

The Challenge of Excellence

By Jamie Buckingham

Psychologist Carl Rogers once said, "The older I grow the more I understand those things most private to us are also those things most universal."

Inside each of us is a little person, stretching, striving, looking at the impossible and saying, "I can do that."

Last week I reread Margaret Craven's novel, *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*. It's a haunting story of a young, dying priest who finds the meaning of life when he is sent by his wise bishop to minister to a tribe of vanishing Indians in the Pacific Northwest. When I finished I lay back on my bed, closed my eyes and said, "I can write like that. I know I can."

It was the beauty of the writing—as much as the message—which captivated me. This deep admiration for craftsmanship stirs up all the slumbering gifts in me, priming my soul to achieve.

As a boy I used to attend the street dances in the mountains of Western North Carolina. Watching the flashing feet, swirling skirts, taps rat-a-tatting on the pavement as the mountain cloggers kicked their heels to bluegrass music—I knew I could do it, too. But my feet were chained by a legalistic theology. All I was allowed to do was stand on the curb and watch as the dancers did "the single shuffle," "the earl," and "the chicken." Now the chains are off. Last week I purchased a bluegrass music record featuring "The Battle of New Orleans." A local cobbler has added jingle taps to an old pair of shoes and I've ordered a book called *Mountain Clogging—You Can Do It*. Just you wait. It's time to dance.

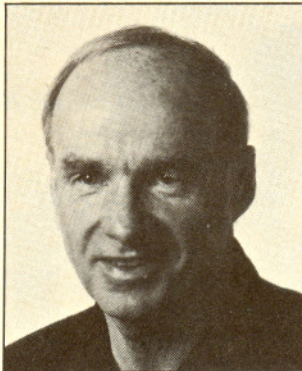
It's been inside me all along, that drive to create with excellence. It's part of the image of the Creator himself.

I doubt if Oliver Wendell Holmes had clogging in mind when he challenged himself to "build thee more stately mansions, O my soul." But the theme is the same. Some build their stately mansions in the science lab, others in the kitchen, some in the animal breeding pens and some at the keyboard. But regardless of how it manifests itself, the drive is spiritual. You look at a model and say, "I can do that, too." To do less is the greatest of all tragedies.

Thomas Gray, lamenting over the tombstones in a country church yard, reflected on the sadness of wasted excellence and wrote:

*Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
Hands, that the rod of empire might have swayed,
Or wak'd to ecstasy the living lyre.*

The models of excellence are those that wake me to ecstasy. When I listen to my old Fritz Krysler records, and hear the master violinist playing "Barcarole" and "The Rosary"; when



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I sit in a jungle village and watch a trained linguist conversing with a dark-skinned tribesman in a never-before-written language; when I watch a helicopter pilot thread his airship between towering trees and steep boulders; when I watch my artist-daughter take charcoal and paper and create beauty out of nothing—my eyes grow moist. "I, too," my heart says, "can achieve."

These are the stimulators of my life—the ones who prime my pump. Thank you, Whittier, Whitman and Longfellow. Thank you, Shakespeare, Kipling and Tennyson. Even today, long years after I was forced to read you in English Lit 102, I take your books from my shelves to read aloud to no one but myself.

Thank you, all the men and women I have never met who have enriched my life with your excellence and challenged me to the finer things by daring to achieve.

Last year I put on a surgical gown and accompanied one of the world's leading ophthalmologists into the operating theatre. For two hours I stood beside Dr. Jim Gills as he removed cataracts and implanted lenses in the eyes of a dozen patients. Watching his skilled fingers through the microscope, I felt something welling up inside me. It was the same feeling an expectant mother must have when she feels life moving in her body—"pregnant with celestial fire." I almost exploded from the operating room into the waiting room where my wife was sitting with my mother who was scheduled as the next patient. Tearing off my face mask I blurted, "I can do that, too, if I have a chance."

My mother's face blanched white. "Not on me, you won't," she said defiantly, and she rose to walk out.

Of course I didn't—on her or anyone else. It takes years of discipline to reach that place. But seeing a master surgeon at work stimulated the creative part of me—the God part—which says, "Nothing is impossible. Don't ever give up."

Every place I turn I find those who are doing things better than I will ever do them. But I am not discouraged by their excellence; instead, I am challenged and motivated. Jesus threw down the gauntlet when He dared us to achieve spiritual perfection—even as your Father in heaven is perfect." Impossible? Absolutely not. God blesses the one who strives to achieve, for he's a winner, regardless of how well anyone else does. The standard can be reached by all because our model, Jesus Himself, "controls and urges and impels us onward" (II Cor. 5:14).

I am grateful for all the models, the heroes, the winners—those who excel and achieve. In them, as in Jesus, I see the reflection of the Creator. Because of them I am inspired onward—toward excellence. ■