

A Social Perspective

By

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It is not uncommon for successful individuals to make statements to the effect that “*You can be whatever you want to be*”.

The absurdity of such a sentiment beggars belief. A full analysis would significantly increase the length of this document, but a simple proof by counterexample should be sufficient for any reasonable person. Success is produced by the amalgamation of several factors, some of which I summarise as:

- Intellectual Potential
- Practical Aptitude
- Personal Ambition
- Opportunity

Of these four characteristics, personal ambition is the only one which the individual can influence to any significant extent. Intellectual and practical development are unquestionably limited by genetic factors. Opportunity is furthest from being under the control of the individual. The contrast between the circumstances facing a child born into a middle class family in the West, and those surrounding an infant in a refugee camp, ought to illustrate the point that “*What you can become is circumscribed by many things which the individual cannot influence.*”

I am fortunate in being an extremely practical, innovative, and highly trained individual. I am doubly fortunate in being married to a girl who is both gifted and highly trained. We both grew up in a society of opportunity. More importantly, at the time of our youth, the traditional family was still regarded, at least to a limited extent, as a worthwhile element within society. Being the CEO in the demanding business of raising a family 24/7 retained some credibility.

It could not be denied that the Feminist movement, supported by commercial interests was in the ascendancy. The banality of the “*Chained to the Kitchen Sink*” war cry went unchallenged. Indeed it still does.

Nevertheless, at that time it remained possible for a girl to choose the role of full time homemaker and mother, in preference to her 9-5 employment as a fully qualified professional engineer. It was feasible for a husband and wife team to cooperate, capitalising on the strengths endowed to each of them by their gender and skills. However, it was a choice which required courage to exercise. It was a choice made against opposition from many quarters. Some opposition was downright overt and cruel. Much was implicit and subversive, but equally cruel. The sources included the usual suspects of television, magazines, and books. More virulent opposition originates within professional institutions, schools, the medical profession, relatives, and even some, who would once have been classified as “*Friends*”.

When employment in engineering dried up, I trained as a teacher. In the schools, I encountered many young girls whose genuine ambition was to raise a family. It was an ambition which they dared not express other than in confidence. I made this point in the public forum of the training college, only to be lambasted. The criticism did not come from the other students, but from the member of staff conducting the forum. As the individual concerned declared before the entire course: “*I will see that you will not be given a platform.*” Well that was clear enough! Perhaps I ought to have been more circumspect. Expressing my observations openly before a known Feminist Activist, who held a key appointment in St Andrew’s Catholic Teacher Training College, was bound to be risky.

I was also foolish enough to condemn the bigotry I encountered within teaching staff in the Catholic school at which I trained. In my view, it was unacceptable behaviour. I had not observed anything similar in the non denominational schools in which I had taught. Many of the staff in the Catholic school concerned had known my parents, who had both been Catholic Schoolteachers. One of the staff made a particular point of telling me how grateful he was to my father for encouraging him to enter teaching. That teacher was particularly vocal in his bigoted commentaries. Perhaps I did not know my father very well.

Out of 150 students, there were three people refused a teaching certificate that year. I was one of them, and another was a student who was known to “*Associate*” with me. I understand that the third person was an Anglican girl. Perhaps none of this was surprising. It would never do to permit an individual to join a profession if they were unlikely to perpetuate the narrow minded - and indeed illegal - agendas of the senior incumbents. *Freedom of choice is the freedom to make the choice one is directed to make.*

From a financial point of view, the choices we made had an adverse impact on our lives. To the untrained eye, the most significant effect might be thought to be the loss of income when my wife decided to leave her employment. Such a view is simplistic in the extreme. I would not deny that economies had to be made. However, the increase in flexibility which arose from having one member of the team no longer “*Chained to the office desk*”, more than compensated for fiscal constraints. The authority to define one’s own daily schedule instead of being a slave to the routine laid down by some third party is freedom indeed. The only chain at the kitchen sink was the one which held the plug, and that was discarded at an early stage.

Of course, there are many women (and men) who would scarcely be capable of making effective use of the liberty and authority which self employment affords. There are many who would be incapable of shouldering the responsibility. There are those whose lives would quickly descend into idleness, and perhaps worse.

For many individuals, the simple structure of the 9-5 is the comfortable option. Permitting others to raise their children relieves them of a task which they regard as a burden. Such individuals might reflect that in some regions of the world, having the opportunity to raise one's children is a choice that simply isn't available.

In reality there are very few people who "*Can be whatever they want to be*".

We have been able to conduct our lives within the general guidelines of the "*Macawber Happiness Criterion*" as defined by Charles Dickens. We have continued to make progress even in periods of adversity. Our "*Womble*" characteristics enable us to make effective use of what others discard.

Most of the population do not have a background such as ours. They do not have the skills which we take for granted. They have been conditioned throughout their lives to be consumers. Their creative capacity has not been developed, and that of their children is less likely to be so.

The essentially flawed and destructive nature of Capitalism leaves it to the discretion of far sighted individuals to compensate for corporate greed and Governmental manipulation. An ability to visualise the long term results of squandering the Social Potential of the Nation has to be coupled with a willingness to set aside short term accounting principles and place a value on that which may not be immediately, or even directly, quantifiable in monetary terms.

The following items appeared in the Journal of the Society of Model and Experimental Engineers during 2010. They serve to present one possible approach which might open the door of opportunity to some individuals in due course. The outline given can be broadened and refined in many ways. In the first instance, I have in mind, those over the age of 40 years, who have found themselves discarded by the post industrial society.

THINKING ALOUD

(Letter to the editor of the SM&EE Journal by Mr Brian Harfield)

Dear Alan, the arrival of a great grandchild puts life into perspective. Many of us will have visited friends and relatives in a '*care home*' for elderly persons, and generally speaking, these are not establishments in which we would wish to end our days, even with a high standard of care. The costs are high, with overheads, staff to pay etc. and they have to run at a profit. So, what about a home for model engineers, complete with workshops, run on a co-operative basis?

Suppose, say, 40 persons made up of couples and single persons sold up their homes and could contribute £200,000 per pair. Four million pounds would buy a large country house with plenty of grounds, or probably even better, one that had been used as a hospital or school etc. Water in the form of a river or lake would be a bonus. There could also be a food producing garden with room for domestic livestock.

Model engineers and members of preservation societies have skills in many trades, and can turn their hand to all sorts of construction. The minimum accommodation would be similar to that of a self-catering holiday let, but the home may best be run on a hotel style, with large kitchen and dining room etc. There would have to be an elected management committee, along with the minimum paid staff of a housekeeper, in overall charge, and a cook.

THINKING ALLOWED!

(Adapted from a letter to SM&EE Journal by J W Cahill)

The article "*Thinking Aloud*" by Brian Harfield attracted my attention. Several years ago I read a description of the manner in which some American university had organised what amounted to a "*Faculty of Grey Hairs*." Retired members of staff who retained an enthusiasm for their subject are provided with facilities in which to potter about. There is no pay and there is no obligation to meet deadlines. To be fair, the Grey Hairs are individuals who are pretty comfortably off in any case. Most importantly though, they are not placed in some kind of isolation ward lest they infect the younger generation with their experience and wisdom. It has proved to be quite the opposite. Younger members of staff and even the students themselves have found that the Grey Hairs have time to talk and explain matters as well as making proposals and generating ideas. The Grey Hairs have found that the young folk have the energy to push the ideas forward. Brian Harfield's proposal is thus not only feasible, but a form of it has been demonstrated to be practical under favourable conditions.

Of course it is not necessary that the individuals comprising such a group be former academics. I would go as far as to suggest that ensuring academics were not permitted to proliferate unduly would promote a much more balanced community. The essential point was that the Grey Hairs regarded their area of interest as their hobby and were prepared to pursue it even when the salary was no longer an inducement. Furthermore, it is not necessary, and probably not desirable that such a community be comprised entirely of Grey Hairs.

In the university model described, the presence of younger people was an essential component contributing to the success of the arrangement. Another danger inherent in forming a community which is too limited in its range of age and interests, is that it can too easily drift into being a cult with a quasi religious belief in its own specialism and importance. Creating a community which might attract nicknames like “*Codgerville*” or “*Zimmertown*” does not strike me as a good idea.

On the other hand, the notion of “*Little Engineering on the Wold*” is quite appealing. Mr Harfield suggests that a suitable location might be a country estate or a former hospital. I would be inclined to think in terms of a former military base since these were constructed to be self contained, and are frequently close to towns and villages, providing natural scope for integration. I would also suggest that an affiliation with a university might provide a further means of assisting integration.

Prior to the advent of commuting, it was common for communities to become established in the vicinity of particular industries. It is arguable that the presence of a single major employer provided a social focus, bringing people with related skillsets together in one location. Whether the people of the community liked their employment or not, they were surrounded by a concentrating force for like minds and a common context for their lives.

Commuting is perhaps one of the most extensively adopted *lifewasting* behaviours known to modern society. Stand on any motorway overpass in the morning and watch how similar volumes of similar types of traffic travel in opposite directions. Watch again in the evening and observe the traffic retrace its steps. Then consider that for the most part, the people and goods going in opposite directions and back again were comparable. The jobs the people do are comparable. Their salaries and conditions of employment will be comparable. Their future prospects will be comparable. Commuting is counterproductive to the welfare of communities. Commuters consume their “*Quality*” time and resources travelling to and from their place of employment. They expose themselves to unnecessary travel risk. There is no sensible reason why people should not be employed locally, or goods produced and consumed locally, to the greatest possible extent.

In the absence of the major local employer as a common factor, it is not unreasonable to suggest that individuals with a common interest should create a community instead. Furthermore, as Brian Harfield indicates, there is no reason why such a community would not give rise to healthy business activities in due course.

The Irish Government has spent a lot of time and hundreds of millions of Euros creating what it calls “*Centres of Excellence*” of one sort or another. I am yet to hear of a single one of these institutions producing anything of note. In my view, the reason is simple. Money builds empires, nothing more. Money can purchase a few Professors and experts with glowing CVs. But these individuals are likely to be career driven “*CV polishers*”. Their eye is on their next promotion, which will be achieved by making the rounds on the “*Conference Jolly*” circuit and publishing arcane papers that few will ever read. If these types are presented with a real challenge they are likely to seek their next appointment that much sooner.

An amalgamation of self motivated individuals with a common purpose and a touch of pigheaded obstinacy in the face of adversity is essential to create any form of excellence. Such groups come into existence more or less spontaneously. Perhaps it is possible to sustain and develop such a group once it forms, but setting out to create one using *money* and *status* as the driving forces has a low success probability. Pay peanuts and perhaps you’ll get monkeys, but pay high salaries and you will definitely get greedy monkeys.

Several years ago, I devised an energy storage technology. I tested the core principle and satisfied myself that my reasoning was sound. The technology is exceptionally valuable. However, bitter experience of the Intellectual Property Circus forced me to accept that as an individual I would be swept away by vested interests if I attempted to commercialise the technology on my own. I know that I need strong institutional or commercial backing. Had I been employed in a university or commercial organisation the technology would have been on stream long since.

As an Individual I know that my best, and in fact only, policy is to maintain the secrecy of the technology until I obtain appropriate backing. The technology is sufficiently important that it would improve the ranking of any university which adopted it. The royalties would easily fund an engineering or scientific research group within the first 3 years, and in due course could be expected to finance an entire department with ease. My initial conclusion was that the technology might therefore serve to restart my mainstream academic research career. I put the proposal to a number of universities. I also approached commercial organisations and offered it to various governments including the last and present UK administrations. Furthermore, I went to some lengths to explain to the present UK Government how the technology could be funded at zero cost to the UK taxpayer, and based on a very modest estimate, would create a number of high quality technical jobs while saving the UK economy about £1Bn annually. - I might have saved myself the postage.

As time passed my thinking developed. Reflecting on the potential value of the technology, I realised that once my personal financial security was assured, I have no desire for annual royalties which could readily amount to tens of millions of pounds. What I really want is to see that the technology produces some benefit for mankind. My vision incorporate the establishment of an organisation for development and deployment of intermediate technologies. This will not be some esoteric ivory tower based on the Keynesian philosophy of “*Jam tomorrow*” but never Jam today. Nor will it be a mud hut and toy windmills organisation. I have hopes of attracting a group of hard headed enthusiasts who would like to do some good with their lives, know what quality is, and are prepared to strive for it. One volunteer is worth 10 conscripts. With such a team, Jam will be ready for immediate delivery - every day.