



AMBITION AU GROTON

I FIRST DISCOVERED that it was unbecom- ing to show ambition when I was a sec- ond-former at Groton School. Elections were held that spring for the position of editor in chief of the *THIRD FORM WEEKLY*, the newspaper put out by the ninth graders. Although it was supposed to be a short jump from the *WEEKLY* to *THE NEW YORK TIMES*, no one mentioned the upcoming election all year. We just thought about it a lot.

Then one evening the English teacher (or "master" as we said at Groton) who oversaw the paper appeared at study hall to announce his nominations for the editorship. To my great joy, I was one of the three students named. The voting by the class was to begin immediately. There wasn't time for the nominees to intone a single impressive literary allusion, or even to flourish a pencil in a suitably journalistic manner. As was the electoral custom at Groton, we all covered our eyes and prepared to raise our hands for the candidate of our choice when his name was called.

I can still feel the herringbone tweed of my jacket sleeve pressing into my eye sockets as I pondered the first major ethical dilemma of my young life. Should I vote for myself?

Misplaced Modesty

You might think that the answer is obvious. One can hardly imagine presidential candidates, for example, going through a two-year campaign only to vote for the other guy out of modesty on election day. But at Groton it was considered vulgar to put oneself forward so shamelessly. Just as one was not supposed to be seen grinding out A's in the library stacks, one was not allowed to politick openly for votes. And it was regarded as hopelessly self-centered to vote for oneself. At Groton, nothing could be quite so ignominious as to discover that a vote was unanimous.

Partly this was just being "cool" in the

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manner of the times (this was the 60s). But the school encouraged the tendency in its own way by pushing on its students a genteel humility that bordered on masochism. While outsiders might think that Groton was training its sons to join the ruling elite, quests for personal glory were actively discouraged. Public service was the way to heaven. *Cui Servire Est Regnare* was the school motto – Whom to Serve is to Reign. That "Whom" was Our Lord, not, as one might suppose nowadays, My Self. Of course, we knew that we would still be rewarded here on earth no matter what we did. It was for this reason that we sang most lustily the line from the school hymn, "and make our Father's business ours." Most of us were next in line for Daddy's company.

So what did I do that spring evening, second-form year? I did the only sensible thing considering that the eyes of my English teacher were upon me: I voted for a rival. But, sneakily, I voted for the one I figured most likely to lose.

That way, I managed to preserve both my honor and my chances to win. And, to my surprise, win I did.

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I bring this up because the idea of not voting for yourself seems so quaint today. Right now we're in an Age of Ambition – the word in fact comes from the Latin *ambitio*, to go about collecting votes – and it has turned everyone into a career politician. Hardly a cocktail party goes by without my hearing of another friend's eager gambit to Make It. One book editor I know is putting a portion of his salary into a limited partnership for a chocolate chip cookie franchise. An anesthesiologist wants to make a killing in videocassette rentals. And an architect I know tells me he has designs on investment banking. When I ask why, he exclaims, "Oh, the power!"

It is hard for me to deny the attraction of ambition's big three: fame, power and money. But ambition itself has always reminded me of some large and rapacious animal, something on the order



of a wild boar – it impresses me, but I prefer to keep my distance.

Stewart Brand, a self-described hippie artist and businessman who has produced, most recently, *THE WHOLE EARTH SOFTWARE CATALOG*, expressed similar ambivalence about ambition in a recent interview with *THE NEW YORK TIMES*. He said an angel and a devil ride on his shoulder: “One says, ‘Go get stoned,’ The other says, ‘Double your income.’”

As ambition’s semantic links with vote-grubbing politicians suggest, people have always felt some ambivalence about it. My *WEBSTER’S NEW COLLEGIATE*, for instance, can’t make up its mind at all, calling ambition “An eager or inordinate desire for preferment, honor, superiority, power, or attainment.” Well, is it mere eagerness, or is it inordinate? Where does Horatio Alger leave off and Macbeth take over?

Clearly, ambition is not always admirable. My guess is that, as with so many supposedly universal human qualities, ambition is subject to class considerations. What is admired in commoners may be regretted in kings. In the lower ranks of society, ambition is encouraged as the only ticket out of poverty. Before Jesse Jackson ran for president, he used to go around the country trying to inflame the ambition of inner-city high school kids with his *PUSH-Excel* program. But that wouldn’t have gone over too well at Groton. The higher one travels in society, the more unseemly such blatant striving becomes.

A Matter of Style

In polite society, one has traditionally been expected to tuck one’s ambition away like the good silverware. One may have it; one may not flaunt it. That is declass . As Joseph Epstein remarks in *AMBITION: THE SECRET PASSION*, “Ambition connotes a certain Rotarian optimism, a thing unseemly, in very poor taste, rather like a raging sexual appetite in someone quite elderly.” Among the upper class, such an attitude may simply be practical – what good is ambition when you are already at the top?

But it is also a matter of style. So much of upper-class manners and morals consist of concealing one’s essential animal nature – cloaking it in silk, sweetening it with perfume, disguising it with refined talk. That’s the polite way of asserting one’s superiority. Ambition is too raw to belong in a drawing room with a Bechstein piano and Baccarat crystal.

In some cases, the desire for success may be snuffed out as a result, although that is growing increasingly rare as the ambition boom progresses. An elderly gentleman I knew once held what he freely called a “retirement party” for himself the day after he graduated from Harvard. He never held a job his entire life. His daughter, consequently, never knew what to put down on various application forms in the space for Father’s Occupation. She settled on “Stock Analyst” in subtle reference to the family holdings that allowed her father a lifetime of leisure. She works long hours for a weekly newspaper.

Such is the upsurge in ambition that it has made substantial inroads even into the upper class. For an upcoming book (I’m too principled to flack it by naming it here), I talked to over 50 young heirs and heiresses and was surprised to see that many of them were openly ambitious, as if they really needed the money. None of them would dream of putting down on a marriage form under Occupation, “Gentleman,” as Reginald Vanderbilt did in 1902. One rich kid is running an upscale delicatessen, another plans to develop a blimp, a third is dabbling in the movie business. Strivers all. As one heiress told me dreamily, in a tone that she might also use to describe a pair of gold-brocaded slippers, “Oh yes, I’d *love* to make money, tons and tons of it. And I will!”

Other young rich are now stooping to previously unimaginable depths to accomplish their ambitions. I am thinking particularly of Sydney Biddle Barrows, of the Philadelphia Biddles no less, who was apprehended in New York City last fall for allegedly running a high-class bordello. Asked why she did it, the May-

flower Madam (as the *NEW YORK POST* dubbed her), who had studied merchandising and business management at New York’s Fashion Institute of Technology, said that she viewed it as an excellent investment opportunity. Quite so! But not without a few risks.

Failed Ambitions

Just as Sydney bit the dust, I suspect that little will come of these rich kids’ ambitions. As F. Scott Fitzgerald said, the rich are “soft where we are hard.” And that softness doesn’t always work in business. One summer I took a bit of my father’s advice about the value of learning the arts of salesmanship and signed up for a job selling encyclopedias. It was a fairly shameless enterprise operating out of a paneled office in a suburban mall. Every morning, we salesmen had a list of people to call and inform that – surprise! – they had won a handsome reproduction of a classic painting. The only catch was that the lucky winner had to receive the painting in person. Every evening I drove around the suburbs lugging paintings and sample encyclopedias in a feeble attempt to sell the “winners” a set of books.

I wasn’t very good at it. Much as I impressed my customers with my rambling disquisitions on assorted encyclopedia entries, I could never bring myself to actually close a sale. By contrast, another salesman, who called himself Joe Banks because, as he said, “it’s easier for customers to remember,” had no such compunctions. He must have weighed 400 pounds, but his girth gave him a husky voice that played beautifully over the phone; and it gave him a point of understanding with his customers, many of whom were housewives who admitted to being a little “heavy” themselves. How he could sweet-talk the ladies! He sold encyclopedias by the ton. I quit after a month of frustration. My only sale was to my aunt, who bought a set to donate to her town library.

Joe Banks probably owns the company by now. And no doubt he is planning to send his sons to Groton. ♦