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# The Power of Persistent Effort

by Eugene V. Debs

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There is no obstacle in the way of human desire that cannot be overcome by persistent effort. The mighty forces of nature do not act suddenly; they attain their object by persistence. Slowly, grandly, the march goes on, never ceasing, never deviating from the course of success. Through what countless ages the silent drip, drip, of the water drop has gone on which has constructed the cave stalactite. Inch by inch the mud of the Nile built up ancient Egypt, “through the still lapse of ages.”<sup>1</sup> Cell by cell, bit by bit, the coral insect lifted to the light of day the mighty islands of the South Pacific; not in a year, not in a hundred years, but in millions of decades. So has it been with human progress. Civilization did not, like Athena, leap full armed from the brain of Jove. No, civilization is an evolution brought to perfection by centuries of persistent human effort. Sometimes we find breaks in the grand march — stumblings of the giant in his resistless course — but from these apparent failures the needed lesson of persistence was learned, and the onward sweep was the more rapid and sure after the recovery from temporary defeat.

From these examples the individual should learn a grand lesson. Persistence is the secret to all success. Men are not like the night-blooming cereus, bursting into full-blown perfection in a night, they are like the oak of the forest, slow of growth, matchless in strength when grown, if they but meet the storms and trials of life with indifference and defiance.

If we have an object in view, a worthy and noble one, we can only gain it by persistence. The citadel of error and opposition will always surrender if we but lay siege to it. It may take years, it may take a life-

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<sup>1</sup> Line from “Thanatopsis” [1811] by William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878).

time of struggle, but the object to be gained is worthy the sacrifice. And what a proud moment is that we stand upon the ruined ramparts of the enemy's stronghold with the banner of success waving grandly over us. The hero in the battle of life is loved of God and honored of men. Therefore,

In the world's broad field of battle,  
In the bivouac of life,  
Be not like dumb driven cattle,  
But be *heroes* in the strife.<sup>2</sup>

As an organization we have an object in view, the noblest that can actuate humanity — sympathy with the living, charity for the friends of the dead. Not the cold, heartless charity of the world, but the kind, loving charity born of common danger and mutual protection. In order to fully accomplish this object we must organize *all* our working forces. Like the coral insects we must combine our efforts. Persistently we must labor, through danger, doubt, and opposition.

If we are true to ourselves, true to our loved ones, true to the spirit of manhood, failure can never be our lot. We shall, in time, become the greatest charitable organization in the world. All we need is persistence, unwavering persistence. Slowly have we toiled through the past, slowly must we toil through the future. Has not our toil brought rich rewards? Have we not heard the "God bless you," from the trembling lips of widowhood, and the prattling lips of infancy?

What need have we of greater fame  
Than tears of love on widow's cheeks?<sup>3</sup>

Another year lies before us with its manifold hopes and fears, joys and griefs. The sky looks bright for us. All over the land our craft is awakening to the fact that we must organize for the protection of the loved and loving. Wives must not be left uncared for. Babes must not be left to eat the bread of heartless charity. We must help each other. Death and disaster must be robbed of their terrors.

Firemen of the United States and Canada! Come and join our noble Brotherhood. Let us all join our individual efforts as the moun-

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<sup>2</sup> Stanza from "A Psalm of Life" [1838] by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882).

<sup>3</sup> The origin of this literary snippet is uncertain.

tain rivulets join their waters and become at last a resistless river sweeping grandly on, overcoming all opposition, stopping for nothing.

Let us go to work fearlessly, persistently, remembering that—

Work grandly done is always great,  
Though done by men of daily toil.<sup>4</sup>

*Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport*

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<sup>4</sup> Snippet from the poem “Our Brotherhood Chart,” written for *Locomotive Firemen’s Magazine* in February 1880 by young Indianapolis attorney H.N. Spaan.