



A Sense of Achievement

Achievement may seem to be out of style at a time of disillusionment over whether it makes any difference to one's future. But personal and social progress are one and the same. The urge to excel needs to be encouraged. It's a matter of everyone working for the good of everyone else . . .

□ Nobody pays any attention to Horatio Alger anymore, except for a few curious readers with a taste for quaintness and unconscious humour who picked up his *Silas Snobden's Office Boy* when it was first published in book form in 1973, 84 years after it appeared as a magazine serial. Yet in the late 1800s, Alger was America's most popular author, greatly outselling such superior writers as Bret Harte and Mark Twain.

Alger wrote more than 120 juvenile novels which told of the struggles of poor boys to rise to positions of wealth and prominence. His heroes, unfailingly industrious, diligent and courageous, were the role models of three generations of American youths. It says much about how times have changed that, if Horatio Alger heroes are now referred to at all, it is as subjects of satirical mockery. In this sceptical age, they look too good to be true.

If "Ragged Dick" or "Tattered Tom" were on television these days, they would appear hopelessly naive to all but the youngest viewers. Alger's boys would never dream of doing anything dishonest to advance their interests, in contrast to some of the street-smart anti-heroes who now populate the tube. They had a wide-eyed faith that, in good times or bad, the economic and social system under which they lived would reward those who worked unusually hard and exercised their native ingenuity. They defied realism to the point of never knowing when to quit.

But that, surely, is what achievement is all about — sticking to your quest and refusing to throw in your cards when the odds are against you and the game is going badly. It happens that Alger's rags-to-riches heroes were the type of achievers who had their eyes fixed on material success. There are, of course, other types for whom the reward is the sheer satisfaction of having accomplished something extraordinary. But, whether the pay-off is a swelling bank account or a glowing sense of spiritual contentment, all achievements are difficult by definition. They must be *gained*, rather than taken in stride.

Corny as they may have been, Alger's tales were in a literary tradition that stretches all the way back to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Throughout the centuries, men have written about the inherent impulse of human beings to pursue their dreams, and about how they have struggled to overcome the obstacles strewn in their way. The themes of heroic literature may be man against the gods, man against the tides of history, man against hostile man, man against nature. But underlying all these is the theme of man against his own nature — against the voices that whisper to him to quit when it looks as if he can't win.

This is because the instinct to achieve is countered by another instinct to take refuge in inaction. If inaction eventually leads to trouble, you can always blame it on someone or something else — your mate, your bosses, the times in which

you live, your environment, "the system." There is a saying to the effect that a person can fall down again and again, but he only becomes a failure when he says he has been pushed.

A modern psychologist, Dr. William Maston, found a few years ago that human nature is not amenable to achievement. He conducted a survey of 3,000 people which asked, "What are you doing with your life?" Up to 90 per cent replied, in effect, that they were waiting — waiting for a particular event to occur, waiting for their children to grow up, waiting for retirement.

The only conclusion to be drawn from this is that people do not realize their dreams because they never get past the stage of dreaming. If they do not give in to discouragement, even people in adverse circumstances can accomplish things they believe beyond their reach. In fact, adversity has a way of stimulating achievement, as shown by how people outdo themselves in emergencies.

According to the psychologist Dr. Aaron Hemsley, however, there is more to peoples' lack of achievement than simple laziness. In an article in the life insurance journal LUAC AAVC Forum, Hemsley wrote about a "deep-seated fear of being too successful. The fear is so universal that it is found in almost everyone to one degree or another. It does not inhibit you from using some of your talents, but it certainly does inhibit you from using all your talents . . . The fear of success may be defined by the individual as the unconscious fear that their success is not justified."

*Ability is the timber;
achievement is the house*

The obvious way to overcome this self-made obstacle is to try to use your talents to their full extent and see whether you feel more or less contented for doing so. Turning your back on your potential can result in a growing burden of dissatisfaction as the years go by.

It is a common mistake to confuse talent with achievement. Despite the fact that ability is an ingredient of achievement, they are two separate things. Ability is like the raw timber you might use in building a house; actually building the

house is achievement. Its extent varies, of course, with individual capacity. For a handicapped person, it might be as much of an achievement to tie a shoelace or take a bus as it is for a musical genius to write a symphony.

The finest — if not the greatest — achievements come from stretching whatever ability one possesses to its limit. Alex Colville, a former art teacher at a New Brunswick university whose painstaking artistry has brought him world renown as a painter, once told a newspaper interviewer: "I use the same philosophy one does in running. I always run to collapse on the tape."

*Success may depend on knowing
how long it takes to succeed*

If you read the biographies of great men and women, you will find that their accomplishments came not so much from their brilliance as from their energy and persistence. Gregor Mendel, the Austrian monk who discovered the principles of heredity, failed his teacher's examinations three times, but carried on regardless with his experiments in breeding plants. He cross-bred 21,000 plants over 10 years, making detailed statistical analyses of his observations until he was finally able to unlock the secrets of genetics. Mendel was one of those who had to be content with the spiritual satisfaction of having done something lasting; his work was largely ignored in the scientific community until well after his death.

"In most things success depends on knowing how long it takes to succeed," wrote the French philosopher Charles de Secondat Montesquieu. This is a difficult message to get across to young people in the western world today. To compound the natural impatience of youth, they have been raised in a society which puts the emphasis on speed and convenience, and they are surrounded by instant-acting products and rapid transportation. The search for quick and easy ways of getting things done has reached into education

and training, creating a demand for fast knowledge to go along with fast food. The message that you must "pay your dues" to accomplish really worthwhile things is not a popular one these days.

The trend is hard to resist. "Overnight stars" in the entertainment field seem to carry the message that you don't necessarily have to be able to sing or play an instrument to win wealth and fame. Best-selling books give every indication of being written, not only on, but by computers programmed with trite interchangeable plots and a limited and inaccurate vocabulary. Television "comedies" are so hastily slapped together that the writers seem to have neglected to include any jokes that are more than vaguely funny. Looking at popular entertainment, one might conclude that the society has come to believe, with Touchstone in *As You Like It*, that "so-so is good, very good, very excellent good," while forgetting his caveat — "and yet it is not; it is but so-so."

Consistent achievement should be honoured by its beneficiaries

The rewards for those who reject the temptation to try for instant success and take the long, hard road to the highest attainable goals are rich (not always in the material sense) and lasting. The satisfaction — even the thrill — experienced from doing any job extraordinarily well builds up an appetite for more. Achievement begets achievement; once you have mastered one thing, it becomes that much less difficult to master another. This explains such "multi-talented" persons as the American scientist-author Isaac Asimov, whose 200 books include his respected science fiction novels, mysteries, social novels, studies of the Bible and Shakespeare, and scholarly works on astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology and mathematics.

At a certain point, achievement becomes a habit and almost a duty. The Canadian writer Morley Callaghan, who has enjoyed a career of great distinction, published what some critics considered his most original novel last year. It was entitled *A Time for Judas*, and it contained daring new insights into the nature of Christianity. He finished it when he was 80 years of age.

Callaghan was the recipient of the 1970 Royal Bank Award, established by the bank on the premise that consistent achievement of a high order should be brought to the attention of the society which benefits from it. Another distinguished novelist, Hugh MacLennan, received the award for 1984. Since 1967 the gold medal and cash prize which accompanies it have been presented to outstanding Canadians in a number of fields: medicine, education, engineering, architecture, agricultural research and humanitarianism.

The Royal Bank Award is a manifestation of the bank's recognition as a corporate citizen that personal achievement is essential to the continued progress of society. The advances that are made in science and technology, in the arts and in man's understanding and treatment of his fellow man are nothing more than the sum of the things which individuals have accomplished, whether working alone or in groups. Blaise Pascal, the 17th century Frenchman who personally made a great contribution to human progress in mathematics, physics and philosophy, took an idealistic view of the subject: "By a peculiar prerogative, not only each individual is making daily advances in the sciences, and may make advances in morality, but all mankind together are making a continual progress in proportion as the universe grows older; so that the whole human race, during the course of so many ages, may be considered as one man, who never ceases to live and learn."

One objective of the Royal Bank Award, as well as of other programs such as Junior Achievement which the bank supports, is to encourage further achievement. Recognition in all forms, whether a gold paper star stuck in a child's reader or a gold medal in the Olympics, helps to give rise to a climate in which extraordinary effort is highly valued, as it should be.

A social orientation towards achievement is especially important in this rather lugubrious era. Attitudinal surveys among North American youth have painted "a gloomy portrait of defeated hopes, deferred ambitions and a passion for financial security," as a Canadian newspaper reporter recently wrote. Persistent economic problems have left too many present-day youths with little confidence in the future. They are discouraged about their prospects, wondering whether any efforts they make to better themselves will actually result in a better life.

Institutional incentives to fulfil their potential appear to be lacking in many cases. Educational standards in general are not as high as they once were. Public education systems at the primary and secondary levels have tended to make the average into the standard, thereby reducing the need for the above-average to extend themselves.

Equality includes the chance to be uncommon

The softening of the educational system is part of a more general movement to iron out the inequalities among various groups in the society. It is a noble and historic development that deliberate steps should be taken to redress the injustices done to people who are at a disadvantage through no fault of their own. But attempts to impose equality without keeping a close eye on the effects may have a deleterious impact on standards. The levelling process may level everyone downwards instead of elevating the disadvantaged upwards. Herbert Hoover, a highly accomplished engineer and administrator who had the misfortune to be President of the United States in the early years of the Great Depression, showed an understanding of the true ideal of equality when he declared: "We believe in equal opportunity for all, but we know this includes the opportunity to rise to leadership, to be uncommon! The great human advances were not made by mediocre men and women."

Mediocrity is not so much the enemy of achievement as is the public willingness to accept it. If

our society is to keep moving forward in terms of social equality and everything else, we must not permit ourselves to be "gratified with mediocrity when the excellent lies before us," in the Victorian literary critic Isaac D'Israeli's words.

The will to accomplish may be getting a second wind

This means that we should not be satisfied with the kind of relative accomplishments that only shine because they have emerged out of such a dim background. The tendency in the media today is to sling about superlatives, proclaiming things to be great and wonderful when they are really just so-so. At the same time, a certain negativism in the news media concerning things that are not subject to "hype" deprives genuine achievements of the attention they deserve.

There is no doubt that genuine achievements continue to be made, many of them by those same young people who sometimes appear so unenthusiastic and poorly motivated. Scientific and technical break-throughs which would once have taken years to attain have become almost routine. The body of learning in all fields is steadily expanding, and records in sports continued to tumble at the recent Olympics. Orchestra conductors attest that young players are better than any concert musicians before them.

And there are heartening signs that the will to achieve is growing stronger in spite of — or perhaps because of — the troubled economy. In the most recent survey of attitudes among Canadians aged 15 to 24, 83 per cent of the 1,200 persons canvassed placed personal achievement at the top of their list of priorities in life.

So the achievement ethic is alive and well among us all these many years after the death (in 1898) of Horatio Alger. Still, it needs to be stimulated, because it is necessary for any improvement in life in this world.