

THE GENIUS OF PERSISTENCE – PART 3

RESEARCH INDICATES THAT EVEN AMONG THE MOST GIFTED SCIENTISTS, ATHLETES OR PERFORMERS, MORE THAN A DECADE OF INTENSE TRAINING AND PREPARATION IS REQUIRED BEFORE ACHIEVING A WORLD-CLASS LEVEL OF PERFORMANCE.

Two very different individuals and their professional careers come to mind as a classic example of this finding—Actor and dancer Fred Astaire, and 19th century British missionary William Carey. Fred Astaire.

Fred Astaire (1899-1987) is by consensus the greatest dancer to grace the silver screen. Now an American icon, Astaire has been hailed as an artistic and performing genius, grace personified and the best dancer ever. Of course no one would confuse Astaire with William Carey, but he does share something in common with Carey—he, too, was a shining example of the “genius of persistence.”

In January 1933, the thirty-four year old Astaire, then an emerging Broadway star, entered the RKO film studio in Hollywood for a movie screen test. A young studio executive wrote this now infamous description of him. Asked to review his talent the executive wrote, “Can’t sing. Can’t act. Slightly bald. Also dances.”

Astaire later admitted that this evaluation was not so much a miscalculation as it was a factual judgment of his talent—in 1933—before he went to work perfecting his craft. If the studio executive mischaracterized Astaire at all, it was that he failed to see Astaire’s primary talent, the genius of his persistence.

THE STUDIO EXECUTIVE ACCURATELY ASSESSED ASTAIRE’S PRESENT LEVEL OF COMPETENCE, BUT NOT HIS WILL TO PERSIST IN PERFECTING HIS CRAFT.

Astaire was later given a chance by RKO and he seized the opportunity, starring with Ginger Rogers in the RKO movies Top Hat, Swing Time, The Gay Divorcee, and Roberta.

Like Edison and William Carey, there is no doubt that Astaire was a man of immense talent, but he was also a man with an enormous capacity to stay the course and work hard—his greatest talent.

ASTAIRE WAS WELL KNOWN FOR SETTING HIGHER AND HIGHER STANDARDS FOR HIS PERFORMANCE, AND PERSISTING IN HIS EFFORTS TO PERFORM AT THESE HIGHER AND HIGHER LEVELS.

Author and Astaire biographer Bob Thomas knew Astaire for over forty years and interviewed him many times. Writing in Astaire, the Man the Dancer, Thomas observed of Astaire,

“He (Astaire) was feverishly competitive, but always against himself.”

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THE SEEMINGLY EFFORTLESS GRACE WE SEE IN HIS DANCE MOVES ON THE MOVIE SCREEN WAS THE RESULT OF ENORMOUS EFFORT—HOURS AND HOURS AND HOURS OF PRACTICE, AND MULTIPLE TAKES AND RETAKES OF DANCE SCENES.

“For Astaire,” wrote Thomas, “the 46th try was the charm.”

William Carey

I can't think of a better example of the genius of perseverance than the missionary to India William Carey (1761-1834). It was Carey who penned the words,

"Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God."

This financially destitute pastor and part time shoemaker acted on his words and, with his family, set sail for India in 1793 to spread the gospel.

Upon his arrival, Cary, along with his partners in mission, William Ward and Joshua Marshman faced severe physical, financial and personal hardship. Carey's first wife, Dorothy succumbed to a decade long battle with mental illness and died on the mission field. Yet remarkably Carey persisted in his work.

Carey and his colleagues labored for forty years in building the Serampore mission enterprise. They studied and translated Indian dialects, and organized a network of mission stations. It was suggested by some of his contemporaries that the results of Carey's work were due primarily to his genius for language. When asked about his prodigious accomplishments Carey replied,

"I am not a genius, just a plodder."

In addition to founding numerous mission schools, the Agricultural Society of India, and abolishing the practice of widow burning, this self-proclaimed "plodder" completed six translations and twenty-four partial translations of the Bible.

The career and contribution of people like Edison, Astaire and Carey exemplify the truth of Coolidge's plaque.

"Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence."

WE COULD RIGHTLY SAY THAT PERSISTENCE IS THE DEMAND LIFE MAKES UPON THOSE WHO ASPIRE TO EXCEL IN ANY DIFFICULT AND WORTHWHILE ENDEAVOR.