 'Blessed is he that expecteth nothing, for he shall in no case be disappointed.' If you understand the point aright, it tells us something important. We must cast our efforts into the stream of life without expecting people's gratitude, and be happy if we are sometimes rewarded by it. Of course love can be misguided. Love can be misguided for example when not accompanied by understanding. Many a tragedy has been caused by love without understanding.

Here's a last example of the sausage machine principle. I am sure that you can think of others, and I hope that you will. In goes public activity, out comes gratifying favourable publicity. Doing something in the community, on the input end. Getting a good press, a good name, popularity at the output end. Then comes the temptation to do what we do for the sake of the praise we get. We find the publicity seeker on all levels, wherever there are channels of communication and wherever there are human activities. Thirst for publicity often motivates people, and it is a temptation to seek publicity and to welcome the ego-boost which favourable publicity brings. And publicists can make a song out of a note, and a volume out of a paragraph. It's a very sad situation when people will ask themselves before doing something constructive they would not otherwise do whether there is a chance that someone will notice it, and make a favourable comment on it.

But wait!

There's another side to this business about putting something in and getting something out. But it's very good to get a warning about the dangers. The opposite danger is to think that there's always a free dinner. If you hang around long enough or size up the right people, you'll get one. So the opposite warning needs sometimes to be sounded. Reminds me of a story.

A young boy was going with his father, who was a preacher, on a visit to a church in the country. When they arrived there was only one person to make up the congregation. In the foyer of the church there was a box and near it a notice asking for a contribution. So the preacher put some money in. When the service was over and they were saying good-bye to the single member of the congregation, she took the box, opened it, and handing over some of the cash she said, 'It's our custom here to give the visiting preacher half of what's in the box, to help with his expenses.' The preacher duly accepted the money.

When they were outside his young son chuckled and said to him. 'Well dad, if you'd put more in, you'd have got more out.'

No real need to bore you with making an application of this complementary principle. It's so obvious.