



# WINNING BY PERSISTING: LESSONS FROM A PERSONAL TRIUMPH

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In a Personal Perspective for the Libertarian Alliance (No. 4, *Why I am a Libertarian and How I Became One*, 1992), I signed off the piece expressing the dear wish to advance my career in journalism by leaving my provincial paper for something grander and more stimulating.

Well, I have done it!!

That article was written two years ago in the depths of the ERM-induced recession when the prospects of moving on were grim. But by hell I did it, and I now have a fine job with good prospects working for an American finance and economics news agency in the heart of old London journalism — Fleet Street itself. The role allows me to make full use of my intellectual interests. There is quite a gulf between writing about the world economy or Bill Clinton's future, and writing about Granny's 100th birthday. (I would never sneer at regional journalism, however, which gave me a fine start in the job).

## THE VIRTUE OF PERSISTENCE

Now libertarians are justly proud of their achievements and enjoy sharing their happiness and successes with others, believing success and

happiness to be good things worth defending and advancing. No false modesty or Christian nonsense about the "sin of pride" here. It's even more pleasant when one can give some idea of how to be happier and more successful so that others can benefit. What lessons do I draw from my step up the career ladder?

The basic lesson I learned is this — the importance of persistence. Sheer graft, determination, doggedness, never-say-die, call it what you will. Persist in your endeavours and success will often pop up when it is least expected.

This is not a very clever or sophisticated point, like all the tips about creativity, inventiveness, etc., that are made out in the plethora of success and personal development books adorning the bookshops. And clearly attaining success requires a lot more than just plugging away. But like many an obvious point, the virtue of persistence is often ignored in the rush to find more glamorous explanations of how to get what one wants in life. Persistence seems such a humdrum matter.

Persistence has a lot to do with what our Victorian forebears would have attributed to someone

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with “character”. In fact the Victorians like Samuel Smiles and American writers like Horatio Alger fully understood the importance of persistence. Striving for success, does, I think, get dismissed as a “middle class” trait by the trendy non-achievers who expect success to come their way with the minimum of effort. But study the great Victorian engineers and inventors like Brunel or Davy, and you see the tremendous importance of persistence, of following lines of enquiry and investigating new methods of production. The design of the Rocket steam engine, the development of Darwin’s evolutionary theory, the exploration of Africa or the repeal of the Corn Laws all have this common feature — they were brought about by people with great will-power and the determination to achieve a goal despite the difficulties.

### **LIBERTARIAN PERSISTENCE**

The importance of persistence is particularly relevant for the libertarian activist, I believe, since quick successes are often scarce. We have to contemplate winning arguments and putting the ideas across over a long period of time. This requires a stoical attitude in the face of frequent disappointments. If Ayn Rand had given up her struggle to be a great writer after the first or even tenth cool reaction from a publisher, the world would have been a poorer place in its literary and philosophic heritage. Many other leading figures in the movement, like F. A. Hayek, and Arthur Seldon at the IEA, had to persist in working for change in a hostile environment when success seemed a long way off.

Now I would never liken my own success to that of these great figures, but my own efforts also did not immediately bear fruit and required a lot of persistence. I tried to get casual shift work for some national newspapers, and got friendly but firm responses of the “sorry, we’ve nothing for you at the moment” variety. I struggled slowly to get promotion in my own newspaper, the *East Anglian Daily Times*, and began to improve the look of my CV with improvements in responsibility. But getting a really stimulating job on a national paper, agency or magazine seemed years away.

### **“YOU HAVE WHAT WE ARE LOOKING FOR”**

After dozens of job applications and requests for advice, I was starting to get pretty downhearted by the middle of 1994. A number of colleagues

had left for new jobs, although not all were very pleasant sounding and all the best jobs in journalism seemed to be going to smart Oxbridge graduates. I wanted so much to get a job in London where most of my friends are and where I could pursue my interests more fully than in dull old Ipswich.

It would have been so easy to become a comfortable regional hack for the rest of my working life, a prospect which appalled.

One day in late July I saw a job advertised in the media section of the *Guardian* for a reporter’s job with a U.S.-owned company called Market News Service Inc, involving reporting foreign exchange, Government policy, the economy, politics, and so forth. It seemed interesting but my chances of getting an interview, never mind a job, seemed remote after my recent disappointments. Anyway, I sent off a covering letter and my CV and two days later was called for an interview. And several weeks later, I was offered the job out of a total of 110 applications. There are few more wonderful moments than when someone wants you to work for them in a serious position with the words: “You have what we are looking for and I’m sure you will make this firm an even bigger success.” I felt like a million dollars!!

### **FLEXIBILITY**

My experience did not just teach me about persistence, of course. Persistence as a virtue needs to be tempered by flexibility. If progress towards a goal seems to have stopped dead, one may have to reconsider whether the goal is attainable and change tack. One must consider acquiring certain new skills, such as better interview techniques and getting more qualifications and experience. It is important to know when to give up and try something else.

But I do not believe in giving up on my big dreams — not on the things I really care about. I want to become superb in my field of economic journalism and be recognised as a serious player in the field. I want to advance libertarianism more effectively, enjoy a constantly improving social life, travel a good deal and stay fit and healthy. All this will require skills and behaviours of certain kinds. But at the heart of my future progress will lie the willingness to keep trying even in the toughest moments. And my message to anyone reading this is to keep working and fighting for what you really want in life. Believe me, untold success awaits you! Just persist.