

The Strangest Secret Revisited



THE SIX-WORD SECRET TO SUCCESS

From the bestselling author of *The Strangest Secret*

EARL NIGHTINGALE

TO:

FROM:

THE
SIX-WORD
SECRET
TO
SUCCESS

EARL NIGHTINGALE



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For Diana—as the Earth thanks the Sun

CONTENTS

Introduction	vii
PART ONE: A River or a Goal	1
PART TWO: Stay with It	39
PART THREE: Finding Balance	73
About the Author	103



INTRODUCTION

In order to fully enjoy prosperity and its accompanying sense of achievement, one needs to have known poverty and an environment in which daily survival is the purpose of life. As a youngster, I didn't know anything about a sense of achievement, but I was all too aware of being poor. It didn't seem to bother the other kids, but it bothered me. What made it all the more exasperating to me, as a boy of twelve, was to be poor in Southern California, where there seemed

to be so many who were rich. In fact, anyone who had an automobile, an electric refrigerator, and wall-to-wall carpeting was rich in my book, and the children of such people seemed to me to be fortunate indeed. I decided to find out why some people were rich while so very many of us were poor.

The year was 1933—the bottom of the Great Depression. Millions were unemployed. My two brothers and I were fortunate; although our father had disappeared in search of greener pastures, our mother never missed a day at her Works Progress Administration (WPA) sewing factory job. Her earnings, as I recall, were fifty-five dollars a month, which produced survival. We lived in “Tent City” behind the old Mariner Apartments on the waterfront in Long Beach, California.

“What makes the difference?” I asked myself. “Why are some people well off financially and others poor? Why are some so well paid while others are so poorly paid? What’s the difference? What’s going on here?”

I tried asking the adults who lived in our

neighborhood and soon discovered they didn’t know any more than I did. In fact, I made what was to me an astonishing discovery: *The adults in our neighborhood didn’t know anything at all.* They were pitifully uneducated—driven by instinct, other-directed.

My mother had many endearing qualities. One was her unfailing good cheer; another was her love of books. She haunted the public library, and my fondest memory of her is of her eating oatmeal and milk early in the morning under a dangling, naked, underpowered light bulb with a book propped up in front of her. She loved travel books, especially. Never able to travel herself, she explored the earth from pole to pole through her books on travel and adventure. I’m sure it helped save her sanity during those hard years. She was an attractive woman, still young but completely dedicated to the raising of her boys. Her books and our battered radio were her only entertainment. She read on her long Pacific Electric train rides to and from work in Los Angeles as well as after we boys had gone to

bed at night. On weekends, after cleaning and doing the laundry, her books again filled her world with exciting travel and high adventure. Later in life, I realized she never had to stand in a sweltering customs shed, or see her luggage disappear into three Italian taxis, or struggle with a foreign language or currency, yet she had traveled from one end of the earth to the other and was intimate with the most remote places on the planet. That she was able to do so without ever leaving Los Angeles County was a tribute to the excellent public library system. It didn't cost her a dime.

And so it was to the Long Beach Public Library that I went seeking the elusive secret of success. I didn't know where to look among thousands of titles, but I felt sure the secret was there somewhere. It seemed to me that if anyone had ever figured it out, he or she would surely have written a book about it. After I began my search, I soon found myself sidetracked into the world of the most exciting fiction: the Hardy Boys, the great mind-expanding stories of Edgar Rice

Burroughs, and the Westerns of Zane Grey. Then came the fascinating stories of the Plains Indians by Stanley Vestal, and before I knew it I was as addicted to books as my mother. I learned about the importance of honesty, personal integrity, and courage and of believing in what is right and being willing to fight for it. I know that it was my early love affair with books that resulted in my getting a better-than-average education.

Later, as World War II loomed on the horizon, I left school and enlisted in the United States Marine Corps. However, I continued my studies—I read everything I could lay my hands on.

I made two decisions that guided the remainder of my life. The first was to discover the secret of success. The second was to become a writer. I loved books and wanted to write them myself. Toward the end of the war, I found myself back in the States working as an instructor at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. Driving between the base and nearby Jacksonville, I noticed a radio station under construction. I decided to apply

for an announcing job, working nights and weekends. I auditioned and was hired. Sitting before the microphone at that small radio station, WJNC Jacksonville, North Carolina, was the beginning of my radio career. The owner-manager, Lester Gould, and I became good friends.

I took to broadcasting like nothing before in my life. I was in my element, and more than forty years later, I'm still in it. But my desire to write did not lessen, and gradually I began planning for the day when I would write my own programs. In the meantime, I learned the business, doing commercials, news, and station breaks. It was extra income and would prove to be valuable experience after I was mustered out of the Marine Corps.

My reading and search for the secret of success continued without letup, I studied the world's great religions. I found myself especially fascinated with philosophy and psychology. But it wasn't until one weekend when I was twenty-nine and working for CBS in



Chicago that enlightenment came. While reading, it suddenly dawned upon me that I had been reading the same truth over and over again for many years. I had read it in the New Testament, in the sayings of Buddha, in the writings of Lao Tse, in the works of Emerson. And all of a sudden, there they were, the words, in the proper order that I had been looking for, for seventeen years. The astonishing truth that *we become what we think about*.

It was as if I were suddenly immersed in a bright light. *Of course!* I remember sitting bolt upright at the thought of the simplicity of it. That was what Ortega was talking about when he reminded us that we are the only creatures on earth born into a natural state of disorientation with our world. It had to be because we are the only creatures with the godlike power to create our own worlds. And we do. We do create our own worlds all the years of our lives. *We become what we think about* most of the time. And if we don't think at all—which seemed to have been the principal problem

of the people back in my old Long Beach neighborhood—we don't become anything at all.

There it was—just six words. There are more than six hundred thousand words in the English language, but those were the six I had searched for, in that particular order, ever since the age of twelve. Seventeen years it had taken to see the obvious. How could we become anything else? Our minds are the steering mechanisms of our lives. And each of us who does much thinking at all thinks differently. There at last was the secret of success or failure or something in between. Each of us is sentenced to become what he or she thinks about. Our brains are what make us human. How we use them decides our destiny.



1.

A RIVER OR A GOAL

There are two categories of very successful people: Those I call "River People" and those that might be labeled "Goal People."

River People are those fortunate few who find themselves born to perform a specific task. They are usually well aware of just what that task is while they are still quite young. They are not interested in doing anything else. They are born to spend their lives in great rivers of the most absorbing interest, and they

throw themselves into those rivers wholly. Mozart and Leonardo da Vinci were River People. There are hundreds of thousands of River People living today, and they can be found in all fields. They are our finest musicians and performers in all the arts; they are writers, scientists, and lawmakers and can be found in every profession.

Dr. Al Rhoton, a brilliant microneurosurgeon at the University of Florida, comes to mind as I write on this subject. He heads the Teaching Center and performs brilliant, life-saving surgical procedures. I saw a dozen or so physicians from all over the world at the Center, sitting in a circle, peering through powerful microscopes and operating on the brains of mice in order to perfect their skills in microneurosurgery. They use instruments specially designed for such fine work—tiny, delicate forceps; sutures so fine they're nearly invisible to the naked eye; and miniature scalpels. Their movements are barely perceptible as they work on nerves and tiny blood vessels.

Dr. Rhoton can be seen in the halls of the hospital from early in the morning until very late at night. One sunny afternoon we were taking a walk, and I asked him why he didn't have a high-priced practice in New York or Beverly Hills. He walked along in silence for a few minutes, then he said, "Where I get my satisfaction out of all this, Earl, is knowing that somewhere in the world, every day, people are getting better medicine, better surgery, because of what we're doing here." His work is his life, and vice versa. I'm afraid his family has not seen too much of him over the years; that's true of all River People.

Henry Royce was such a person. His obsession was to build the world's finest and quietest motorcar. Early in the twentieth century, when he started work on what was to become the world's standard for excellence in automotive design and manufacture, the automobile engine sounded like a modern clothes dryer filled with empty cans, punctuated with gunshots. Royce was convinced that the parts of an internal combustion engine

could be finely manufactured to such exacting tolerances and so perfectly lubricated that the noise of their operation would be (or could be) barely perceptible to people standing nearby. He stalked about his auto plant in a nearly constant march. He would not take the time to eat—a boy was hired to follow him about with a sandwich and a glass of milk. When Royce became sleepy, he would lie on a cot in the plant and take a nap. Then he was up again, examining everything.

One day he overheard one of his engineers saying to a workman, “That’s good enough,” and Royce hit the ceiling.

“It is not good enough!” he shouted. “It is never good enough. We strive for perfection. Since that’s impossible, it’s never good enough. Find a way to make it better.”

I once toured the Rolls-Royce plant in London and was astonished at the care taken with imperfections that were invisible to me. Such care and dedication put England in good position during the Battle of Britain,

when Rolls-Royce turned out engines for Supermarine Spitfire fighters. A stained glass window over the entrance to the company’s headquarters was given to the company by a grateful nation.

Royce’s unrelenting dedication is typical of the River Person—the great products and services of the world are usually due to such a person. Henry Ford accepted the challenge—which was at the time thought to be impossible—to produce a motorcar for the working class. Ford did not invent the assembly line—Eli Whitney had done that with the manufacturing of rifles—but Ford was the first to apply the system to the manufacturing of automobiles. His genius for finding ways to cut costs and still produce a quality product was legendary. He raised the salaries of workers to a mind-boggling five dollars a day—a level never before equaled in the history of the Industrial Revolution. One of Ford’s problems was that once he came up with a revolutionary idea, he was irrevocably fixed on it. The passage of time and changing

economic conditions could not bring about changes in his way of thinking. But Henry Ford was a River Person. I'm sure you can think of many others. Perhaps you are a River Person.

Things aren't as simple and clear-cut as they once were. There's such a welter of possibilities—so many options—that it can be difficult for a person to find his or her main interest in life. If we haven't found the work for which we're best fitted, there is usually an unresolved feeling of discontent with what we are doing. If we were true to ourselves, we would say, *I know this work is not the work for which I'm designed*, and begin to explore, in our spare time, other lines of endeavor. Too often we are guided more by the pay scale than by a genuine feeling of interest in the work itself. Whatever our true line of work turns out to be—with the kind of 100 percent dedication and commitment we would give to it—it could produce everything we could possibly want.

Audio publishing did not exist as a business before



we started our company, and we became the world's leader in positive audio programs. It can still be necessary, as it was for us and for Steve Wozniak and Steve Jobs of Apple, to have to start something new. Our company began with my writing and recording *The Strangest Secret*. Perhaps there's some pioneering work for you to do too.

The old motion pictures keep coming back on cable television. Recently I caught a glimpse of a film that starred Mickey Rooney when he was a boy of perhaps thirteen or fourteen. Even before that, he had been a seasoned vaudeville and motion picture veteran. He was a natural, as they say. He took to show business the way Mozart took to music or Edison to tinkering or Lindbergh to flying. Today, Mr. Rooney is a distinguished actor with an ability to do comedy, tragedy, or musicals with equal facility. He has been a show-business phenomenon since childhood. Success is something Mr. Rooney didn't have to worry about. He has a great, deep river of interest that has entertained

millions and will go on entertaining millions for many years to come.

Walt Disney was another good example of a River Person; so were Birdseye of frozen food and Hershey of chocolate. River People are perhaps the world's most fortunate people; they identify the star they are meant to follow, and they follow it all their lives.

Each of us should watch for early, telltale signs of consistent and unusual interest, for the magnet in the midst of the spectrum of options that draws us toward itself as light is drawn toward a black hole. On rainy days, when you were a child, out of school, what did you most enjoy doing?

Dr. Abraham Maslow has pointed out that in the best instances, the person and the job fit together like a key and a lock, or perhaps resonate together like a sung note that sets a particular string in a piano into sympathetic resonance.

He also said,

I have found it most useful for myself to differentiate between the realm of being (B-realm) and the realm of deficiencies (D-realm)—that is, between the eternal and the practical. Simply as a matter of the strategy and tactics of living well and fully and of choosing one's life instead of having it determined for us, this is a help. It is so easy to forget ultimates in the rush and hurry of daily life, especially for young people. So often we are merely responders, so to speak, simply reacting to stimuli, to rewards and punishments, to emergencies, to pains and fears, to demands of other people, to superficialities. It takes a specific, conscious effort, at least at first, to turn one's attention to intrinsic things and values—perhaps seeking actual physical aloneness, perhaps exposing oneself to great music, to good people, to natural beauty, and so on. Only after practice do these strategies become easy and automatic so that one can be living in the B-realm.

I believe that each of us, because of the way our genetic heritage is stacked, has an area of great interest. And it is that area that we should explore with the patience and assiduity of a paleontologist on an important dig. For it is a region of great potential. Somewhere within it we can find an avenue of interest that so perfectly matches our natural abilities that we will be able to make our greatest contribution and spend our lives in work we thoroughly enjoy.

Sir William Osier, the great physician, was a River Person. He was speaking to other possible River People when he said:

Throw away, in the first place, all ambition beyond that of doing the day's work well. Find your way into work in which there is an enjoyment of it and all shadows of annoyance seem to flee away. Let each day's work absorb your energy and satisfy your wildest ambition. Success in the long run depends on endurance and perseverance. All



things come to him who has learned to labor and wait, whose talents develop in the still and quiet years of unselfish work.

If you find yourself saying, "I must not be a River Person," wait. Think about it. Examine your life, your wants, your dreams, your daydreams, your visions. And look for a consistent key, a way in which you like to see yourself doing some particular thing as a form of work or service. A consistent daydream is often our inner intelligence trying to tell us what we should be doing. It may be that you are already in the general area you want to be in but just haven't seen its true possibilities. Discontented actors have found their Rivers in directing; discontented salespeople in sales management, and so on. Every industry has within it hundreds, if not thousands, of possibilities. There is advertising and art, public relations, purchasing—the list goes on and on. But keep this in mind: If it's the right work for you, chances are you've found yourself fooling around

with it in your spare time in some way, or reading about it, or doodling about it, or visiting it in your free time. Look for a consistent interest. If you find it, you may have found your River. A River in carpentry is just as richly satisfying and fraught with possibilities as any other calling.

If we cannot find a special interest in a particular line of work, then we no doubt should become Goal People. There are those of us who seem to be able to do many things with equal facility and equal interest and enjoyment. There are, for example, professional business executives who simply love the challenge of business. They can take an ailing company and within a few years raise it to a level among the leaders. The company's product or service doesn't seem to make very much difference.

Lee Iacocca was known as an automobile man because of his many successful years at the Ford Motor Company. As such, he was asked to take over the Chrysler Corporation when it was in danger of

complete collapse. That he did in a masterful, skillful way. That he risked his professional reputation in the process was an indication of his confidence. The rest of the story is history. But Lee Iacocca might have done just as well taking over a corporation that manufactured toys, copiers, computers, or whatever. Iacocca is a consummate American business executive—he revels in a challenge and in the resulting success and all that goes with it—the big money, the publicity, even the opportunity to run for president of the United States. Iacocca is a Goal Person.

Many will ask, "Why set goals at all? Why not just take things as they come and do your best with what you have 'been given' to do?" That "been given" business is often a way of saying you stumbled into a chance opportunity for work and simply stayed there.

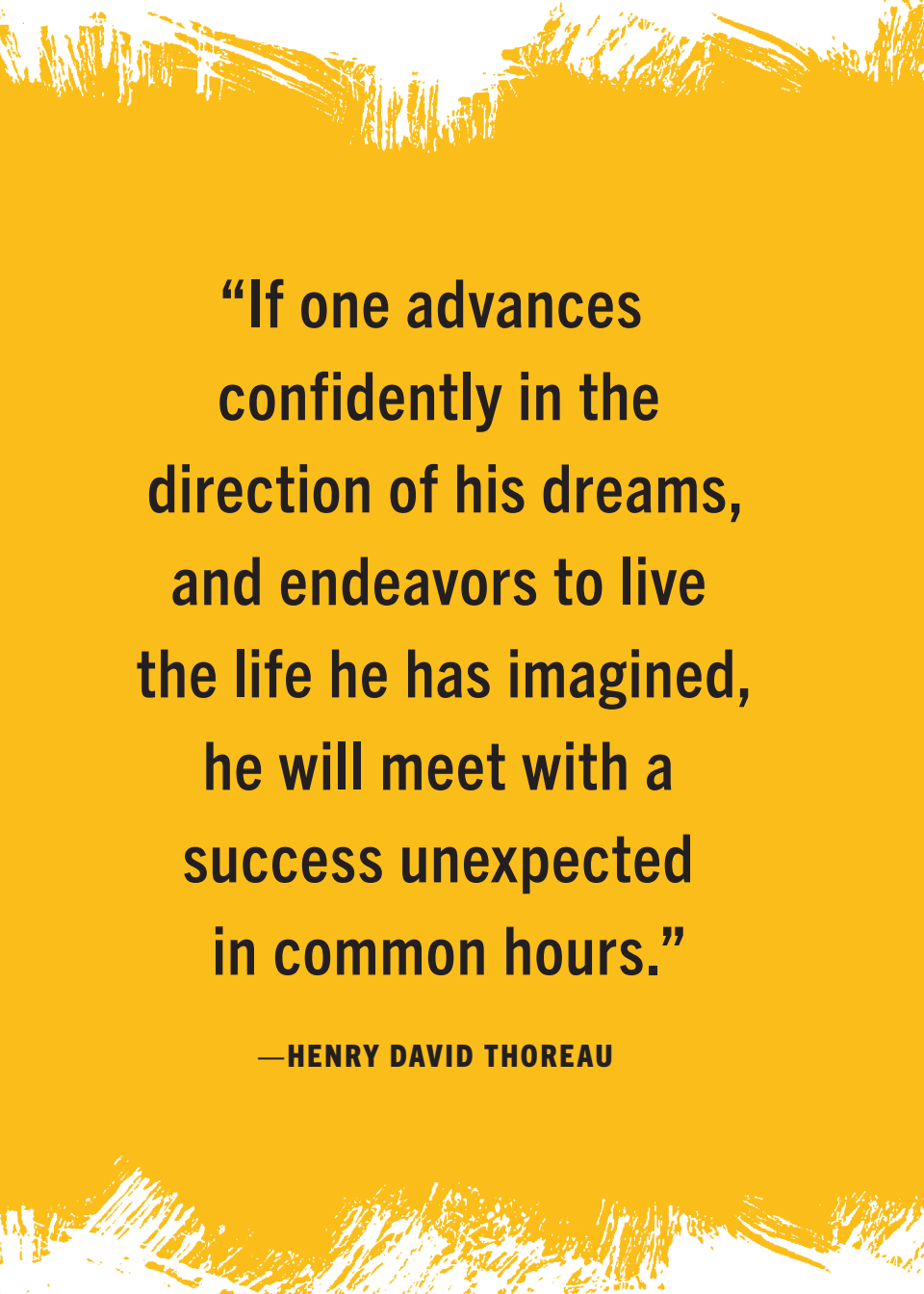
A goal gives a picture to the human subconscious. Everyone has goals, whether he or she will admit it or not. Whatever you want to bring about in your life is a goal: that dress, that sports car, that condominium

apartment in Florida, that home in Martha's Vineyard, that man or woman you want to date. Wants are goals. But it seems that for most people, wants seldom get focused on sufficiently or get mixed with enough positive expectation. "I want a lot of things," someone will say.

Without a goal we are much like the man with a boat and nowhere to go. Goals give us the drive and energy we need to remain on the track long enough for their accomplishment. Like the captain of the ship about to leave port, we should be able to tell anyone our next port of call—and perhaps the one after that too. If you have done much traveling at sea, perhaps you were surprised at first by how slowly the ship moved through the water. In a time when it's common for us to drive at sixty and seventy miles per hour and eat lunch while tearing through the sky at six hundred miles per hour, a ship pulling away from a dock and heading for a distant port at twenty knots may seem painfully slow indeed. But the ship moves steadily,

twenty-four hours a day, always on course, and the cumulative effect of such relentless singleness of purpose delivers us to the next port of call in a surprisingly short time. One day we raise the distant shore, and soon we're in the harbor, mission accomplished. Now, after refueling perhaps, and the scheduled stop, a new port of call must be determined.

People with goals on which they have set their hearts and minds are always moving toward those goals. Even while we sleep, our deep minds are working on the project. That's why we often awaken, early in the morning, with the solution to a problem that had repeatedly resisted our conscious attempts to solve it the day before. We think about our goal as we have our morning coffee and breakfast, while we're in the shower, and it comes to us again and again during the day. We are on course. We are moving toward the fulfillment of our current goal. And it is often the last thing we think about as we drop off to sleep. It is our aiming point. And people with aiming points tend to reach them.



**“If one advances
confidently in the
direction of his dreams,
and endeavors to live
the life he has imagined,
he will meet with a
success unexpected
in common hours.”**

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

EARL NIGHTINGALE could never have known that when he embarked on his journey to find the answers to the meaning of his life, that he would find a formula that would help millions of people around the world to find theirs as well.

Nightingale’s messages of inspiration were for the most part audio, but found their beginnings when written on the pages of legal yellow pads, and while he was hailed for his audio programs and radio shows,

he waited a lifetime before fulfilling his desire to write a book. When he wrote *Earl Nightingale's Greatest Discovery*, it was recognized and rewarded when the Napoleon Hill Foundation presented Earl with a Gold Medal for Literary Excellence.

The story about Sparky that he tells in this book has been licensed many times for use in educational teaching books and serves as inspiration for those young people who have been told repeatedly that they are "losers."

More than sixty years have passed since Nightingale wrote and recorded *The Strangest Secret*, and his works and messages have stood the test of time and still sell, daily, around the world.

Earl Nightingale is recognized as the greatest philosopher of his century. He was invited to the White House by the president, invited to visit and meet Queen Elizabeth, and received the keys to cities around the world. Earl Nightingale sat at the tables of dignitaries at home and abroad.

Among his numerous awards, he treasured most those presented by the following organizations:

- ▶ Columbia Records—Gold Record for *The Strangest Secret*
- ▶ Toastmasters International—Golden Gavel Award
- ▶ National Speakers Association
- ▶ His induction into the National Association of Broadcasters, Radio Hall of Fame

Earl Nightingale passed away on March 25, 1989.

The book *Learning to Fly As a Nightingale* was written by his widow, Diana Nightingale, and tells of their individual lives before meeting each other, their time together, and Diana finding the courage to go on after her husband's death.

In her book, where she shares a side of Earl Nightingale few have ever seen, you will get to know Earl Nightingale, the man, the storyteller, and the dreamer.

WE BECOME WHAT WE THINK ABOUT

A simple statement that packs a powerful punch. *The Six-Word Secret to Success* is filled with equal parts inspiration and practical advice for anyone seeking their “true north.” Earl Nightingale reveals how to go about discovering what that is in order to achieve meaningful success, ultimately answering the question: *What am I meant to do with my life?*



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