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"The Measure of Success" by J. Francis Douglas, UND Commencement: June 13, 1933

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1933

THE MEASURE OF SUCCESS

* * *

By J. F. Douglas

Those of us who talk at Commencement time are asked to put some old message in a new dress, in the hope that we who have traveled the road over which you are just starting may give you a thought that will quicken some latent force within you.

I have taken as a text "THE MEASURE OF SUCCESS."

It would be difficult to find two persons who would give the same definition of success, for it appears in different form to every man. Before we can develop a method, a plan, for success, we must know in our own hearts what we are really striving for. We must delve deeply into the meaning of life itself, life in relation to ourselves, and our relation in life to others.

Volumes have been written on the subject, but no two writers are in accord in resolving that much to be desired and elusive something called "success" into a single definition. It seems to be pretty well grounded in all of us that it is material; that "success" is usually spelled "riches". Yet very few of us could name even a limited number of men of a past generation whose sole claim to remembrance is based on wealth. But the names of many persons come quickly to mind who have made outstanding successes in ways other than material.

Success may seem elusive, yet it is right within our grasp. We have only to recognize what it is; then work diligently toward this goal. As your lives go on, you will find success more spiritual than material; you will find that it consists in utilizing forces and opportunities that lie all around you.

You are entering what for many of you will be an unsettled period in your lives. You may have the way charted out for a short distance, but the change from college life to the next phase of living will be greater than you now realize. What can one say that will make the way seem clearer? With your minds full to overflowing with distracting interests of the moment, we will indeed be fortunate if we can open up a line of thought that may be an inspiration to you.

Our problem is to apply some simple rules to our lives so that we will merit and realize a measure of successful living and accomplishment.

Don't depend too much on a college education. But realize always that college provides you with certain fundamental advantages. It rests with you to use them. You have, in the four years just behind you, acquired something with which many others will not be equipped in their struggle toward success. They must learn through trial and error what you already know. But you must use this knowledge, not as a resting place, but as a stepping stone.

"Who's Who" indicates that the college graduate has much the best chance for success, but my personal experience has been that many executives are not college graduates. Some non-graduates, feeling themselves handicapped by lack of early education and training, apply themselves so diligently and effectively that they make up any lack of early advantages. Better to have an enthusiastic and forceful non-graduate than an indifferent and colorless college man.

A boy came into our office in Seattle and applied for a job. He had finished High School but had not been able to go to college. We had no opening at the moment, we were long-handed, but I could not let this boy go. There was such an air about him, such pent-up personality, I hired him.

He was engaged and put on the payroll until we could find a place for him. We were unable to keep him long, for other people sensed the possibilities of this boy. He has move along until he is the financial vice-president of one of the largest utility companies in this country.

This boy had so filled himself with enthusiasm and good spirits that he was certain to succeed even before he found his first position.

You cannot get out of a pitcher more than you put into it. If you put no enthusiasm into your life, no enthusiasm can or will come out of it. Generally, when there is enthusiasm, there is a certain measure of success.

I have always been in favor of a college education. Three members of our family are graduates of this University. My wife is a graduate. I have three children, all college graduates. As a family we have had close contact with several Universities. I feel that the University of North Dakota is able to turn out graduates with a splendid preparation for the future, but this must be adapted to and used by the graduate himself in his individual endeavor.

My wife and I were two years in the same class in preparatory school, and four years in the same class in this University. We were graduated on the same day. Any success that has come to us has been in no small measure due to her cooperation.

The University of North Dakota in number of students ranks lower than many others. But consider in how many fields of endeavor the students of this University have labored, and how they have stood out like beacon lights. How full is the history of the State with the contributions of the men and women who have studied at this University. How different would be that history without their contribution.

Most of us were rough material in my day. We came from the farms, from the small towns, from poorly equipped schools. It was the University's job to make out of this material well rounded men and women, able to hold their own in the world against those who had been more favored by circumstance. Out of rough diamonds were fashioned many notable sons and daughters.

Through all the years since the University opened its doors it has been educating young men and women far above the average in all worth while qualities. This is no idle statement. Many of us who have been required to appraise men and women, have found from hundreds of close contacts how high minded and wide visioned are the average graduates of this University.

The members of this class have had the benefits of facilities, social and cultural, worked out by pioneering students long before any of you came to the University. The pioneer development of the University was taking place while we were in preparatory school, and during the four years we were in the University itself.

One story may illustrate this growth. Tennis was just coming in about the time our class started through preparatory school. No grounds were ready for us. Two boys borrowed a team, hitched one horse to each end of a railroad iron, and dragged this iron across a stretch of the campus for several hours on a Saturday.

On the grounds thus prepared a tennis court was laid out. But we learned, on that crude court, to play tennis! Six years later there were three or four finely built courts, with all modern equipment.

The same relative progress was made in all student activities. It is now up to you students to maintain the standard set by these pioneer students, even more so because you have had ready-made all the facilities which cost them time and diligent effort. If you do a little better in all ways than the pioneers who paved the way for you, you will be successful men and women.

Have you ever noticed that in every group there is a leader? If you put some men to work on a ditch, you may select a boss in two ways. You can name one of the men boss, or you may let the men select their own boss. If you leave the men alone, they will choose the one among them who is actually fitted to lead, and they will soon be responding to his suggestions and orders.

There is always one man in a group who stands out above the rest, whom others recognize as the man to follow. You can so cultivate friendliness of spirit, the inward strength of a composed and thoughtful mind, breadth and fairness of outlook, that you will stand out as a leader.

About fifteen miles from Victoria in British Columbia was a tract of land from which large amounts of lime rock had been taken, leaving peaks of waste. There were depressions, and rough, unsightly places. But a woman with vision lived in a summer home close by. She began to cover the rough spots with rock plants; she used some of the depressions for pools.

From a small beginning a garden grew that is famous all around the world. It has been visited by tens of thousands of people, who have derived great pleasure from their visit. Many have been inspired by this woman who turned an ugly waste into a glorious garden by utilizing the materials under her hand. Thousands have been stimulated to do more and better gardening.

What a success is represented in this transformation, and what a success this woman has been who continually shares the beauty of her garden with others,

A certain farmer noticed how pitifully small and of what poor quality was the milk of the average cow. He formed a great desire to change this condition. In a few years he developed the record milk-producing cow of all time. This cow gave seven times as much milk as the average cow.

This farmer developed a strain of record-producing cows whose progeny have been shipped to all parts of the world. A grand-daughter of the champion cow now holds the honor of second largest milk production on record.

Learning of these results, thousands of dairy owners were stimulated to increase their milk production with better types of cattle. Here is a success almost unmeasurable in the benefits to mankind, yet the opportunity stood waiting, until this man came to grasp it.

I remember when I was about fifteen years old, trying, in a stumbling sort of way, to figure out why one man was more successful than another. It seemed like a hard problem, but out of a good deal of confused thinking came the idea that the man who could and would do more work than the average man, would have an advantage. I put the idea into practice, and found that practical results followed. The man who can and will do more and better work than the average man, will reap a measure of success.

Biographies have always been very interesting to me. Gradually it became clear to me that the people in the biographies were very much of one mold. They started out at the bottom of the ladder; they encountered many obstacles and overcame them.

There were long periods in their lives when they seemed to make little progress. At length, with what appeared to be stored-up resourcefulness, they emerged as leaders. When adversity is conquered, a foundation for success seems to be surely laid.

I do not know the author of the following statement. It was used recently in a speech by one of our great industrial executives. I quote it here because it illustrates the point of adversity overcome:

"In every life there is a cross. Some sink under the weight of their crosses, and lie still under them as if they were their gravestones; others carry them stumbling, often falling, but bravely pressing on; others carry their crosses with a straight back and a smiling face, not calling on anyone to come and pity them; and some there are who lift their crosses high and carry them gaily as if they were banners. They gleam with light and men look and wonder how a cross can be so glorious."

Make your cross a glory. Make it a test of your ability, a measuring rod for your success, and behold! It becomes a banner with which you march proudly.

No better example of an ambition that crystallized into success can be found than the results from the work of President Merrifield, who was President of the University while I was in school here, and for whom I formed a deep and lasting affection.

He desired to so touch the lives of the North Dakota boy and girl that their horizons would be enlarged, that they would be inspired to do things worth while, and that they would become men and women who would be a credit to this University. How humbly he started out on this course, but what a success was his!

He had the ability to touch a commonplace thought so that it sparkled with a newer and deeper brilliance. President Merrifield was accustomed to discuss the prospects of a student with other students. I assume that he discussed my qualifications or the lack of them with the other boys. This was undoubtedly one of the ways in which he entered deeply into our lives. One day we were speaking of a certain boy and I remarked that he didn't look like a success because he had very little enthusiasm or initiative.

"He will succeed," said President Merrifield. "He has good manners."

I can remember with what force that remark struck me. Could good manners have so great a bearing on success? His reply impressed me deeply, and throughout my life I have noticed that successful men have generally been poised men; perfectly at ease in all surroundings. They have the courtesy of tolerance, the delicacy of feeling which brings out always the best in others, the modesty of demeanor which seems to come to men of unusual ability and broadness of mind.

Time will not permit us to review the constructive work of the men and women who at various times have served on the faculty of the University, but I can

at least mention the name of Professor Earl J. Babcock, who in my time was working early and late in his laboratory. Handicapped with limited equipment and in other ways, he patiently pursued his studies into the clays, the coals and other resources of this state. How modestly he carried on this work, but how much he did to uncover our hidden wealth.

A great part of the success of this University is due to the courageous leadership of the men who have held the office of President. President McVey and President Kane have carried on the tradition of the University of North Dakota, giving themselves completely to the great work of developing men and women.

I am inclined to think too large a percentage of the graduates of the University of North Dakota have moved to distant fields on the theory that greater advantages lay outside the state. I confess I am one of those persons. But no one district has a monopoly on opportunity. You are all familiar with the success of those students who have remained in North Dakota.

Our family was one of the pioneer families of this state. My father was a member of the Constitutional Convention which framed the Constitution of this State. We arrived in Grafton April 1885. I was a small boy at the time. No means of transportation being available, my father and I walked to our farm, a distance of seventeen miles.

The road could hardly be considered a trail. Long stretches were covered with water from one to three feet deep. By night there was a crust of ice over these pools of water. We came to one stretch where the water was too deep for me to get through, and my father ferried me through on his back. We arrived at our destination late at night, weary and wet and benumbed with cold.

The first summer my sister and I went to school in a shanty school house about two and a half miles from our home, walking the distance both ways. We had for desks a plain board table; and plain board seats with straight backs for benches.

In the winter time four or five boys would join together and rent a couple of rooms in town, where they "batched", in order to have a few more months of schooling.

In the course of a year or two we had better country schools, but they were only open a few months in the year. One Spring term I went to school in town and rode on horseback nine miles each morning and afternoon.

This was typical of the experiences of the pioneers in this state. Most of them, like ourselves, had come from comfortable homes in the East. I have often wondered what it was that caused these pioneers to give up their homes, where their families had been long established, to push on to the West, where they were forced to live with few conveniences, and where life entailed many hardships.

When we came West, there was a long train filled with pioneers, all seeking to locate new homes on the prairies of this State. There was something about the great expanse of the prairies, the feeling of a vast out-of-doors, that made them contented under these difficult circumstances.

A number of great men at one time or another have pioneered in this State. The list includes such names as Theodore Roosevelt. For years a large part of the activity of the great railroad builder James J. Hill was taken up with our transportation development.

All the troubles you have now in this State were present in pioneer days. We had a low price for wheat; many farms were mortgaged and abandoned. In spite of all the difficulties, development went on. The country was settled up; roads were laid out; churches and schools were built; and other improvements carried through.

We had no automobiles, no radios, no such amusements as a picture show. We had only an occasional church service, when a visiting missionary would come our way. If one of the Dakota pioneers could return and see the fine living conditions North Dakota offers today, he would feel the people of this State led a very rosy existence.

We are too prone to measure our fortunes in terms of money. We are distressed because wheat and other grains are so low, and because taxes are so high. We have found difficulty in making our income equal to what we feel is the necessary outgo. It is surprising, however, how many things we have that cost very little, that are still open to us almost as free as air.

When we think of North Dakota scenically we generally think of it as a prairie state, but you must not overlook the fact that in few places on the earth can be found more wild beauty than in the Bad Lands of this State.

While the seasons are short, there are very few places in all the world where flowers grow more abundantly and are more beautiful, or where they thrive better than in North Dakota. I remember what a pride we used to take in our old fashioned gardens, with sweet peas and nasturtiums, and other varieties of flowers, growing as they seemed to grow nowhere else.

It is hard to beat the North Dakota vegetables and grains. You can be proud of your fine fields and gardens. In fact, nearly all the advantages of living can still be yours in spite of the depressed market for your products.

Just as it was possible to make a world famous garden in a waste spot, so you can find here in North Dakota some undeveloped resource, and capitalize it for your own benefit and the benefit of others. I quote a verse from William Herschell, substituting North Dakota for Indiana. What Herschell says of Indiana is just as true of this State:

"Ain't God good to North Dakota?
Other spots may look as fair,
But they lack that soothin' somethin'
In North Dakota sun and air.
That don't have that snug-up feelin'
Like a Mother gives a child;
They don't soothe you, soul and body,
With their breezes soft and mild.
They don't know the joys of Heaven
Have their birthplace here below;
Ain't God good to North Dakota?
Ain't He, fellows? Ain't He, though?"

The great activity of this state is farming. Perhaps it might not be amiss to tell you a farm story. Not long ago, in driving through a Western state with a real estate man, I asked him to tell me the experiences of the farmers whose lands lay along our way.

One man had over-extended and bought too much land; another man was caught in the wheat market, another had lost everything in the stock market; one man

bought too many automobiles and too much farm machinery on credit when grains were selling at a high price. Finally we came to another farm, and I was told the story of its owner.

He had only about eighty acres of land, but he worked it intensively. He had a small home, and this home and all out-buildings were nicely painted. It looked as though he took a pride in the place where he lived, and even in the places where he housed his cattle and stored his grain. He had one son in Harvard. He had no debts. Somehow or other he had managed to make a living on this small farm, and made a good job of raising his family.

In rare instances success may be due to a grouping of circumstances which may be termed luck; but somehow in every background is a man who labored patiently, perseveringly and intelligently toward a desired end. I was reminded, in looking at this small farm, of how large a part paint and elbow grease play in the making of a home.

This painstaking attention to the matters nearest at hand, doing them in the best possible way, is no barrier to grasping an opportunity when it presents itself. Rather is it a training ground, making one confident of an ability to carry on.

The time and thought spent in striving toward a certain goal develops a consistency of character which proves a foundation of lasting stability. So, trained to observe, to work, to accomplish in small things, one is ready when the big chance comes, to step firmly into the larger opportunity. One must be ready to receive, or nothing is given him.

The years we spent on a North Dakota farm were happy years for all the members of our family. Yet we had grasshoppers and drought, and frost, and hail. It seemed as though Nature took a delight in scourging us. Through all the discomforts, I believe we were building a resistance to discouragement, a determination to advance over every difficulty, an enthusiasm for accomplishment, which has stood for much in our later lives. A strong character can only be attained by men and women who have had obstacles to overcome.

At the present time our troubles are world-wide and seem overwhelming, but the best minds in the world are working on these problems; eventually solutions will be found for our major woes, -- the lesser ones we can solve ourselves.

After every depression land values have come back; Nature smiles again upon the earth, and crops are generous. Increasing buying power comes to the residents of the cities; increasing demand and higher prices come for the products of the farm.

I remember how restricted was the field for women's work at the time we attended the University. Women were practically limited to home building. But the field for women has widened, and they now compete with men in all the professions. In politics, business and every field of endeavor, the way is now open to women on substantially the same basis as men. There is no better illustration of this than to call your attention to the fact that the Director of the Mint is a woman; another woman sits in the cabinet of the President of the United States, a woman is Minister to Denmark.

The women of today are reaping the benefits of all the years of preliminary work that was done by their mothers and grandmothers, who opened up new and wide fields of endeavor for them. If you young women can earn a small rate of interest on all the thought and labor that has been put into the opening up of new worlds for

you, you may call yourselves successful.

Some of you will go into the professions, or business. More of you will be home makers. It isn't an easy matter to be a good home maker. It is a profession. This means aside from the business of home making, bringing into the family a knowledge and appreciation of the finer things of life, making your home a centre of culture and refinement.

With the right kind of a home you will have the background for a good family. No failure is so great as an unsuccessful family. No success is so great as a well raised and happy family.

A chemist cannot analyze, or the scientist tabulate, the properties of success. Each of you is individualized so sharply that you are unlike any other person in the world, and yet you are a part of the great human plan. Success to you may mean something entirely different than it means to the person beside you.

The measure of your own success will be determined by the use to which you wisely and resolutely put the collective result of your training, environment and will power. Recognition may come to you through world-wide acclaim; or your success in life may be unknown except in the quiet knowledge of your own heart.

Purpose, definitely clear, must control your life history. And purpose is not blind, unreasoning stubbornness. It must be capable of flexibility when necessity demands, without wavering from the goal upon which the vision is fixed.

Life is too short for anything but the best. With this desire, it matters little if realization falls short of expectation. In the struggle to achieve lies the soul's greatest growth and finest satisfaction.

Success will come to you according to what you make of yourself. If you have striven to accomplish what is best for yourself and others, and have endeavored to make your life a benefit to mankind, you can honestly say, "So far as it was possible for me to make it, my life was a success."

A noted theatrical producer went down to death in the sinking of a great ocean liner. His last words were, "We are on the edge of a great adventure."

You too are on the edge of a great adventure, but your adventure is on the sea of life. No sure and certain course can be laid out for you. Success in some measure will come to every man or woman who lives life richly, fully, and with deep understanding. Robert Louis Stevenson tells us how to live in his beautiful prayer, offered in family devotions during the time he spent at Vailima:

"Give us grace and strength to forbear and to persevere. Give us courage and gaiety and the quiet mind. Spare to us our friends, soften to us our enemies. Bless us, if it may be, in all our innocent endeavors. If it may not, give us the strength to encounter that which is to come, that we may be brave in peril, constant in tribulation, temperate in wrath and in all changes of fortune, and down to the gates of death, loyal and loving to one another."