

23rd November 2020

Inspiration

“Inspired by divine revelation ...”

Francis Bacon, The Advancement of Learning

Bessie Anderson Stanley was an American writer and author of the poem “Success”. When I heard the poem many years ago, I was told it was the work of Robert Louis Stevenson. Later, it was suggested it had been written by Ralph Waldo Emerson. So I’ve used it many times and attributed it wrongly. My recent research indicates it was written by Bessie Stanley, and so I apologise publicly for not giving her full credit over all these years.

Her poem was written in 1904 for a contest in a Boston magazine, submitted in the form of an essay rather than a poem. The competition was to answer the question, “What is Success?” in 100 words or less. Mrs Stanley won the first prize of \$250 – a great deal of money in those days.

I returned to the poem after my “Thought for the Day” yesterday, as I recalled occasions when people had viewed their lives so negatively that they were fearful of God’s condemnation, believing outer-darkness and hell-fire to be their lot. I often shared Bessie Stanley’s words with them, and, indeed, I’ve used them at countless funerals. Written in the “gender specific” style of the day, these words are surely meant for us all.

He achieved success who has lived well, laughed often, and loved much; who has enjoyed the trust of pure women, the respect of intelligent men and the love of little children; who has filled his niche and accomplished his task; who has never lacked appreciation of Earth's beauty or failed to express it; who has left the world better than he found it, whether by an improved poppy, a perfect poem, or a rescued soul; who has always looked for the best in others and given them the best he had; whose life was an inspiration; whose memory a benediction.

The phrase “trust of pure women” is of its day, and when I use this piece now, I change this section to “who has gained the respect of intelligent people and the love of children.”

Bessie Anderson Stanley is an inspiration for me. She died in 1952 aged 73. The verse is inscribed on her gravestone in Lincoln Cemetery, Kansas. Would that her words could also be written on mine.

A prayer for today

*Living God, however success might be measured in my life,
may any memory of me be a benediction in your name. Amen*

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