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On Following Through

EVERYONE has been vexed at times by his failure to follow through on a good project or hunch or job. Many a brilliant plan has come to nothing because the person who thought it up lacked the spunk or spine to put it across. Many a fine idea has died at birth because its parent put off the job of starting to rear it.

This is a good time of year for young Canadians, who in their thousands are graduating from high school and university, to take a look at what they need to do if they are to follow through to success and happiness in life.

Merely to step upon the stage does not make a great actor or actress. To be given a chair at a desk does not make an expert business man. To be given a place at a factory bench does not make a skilful mechanic. A person may have had an impressive array of "Excellent" grades on his compositions in school, but when he sits down to write his first business letter he is still a novice. He may have majored in bricklaying at a technical school, but he still must serve his apprenticeship.

This introduces the follow-through. The solemnity of graduation symbolizes the end of preparation: now is the time for energetic doing if one is to make life worth living. The machinery of theory and the stock of knowledge gained hitherto must terminate in the cutting edge of direct action.

One is always starting from where one is now, but school leaving is a special milestone in youthful lives. It is like the Golden Milestone set up in the Roman Forum by Augustus: from it, roads lead to everywhere.

One must have some destination one wishes to reach, and then step out. To day-dream about far-off places and great achievements can be inspiring, but you must come back to the reality of this starting place. Great men have not been merely dreamers. They have returned from their visions to the practicalities of replacing the airy stones of their dream castles with solid masonry wrought by their hands.

Everyone knows that nothing significant is done by lotus-eaters. It was only after Adam and Eve had been expelled from their Eden Lotus-land, says Toynbee in *A Study of History*, that their descendants set about inventing agriculture, metallurgy and musical instruments.

The sense of purpose which we call ambition is no mysterious gift. It is the imagination playing with future possibilities and telling us how to overcome the obstacles that lie between our starting place and their realization.

Our ambition should be big enough to be a challenge to our powers. Only a shallow-brained person will aim at being the only figure among ciphers: one should seek to be eminent among people who count. Ambition should be big enough to give us room to expand. We should copy in this regard the custom of some parents, who buy their children's clothes a size larger than fits at the moment, so that the children may have something to grow into.

Impatience is not a great help to the ambitious man. Plutarch tells us in his memorable *Lives* that Brutus might have been the first man in the commonwealth if he had had patience but a little time to be second to Cæsar. Take the next step; reach the next milestone; then raise your sights.

How does one go about the business of reaching the desired objective? There are five things to do: fix your purpose, make sure that it is the right one for you, search out the ways by which you may reach it, study the details about these ways, and get busy.

A star to steer by

It is a good thing that we so often have a feeling of incompleteness, that we reach the end of a period with the feeling that we are at the beginning of a new one. We traverse a long path toward a desired end, and arrive there, only to see another road passing into wider fields, and beckoning us to things more wonderful than we could have imagined at our starting place.

An ambitious man, more than others, sits lightly in his chair. He is ready to spring into action when action is required. Activity and the challenge of difficulties bring out the best of a man's qualities, because what he seeks is an opportunity to do his best. And if, at the end of his career, he feels that he has approximated in achievement the potentialities which he possessed, he is fully rewarded.

It must not be expected that the road of life spreads itself in an unobstructed view before the person starting his journey. He must anticipate coming upon forks and turnings in the road. But he cannot hope to reach his desired journey's end if he thinks aimlessly about whether to go east or west. He must make decisions purposefully.

One necessary decision is to move forward; we cannot stand still. John Masefield, who ran away to sea when he was a boy and became poet laureate when he was fifty, wrote in one of his poems: "... all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by."

Progress may seem slight, and the horizon far away, and the port only a dot on our map, but so long as we complete a stage of the journey every year, steering by our star and making the most of wind and sail, we have cause for happiness.

Many little things must be done to accomplish one big thing. If the Wright brothers had sat down at their planning board on December 16th, 1903, to figure out a scheme of world air transport, they would never have tackled the job. Instead, they tuned up their flying machine. Next morning they put it into the air and it stayed aloft for twelve seconds — the first heavier-than-air flight by a self-powered machine, the vital spark that kindled life in aviation.

Difficulty provides opportunity

The best way for a youth to think of opportunity is this: his greatest opportunities will be found in difficulty. When a task is troublesome, that gives him the chance to show his capability: when a decision is perplexing, that gives him the chance to show his superior judgment.

Opportunity in business is provided by certain conditions which, if handled in the right way, will yield a profit. Something must be done to take advantage of the favourable occasion, because opportunity has no virtue unless it is buttressed by activity. It is no relative of luck.

He is a weak man who depends upon luck for his success. Distinction is not bestowed upon us by some favouring goddess. It is gained through search and work and adaptation of a man's powers to the conditions that surround him. Only when our calculations prove false, and wisdom can teach us no more, and our efforts have exhausted us without bringing us success: only then, said the wise Roman emperor

Hadrian, is it excusable to turn to the random twitter of birds or the distant mechanism of the stars seeking lucky omens.

It has been said of a man who seized his opportunities with success that he "stumbled on a good idea." There may be some truth in the comment, but the whole truth is that the moment of inspiration would not have come to him if he had not prepared himself for it. Pasteur once wrote that "chance favours only the prepared mind."

Nobody in this world ever gets anything for nothing. The sciences of business, sociology, medicine and space travel have this in common: they are attempts to formulate a satisfactory balance between what is desired and the price to be paid for its attainment.

Temporary defeats are a small price to pay for success. In the acid words of the artist in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "The stupid have the best of it in this world. If they know nothing of victory, they are at least spared the knowledge of defeat."

Adapting to change

It may be necessary to change our views in the process of following through to success. Among the most pitiful people are those who are trying to fight the twentieth century, to live in a past age. To resist change, to refuse to adapt to it, is like holding your breath: if you persist you kill yourself.

In today's society there is no fixed state, but only a changing pattern. Innovation and obsolescence make their mark in the short time the commuter takes to travel to work and back. The rate of change is so great that a human being of ordinary length of life will be called upon to face many novel situations which find no parallel in his past.

But change is terrifying only to those who refuse to recognize it, who try to leave it out of account. At a crucial period in the history of science Albert Einstein showed that ancient ideas about the universe were not in any way sacred. Before that, Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* persuaded the world that the difference between species of animals and plants is not the fixed immutable difference that it appears to be. And, ages before Darwin, Homer showed continual flux and change to be the law of life.

At the bottom of their final examination papers young people could very well write: "This is what looks true today, but tomorrow it may be something quite different." To follow through is to search for new ideas, to proceed from clumsiness to skill, to avoid complacency and seek advancement, to look for a better way of doing things.

This involves making choices. A man is mature and free in the proportion to which his life is governed by his own choices, for maturity and freedom do not consist in doing as one pleases, but in doing what one chooses.

In sheltered childhood and adolescence we move in grooves according to custom and with parental guidance. Now, seemingly suddenly, we become aware for the first time of the burden of choice. We come into contact with people who try to persuade, cajole, seduce, shock or dazzle us into accepting their views and following their plans. It is important to listen to them — for how else can we know between what courses we are choosing — but we should retain mobility of thought.

There is nothing more certain in life than that we must make decisions. If we debate long about what to do, history is going on behind our backs. Things are changing. Our decision may be out of date before we reach it. Crowned king at a time when one swift blow would have scattered his foes and united his friends, Saul stood, like Hamlet, midway between his duty and his task, and indecision slew him.

Almost any decision that jogs us out of our abstractions is a good one. If we stay shut up in our thoughts we shall never grow, and growth is one of the tests of development. Having got one idea upon its feet we should swing our searchlights here, there and everywhere, seeking more ideas to beget new inspiration.

Neither the extent of the knowledge we have gained up to now nor the capacity of our talent is one half so vital as our driving power. Enthusiasm turns ideas, plus interest and ambition, into whole-hearted effort that adds zest to life. We should follow every task with a sense of expectancy and all the ardour of which we are capable.

Courage for new starts

The man who wishes to make his follow-through effective will not do so by timid and tremulous ways. He needs to be able to stand up to buffeting and setbacks.

People are born with different degrees of courage, but every natural disposition may be improved by training and exercise. There are different sorts of courage, too. When Athena, the goddess of wisdom and the liberal arts, bestowed courage upon Menelaus, it was not the courage of a lion, but of a fly — the most fearless in attack and the most persistent of all creatures small or great.

One effect of going forward courageously is that a man does not need much armour on his back; he need not build many fortresses to which to retire. Battles are seldom won by running away, any more than hockey goals are scored by backchecking.

There will be discouragements. In fact, it is generally true that life seldom gives us any more than just that degree of encouragement which suffices to keep us at a reasonably full exertion of our powers. Following through is a series of recommencements,

some of them after defeats, so that "each tomorrow finds us farther than today."

When Donald Campbell drove his boat at 260.35 miles an hour in 1959 the record-making run was the latest in a series. His father had brought him up on the principle that upon reaching one record he must set his sights on another. It was natural, then, when his *Bluebird* gave him the world's water speed record at 202.32 miles an hour to call his team together and tell them he was tuning up for 250 miles an hour.

In starting to follow through from school, or from a present job, make sure that the job you seek is one which will give you the best opportunity to do the thing you are most interested in doing. Then make a list of the qualities of work and recreation that will contribute to your successful follow-through, and use or develop them.

The quality of work

In weighing work against pleasure, Lord Beaverbrook advised in his book *Don't Trust to Luck*, let the leaning be toward work. "A man will come to less harm by over-working than he will by over-playing." Loafing is not fun to the man of spirit. He knows that the strenuous life gives him as rewards not only the necessities but the happiness he desires.

A man may misrepresent himself to you in many ways. He may sparkle at parties though he be dour at home; he may be the soul of discretion in his service club but gossip meanly over the card table; he may have a front of culture but be niggardly in spirit. But he cannot deceive you in his work. There is the fruit of his life, of his hands, of his mind, by which he may be truly judged.

A piece of work may be tested by three questions: (1) does it please the person who did it? (2) does it satisfy the person for whom it was done? (3) does it accomplish the purpose for which it was done? If these can be answered "yes" the job has added grace to the doer, the recipient and the work.

The job we do should be a part of our follow-through in the direction of still more polished output. Again and again we are tempted to relax, to look upon some position we have reached as a place where we can feel secure. In it we have achieved a reputation, a satisfying amount of worldly success. Its appeal of sensuous ease tempts us to delude ourselves into believing that this is the point for which we started from the Golden Milestone.

It is possible for us, on any plateau of achievement, to retire from competition and the noise of society, to weave ourselves a triumphal garland of inactivity, and to fly the banner of mediocrity. This is something for the person with ambition to guard against continually. To give in to the temptation marks the end of his follow-through.

The story was told in *Technology Review*, the magazine of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, of a firm which sought a man of high ability and imagination for a new enterprise. A young man of excellent academic record was being interviewed for appointment to this position with all its exciting possibilities. The company interviewer outlined the great opportunities in the new development, and then asked the young man if he had any questions. The applicant asked, "What assurance can you give me of promotion?" The interviewer closed the interview right there. The young man evidently had no sense of follow-through. He wanted to be carried.

On getting started

Doing at once what there is to do inevitably increases the probability of success. While we may see dimly what lies at a distance, we must do what lies clearly at hand. As a proverb has it: "The best way to peel a sack of potatoes is to take one potato at a time and peel it."

Everyone knows people who are strong in this or that way — physically or mentally, in theory or in practice — who disperse their efforts over many objects and fail to achieve perfection in any. It is not so generally appreciated that a person who is weak may, by concentrating his powers on a single object, accomplish greatly.

When should we start? On our present job or on one we hope to get? "Forthwith" is a good word that has gone out of style, but it has the imperative ring needed here. Plans are useless until steps are taken to realize them. They are like music, silent unless performed, though all the notes are there.

Time does not pause for our delays. It waits for nothing before moving on to the next chapter, and it is in the present chapter that we must prove our right to be represented there. If you doubt your ability, get busy to test it. A prominent man gave this advice to a youth starting his business career: "Do the wise thing if you know what it is, but anyway do something — the wisest thing you know."

This may seem to be reminiscent of Nelson putting his telescope to his blind eye as he sailed into the battle of Copenhagen, or of the ship's captain at Camperdown who, unable to read a complicated signal, flung his signal book on the deck and ordered: "Up with the helm and get into the middle of it!" These may strike today's reader as being old-fashioned maxims, but even in these days there are ancient principles which cannot be disregarded with impunity.

What is advocated is not recklessness. Deliberation and analysis are, in risky situations, positive approaches to dynamic action. Tidy up your problem so that you can decide quickly and with certainty what to do. Analysis is the foe of vagueness and ambiguity and hesitancy.

What is the cause of the foolish air some people have of always being shocked and surprised by the things that happen around them? It is lack of foresight. They have not made themselves aware of the changes that are taking place; they have not kept up to date; they are taken unaware by the consequences of causes they did not know existed. When a person has analysed the present, and looked ahead to appraise the worst that can happen in future, he is protected against shock and he is ready for the appropriate action.

This is a constructive sort of preparation. You may have to invent or make the tools of progress, or even wrestle along without them. Aristotle was an astronomer without a telescope, a biologist without a microscope, a chemist without a laboratory, and yet for nearly 2000 years his conception of natural phenomena ruled science.

The uses of experience

A lot is said about learning by experience, and experience is a good thing, but if hard personal lessons can be avoided by studying the experiences of others, why not avoid them? He is an unhappy motorist who becomes an expert driver by his participation in many highway accidents; he is an unhappy business man who does not learn except by becoming many times bankrupt.

The intuition which prompts the decisions and actions of many business men is the product of a large store of memories of previous experiences — their own and those of others — which can be linked in a meaningful way with the present situation.

You cannot wait through the tedious processes of learning by personal experience how to answer the questions "What shall I do?" and "How shall I do it?" The principles on which you may base your answers in science, business or the arts are to be found by reference to the past just as much as in today's trial and error.

This does not mean that we are to live by the past, but only that we should look there for anything that will make our way more certain. Going onward is the only way to gain practical acquaintance with the full colour, flavour, poetry, passion and variety of life.

By making use of the knowledge our forefathers gathered, and applying it in such a form as to fit today's changed environment, we can face difficulty with stout hearts. Only a little bit more knowledge than others have, just a little bit more effort, merely a trifle more fixity of purpose and determination, can turn an apparent minus into a plus in business as in sport. At the Winter Olympics, the winner of the women's giant slalom was only one-tenth of a second faster than the runner-up, and in the 1,000-metre speed-skating the difference between first and second place was only two-tenths of a second.