

SEVEN MARKS OF GENIUS

ONE DAY, when discussing the subject of greatness with Emil Ludwig, the celebrated biographer of Napoleon, Bismarck and Goethe, I heard him make this observation:

"The inherited talent of the great German genius, Goethe, appears to have been no greater than that of half a dozen contemporary German poets, but these others lacked the devotion and faith to make themselves more than God had given them to start with. Goethe on the other hand, like the diligent man in the gospel, put his talent to usury."

Ludwig called my attention to the fact that Goethe, when he was twenty, distrusted his early and easily won glory, and resolved to apply himself that he might do better. At twenty-three he began *Faust*. There were in Germany at this time two other talented poets, Wieland and Lenz. Today, they are practically unknown even to close students of German literature.

Wieland and Lenz appear to

have been as talented by nature as Goethe himself. Why have they been entirely lost sight of? Because they were not so earnest, not so eager, and they did not desire what Goethe desired, at least not in the same way. They digressed from their objectives. One was diverted by love affairs; the other turned his attention to industry.

But Goethe, having made a good start and having won praise, *persevered*. He developed his gifts by self-education, took upon himself great labors, meditated profoundly upon affairs of state and, in the fullness of his powers, pursued his studies in literature and in those larger subjects, mankind and natural science.

Geniuses, though born with high capacities, work and keep on working as though they had great handicaps to overcome. No one can say how commonplace their achievements might be did they not persevere in training themselves in the abilities required for accomplishing their objectives. Perseverance!

I used to visit Thomas Edison at his laboratories at Menlo Park, New Jersey. One day, one of his assistants showed me the bunk where the famous inventor slept when he was perfecting the early wax cylinder type of phonograph.

Ludwig referred to that bunk as an impressive symbol both of Edison's character and the *intensity* of his genius. Weary and worn by days and nights of continuous labor, he lay down there to rest, returning to his work upon recovering from excessive fatigue after a brief interval.

That, however, is not the normal way of doing things. The average man, having wearied at his task, suspends his efforts and goes home to bed for eight or more hours. But not this man, so strong, so determined, so un-mindful of himself and so obsessed with his purpose.

It is conduct of this sort that has led to the saying that genius is always a little bit mad. What this observation is intended to convey I would put in a different way.

In the course of his development, the genius acquires extraordinary powers of concentration. This power of concentration, together with an intense devotion

to some particular end, may result in an abnormal preoccupation with a single pursuit for days or months or years, as in the case of Einstein, for instance, and to such a degree that it amounts to an *obsession*, a fixed idea. And this betrays, itself in conduct that impresses the observer as a kind of madness, though in the circumstances it is comprehensible and sane.

Nowadays, there are iconoclasts who would smash certain interesting traditions that have been handed down to us about great men. One story, now questioned, is that of the inspiration which came to Newton when he beheld the falling apple. While this story, historically, must probably be accepted as a myth, even the iconoclast admits it to be *psychologically* true. That is to say, the anecdote represents the way in which a great mind acts. *Things are continually happening that are loaded with suggestive meanings, but only the intellectually prepared—the man with a purpose—can interpret them.*

As we have seen in an earlier chapter, once the mind has been trained to work and think in a certain direction, and is well informed, we all experience occasionally what might be called

flashes of insight. The same thing happens to the genius in every field of endeavor, only in his case, because of the momentous results, they are called *inspirations*.

The everlasting and phoenix-like characteristic of the aspiring man, the healthy genius, is sufficiently expressed by that familiar, plain, unvarnished word—*enthusiasm*. In another era, when a different mode of expression prevailed, George Sand, in her florid way, voiced much the same thought in a letter to her old friend, Gustav Flaubert:

“To love in spite of everything, I think that is the answer to the enigma of the universe. Always to grow, to spring up, to be born again, to seek and will life, to embrace one’s opposite in order to assimilate it, to receive the prodigy of blendings and combinations from which emerge the prodigy of new forms—that is the law of Nature.”

Hand in hand with that inborn talent which is characteristic of genius goes something else, and that is a lordly self-confidence, *faith*. It is characteristic of the genius that he believes in his mission and in his own powers, though recognition from the world be long withheld.

Genius, then, is talent developed to the nth power, plus certain inner capital that we call character. The genius is the man who fulfills his fancies. Calculating the odds against him, he perseveres in the development of his natural gifts. Passing through stages of growth and change, he acquires those abilities which enable him to transform his imaginings into facts.

One thing the genius is *not*. He is not a mythical being whose mind does not work like that of the average man. Nor is he one who endowed with miraculous powers enabling him to produce successful commercial enterprises, scientific theories, poems masterpieces of art, mechanical inventions, great business organizations and theories of government, with the ease of a Houdini shaking rabbits out of a hat. Like other men, geniuses differ in many ways, in stature, in disposition, in habits of work.

On the other hand, if certain qualities are common to them all and are not possessed to anything like the same degree by other men, is it not reasonable to suppose that things make the genius what he is?

Follow from beginning to end the life story of any genius, and you find that this is true: He picks a goal that has a meaning all its own for him. He gets his schooling. He makes it hard. He hangs on, shaping the powers within him by the fires of his own troubles, defeats and victories. In sickness or in health, in sorrow or in gladness, he rises to the occasion, exulting, confident that out of his own brass he can hammer the unique instrument that will make his dream come true.

The seven marks of genius? I recapitulate.

First, the genius, like all the rest of us, is born with a *natural aptitude*. It may be very marked from the start.

Second, he *discovers* what this went really is. As with rest of us, his discovery may come early, or may come late.

Third, he *develops* that aptitude, trains his abilities to a high

degree of effectiveness.

Fourth, he *petsists* in the application of effectiveness.

Fifth, he applies himself with never-failing *enthusiasm* under all sorts of conditions.

Sixth, he applies himself with such concentrated energy and mental power that *flashes of insight or genuine inspirations* come to him; and these are productive of ideas that facilitate his labors and benefit himself and his work.

Seventh, having counted the cost, he has faith that his end will be achieved if he pays the price.

Identically the same seven traits are characteristic of all successful men and women in every field, from Pupin, Ammann and Tesla to G. A. Garver, to Beeman, to Brasher, to Markham, Robinson, Barnard, Einstein, Edison and Ford. The difference is simply one of degree, and perhaps mainly one of intensity.—*An excerpt from Your Life.*

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A PATRIOTIC ORATOR

"CAN you give me a definition of a patriotic orator?"

"Well, if you want definition, he's the fellow who's ready to lay down your life for his country."