

# HOW FAR HAS YOUR BOTTLE GONE?

Ask the right questions when reviewing your life's achievements.

By Ernest R. Stair

**O**ne day in the middle of your life, you suddenly wake up and wonder, *Where did I go wrong?* Not that you are in any kind of trouble. You are a law-abiding citizen. You pay your taxes; you are two months ahead on mortgage payments and your kids' school grades are above average. So what's wrong with the present picture of your life?

With apologies to Edward Gibbon and Charles Dickens for splicing together the titles of their literary

achievement often returns to haunt us when we measure our progress from those starting points of earlier times. Not much ground has been covered, it seems, and time is running out.

## A Pivotal Point

If you feel yourself in the early stages of a decline and fall of your great expectations, you are standing directly on top of one of life's decisive moments. What's it going to be? Do you settle for less? Or do you find a better

all the exotic places that bottle with his name inside might travel.

One day, two people walking on a beach found the bottle. They opened it, read Burrows' note and located him with the help of a computer database. Burrows was amused to learn that the bottle he had tossed into the sea more than 45 years earlier was found—where? Only a *few hundred yards* from the spot where it set sail!

## A Life in Three Acts

Sooner or later, a moment of truth like that is bound to show up on everybody's doorstep. Once it does, it is in no hurry to go away. Then you must ask yourself, "What happened to the big plans I made for myself?" If you are like most people, your life can be divided into three acts:

- ▶ **Act One: The Launch and the Dream**
- ▶ **Act Two: Facing the Truth that My Bottle Didn't Go Very Far**
- ▶ **Act Three: All the Time After That**

When the curtain goes up on Act Two of your life, don't get discouraged. Just like most plays, your life will go on. You will doubt your achievements. You will recall only the mistakes, the regrets, the mountains not climbed, the horizons not crossed, the adventures not tried. And once you do that, questioning the worth of your life won't be far behind. The most important question for Act Two

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classics, call it: *The Decline and Fall of Great Expectations*. "I haven't done much with my life," you say. "I had greater things in mind for myself when I started out."

You're not the only one to suffer mid-life disillusionment. Sooner or later it happens to nearly everybody, even to those rich and famous celebrities who parade across the big and little screens of our lives.

Achievement is the culprit. Early on, we plan to make something of ourselves, to leave our mark on the world, to climb some ladder of success all the way to the top — two rungs at a time. That hunger for

way to pass life's achievement test? To help make up your mind, try seeing your life as if it were a bottle tossed into the sea.

One day, Bill Burrows of Massachusetts searched his house for a seaworthy bottle that could carry the note he had just written to the far corners of the world. The note said, "Will the person who finds this let me know where and when it was picked up?" He added his address, then stuffed the note into a glass bottle, sealed it with wax to keep out the water and tossed it into the sea from the Massachusetts coastline. Then he went back to his house, dreaming of

of your life is: *Now what?* What will I do with the rest of my life, now that I have faced the truth that my bottle didn't go very far? Everyone has an Act Two. Not everyone moves successfully from Act Two to Act Three.

In the theater of life, all the action is in Act Three. Anybody can be happy in Act One, dreaming of all the wonderful possibilities that lie ahead. Anybody can be miserable mired in Act Two, mourning all the great expectations of the past that show no signs of ever being achieved. But Act Three — all the time after you face up to that feeling that your bottle didn't go very far — Act Three is where the courage is. Act Three is where the

**"Real achievement cannot be condensed into resumes or statements of net worth."**

wisdom is. Act Three is where the greatness is.

You will never pass life's achievement test if you ask the *wrong* questions. Those questions are:

- ▶ How much money do I make?
- ▶ How many square feet does my house contain?
- ▶ How will my job title sound at a high school reunion?
- ▶ Do I get dizzy thinking about my rung on the ladder of success?
- ▶ How many people report to me?
- ▶ How many walls are needed to display my degrees, awards, honors, trophies and tributes?

These questions have one thing in common: The answers determine your grade on your life's achievement test based on *other people's* definitions of success. Other people drive by your property and estimate your net worth. Other people measure your success by your job title. Other people put

weight on whether you give orders or take them. Other people size up your achievements by counting the awards and recognitions bestowed upon you with a pinch of pomp and circumstance. If you are asking yourself these questions, you care more about what *they* think about you than what you think about yourself. You trust your precious self-esteem and happiness to everybody else.

To really pass life's achievement test, you need to start asking the *right* questions:

▶ **How many times did I refuse to quit?** Anybody can be promoted to bigger and better things, but it

takes true grit to stay put and see things through when you are not being recognized. Anybody can write somebody off, but it takes exceptional determination to stay beside someone who is making major mistakes in life. Count all the times that you didn't give up on someone or something.

▶ **How many times did I learn from my mistakes?** A concert pianist will tell you there is no such thing as a flawless performance. Learning how to handle mistakes is as much an art as knowing the right keys to press. Everybody makes mistakes, but not everybody takes the time to examine those mistakes and, without fixing blame, look for ways to chart a new course for the future. Count all the times in your life that you learned from your mistakes.

▶ **How many times did I make a comeback?** The only normal thing

about life is its alternating current of highs and lows, brought about by the whims of fortune. To find the secret of success in others, look not at their highs, but at their lows — how they meet the heartaches, disappointments and tragedies of their lives.

A crowning achievement in your life may not be in your building a way to the top, but in rebuilding after a fall. Count all the times in your life that you made a comeback.

▶ **How many times did I let somebody else have all the glory?** In soccer, an individual's season score includes assists as well as goals. Throughout life, you have opportunities to help other people get the credit they deserve, then enjoy the applause they receive when standing in the spotlight. It is nice to receive an award, but there is a deeper satisfaction in opening a door for somebody else to get one. From that, you will receive the kind of trophy that does not gather dust. Count all the times in your life that you let somebody else have all the glory.

▶ **How many times did I take criticism gracefully?** Criticism is the acid test of character. It brings out the best in us and it brings out the worst. Whether it comes from a supervisor's cutting evaluation at work or an adolescent's whining complaint at home, criticism typically provokes one of two classic responses: the counter-attack (criticizing the critic) or the retreat (wallowing in your own misery). But there is a *third way*. Some rise above the anger and hurt of the moment to hear every nuance of the criticism. These individuals are capable of saving what's useful and deleting what isn't. That way, criticism, fair or not, only adds to the stature of the one who's criticized. Count the times in your life that you took criticism gracefully.

▶ **How many times did I make somebody's day?** A sixth grader basks in your attentiveness as she tells you every detail of the demanding practice it takes to be a champion cheerleader. A friend's posture straightens when you say, "I've seen you come through tough times before, and I know you will do it again." The worried face of a boy struggling with a math problem breaks into a smile when you say, "You try so hard, I like that." You know your carefully crafted compliments offered to colleagues, neighbors and even strangers hit the mark when you're told, "You just made my day." Count all the times in your life that you made somebody's day.

These are the right questions to gauge how you are doing on life's achievement test. Instead of sizing yourself up by computing the sum of your property, position and credentials, use these questions to probe deep into the heart of your character. They measure what you are made of — courage, compassion and humility.

Sure, these questions might prompt you to think about some of your imperfections. But they also succeed in highlighting the true you, as you rise to great heights turning ordinary moments of your everyday life into events of extraordinary significance. That's Achievement with a capital A. Real Achievement

cannot be condensed into resumes or statements of net worth. Real Achievement is always an inside job.

When you ask yourself the right questions, you may be surprised to find that your bottle went much farther than you imagined. It is just possible that you pass life's achievement test with flying colors. ☉

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## CC SURVIVAL GUIDE

By Beth Black

Wherever your milestones may lie, here are a few ideas to help you succeed along the way to your Competent Communicator award.

▶ **Be brave and begin.** Good news: The time requirement for the first speech — the Ice Breaker — is shorter (4–6 minutes) than any of the other speeches. If you stand up to speak, you are building courage. If you say a few words, you are controlling your fear. And if you tell the audience a little about yourself, you are conquering it!

▶ **Try the self-evaluation after Project 5:** It is a test you cannot fail and you will be able to move forward with the confidence that comes from knowledge.

▶ **Don't stop.** You can reach the tenth project! You learn the basics with the first few manual speeches, but the later projects help you put everything together in a meaningful way. Then, when you give your final speech-to-inspire you will be inspired, too.

Along the same lines, John Lesko of 1500 Speakers club in Crystal City, Virginia, says "Project 8: Get Comfortable with Visual Aids," fills a vital role for many Toastmasters. "I've seen many members go overboard with slides, thinking that their *entire* speech now must be covered with audio-visual aids," he notes. "On the other hand, this project — particularly within the corporate environment — is critical for oh-so-many organizations."

The truth is, if you are working to overcome a particularly troublesome aspect of public speaking, any project that helps you improve will be your biggest milestone. Ultimately, no matter where your milestones lie along the CC path, it is important to keep moving forward, tackling each challenge and relishing each opportunity for success in reaching your public speaking goals. ☉

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