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Something About Ambition

MANY YOUNG PEOPLE leave school and university this year as potential trail blazers, eagerly in quest of a trail to blaze. How are they to decide what way to go?

Successful living depends upon the choice they make and the intensity of their determination to follow their star.

Those who have profited to the fullest extent of their educational opportunity will find important and rewarding employment. Business men are looking for young people with enough drive to take some burdens off their elders' shoulders. Research is adding new commercial products and opening up new markets. There is no lack of opportunity for those young people who have prepared themselves by education to move in, perhaps to specialize, and to climb with a company and a product.

Some will be content to be workers rather than leaders, but even if they have made up their minds not to be top dog they have decisions to make. If they are to serve others they should still have ambition — the ambition to serve the firm to which their service will be most useful. By advancing it and its interests they will expand their own lives.

Of this be sure: ambition is no simple willingness to receive. It is a positive, purposeful, creative aim, an urge for the energetic doing of something definite.

There's magic in having a goal, but if your ultimate objective has not yet risen into your consciousness, do not because of that neglect preparation. You need not fix upon one subject to study in the hope that some day it may turn out to be the right one. Spread yourself. One youth who was undecided about his proper field held a half dozen jobs while studying by correspondence. He reached the top in a field never contemplated at the beginning, and found that every one of his four home study courses had contributed to his success.

Choose your job so that, as you follow it industriously and learningly, it may develop into a career in which you can use your greatest talent. It takes reso-

lution of a high order to resist the temptation of inflated starting wages in jobs which lead to no worth-while goal.

What is ambition?

Success and fame are weak words to sum up ambition. Success in what? Fame for what? These are but the by-products of real things. True realization of your ambition will not reside in status symbols like carpeted office floors and a two-car garage, but inside you. When you know you have done what it was in you to do, it does not matter whether you are in a sparsely furnished attic or a luxurious penthouse. Nothing can rob you of the happiness of successful achievement in an important sphere of work.

On the surface there appear to be different levels of ambition. Is the urge to excel in science higher than the urge to make a joyful noise in a jazz band? One leads toward Einstein's theory of relativity and the other to a golden platter. You must paint your ambition picture to reflect your abilities. The virtue in ambition lies in striving to be, not merely to appear, the best.

To make such an ambition effective there are some things you need to know and do. Your personal inventory is a counting of resources and a dramatic rehearsal in imagination of the decisions and actions to be taken to augment them.

Here is a useful check list: (1) know what will be required of you in the career you have chosen; (2) know what success means; (3) know what defeat means; (4) tabulate your powers; (5) tabulate your weaknesses; (6) outline a course of starting and proceeding; (7) make yourself acquainted with the benefits attending various choices of how to go about it.

In pursuing an ambition, we cannot bulldoze our way, but must adapt ourselves intelligently to the conditions which surround us and turn them to our advantage.

This adaptation calls for foresight and appraisal, a pause once in a while to look things over. Pride in our skills and abilities may urge us to rush our fences, but we recall that even the greatest athletes in catching a baseball or kicking a goal use what we call "a moment of pause" to set themselves for the play. This is the moment known to photographers when even a slow film will catch what seems on the screen to be an action shot.

Not all that people call ambition is worth the effort. The itch to hear ourselves spoken of produces only fool's gold. There is no deep or lasting satisfaction in being acclaimed for something small or transitory. We should not be satisfied with wide notoriety when we might win real fame.

A healthy ambition is not greedy for conquest and luxury and show, but is the source of great actions arising from great minds. There was a philosopher once who drew a lesson from a humble example. He said that people who are over-eagerly ambitious are like a dog with a tin tied to his tail — the faster he runs the rattle of the tin urges him to still greater speed, but he is not going anywhere in particular.

How different was Charles Darwin's ambition! He resolved to make a contribution to his subject. Out of that determination came great advancement in biological science and the theory of evolution.

Opportunity

There is more argument about opportunity than about any other feature of ambition. We must not allow ourselves to become disheartened by those who moan about the lack of opportunity. There is always a new frontier for the person who has an open mind and a willing hand.

Here is the law of opportunity as formulated by Dean Johnson, author of *Business and the Man*, a volume in the Alexander Hamilton Institute Modern Business library: "Opportunity offers itself to men in proportion to their ability, their will for action, their power of vision, their experience, and their knowledge of business. Inversely, opportunity is concealed from men in proportion to their slothfulness, their reliance upon others, their passion for imitation, and their ignorance of business."

The moral is: once you know what your ambition is, get busy. Some people say to themselves that they can get something for nothing and that if they are smart enough they will get a great deal for nothing. Such a fallacy does not become true no matter how many people profess it. Mass madness remains madness still.

King Lear said it pithily in Shakespeare's play: "Nothing will come of nothing."

Anyone who values day-to-day present comfort more highly than the attainment of a purpose should

shy away from ambitious thoughts. The ongoing person knows that he will likely get some splinters in his hands while climbing the ladder of success. He is willing to pay that price.

Vital to the spirit of achievement is a purpose. Your most profound characteristic must be this: you are heartily in earnest. Force of purpose will generate the will to labour earnestly and perseveringly, and so enable you to become whatever you set your mind upon becoming. Enthusiasm creates zest: without it you are living only half a life.

Determination

Out of zest arises determination. The quality of an ambition exists not so much in its height as in its intensity. In other words, success begins with a fellow's will.

The place of determination in achievement is illustrated by an ancient Norse crest. It carried a pickaxe as an emblem, and the motto: "Either I will find a way or make one."

Being determined does not mean going through life with jutted jaw and tensed muscles. All that it means is giving form and drive to your dreams. We must, once in a while, escape into the land of dreams — if due precautions, chiefly with regard to the return journey, are taken. A day-dream can be a refreshing and inspiring thing. Just remember that you must come back to translate the dream castle into stone and mortar.

The habit of applying ourselves to the job of building becomes easy in time, when it is bolstered by purpose and expectation. We need a feeling of "mustness" about our immediate tasks, so that we settle down to do steadily what is in hand without allowing the intrusion of other things. Try tackling even little jobs in a spirit of mighty accomplishment.

Determination and concentration require energy to give them body. Mere resolutions engender a sort of sickness in the mind unless they are promptly embodied in act and deed. They are like maxims of conduct, of no value unless put into practice; or like music, silent unless performed; or like seeds, sterile unless planted and cultivated.

This principle of the necessity to work does not apply only to the humbler tasks in life, but to the professional and scholarly things too. The garlands and prizes go to those who decipher inscriptions, solve equations, put together a formula that slays disease germs.

Such triumphs do not come of pretentious bustling activity. You may be a dynamo of energy, but you need to learn what to drive with it and where to go.

There are no certificates or trophies for people who cover only part of the course. Jim Corbett, who was world heavyweight champion in 1892, said the most important thing a man must do to become a boxing champion is: "Fight one more round."

To see the difficulties in a task without shrinking from them or giving way to alarm is the way to succeed. A man cannot fulfil his ambitions if he allows himself to be discouraged by the first person who says "It can't be done". He needs an inner discipline to enable him to cling to the purpose he is convinced is desirable and possible, brushing aside all entangling superfluity and depressing obstruction.

Continue to learn

Above all, guard against the dangerous opinion that you know enough. Do not fixate upon a lowly job just because you cannot go on to higher formal education. Broaden your knowledge and understanding under your own steam.

If you have been lax in recent years, the time has come for you to get out the books again. The pursuit of knowledge is lifelong. After learning an answer, wisdom cocks its ear to listen for another question.

Youth is not altogether a matter of chronological age. The outstanding characteristic of youth is the temperamental predominance of courage over timidity, and this often exists in a man of fifty as much as in a boy of twenty.

The mature adult does not look upon learning as work but as a perpetual source of satisfaction. The more education he acquires, the better equipped he is to meet the important obligations of contributing toward the sound development of his children, through whom some of his cherished ambitions may be realized.

The studying that is done from books is not the only sort. We learn also from experience, if we are perceptive enough to profit by bumping our heads against life's corners.

To the ambitious person the daily job is a series of discoveries of his potentialities. He observes acutely, relating elements of earlier experiences to what is turning up today.

He will expand his yearning for excellence so that he pursues knowledge for its own sake. More than two thousand years ago the ancients symbolized learning by a torch passing from hand to hand down the generations, always on the move. That lighted torch was not a symbol of knowledge gained, but of imagination carrying the bearer into new continents of knowledge.

No spirited mind ever remains within itself. It is always reaching out, asking questions.

Out of these questions and answers will come principles, which are far more valuable than techniques to the ambitious man. Old customs and systems are dissolving around us like sand castles in the rising tide of new things, but we still need — indeed, we need more than ever — principles to guide us.

We need not be philosophers who deal in abstractions and propose utopias, but every man must be a searcher after the knowledge that enables him to

develop a sense of values by which to judge and test and use the gifts of material civilization, to like and to dislike what he ought.

Some of the knowledge upon which to build a way of life will come, not from our own experience but from the experiences of others.

A great many people are not satisfied unless they have gone over every foot of the road themselves, remembering every stone, every effort. Other men and women, some much wiser and many equally foolish, have sought the solutions to problems like ours yesterday and a thousand years ago. We burden ourselves needlessly if we fail to profit by what they learned.

When you have studied their lives, and related their experiences to yours, you have as it were assayed and stamped with the seal of your approval the knowledge they gained, so that it is no longer theirs, but yours.

Finally in this roster of ways to progress, you will be wise to protect your good name for the future against the disrepute of bad or inferior company today.

Take help and encouragement wherever you may get them, and give them whenever the opportunity offers itself. After turning first to yourself to find out what qualities you have for solving a problem, then go to a friend for help. Willingness to seek and accept advice is one of the characteristics of successful men. But be sure that the person in whom you confide has the qualities to throw new light on the question at issue.

As to the other side of the coin, seize every chance to coach a fellow student or to explain an operation to a fellow worker. Nothing makes a person learn more thoroughly than the discipline of teaching.

Some hindrances

Every man of ambition must expect to encounter reverses, but he will continue to look forward with a sense of expectancy. Difficulties show men what they are made of.

Errors may be used to reach truth. How? By elimination. One of his colleagues said to Edison after a disheartening run of experiments that failed: "It's too bad to do all of that work for nothing." "But it's not for nothing", said Edison. "We have got a lot of good results. Look: now we know 700 things that won't work."

The first rule for coping with frustrations is to expect your full share of them. They are incidental to daily living. They are like the sand-traps on a golf course, put there so that you may prove your skill.

Of course, things can get so bad that the situation seems actually ridiculous. On such occasions you need recuperative power, to roll with the punches, to pick up the pieces and start over again.

Faint-heartedness holds out small hope of accomplishment. The timid and hesitating are likely to find everything impossible, chiefly because it seems so to them, while the courageous and determined man

reminds us of General Titus Lartius in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*. He declared that he would lean upon one crutch and fight with the other rather than stay behind.

Not physical fear, but fear of failure, may undermine a man's drive toward his goal. He evades putting himself to the test. He doesn't take his fear out and examine it. He develops into a ritualist, doing everything in the way he has done it before without getting into trouble.

It would be foolish to be unaware of dangers when they exist, but it is seldom that a danger can be dealt with as adequately by fear as by rational action. Analyze the danger, calculate the chances, and then deal with the situation. Recall the orders given the little boats at the evacuation of Dunkirk — one of the most gallant naval operations ever carried out — "steer for the sound of the guns."

Getting started

Now that we have glimpsed some of the principles underlying the expression of ambition, we have reached the starting line. Whether you are in your first year in high school or your final year of formal education or your twentieth year in employment, now is the time to put your best foot forward.

Doing nothing at this moment has consequences just as surely as doing something has, but of an opposite and not so pleasing nature.

If you have resolved upon doing something toward reaching the height of your ambition, you have already taken a long stride toward it.

Perhaps you are a slow starter, but do not be downcast. Men mature physically and mentally at different rates of speed. With the passing of every year your ability to do things will increase, and new impetus will be given your progress.

You may seize upon small ways of demonstrating your talent. One of the shrewdest is to acquire specialized knowledge in your job which enables you to stand out among people in your office or workshop and thus attract the attention of superiors.

While you have one eye on your books, to learn from them everything that is worth-while, keep the other eye on things as they are developing outside the books. Don't be like the elevator operator who said: "I know more now than I get paid for. I don't want to learn."

The obligations of success

Increasing success brings increased power, and it is in the wise use of power that happiness is found.

You need to carry with you on the road toward your ambitious goal a spirit of great-mindedness. You will not seek success at the expense of others, but will, on the contrary, exercise your instinctive sense of obligation to your associates.

Great-mindedness takes note of debts which are debts of honour. There is the debt you owe for your

nurture when you were young, and for your education: your repayment consists in making the most of the opportunities these give you.

Through all your career you will remain modest. However soaring your ambition, you must not lose touch with earth. Many writers down the ages have referred back to the giant of ancient times, Antaeus, whose strength was increased every time he touched the ground.

Conceit is a foolish belief in one's power or ability. Like little brooks, which make more noise than mighty rivers, conceited people are loud boasters rather than prolific producers. An example of modesty was given us by Marcus Cato, the Roman consul. When asked why he had no statue he said: "I would much rather be asked why I have not one than why I have one."

As another argument against arrogance and conceit, consider the fact that they render their victims vulnerable. In the days of chivalry a wise knight entered a tilting tournament with a bare helmet, or at most a bunch of flowers which would not hold spears. Those who were vain enough to wear metal crests showing their high place in society were giving their opponents advantage, because spear points found a ready lodging in the embellishment.

This, then, is ambition

Being ambitious does not mean retiring from the normal things of life. Do not let your single-mindedness — which is an advantage insofar as attaining success is concerned — go so far as to deprive you of the colour, flavour, poetry, passion and the infinite variety of life. But keep your elbows free: don't get caught up in a crowd of unimportant occupations and passing interests.

This is not to say that your ambition is something that can live in a back room of your life, but only that it must not absorb all of life.

When the relationship between you and your ambition is a healthy and happy one, you will find these conditions: you learn with enthusiasm what you need to perform your role; you discipline your impulses to keep them from getting in the way of wise action; you do your job better than you would need to do it in order to satisfy your boss; your attitude toward work is not that it is an imposition but that it is something beneficial for which you have affection; you will be great-minded in the knowledge that you are paying your way; you will participate happily in the human scene.

If you face life like that, there are a thousand paths open to you which have never been trodden, and you can go ahead in the sure knowledge that you will become what you have it in you to become. You will not be satisfied with mediocrity, but even if you fail of your highest purpose you will have the satisfaction of knowing that you did your best.