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Dear David:

Thank you for your kind invitation to me to participate in **The Legacy Letter Project**. It appears to be a novel and very worthy project and I will be pleased to participate and will do so in the following manner. When I had the honor of being inducted into the **Horatio Alger Association** in 2002, I was asked to respond to a series of questions to be used in a seminar with some 100 Horatio Alger Fellows who were being awarded collegiate scholarships by the Association in conjunction with the induction of ten new Horatio Alger members. Set forth below are the questions posed and my responses, which I am hopeful may be of interest to your students, just as they were to the Horatio Alger Fellows who were 2002 scholarship winners selected from some 40,000 disadvantaged applicants from throughout the U.S. For those who may not be familiar with the Horatio Alger Association, let me say succinctly that it is an Association founded in 1947 that in meeting its missions, "identifies and honors distinguished Americans who, through hard work and determination, have overcome adversity to become self-made successes in their chosen fields of endeavor. In turn, these American heroes and heroines provide college scholarships and become mentors to this nation's most deserving youth." At present, the Association has 300+ members and each year provides \$11.5 million to fund some 100 scholarships for Horatio Alger Fellows selected by the Association from all corners of our nation. The questions posed to me and my responses follow.

### **WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THE AMERICAN DREAM TO YOU?**

The American dream, to me, means the opportunity that each one of us has to rise as high in life's accomplishments as our God-given talents will take us – providing we are willing to become educated, work hard, and persevere in overcoming adversity. If one vigorously devotes himself or herself to this pursuit, there will be many people along the way who will be more than ready to lend a hand to put you in position to help others as you strive to reach your American dream. To achieve this goal, one should strive to:

- Maintain a positive attitude about his or her own persona.
- Not permit adverse circumstances to crush personal hopes and dreams.
- Seize opportunities when they are presented; and be respectfully pro-active.
- Be respectful of others and help them to reach their goals.
- Develop a code of personal morality.

## **WHAT IS THE BIGGEST OBSTACLE IN LIFE THAT YOU HAVE OVERCOME TO ACHIEVE SUCCESS?**

The sine-qua-non for a successful life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is education. The single biggest obstacle that I overcame in my early years was the dilemma of how to self finance my undergraduate collegiate education – for without that, nothing that came later would have been possible.

### **How did you do that?**

At age 15, it became apparent that the best paying jobs for junior and senior high school students of my time were summer laboring positions on the “line-gangs” of the local power company engaged in building electrical distribution systems in my home town in northern Iowa. It was clear that nearly all of the kids who got those jobs were the sons of well-to-do “country club” type families.

In making this observation to an adult member of our church, that person suggested that I should go to see Charlie Strickland. I inquired as to his identity and was informed that he was the head of the local power company. So naively, I walked up to the power company one morning thereafter and told the receptionist that I would like to see “Charlie Strickland.” She seemed surprised by my request, but directed me to the top floor of the building. Upon emerging from the elevator, I found myself in a world I had never seen before – namely, “walnut row,” with lots of wood paneling, glass, carpeting, and a general aura of luxury. On the wall was a sign reading: Charles A. Strickland, Chairman and CEO – words with which I had no familiarity. I entered the door to Mr. Strickland’s office and was encountered by two secretaries who entertained my request to see Mr. Strickland. They asked if I had an appointment, which obviously was a rhetorical question. One of the secretaries entered the inner sanctum of the office and came back in a few minutes indicating that Mr. Strickland would see me now. As I entered his office, I encountered a humongous desk in a very spacious office surrounded by shelves of books and memorabilia and, needless to say, my legs were a bit rubbery. Mr. Strickland came out from behind his desk and greeted me warmly and invited me to take a chair. He then asked what he could do for me and I repeated my tale that the best jobs in town held by kids of my age were on his line-gang, but that my observations were that most of them were filled by sons of well-connected families. And since I was not in that category, I thought I would apply directly to him for one of the positions, and I would be grateful for any help that he could provide. He responded by indicating that he personally did not handle these positions but that he had an officer who was in charge of that segment of the company. He then asked about the nature of my family, what my father did for a living, and what I planned to do with the money that I would earn from one of the line-gang jobs, were I fortunate enough to get one. I told him that I needed the money to finance an undergraduate college education and that the money would be used almost exclusively for this purpose. He then buzzed a secretary and directed that she ask the other officer to join us, which he did. Mr. Strickland told him who I was and why I was there and it seemed to me that the officer was somewhat perturbed by my direct approach to Mr. Strickland for one of the positions falling under his purview. But, fortunately, Mr. Strickland told him that I felt that most of the line-gang positions were going to well connected young people and that since I didn’t fall into that category, an adult friend had suggested that I apply directly to Mr. Strickland. He

went on to indicate that he wanted the officer to walk me through the application process and to do whatever he could to assure that I was seriously considered for one of those positions. As I walked out of that office with the officer I did so with the clear impression that the message had just been delivered that I was to be employed on the line-gang during the upcoming summer months. Sure enough, a month later I received notice from the power company that my application had been accepted and that I should appear for work on such and such a day. I obviously did, and I was on one of the line-gangs for the next six summers, and used almost all those funds as a base for financing my undergraduate education at a high-quality small liberal arts college.

Needless to say, I shall forever be grateful to Mr. Strickland for opening up a whole new vista in my life. Upon earning an undergraduate degree, I served in the U.S. Army for two years, after which I completed graduate education at the U. of I. courtesy of the Federally-funded G.I. Bill of Rights.

### **WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO YOUNG PEOPLE REGARDING HOW TO GET STARTED IN LIFE?**

In my experience, most young people, particularly those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, do not, early on, have a reliable way of measuring their own talents and how their God given talents compare vis-a-vis others with whom they are competing. Given that reality, I would advise young people to set goals that are realistic in terms of achievement and then once achieved – continue to raise the bar to a higher level. Somewhere along this road of escalating bars you will develop a pretty good sense of your comparative level of talent and how and at what level you will be able to achieve and feel fulfilled. I feel that if young people follow this approach to their personal self-development and work to the limit of their abilities, persevere in the face of falling short on occasion, and dream realistically, they will be rewarded with careers in which they can take justifiable pride and feel fulfilled at whatever level they “top out.” In following this path, please bear in mind that:

- Education is the sine-qua-non for success.
- Hard work dramatically improves your chances for a fulfilling career.
- The harder you work, the luckier you will become.
- Relentlessness in pursuit of excellence is critically important.
- Self determination can conquer inner fears.
- Winners focus on winning; losers focus on getting by.
- You will not reach full potential until you perform to the maximum of your capabilities.
- One who plants for days, plant flowers; one who plants for years, plants trees; but if you want to plant for eternity, plant ideas and ideals into the minds and lives of yourself and others.
- Remember that a little adversity can be a great stimulus to success.
- Winston Churchill defined success as the ability to go from failure to failure without losing enthusiasm. He, personally, blew one assignment after another until he came up against the big one – World War II – and he saved the world!
- Higher education is now your bridge to the future and success.

## HOW DO YOU DEFINE SUCCESS AND WHAT IS YOUR PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE?

There is a biblical passage which says, in essence, that on judgment day each of us will be accountable for our use or misuse of God given talents. In sum, much is expected from those to whom much has been given and less so for those who are endowed with lower levels of talent. Departing from this biblical premise, I judge a person's level of success in life on how well he or she achieves on three fronts:

- 1) First, how well an individual conducts his professional or occupational life in developing the full potential of his or her endowed talent and how that person helps others to do the same. In my view, a carpenter can have every bit as much success in life as a space scientist – when the achievements of each are calibrated for the relative nature and amount of talent bestowed on each by their creator.
- 2) Second, how well an individual conducts his professional/occupational life in a way that permits him or her to meet family responsibilities. Success on the professional front at the expense of family obligations is, in my view, an empty accomplishment.
- 3) Third, how well an individual conducts his professional/occupational/family life in accord with some moral code with which he or she is comfortable. For many in this country, including myself, it's the Ten Commandments.

If one scores high on these three fronts, I believe that that person qualifies to be judged a success in life. Anything short of achieving on these three measures would, in my mind, represent qualified success. One should bear in mind that success is too often equated with the possession of material acquisitions. Rather, we should continuously focus on the truism that we make a living by what we earn and receive, but we make a **life** by what we give to others.

Thank you, David, for the opportunity to participate in your program. I hope that these reflections are of some use to **The Legacy Letter Project** and to the students participating in the program. Please feel free to use them in any way that would be beneficial to your project.

Sincerely,



John W. Colloton  
Director Emeritus

University of Iowa Hospitals & Clinics

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