

GUIDELINES IN THE SEARCH FOR PERSONAL QUALITY
What It Takes To Build Character And Excellence

Everyone's life is spent in the pursuit of self-fulfilment, but not everyone reaches his objective. The man or woman who succeeds is a person who has realized in time that satisfaction does not arise merely from being good at something, but also from being a certain kind of person.

Such a person is not content to dedicate his life to small purposes. He has quality in his ambition. He does not strive to amass stuff to feed his vanity, but does his best to become somebody who is esteemed. He wishes to be, not merely to appear, the best, for this is the mark of quality.

The person of quality realizes that there is something beyond success: It is excellence. One may be successful in the eyes of the world without touching the Golden Fleece of excellence, for excellence is in the person and is not conferred by the greatness of the office he holds. It is typified in what the goddess Athene said of Ulysses, that in him "deed and word notably marched together to their deliberate end."

It is people of excellence who build greatly and lastingly. Egypt had millions of people living on the world's most fertile soil and Athens had 200,000 living on a rocky plain, yet the Egypt of that day is remembered for Cleopatra while Athens is imperishable in the minds of men.

Our idea of excellence cannot be limited to this, that, or the other area of human activity. Excellence is a thing in itself, embracing many kinds of achievement at many levels. There is excellence in abstract intellectual activity, in art, in music, in managerial functions, in craftsmanship at the workbench, in technical skill, and in human relations.

Only by being a person of the highest quality it is possible for him to become can a man attain happiness, because happiness lies in the active exercise of his vital powers along the lines of excellence in a life affording scope for their development. He must, of course, be competent, but excellence rises above that.

We mass-produce almost everything in this country, but we cannot mass-produce character, because that is a matter of personal identity. It belongs to those who have found the part they are to play, who are doing the work for which they are best endowed, who are satisfied that they are filling a vital need, who are meeting their obligations and standing up to their tasks.

Such people willingly learn whatever they need to know to perform their role; they discipline their passing impulses so as to keep them from getting in the way of proper performance, and they do their jobs better than is needed just to "get by."

Character is a positive thing. It is not fear of vice, but love of excellence.

Inner Light and Courage

Character takes no account of what you are thought to be, but what you are. You have your own laws and court to judge you, and these persuade you to be what you would like to seem. Character is having an inner light and the courage to follow its dictates. As Shakespeare put it:

... to thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man.

People need something to believe in. Scientific discoveries may shake the world, but principles of behavior give it stability.

To have a set of principles is not at all to become a starry-eyed dreamer, but a person who knows simply and convincingly what he is here for. There are certain things one has to believe in, or civilization will die - permanent truths that, though they have their roots in the far past, are important for the present.

Finally, in this array of the components of quality, consider great-mindedness. Here is the ornament of all the other virtues. It makes them better, and it cannot exist without them. A person who has once perceived, however temporarily and however fleetingly, what makes greatness of spirit, cannot be happy if he allows himself to be petty or self-centered, or to fall short of the best that he has it in him to be.

There are sound standards of craftsmanship in every calling - artists have to meet them, as do carpenters, lawyers, stenographers, operators of bulldozers, surgeons, business managers, and stonemasons. Every honest calling, every walk of life, has its own elite, its own aristocracy, based upon excellence of performance.

The person of quality will take delight in craftsmanship, whether he be building a bird house or writing a novel or planning a business deal. He is impelled by his principles to do well habitually what it is his job to do. That means patient thoroughness.

This is not, as some avant-garde people would have us believe, antipathetic to expressive individuality. Craftsmanship is a means toward competent expression rather than a brake upon it. It does not imply a sophisticated as opposed to an imaginative approach, not slick work as opposed to clumsy work. It does mean that there is attention to details, fundamental integrity in the work, and evidence that the workman knew what he was doing and carefully brought his skill to bear on the task.

Life's Greatest Sufferings

To seek quality in his work and his life a person must have a substantial motive. One pities the man or woman whose obsessive dream is not improvement toward excellence but escape from actualities and responsibilities. Such people must feel unwanted, unused, and purposeless, and that is one of life's greatest sufferings.

It is the anguish of empty and sterile lives, far more than any economic condition or political injustice, that drives men and women to demonstrate and demand instead of studying and learning.

The man of quality will wish to have his journey through life leave some traces. Capt. James Cook, whose voyage of discovery carried him to Canada's West Coast in 1778, said: "I had ambition not only to go farther than any man had ever been before, but as far as it was possible for a man to go." John Milton said he was prompted to "leave something so written to aftertimes as they should not willingly let it die." Charles Darwin wrote in his autobiography that he had made up his mind to make a contribution to his subject.

These men sought and found problems to be solved. They were positive. It isn't enough to be against error and ignorance; that leaves the impression that error and ignorance are the active forces in the world while we are a formless mass opposing them. Instead of denouncing or denying what others bring forth as the truth, great men offer their own truth.

A motive needs to be a sincere, deeply felt urge to find meaning in life-relevance, significance, and usefulness. Without such a goal, life becomes drab and humdrum. The man of quality lifts his head above the crowd to see a horizon fitting his abilities. He teaches his imagination to play with future possibilities, and bends his back to the immediate task that will contribute toward their coming true.

There is nothing paltry about the man who is struggling, not to be great or to hobnob with the great, but to be greater than he is.

Some people are misled from their search for personal quality by skepticism. They encourage themselves to say, "Why should I do any more work than is necessary to get a passing mark or the going rate of pay?" People are not roused to seek excellence by ease or pleasure by any other sugar plum. Perhaps there are some who are content to try for nothing more than being units in an assembly line, but even they must have moments of uneasiness in which they regret the opportunities they have spurned to become something better.

To push up from colorless mediocrity toward superiority is the way of the person of quality. All satisfying human life proceeds along this line of action - from below up, from minus to plus. To be successfully what we are, and to become what we are capable of becoming, is true ambition.

In choosing an aim, we should make sure that the ultimate value of it will offset the inevitable discomfort and trouble that go along with the accomplishment of anything worth-while. Success has terms that must be met. It demands that we sacrifice secondary things, however delightful they may appear, and that we are prepared to get some splinters in our hands while climbing the ladder.

This, of course, requires that we develop a sense of the values of things. Every thoughtful person who has reached the age of 20 or 25 will realize that his mind has produced for him a certain set of views as to the conditions of life and the purpose of his existence. These should be reviewed from time to time, and revised upward in the light of experience.

A sense of values is a personal thing, not to be measured by a yardstick common to all humanity. In applying it to our special cases we learn to tell truth from falsehood, fact from opinion, the real from the phony, and the beautiful from the tawdry. We develop consciousness, enabling us to discriminate the quality of things. We learn that everything is worth what its purchaser will pay for it, and we ask before making a choice: "What is the price?"

This is a question of deep seriousness, and sometimes it demands courage in the asking and in the answering. Finding the point at which a value begins to totter is an authoritative guide as to how high you really rank it.

Look for the major characteristics, without being misled by the unlimited number of peripheral and secondary features. If you are weighing the value to you of a color television set against that of a chrome-encrusted car, that is simple and there are few factors; but if you are measuring the value of an extended education against the immediate attractiveness of a job, you can reach a reasonable decision only after considering the conditions under which you wish to live far in the future. What is the paramount thing? To elevate your thinking above the immediate and consider what is best in the long run.

Among the things needed by the person in search of excellence are these: A wide view, curiosity, courage, self-discipline, enthusiasm, and energy.

Having a wide view does not include only seeing things near and far in proper perspective, though that is very important. It requires broad training in fundamental principles. Specialization is vitally important in the modern world, but it is unfortunately true that for many individuals specialization is a dead end rather than an avenue to deeper and broader understanding. The person seeking excellence will realize that this need not be so, and he will respond to the challenge to prevent its happening to him.

The key positions in all walks of life will go to those who are educated broadly, in a balanced way. Only they have the depth of judgment, the sense of proportion, and the large-minded comprehension to handle big affairs.

One needs the curiosity to look below the surface of things. It is curiosity that has led to every scientific advance, and through it man has risen to the high level of philosophy and the meaning of things.

Curiosity is followed by research. You get hold of an idea and nurse it to life with persistent patience. You separate your key thoughts from irrelevancies. You sift through a haystack and find the pin, but you do not stop there. You look closely enough to see the Lord's Prayer inscribed on the head of it. That little extra piece of applied effort counts mightily in turning curiosity into something that is rewarding.

This process gives you faith in the validity of your judgment, which is the backbone of courage. What do commencement speakers mean when they repeat, year after year: "Education is a life-long process"? Every youth already knows, as he walks down the platform steps with his diploma in hand, that he must keep on learning.

'To Survive Errors'

What the speakers mean is something beyond keeping up with the techniques of one's profession, business, or craft. They have in mind the attributes needed to survive errors, to keep marching on a road that seems to be without end, to rise above disappointment and distress, to lie awake at night staring at broken hopes and frustrated plans and at a future that seems wholly dark - and to get up in the morning and go about their business with determination. All of these are part of education.

To pursue his course with success a man needs a strong sense of personal ability, and part of the process of maturing into excellence is that of substituting inner discipline for outer. Tolstoy wrote in one of his letters: "There never has been, and cannot be, a good life without self-control."

Nothing will protect us from external pressures and compulsions so much as the control of ourselves, based upon ideals formulated by ourselves. Much is said in praise of endurance, and indeed much should be said, because being able to bear up manfully under stress and hardship is a great accomplishment. But self-control is different: It is not continued resistance but actual mastery. It enables us to say "yes" and "no" to other men not prompted by blind obedience to a code, but with the assurance derived from a conscious evaluation of relevant alternatives.

Only an imaginary line separates those who long for excellence and those who attain it, and enthusiasm is the quality needed to carry one over the border. This means having interest, zeal, and a strong feeling of the desirability of success. Enthusiasm provides the perseverance that overcomes impediments both real and imaginary.

One obstacle in the way of progress is resistance to change. We must develop a sense of the pulse beat of this changing life. We need to observe what's going on around us and filter it through a layer of common sense so as to decide in what direction and to what extent we have to alter course.

Why Education Is Needed

At the beginning of the century the only people needing advanced education were those who were going in for medicine, the ministry, law, and the scholarly domain. Today everyone needs all the relevant education he can absorb so as to be able to cope with the complexities of life and of his job.

Capability must be changed by application and work into indubitable performance. As one of the earliest Greek poets said: "Before the gates of excellence the high gods have placed sweat." All executive work, all research, all intelligent work of every sort is based on directed diligence on lively movement, on getting one idea on the rails and springing another.

There are several sources from which the person seeking quality in life draws inspiration: School, home, the church, and experience.

Intelligence needs information on which to work and the tools with which to work. Everywhere in the world there is emphasis on education. The underdeveloped countries need elementary education urgently, and in our own country every step forward in industry and science raises the required standard of higher education.

Some wake up to the possibilities and needs in their final high-school year, or when they come up against the increased demands of freshman year in university; there are unfortunate people upon whom the realization does not dawn until they have put aside their graduation gown and rubbed shoulders with the workaday world.

Every child's home should provide a stimulating and instructive environment. Young people need to be exposed there to a context of values in which high performance is encouraged. When a prominent business man was complimented by a fellow-commuter on the scholarships won by his two sons, and was asked for the secret, he replied: "We just show them that we expect it of them."

The child has an advantage when his parents qualify themselves and exert themselves to make him familiar with books, ideas, and conversations - these are the ways and means of intellectual life - so that he feels at home in the house of intellect.

To succeed, parents need to pull themselves into the mainstream of current knowledge. They may do so by reading, by attending lectures, by taking correspondence courses, or by forming community or neighborhood study groups. Only so can they fulfil adequately their children's need for an awareness of intellectual and educational goals.

Parents are assisted by the churches. All of the great religions have enunciated principles of conduct, and have established congregations in which these principles are taught.

Practical experience is more harsh than school and home. It is ruthless but effective. We need not merely to learn things by chance or under compulsion but to develop the ability to extract the broadest meaning from our observation of the how and the why of things. One of the most valuable human rights available to the person seeking excellence is the right to correct errors revealed by experience.

This is a good time to scrutinize the virtues taken for granted in our society. Do they need to be restated, revived, and encouraged?

William James told students of Stanford University in 1906: "The world...is only beginning to see that the wealth of a nation consists more than in anything else in the number of superior men that it harbors."

A democratic, equalitarian society does not find it easy to applaud the superior individual. It fears that by praising one it belittles another, and that somehow seems to be undemocratic.

Every person of quality gives something of advantage to his country, but before the country can appreciate these gifts it must learn this: A society only produces great men in those fields in which it understands greatness. Quality and excellence must be inspired by people who expect high performance of themselves as well as others.

For The Undergraduate

The best thing to give an undergraduate at this time is encouragement toward development of quality and inspiration in his search for it. The best wish we can give the graduate is capacity for continued growth.

Inability to appreciate the need for personal devotion to the idea of excellence, either individually or through those we might stimulate toward it, may bring on that

saddest state of intelligent beings: regret for what might have been, when it is too late to take another path. The question is relevant to every person: "What is my contribution toward quality going to be?"

There is no need to become cast down if we do not at once attain the super-best. It is a good thing to strive for excellence, but we must realize that the best possible is not too bad.

Most of life is lived by batting averages, not by perfect scores. The research-scientist does not expect that every hypothesis he sets up will prove out. The financier does not expect that every investment will return a maximum dividend. People live by making plans and by putting forth efforts that are, so far as they can see, in line with the results they want. Then they revise their plans and improve their performance as experience dictates. We need fear only one failure in life: Not to be true to the best quality we know.

There is a certain satisfaction in trying, even if we do not succeed perfectly. As Robert Browning put it in Rabbit Ben Ezra:

What I aspired to be
And was not, comforts me.

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