Tuesday, March 26, 1996
INASMUCH, THEREFORE (A Paper for the Polemic Club by Otis Young)

The title of this paper may seem disconnected from its content. That's because it was chosen simply to meet a deadline for a printed program, and at the time, I had no idea what topic I would pursue. So, consider it your good luck that I've decided to talk about luck tonight and how it plays a part in our daily lives — both good and bad.

To begin, let's consider a quotation from William Jennings Bryan: "Destiny is not a matter of chance. It is a matter of choice. It is not something to be waited for. It is something to be achieved." Do you agree with this entirely? Or do you believe that a certain amount of luck touches all our lives — that your destiny and mine, and perhaps even the world's, are influenced to some degree by chance or luck?

I believe that most of us think luck plays a role in life. How much or how little varies from person to person and even from culture to culture. For instance, it was my good luck — and yours — to be born in the United States, and therefore to automatically be U.S. citizens. It was my good luck to be born into a loving family rather than an unloving one.

"Good luck" was Theodore Roosevelt's favorite parting expression. Many of us still use it today. A popular modern version is "Have a nice day." Sometimes I feel like responding, "Thanks, but I have other plans." When we say "Good luck" or "Have a nice day," we usually don't believe that our wish will somehow make it happen. It's simply an expression of goodwill and part of the small talk that connects us as human beings.

A Bit of History

The idea that luck is a personified power whose favor can be won or lost is ancient. In classical antiquity, there was the cult of the goddess Fortuna, from which we get the word "fortune." On the other hand, philosophers like Cicero and theologians such as the early Church Fathers argued against the power of luck, as did William Jennings Bryan. Yet, despite their arguments, the practice of trying to win favor from Lady Luck has never fully disappeared.

Modern confidence in science and reason has undermined this tendency to some extent. Today, we like to think we live in a rational world, where things that affect our well-being are predictable, calculable, and controllable. We pride ourselves on living in an age of reason, science, and technology.

But is this truly how the universe works? Or do you believe, as I do, that life largely proceeds in ways not of our making or choosing? No matter how carefully we plot our journey, an unexpected storm can blow us off course. Acknowledging that luck exists means admitting that there are still many circumstances beyond our control.

Still, many of us don't like to believe that. So, we take various steps to control or manipulate luck. There's the belief that luck — good or bad — comes in threes, or that certain objects or practices can bring good or bad luck. Superstition runs deep in this area.

Supposedly, good luck comes from carrying a rabbit's foot, wearing a good-luck charm, seeing a lucky star, finding a four-leaf clover, or eating sauerkraut followed by good bourbon on New

Year's Day. Bad luck? Walking under a ladder, having a black cat cross your path, breaking a mirror, or stepping on cracks in the sidewalk.

To counter bad luck, we knock on wood or cross our fingers. Travelers may carry a St. Christopher's medal, athletes wear lucky clothing, and salespeople don their lucky ties. All of this is just an attempt to control the uncontrollable.

Even sensible people sometimes engage in these superstitions "just in case," thinking it can't hurt. But it all assumes luck can be manipulated or controlled, when in fact, luck by definition is outside our control.

Different Views of Luck

Western philosophers have long tried to imbue the world with the intelligible order of a rational system. By contrast, Spanish philosophers of the anti-scholastic tradition view the world as uncertain, unpredictable, and unreliable. They believe life is precarious and chaotic, and no amount of planning can guarantee success.

According to this view, while planning, prudence, and foresight are useful, they're not enough to ensure a satisfactory outcome. Chance, accident, and luck play a predominant role in life. This aligns with the well-known saying of Murphy's Law: "If anything can go wrong, it will."

What do you believe? Many people say they believe in luck, yet they try to control it. But if luck could truly be controlled, it would cease to be luck. After all, if we could manipulate luck, we wouldn't have proverbs like "You can't beat a fool for luck."

That said, feeling lucky can sometimes make a difference when confidence matters. For instance, a salesperson might perform better with a difficult client or a tennis player against a tough opponent if they feel today is their lucky day. However, in genuine games of chance — like playing roulette or buying lottery tickets — feeling lucky won't make a difference.

Luck and Prudence

While luck itself can't be manipulated, prudence can help reduce the extent to which we rely on it. Common sense, insurance, hedging bets, thoughtful timing, and preparation can help us cushion against misfortune and seize opportunities. While we can't control luck, we can control how exposed we are to it.

Take the example of a bachelor who moves from a job in a factory that only employs men to an office staffed with many unmarried women. His chances of finding a wife improve dramatically. Or as Woody Allen quipped, "The advantage of being bisexual is that it doubles your chances of a date on Saturday night."

Students who work hard don't rely on luck to pass their exams, and travelers who plan their routes don't rely on luck to find helpful guides along the way. Prudence, planning, and hard work reduce the role that luck plays in achieving our goals.

Of course, we can never completely eliminate the power of luck in our lives. Human life is full of risks. It's luck for those who couldn't buy a ticket aboard the Titanic, and while it would be unlucky for us to experience an airplane crash, it would take flying every day for 4,000 years before such a mishap statistically occurs.

The problem with superstitious approaches to managing luck is that they're counterproductive. They divert time and energy from the kind of planning and hard work that can actually improve our lot in life.

The Lottery Mentality

This brings me to the topic of state-sponsored gambling, such as lotteries. Politicians often see lotteries as easy ways to raise revenue without raising taxes. But what gets overlooked is the damaging message that lotteries send: that success depends on the whims of fate rather than on hard work and talent.

The lottery mentality teaches that life is all about luck, not planning, hard work, or productivity. This runs counter to the quote I mentioned earlier from William Jennings Bryan: "Destiny is not a matter of chance. It is a matter of choice." The lottery mentality sends the opposite message.

Moreover, the lottery mentality extends far beyond buying lottery tickets. It permeates our culture, from personal injury lawyer ads on daytime TV to the belief that lawsuits are a quick way to get rich. Jurors in personal injury cases sometimes seem willing to award lottery-sized verdicts for minor injuries, further eroding personal responsibility and reinforcing the idea that life's problems can be solved with enough money.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we need a balance — a world that is predictable enough to make life manageable, but unpredictable enough to keep things interesting. A totally unpredictable world would be chaotic, but a completely predictable world would be equally unbearable.

An enjoyable life, like a good story, needs a mix of predictability and suspense, security and surprise. And while we can't control luck, we can plan and prepare, putting ourselves in the best position to succeed. But at the end of the day, we must accept that some things are simply beyond our control. Amen.