INASMUCH, THEREFORE

A Paper for the Polemic Club by Otis Young

March 26, 1996

INASMUCH as the title of this paper has little connection with its content and subject matter...it was chosen only because a title needed to be submitted by a deadline so that the programs for the year could be printed and at that time I had no idea what subject matter I might pursue.

THEREFORE it is your good luck tonight that I am going to discuss the subject of "luck" itself and how it plays a part in our daily lives, both good and bad. But as you can see I have worked the title into the introduction.

First, 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 believe this in total?

Or do you believe that a certain amount of luck touches us all, that your destiny and mine and the destiny of the world at large are all to some degree matters of chance or luck?

It is my thesis that most of us, if not all believe that there is a certain amount of luck in life, how much or how little varies from individual to individual and even from culture to culture. For example, it was my good luck and yours to be born in the United States and therefore to automatically be a U.S. citizen. 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 the same term. A popular paraphrase of it today is, "Have a nice day." Sometimes I want to respond, "Thanks but I have other plans." When we say "good luck," or "have a nice day," most of us do not believe that the wish itself will somehow help people to have it. The expression displays good will and supportive feeling. It's part of the small talk that connects us as human beings.

First, a little bit of history. The idea that luck is somehow a personified power or agency whose services can be enlisted and whose favor can be gained or lost is an ancient belief, reflected in

classical antiquity by the thriving cult of the goddess Fortuna, from which we get our English word, "fortune."

On the other hand, philosphers (especially Cicero} and theologians (especially the early church fathers) have consistently argued against the power of luck in life, as did William Jennings Bryan (as quoted earlier) and others.

Nevertheless, as with other ancient superstitutions, such as astrology, the practice of seeking to win her favor by paying homage to Lady Luck has never been altogether extinquished.

To be sure, our fashionable, modern confidence in scientific reason has undermined this tendency to some extent. Nowadays we like to think that we live in a world that has been substantially

rationalized with human affairs rendered amenable to rational control. We pride ourselves on living in an age of reason, science and technology, where the things that affect our material and social well-being are predictable, calculable, manageable and controllable.

But is this truly the way the universe operates? Or do you believe that now, as has always been the case, human life largely proceeds in ways not of our making or choosing? Is there still a large amount of chance, chaos, willfullness and unknowing that surrounds us? That no matter how carefully we plot our journey, an unexpected squall can always blow us off course? To acknowledge that luck exists is to admit that there are still many circumstances beyond our control.

But many of us do not like to believe that either. Therefore people do take all kinds of steps to try to control or manipulate luck. For example, there's the widespread belief that luck, good or bad, comes in threes and that recourse to a whole host of objects or practices can bring good luck or bad. Superstitution is widespread in this field. Good luck is supposedly provided by carrying a rabbit's foot (which is usually bad luck for the rabbit), wearing a good-luck charm, seeing one's lucky star, finding a four-leaf clover, finding a horseshoe, finding a pin, encountering lucky numbers, tripping upstairs, touching a famous person, eating herring on New Year's day, or sauerkraut followed with good bourbon.

The things that supposedly bring bad luck are many: walking under a ladder, having a black cat

cross your path, stepping on cracks in a sidewalk, breaking a mirror, encountering 13 or other unlucky numbers. There are very few 13th floors by number in hotels. And to ward off bad luck, we cross our fingers, knock on wood, and do all sorts of other strange things.

The traveler carries a St. Christopher's medal, the tennis player wears his lucky shirt, the salesman his lucky tie. All this hocus-pocus is no more than an attempt to contol the uncontrollable.

Many otherwise sensible people go along with superstitious measures to control luck "just in case," on the basis that it can't do any harm. All this is based on the theory that luck is something that can be manipulated as least to some degree. It withdraws luck from the domain to which it

belongs--that of uncontrollable chance or unavoidable ignorance--and domesticates it to the more familiar and comfortable realm of the controllable.

To p. 10

Parenthetically, in doing my research on the subject of luck, I discovered that the Western philosophical mainstream has worked to imbue our understanding of the world with the intelligible order of a rational system, while on the other hand the Spanish philosophers of the anti-scholastic tradition have generally viewed the world as an uncertain, unpredictable, and unreliable setting for human life.

Their position runs roughly as follows: Nature and we humans conspire in creating a difficult and largely intractable environment. Spanish

philosophy has tended to keep reason in its place. It inclines to see reality, or at any rate that part of it that constitutes the setting for human life, as chaotic, incoherent, pervaded by disorder. Life is precarious. In all our doings and dealings, we cannot count on things going "according to plan." Although "Murphy" was not Spanish as far as I know, he believed the same. His famous law states, "If anything can go wrong it will."

According to Spanish philosophy, planning, prudence, foresight and the like can doubtless help to smooth life's path, but they are far from sufficient to ensure a satisfactory outcome for our efforts. Chance, accident and luck--fortune in short, play a preponderant role in human affairs. The outcome of our efforts does not lie in our control: fortune (chance, contingency, luck)

almost invariably plays a decisive part.

What do you believe? As I said earlier, many people say they believe in luck but at the same time try to control it. But if luck hinges on the fortuitous, there simply is no way to manipulate or control it. After all, if luck could be effectively manipulated, then it would cease to be what it by hypothesis is, namely actual luck. If luck could be managed, we would not have the proverb "You can't beat a fool for luck." The gambler who "just knows" he is going to be lucky today is riding for a fall.

It needs to be conceded that sometimes the superstitious feeling that "luck is on one's side" can make a difference-- namely in circumstances where one's mental attitude counts because a

feeling of confidence can affect a performance. When a salesman is dealing with a difficult customer, or a tennis player with a tough opponent, the heartening feeling that today is one's lucky day--can make a real difference in one's prospects. Obviously, in situations where the psychic boost can engender better performance, the sentiment, "I feel lucky today" can be productive. But where this is not the case--as with genuine games of chance, like betting at roulette, or pulling the lever on a slot machine, or buying a lottery ticket, it is an invitation to frustration. Luck as such doesn't take sides; if it did, it would not be what in fact it is.

However, luck can be influenced not by superstitious manipulation but by prudence. It is

my thesis that we can to some extent guard against bad luck by various prudent measures, common caution, insurance, hedging one's bets--which can provide some cushioning against unfortunate happenings. And alertness, preparedness, thoughtful timing and the like can serve to put us into a better position to create and seize opportunities and so to help put us in the way of good luck.

The workings of luck as such are beyond our reach; whether or not we will be lucky or unlucky in particular circumstances and situations is something over which--virtually by definition--we have no control.

But the scope of what is left to luck--the extent to which we expose ourselves to the impact of

chance--is something we can indeed influence. The bachelor male who moves from a job in a factory that only employs men into an office heavily staffed with unmarried women thereby obviously improves his chances of finding a wife and securing domestic bliss--or its opposite. Or as Woody Allen said, "The advantage of being bi-sexual is that it doubles your chances for a date on Saturday night."

The student who works hard does not just trust luck to pass the examination. The traveler who maps the journey out in advance does not rely on luck to produce a helpful and knowledgeable person to show the way. Foresight, planning, sensible precaution, preparation, and hard work can all reduce the extent to which we require luck for the attainment of our objectives. To be sure

we can never eliminate the power of luck in our affairs--human life is everywhere punctuated by risks of mishap.

It was a matter of luck for those who could not buy a ticket aboard the sold-out Titanic. And while it would be unlucky for us to suffer a mishap on an airplane, we would not really be lucky merely to survive our journey: it has been estimated that a traveler would have to take a scheduled flight daily for four thousand years before an accident would occur to him.

On the other hand what is regrettable about the superstitious management of luck as contrasted with prudence and planning-- keeping track of one's unlucky days, staying home on Friday the 13th, carrying a rabbit's foot, and all the rest is

that it is counter-productive. It diverts time, energy, and effort away from the kind of effective planning and working that has some real chance of improving one's lot.

This leads then to a few comments I want to make about state and local government sponsored gambling, lotteries and the like.

Politicians see these games as easy means of raising revenue, preferable to taxes, although they never consider the increased social costs. Educators are co-opted because school aid is typically one beneficiary. Much of the opposition comes from do-gooders who worry that the poor are being induced to risk money they can ill afford. And sometimes that argument is offset by the claim of other do- gooders that what the

downtrodden are buying is that irreplaceable commodity, hope.

What gets overlooked is the disturbing unstated message to the masses, win or lose: that their chance of success depends on the whims of fate rather than on their own hard work and talent. Worse, the lottery mentality often translates into an assumption that all life is a game of chance, all success accidental, the wealthy and powerful are simply lucky rather than accomplished. When daydreams substitute for plans, when wishing seems more appropriate than work, when envy gains yet another rationale, the whole society is the loser.

From an economic point of view the lottery mentality is anti- capitalist because that mentality

teaches that all of life is based on luck, not planning, or producing a product and making a profit. Remember that quotation from William Jennings Bryan that I used near the beginning of this paper, "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." The lottery mentality is the opposite of this assumption.

The lottery mentality extends far beyond buying lottery tickets with unbelievable odds. The airwaves are filled especially in the daytime when the unemployed and indigent are a larger percentage of the audience, with commercials solicting cases for personal injury lawyers. The ads promise big money to everyone who has sustained (or imagined) the slightest mishap. We

are a litigious society. We are also a nation still in the grip of the Gold Rush and much of our litigation is an expression of the belief that the only way to get rich is quick.

People who have sat as jurors in personal injury cases have described the efforts of their colleagues, especially those who have no secure personally earned income as being willing to vote lottery-size verdicts for piddling events. One recalls a juror saying, "We could change this person's whole life." That was the juror's rationale for urging a two- million dollar award to someone who lost a single joint of the little finger on the hand he doesn't even write with.

What troubles me is not only the cost or the moral corruption implicit in such cases, but the further erosion of personal responsibility in favor

of the idea that all of life is a matter of luck and furthermore that only if a person had enough money, all problems would be solved. One reason I don't buy lottery tickets is that I'm afraid I might win.

— To Willy God

Conclusion: We need (and apparently do actually have) a balance--a world that is predictable enough to make the conduct of life manageable and--by and large convenient, but unpredictable enough to make room for an element of suspenseful interest. For we do also require the presence of much that is unpredictable, novel and surprising. A totally unpredictable world would be a horror even if (contrary to hypothesis) we were able to live in it. But the opposite extreme--a world that is substantially predictable--would be an equal horror. An

enjoyable life, like a good story, must have a judicious mixture of uncertainty (suspense) and predictability (security).