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Making the Most of Your Qualities

HE WHO SUCCEEDS in any enterprise in which others fail may be presumed to have qualities of some sort or other which they do not have.

Unless one is aware of his qualities he is like an acorn that does not know whether its proper destiny is to be an oak tree or a cabbage.

It is a good question, then, to ask: "What qualities have I as a person, as a worker, as a home-maker and as a citizen?"

There is in every person a desire for distinction which inclines him first to hope and then to believe that nature has given him some talents peculiar to himself. Making the most of those qualities is an end in itself for his own sake: it is also a contribution to his family and to society.

The development of qualities is something that needs to be done with patience, vigilance, sagacity, and determination. It is not an exercise for young people only, but for people of all ages. There are many notable examples of persons who have discovered or expanded talents and qualities late in life. Happiness at any age consists mainly in the exercise of one's vital powers along the lines of one's talents.

A mature person is always clarifying his ideas, modifying his beliefs, enlarging his capabilities, and adapting his life plan to a changing environment. This adaptability is not only desirable for advancement, but is necessary to survival.

Change is inevitable. The first industrial revolution substituted machinery for men's muscles; the second industrial revolution, now under way, is substituting machinery for men's minds in routine work. There have also been three communications revolutions. The first was when men invented writing; the second was the invention of printing; today's is the appearance of the mass media, radio, television, newspapers and magazines through which everyone has access to all the information and knowledge of the world.

The changes wrought by these revolutions have special meaning for young people. As they graduate from school and university, they have grown beyond the easy challenges and simple choices of childhood.

They are learning that their capacity to consume things does not dictate what society shall give them, and that they must prepare themselves to bear their share of the production process. They are beginning to realize that they need to get busy rowing the boat, which is safer and more healthful than rocking it. Their happiness depends upon this: that they make the best of what it is in them to become.

The search for identity

The transitional stage of a historical period is difficult. As Dr. Rollo May wrote in *Man's Search for Himself*: "The beliefs and traditions handed down in the society tend to become crystallized into dead forms which suppress individual vitality." Then: "Vitality gets divorced from tradition, and tends to become diffuse rebelliousness."

Today's young Canadians have been born into a developed society. They do not have to struggle hard to survive, therefore they are seeking by many means to use their energy in the process of social evolution. They see the world as being full of ancient rigidities, but in trying to break these fixities they are in danger of indulging in directionless endeavour.

Parents need to realize the vastness of the difference between their childhood and the lives of young people today. Thirty years ago young people were not embroiled in the world's affairs: today they have their ears and eyes assailed by every disaster, every war, every revolution, every crop failure, every threat of death by pollution. They feel personally involved. All the sorrow, sadness and frustration of people everywhere is forced upon them by television, radio and the press. Both young and old are confused by the complexities of life and the present world-wide disorder.

It would be unjust to depreciate too harshly the past which has led up to this state of affairs. There were many good qualities in that past, and none of us would be here today except for the care of people who lived before us. Anyone who censures the contemporary world should have a clear idea of what he believes a good world should be. Happiness and contentment are

not generated by people who criticize things as they are without proposing valid ways of making them better.

To inflame disorder has no virtue or merit in itself, and it may deteriorate into mere mindless provocation. We recall the witches' chant in *Macbeth*: "Fair is foul and foul is fair." To them all good was repugnant and all evil attractive. Storm and foul weather and disorganization made the most favourable setting for their vexatious work.

What are the positive aims to which people need to apply their qualities? All three generations — the one now old, the one now mature, and the one now adolescent — would like to use their best qualities to attain happiness, something worth working for, recognition as persons, and hope for the future.

Every person is worth just so much as the things are worth about which he busies himself. To quote the great Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius: "A man's life is what his thoughts make of it." Whatever values you profess, and whatever qualities you have, you are only as good, in work just the same as in sport, as your actual performance proves that you are.

To be rational and realistic about this is to give discriminating attention to things as they are and to use diligence in making the best of our qualities to improve them. It is realistic to relate what is strategically desirable to what is tactically possible with the forces at one's command. This is common sense, or mother wit, or good judgment. It applies qualities efficiently in the right endeavours.

Knowledge is needed

The key to realistic use of qualities is knowledge obtained by research, experience and experiment. Knowledge gives the only sound basis for confident planning. It is the raw material from which you manufacture right opinions about things.

The ability to discriminate between one piece of knowledge and another with regard to its significance for your purpose can be learned. The brilliance you see in a courtroom, or laboratory, or operating theatre, or a piece of writing, is the end result of accumulating knowledge and checking it for its validity in such-and-such circumstances. It is the outcome of weeks, and sometimes months, of grinding and often boring work.

Getting knowledge is part of continuing education. Some people say to themselves that at a certain age, say 18 or 25, they will consider themselves educated. They believe, confidently, that at the same time as they are full-grown in education they will continue to have young thoughts. The great attraction about continuing to feel young is the vitality that says "Go . . . go . . . go." If you stop learning at your mid-twenties you will in a few years find new sprinters coming up to pass you.

Whatever your age, apply your knowledge thoughtfully and reasonably in terms of what you already are, and use the services of academic, professional, church, business and government departments to help you press on.

This keeping sensitized to the world around you by giving of your qualities while continuing to learn is a rewarding experience. It encourages you to spread your thought and activity into areas that are not directly connected with your job.

It is highly pleasing to escape out of the complexities of everyday life into its simplicities, and then find that its simplicities have solved its complexities. Robert Burns had this quality. The ploughman-poet was at home in any society from the Ayrshire cottage to the Edinburgh palace. But his special quality was his love for all creatures, even the lowly mouse and the daisy, and this gave him understanding of human beings and their motivations.

You may, like Burns, have limited resources, but you need not have narrow horizons. Everywhere, in fields, workshops, and events, there is something to explore, something worth while to discover, beauty and truth, poetry and science, and best of all, wide understanding. Acquaintance with these basic things helps to make plain the complicated things built upon them.

It is out of wide knowledge that you develop the quality of making good choices. Here, indeed, is the truest freedom of the human race: the freedom of choice. But you cannot choose something you have never heard of.

It is not desirable to fill life with one activity. In a rapidly changing world versatility is a priceless asset. The same array of qualities can be used for many purposes. Leonardo da Vinci could be, on different days, a painter, a sculptor, a musician, a scientist, an inventor and an engineer. He employed identical basic qualities in every capacity.

Ingredients of success

One must be enthusiastic. Enthusiasm is interest plus energy, and this combination provides the most dynamic of all human qualities. Anyone who does not have it naturally can cultivate it by applying a little auto-suggestion. Merely deciding that a job is going to be interesting helps to make it so.

One must have ambition. What part do you wish to play on the world stage? What do you want to make of yourself? Many people are worried in the final third of this memorable century by emptiness: they want, without knowing what they want.

Ambition is based upon discontent, but being dissatisfied with what you have is not enough. You need a positive, purposeful, creative and energetic aim, the attainment of which will make use of all your good qualities. This is very different from the desire of Sancho Panza in *Don Quixote* to be lord of an island if it were offered to him "with little trouble and less danger".

Ambition can be a malignant mistress unless properly wooed. No person is ridiculous for being what he really is, but he can make himself absurd by affecting to be what he is not, or by attempting to

climb heights beyond his qualities, or by trying to appear in everything.

Neurotic ambition reveals a person driven by a gad-fly: like Caesar, for whom the map of the world had no boundaries and the words "journey's end" no meaning, or like Cyrano de Bergerac, fulminating and frenetical, seeking a whole army he could put to flight. The saddest thing to happen to an overreaching ambition is the realization of inability to fulfil it.

Courage is another needed ingredient of success. It is true that to venture causes anxiety, but not to venture is not to find oneself. You require the quality of being able to go to work on a task the outcome of which cannot be assured. The volunteers in small boats who were setting out to rescue the British soldiers from the beach at Dunkirk were told: "Now off you go and good luck to you — steer for the sound of the guns."

Creative workmanship

Having ambition, enthusiasm and courage, you must work. Idleness is a desolate doctrine, appropriate only to those who have given up trying to make themselves adequate to life. The hope of the human race for improvement would be futile indeed if it were in the hands of people capering for joy at the thought that they can throw off Adam's curse and cease work while living on the charity of others.

Work is more than an individual activity: it is a social activity, because whether high or low on the wage scale it contributes to satisfying the wants of mankind. It is a culture-creating activity, for it believes in a better future: idleness is reaction, for its ideals are in the past and it is the image of a death wish.

The ambitious person will develop an instinct for craftsmanship. An artist or technician or business man may be filled with noble ideas and fine inspiration, but if his hands refuse to obey the prompting of his mind, his good intentions can never be worked into satisfying reality. When it comes to judging a piece of work, your own or that of someone else, of this be sure: it is bad if it is shoddy or unsuited to its purpose.

The ambitious person will try to pick up some particular piece of life and leave it in better shape. He looks creatively at the commonplace; he seeks a new use; he brings alive something hidden to others. Keats heard the song of a nightingale, but while others listened abstractedly he listened with all his heart, and composed his "Ode to a Nightingale".

The act of creation does not bring into being something out of nothing. It uncovers, selects, reshuffles, combines and synthesizes already existing facts, ideas, faculties and skills. The musicologist was creative whose persistent search through monastery after monastery uncovered a lost Haydn mass. That discovery gave him his opportunity to enrich the world with something new to it. Similarly, Shakespeare took themes and words from many now forgotten sources and wove them into plays that thrill, excite and inform us.

Being creative requires that we put more effort into building up than into knocking down. It cautions us to have the blue-prints ready for a better building before tearing down the old one. It demands that we study the job ahead so that we become qualified to do it well, with competent minds and skilled hands.

Know thyself

A healthy self-examination is needed in order to develop potential qualities and to correct faults. The machines developed by electronic technology not only do their jobs but run simultaneous checks on their own equipment to eliminate the possibility of error.

The Greek precept "Know Thyself" was not designed to lower our pride, but to help us to understand our worth. Belief in yourself and your qualities is necessary to success, but how can you believe unless you know?

This seeking of self-knowledge helps you to tidy up and draw your qualities together. Make an orderly array of what you already know. Then group the elements according to their relative importance. Select the feature to which you propose to pay special attention. Unless you do this preparatory work you will dissipate energy by living under compulsive, undirected activity.

Self-analysis helps you to use all your equipment in your effort to become all that you can become. A single quality is seldom sufficient to build a successful life. Lord Beaverbrook, a hard-headed business man, said: "He who succeeds will be he who, through the totality of his qualities, deserves to succeed."

Get to know what is involved. When your eye lights upon a position that attracts you, there are two things you need to consider: the fitness of the position for you and your fitness for the position. This will avoid the danger of wasting time and effort on unsuitable work.

Dispersion of effort can be a fatal flaw. Concentration, which is a habit necessary to success in business, science and personal life, means bringing things to a focus. The weakest living creature, by concentrating his powers on a single object, can accomplish something; the strongest, by scattering his powers over many, may fail to accomplish anything.

A song unsung

The next thing is to get busy. Ambition has no real efficiency unless pressed forward by activity. Creative efficiency is as dependent upon our quality of driving power as it is upon knowledge and talent. Two lines from the Indian poet Sir Rabindranath Tagore sound the warning: "The song that I came to sing remains unsung . . . I have spent my days in stringing and in unstringing my instrument."

No one can make the best of his qualities if he puts them in cold storage. What has been learned can be forgotten, and what has been frozen has no flexibility to meet new situations and to embrace opportunities.

Do not pigeon-hole or file a good idea. If you cannot put it into execution at once, make a note in your diary to dig out the idea and look at it again.

When you have started, development of your qualities demands that you keep going. You have to overcome human inertia. The inability to sustain interest until a task is completed is unmistakably a childish trait which belongs to the time of life when the immediate moment is still the only real moment. It is important if we are to use our qualities effectively that we learn the discipline of finishing what we start.

Get out of your depth

Having completed one part of your plan, it is desirable to progress at once to another stage. Do not give anyone the opportunity to say that you reached your peak yesterday.

You hold your success as a challenge cup, and at any time some other player may come along to contend for it. Alfred North Whitehead, that giant among philosophers and mathematicians, was asked: "When did you first begin to feel an adequacy to your work?" He replied: "I have never felt adequate to it." Every quality can be improved. The minute you are entirely satisfied with your performance the first step toward degeneration has been taken. Perfection, as Santayana put it, is a synonym of finitude.

If you do not ever get out of your depth you will never learn to swim. Most successful men have at some time been kicked upstairs. At a critical moment in their lives they have been forced to do more than they had planned to do, or to accommodate themselves to a new situation, and out of their qualities they proved their ability to cope with the challenge. Abraham Lincoln suffered one set-back after another, but he became President.

Other stanzas of Kipling's poem called "If" are more frequently quoted, but none is more important to the person seeking to develop his qualities than this one: "If you can watch the things you gave your life to broken, and stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools . . . you'll be a Man!"

The alternative to any plan which fails to work is always another plan. There is small satisfaction and less benefit in just walking away. Consider alternatives. If you make a false start, wipe it out and start again. If the qualities you use do not produce the desired result, try some others or another combination.

Nobody should expect to be perfect, or be unduly troubled by the fact that he is not. Even the greatest artists have their comparatively uninspired moments. It is not disgraceful to fail in an attempt to do something. The only disgrace is not to seek the quality in you that will prompt you to make the attempt. Recall the man in one of Shakespeare's plays who vowed that he would "Lean upon one crutch and fight with the other" rather than stay out of the battle.

The quality of character

Character is what you are when there is no one else around. Many preachers and teachers emphasize various requirements of life: social rights, honest work, culture, sanity, and optimism, but not one great teacher has played down the need for having character.

The corner-stone of character is integrity. This does not ask "What will people think?" but "What will I think of myself if I do this or fail to do that?" It has principles, which are qualities of the underlying sort: laws and ideas, controlling concepts and basic facts. They enable a person to play his part with equal comeliness whether he is dressed in overalls or dinner jacket.

Principles involve honour, "an old-fashioned word which encompasses duty, responsibility, and respect for eternal values." This is not a quotation from some old-fogey academic philosopher, but from the son of Thomas Alva Edison, president of Edison Industries and an eminent servant of his country in peace and in war.

Character involves a feeling for humanity and the power of sympathy and the desire to serve. The quality of chivalry is not dead, and can be revived. It regards courage as splendid, fidelity as noble, and mercy as part of a gentleman's code. It is a way of life in which the bigger ones look out for the littler ones. As is said in Ireland, it is "a relic of an old decency".

Character is not summed up in that much-abused concept "personality" but it does give charm, a quality that has a wistful appeal which accomplishes more than would dominance and force.

To sum up

When you take stock of your qualities you are already ahead of the great mass of the people who never seriously consider what talents they have with which to work. No one can expect the best of himself if he thinks aimlessly about his qualities and selects his quality tools at haphazard. The nuclear physicist does not use a pickaxe to split atoms.

No one can guarantee you success in using your qualities, but you can deserve it. What you imagine on a large scale will be realized, perhaps on a smaller scale, depending upon how right your assumptions were about your qualities and how earnestly you try.

At any age you may be able to say "my present situation is but a sketch of a picture which I must finish." Start every morning with your mind set toward doing things. Comte Henri de Saint-Simon, who was no sluggard in war or business and who became the grandfather of the positivist philosophy, instructed his valet to address him, first thing every morning, with the reminder: "Remember, Monsieur le Comte, that you have great things to do."

One who seeks to make the most of his qualities will do habitually well what he has to do. "According to one's power": that was the refrain and favourite saying of Socrates, a saying of great substance.