
Secret *of* SUCCESS

Earl Nightingale's Greatest Discovery

by Marie-Louise Cook

Earl Nightingale's 17-year quest for the secret of success ended one night in 1950, when he came across a sentence in a book. To Nightingale, it was more than a string of words on a page—it was the answer to the question that had haunted him since childhood. "What makes the difference?" Why are some people well-off financially and others poor?

At 12, Nightingale's father had left the family. Nightingale was living in a government-issued tent in Long Beach, Calif., with his mother and two brothers. It was during the Great Depression, and like many thousands of families, the Nightingales would have been homeless if not for the help of the government's Works Progress Administration (WPA), which created 8 million jobs and redistributed food, clothing and housing to the poor.

The disparity between the lives of the haves and have-nots was vast, and it troubled Nightingale. "As a youngster, I didn't know anything about a sense of achievement, but I was all too aware of being poor," he says in his book *Earl Nightingale's Greatest Discovery*. "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 12, was to be poor in Southern California, where there seemed to be so many who were rich.... I decided to find out why some people were rich while so very many of us were poor."

He asked, but no one seemed to know. "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."

'Knowledge Is Everything'

Fortunately, his mother, Gladys "Honey" Nightingale, loved books, and she actively encouraged the same trait in her sons. When she wasn't working in a sewing factory or looking after them, she read. She told her sons, "Knowledge is everything; everything



you want to know has been written down by someone." Encouraged, Nightingale went to the public library to find the book he was sure would explain the secret of success. After being told there was no single book that contained the information he wanted, Nightingale began to read, certain it had to be written somewhere.

Through reading books on religion, philosophy, history and psychology, he

learned about "the importance of honesty, personal integrity and courage, and of believing in what is right and being willing to fight for it." But he still didn't have the answer to his seemingly simple question: What is the secret of success?

He spent 17 long years seeking the answer. During that time, he joined the Marines, was posted to Hawaii aboard the U.S.S. *Arizona*, and was one of the few hundred men who survived the battleship's bombing in Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941. Nightingale described the chaos and tragedy of the attack: scrambling to battle stations as bombs crippled the ship, seeing friends killed amid shrapnel and flames, getting blown into the water by the concussion of a blast and finally making it safely to shore with help from a Marine officer.

Great Expectations

His experience left him with a conviction that he was spared for a reason, says his widow, Diana Nightingale. "He was a great



believer in paying the price for what you wanted—whether that was personal freedom or the freedom of your country,” she says. “He came home from the war with great expectations and went about the business of life.

“He was a man who really did live in the present. He felt the past served as an education and we should take what was valuable from it. He said the future wasn’t promised to anyone and that you should live each day fully and to the best of your ability.”

Toward the end of the war, Nightingale was posted back to the United States, working as an instructor at Camp Lejeune, N.C. While traveling near the base, he noticed a radio station under construction and volunteered to work weekends and evenings as an announcer, thinking it would be a useful skill to learn.

“I took to broadcasting like nothing before in my life,” he said. After the war, he moved to bigger radio stations in Phoenix and then Chicago where he worked for CBS, becoming the voice of the popular radio hero, Sky King. Around the same time, he made two decisions that were to guide the rest of his 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.”

In 1950, at the age of 29, he found the secret of success in Napoleon Hill’s book *Think and Grow Rich*: “We become what we think about.”

“While reading, it suddenly dawned upon me that I had been reading the same truth over and over again for many years. And all of a sudden, there they were, the words, in the proper order that I had been looking for 17 years: the astonishing truth that we *become what we think about*. Those six simple words, in that order, revolutionized my life.”

Memories of a Brilliant Communicator

Earl Nightingale was an inescapable part of young Vic Conant’s life. The son of Earl Nightingale’s partner Lloyd Conant, Vic grew up listening to the *Our Changing World* radio shows. “Each fortnight, my dad would bring home a record containing 10 of these shows, and he would play them constantly. They had a huge impact on my life,” says Vic Conant,

now Nightingale-Conant chairman of the board.

“Earl was one of the most brilliant guys I have ever met. His genius was that he could read a book and condense the essence of it and share that in a five-minute radio program. He had an ability to synthesize the information down to the essence and be able to impart it in a way that any of us could understand and use in our lives.”

The Power of Personal Accountability

Earl Nightingale believed strongly that we should all take individual responsibility for our lives, says his widow, Diana. “Earl was a great believer in finding the truth within yourself. People used to come up and say, ‘Oh, I heard you speak and you changed my life,’ and he would say, ‘No, I didn’t. All I did was share the

information and it rang true with you and it was you who did the work. You put it into operation in your life.’ He never took the credit for changing anyone’s life, and he didn’t think we should look up to other people as if they were superheroes, because it diminishes our own power and belief in ourselves.”



Courtesy of Nightingale-Conant

‘The Strangest Secret’

Seizing new opportunities, Nightingale bought a small Franklin Life Insurance agency and gave pep talks to his salesmen every week. The talks proved so popular that his manager asked him to record something to be played while Nightingale was away for two weeks.

“In the spring of 1956, I was asked to put the essence of what I had learned during those many years of assiduous reading and research into a rather short essay. Because my working career involved both writing and broadcasting, I was to then record the essay for the possible benefit of others.

“I thought about it, turning the ideas over and over in my mind. Finally, I asked myself, ‘What would you tell your children if you found you had only a short time to live? What advice could you pass on to them that would assist them in living highly productive, very successful lives?’ I awakened at 4 the next morning with the answer to that question clearly in mind.” He got up and wrote down his ideas, and by noon the following day, had recorded the essay. “I called what I had written and recorded *The Strangest Secret*.” He chose the name because it seemed strange to him that such a simple truth could be secret to so many.

Word spread from insurance agents to their relatives and friends, and demand grew. “*The Strangest Secret* was the child that grew into the audio recording industry. With no effort on my part whatsoever, with no advertising of any kind, *The Strangest Secret* became a national best-seller. I was ill-prepared to handle the avalanche of orders for that recording. My good friend Lloyd Conant, then owner of Specialty Mail Services, stepped into the breach. He was happy and abundantly prepared to handle the business end of my sudden good fortune. The orders continued to pour in from every section of the country. It was astonishing how the word about that

THE 30-DAY TEST

by Earl Nightingale

Why do men with goals succeed in life and men without them fail? Well, let me tell you something, which if you really understand it, will alter your life immediately.

Throughout all history, the great wise men, teachers, philosophers and prophets, have disagreed with one another on many different things. It is only on this one point that they are in complete and unanimous agreement. Marcus Aurelius, the great Roman emperor, said, "A man's life is what his thoughts make of it."

You see, the very law that gives us success, is a two-edged sword. We must control our thinking! The same rule that can lead a man to a life of success, wealth, happiness, and all the things he's ever dreamed of for himself and his family, that very same law can lead him into the gutter. It's all in how he uses it, for good or for bad. This is the strangest secret in the world.

I want you to make a test that will last 30 days. It isn't going to be easy. If you will give it a good try, it will completely change your life for the better. First, I want you to write on a card what it is you want more than anything else. Make sure it is a single goal and clearly defined.

You needn't show it to anyone, but carry it with you so that you can look at it several times a day. Think about it in a cheerful, relaxed, positive way each morning when you get up, and immediately you have something to work for, something to get out of

bed for, something to live for. Look at it every chance you get during the day and just before going to bed at night. As you look at it, remember that you must become what you think about, and since you're thinking about your goal, you realize that soon it will be yours.

Now we come to the difficult part. Difficult because it means the formation of what is probably a brand-new habit, and new habits are not easily formed. Once formed, however, it will follow you for the rest of your life. Stop thinking about what it is you fear. Each time a fearful or negative thought comes into your consciousness, replace it with a mental picture of your positive and worthwhile goal.

For 30 days, you must take control of your mind. It will think only about what you permit it to think. Each day for this 30-day test, do more than you have to do. In addition to maintaining a cheerful, positive outlook, give of yourself more than you've ever done before. Do this, knowing that your returns in life must be in direct proportion to what you give.

Excerpt from The Strangest Secret by Earl Nightingale, 1956, Keys Publishing Inc.

recorded message got around. And that was the beginning of what was to become—officially in 1960—the Nightingale-Conant Corporation."

The recording sold more than 1 million copies, eventually becoming the first spoken-word recording to reach Gold Record status.



Mastermind Alliance

In 1959, Nightingale began a radio program called *Our Changing World*. The show a five-minute uplifting message, became the largest syndicated radio show of its kind anywhere and was distributed to a worldwide audience via Nightingale-Conant. At its peak, about 1,000 radio stations carried the show.

The Nightingale-Conant partnership was dubbed a "mastermind alliance" by W. Clement

Stone because the skills of both men were so complementary. Between them, they built Nightingale-Conant into the premier audio self-improvement company in the country.

In 1960, Nightingale recorded *Lead the Field*, 12 records focused on an enduring success principle. It has been updated over the years and has sold more than 1 million copies. "I can't tell you how many people have told me that listening to *Lead the Field* was the trigger that changed their lives," says Vic Conant, chairman of the board for Nightingale-Conant. "It's one of the classics of the personal-development industry like Napoleon Hill's *Think and Grow Rich*."

Although Nightingale died 20 years ago in March 1989, his books and audio programs continue to inspire people around the world. Best-selling author and motivational speaker Zig Ziglar says, "Earl Nightingale has inspired more people toward success and fortune than any other motivational speaker on the planet."

Nightingale's widow, Diana, attributes his enduring appeal to the fact that his work, based on universal laws, is as relevant today as it was when he wrote it:

"You become what you think about, you will reap what you sow and you must provide service to others." **S**

