

# Jackson (1930) on Your Labor, Your Leisure and Your Life

*John Q. Barrett\**

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In June 1930, attorney Robert H. Jackson, age 38, gave the commencement speech at the public high school in Dunkirk, New York, a city on the shore of Lake Erie south of Buffalo.<sup>1</sup> He was one of that region's leading lawyers and his national reputation was growing.

On that evening, Jackson assured the graduating students that they would find employment—the Depression had not yet struck western New York. He also told them, however, that their leisure pursuits, not their jobs, would define their lives, and he urged them to do better in that realm than to follow their elders' examples of consumerism and conformity.

Jackson's full speech, printed below,<sup>2</sup> might seem in spots to be dated, provincial and even preachy. Some of it strikes 21<sup>st</sup> century eyes as sexist. But much of it could have been lifted from, and it belongs in, today's discourse. It is a developed, thorough statement of Robert Jackson's opinions and values, including his deep commitments to individuality, freedom and what he regarded as life's more substantive pursuits. I hope that you will make leisure time to read this speech and, thereby, make it part of your real life.

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For an archive of selected Jackson List posts, many of which have document images attached, visit [www.stjohns.edu/academics/graduate/law/faculty/profiles/Barrett/JacksonList.sju](http://www.stjohns.edu/academics/graduate/law/faculty/profiles/Barrett/JacksonList.sju).

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<sup>1</sup> See *Bob Jackson Addresses Graduates Of Dunkirk High School and He Says*, JAMESTOWN (NY) EVENING JOURNAL, June 26, 1930, at 5, 11.

<sup>2</sup> In my transcript, which follows, I made light editorial improvements to the 1930 newspaper version.

Speech at Commencement Exercises

Robert H. Jackson

Dunkirk, New York

June 25, 1930

I am glad to stand face to face with this rebellious generation that is so much in the speech of people. As certainly as women will talk about the “servant problem” and men about the stock market, so a mixed group will discuss “the coming generation.” Grandmothers with bare knees bewail the declining modesty in dress, men in their cups tell of youth carrying flasks, elders who have mortgaged their homes to buy automobiles say their children are extravagant, and as dawn breaks up the party one hears of the late hours of youth. Now, as always, the middle-aged world of conformity and conventional poses screams at your untrammelled freedom and old age distrusts uncalculating youth.

If you were going to try to shape your lives by the advice I give, I should fear the responsibility of advising you. But no harm can come from my words, for, “they say,” you will not take any advice anyway. I can believe it. Your fathers and mothers wouldn’t and still don’t. Spoken and written words are very futile to convey wisdom or inspire virtue. Our book shelves are filled with the wisdom of the ages—yet how few of us govern ourselves with half the wisdom of the precepts we read. Wisdom comes only from experience—“and the eyes of the wise are sad.” While you are young enough to remember what I say, you will not have experience to judge it, and by the time you have had the experience to know the truth, you will have forgotten my words. So I venture on, free of the responsibility that would follow if you were to be greatly influenced for either good or ill by a speech.

Success in whatever life work you choose or whatever fate thrusts upon you is a natural aim that never needs emphasis to an American graduating class. It is hard to avoid being a success today with its abundant opportunity for technical and professional preparation. Great industries are scouting in our colleges to find men and women of prospects, self-reliance and character whom they will help to prepare for careers in industry. The business world is so needy of men and women that it seeks diligently and too often has to be satisfied by extending first class advantages to second

class prospects. No age ever offered earlier or better material prospects to the worthy than this one.

I do not decry success nor depreciate the value of your life work. Unless you are to be a vagabond like Mahatma Gandhi or St. Francis, you cannot be free unless you are financially free. So I encourage you to get ahead—and do it early in life. There is a good school of noisy prophets who now tell us we can bring about general prosperity if we will only spend and spend and spend. Whatever you may think of such political philosophy, make no mistake about it personally—there is no way to financial freedom except to spend less than you earn. Make financial freedom one of your aims; do not be ashamed of the self denials necessary to that end.

But business success is not enough; it is so easy today that it is not an exalted aim. The average person can by ordinary industry and fair intelligence reach economic security. Standards of work required to hold pretty good positions are fairly easy of attainment. Sad indeed is the job of one who reaches your stage of education and is then unable to attain fair independence in life. So in what I say I assume that you are to succeed in some position or occupation that will put up a fair margin between your necessities and your earning power.

Success today means specialization. No longer can the “jack-of-all-trades” flourish. Life’s functions are subdivided and each one does but a limited number of things. A specialist has been defined as one who “learns more and more about less and less.” The family doctor is about gone; a host of specialists divide his work and multiply his fee. The family lawyer too is going and specialists appear in the legal field. Engineering, business administration, teaching, all are specialized. The pathway to success today is straight and narrow—for the mind as for the conduct. So business success, demanding undivided devotion and concentration, threatens to cramp and warp and imprison your lives within the narrow compass of some specialty.

There is a way of escape. Our industrial age has produced unprecedented wealth. Each generation starts off with an accumulation of facilities for transportation and production greater than the one before. Never before did the race have so many tools for earning its living.

The very specialization that narrows has produced its antidote in an efficiency which means short hours of work. In lines of work such as you may expect, eight hours is about the maximum daily average, so that you will have about eight hours of daily leisure forced upon you. All professions and vocations now recognize the annual vacation; the periodic holiday; the Sabbath, no longer a day of torture; the Saturday half holiday; and on each working day an hour of leisure offsets every hour of work.

It is this great and growing amount of leisure time that I want to talk to you about. Leisure is a blessing or a curse depending on its use. No injury from long and hard labor ever injured men as they have injured themselves by idle hour indulgences. No wages have ever been of such value as the fruits of well spent leisure. What you will be in middle life will depend more on the use of your leisure hours than your working hours. In your hours of work you make a living. In your hours of leisure you make a life.

Let us contrast and assess the value of those two units of time, eight hours of work and eight of leisure, leaving eight for sleep. Ninety percent of your education has been and will be directed to fit you for work—you have had almost no training for leisure. For almost any work, there is a period of apprenticeship and guidance from master workmen. In leisure, we grope leaderless and most of us without aim. In your work, there is a fixed standard of accomplishment and you make good or you are warned by a superior. In leisure, you drift unchecked, wasted hours unnoted. And your work imposes fixed and fairly high standards of industry, temperance and behavior. Your leisure is pretty much without standards. Its greater freedom makes it the greater blessing or the greater menace. In your off hours, you can become scholars or drunkards, athletes or dreamers, you may be prudent or spendthrift, you may add to the accomplishments of your work day or cancel all its gains.

So I repeat, in your hours of work you make a living—in your leisure you make a life. And if you are not going to build a life, why bother much about the living? Realizing that your work is laid out with necessity as your master, but that your leisure is in your control for better or worse, I propose to discuss with you your attitude to leisure.

This is a subject that concerns girls as much as boys. Modern inventive genius, smaller families, greater means to employ help, and an increasing number of household duties now done outside the house have

thrust leisure upon our women far beyond their training to utilize. While an idle man is only a drone, an idle woman is a mischief maker. The woman not only has her own leisure to account for but she is often a predominant influence in her husband's use of his. And many a man has laid down a promising career to the petty round of social trivialities imposed by a badly balanced wife.

So both boys and girls should be seriously concerned about their great amount of spare time. Do not think I am now going to try to scold you into conformity with the dull routine of your elders and hold my own generation up as a model. Far from it. Because you are young rebels, I have hope of your doing better than those of my age have done. Older people fear you will not "settle down"—I am afraid you will. Many fear you will carry disrespect for the conventions too far into your lives—I fear you will drop it. Many fear you will defy "public opinion"—I fear you will be slaves to it. Some deplore that you are headstrong and venturesome. I fear you will be overwhelmed with the commonplace. Some fear your shocking freedom and assertive individualism—I fear you will surrender to a deadly conformity to the herd ideals, mob emotions and gang conduct that characterize your elders. I cheer and connive at your rebellion if you will only rebel at the right things.

In the two or three generations that go ahead of you there is much that must challenge your admiration and merit your approval. In a material way, they have progressed beyond the total of the ages preceding. They have made an unparalleled success of business, of trade, of transportation and of production. Never before has the world seen such industrial enterprises, such financial structures, such distribution of products or such a mess of government. Necessities and conveniences are supplied at a cost and effort unbelievably low. We travel with a standard of speed and comfort unbelievably high. We have brought into being and utilized commercially agencies never before available to man—the radio, the motion picture, the talking picture, the airplane, the automobile and a host of other inventions that one cannot even recall. Surely as you young people come onto the stage your elders are gradually leaving, you must stand almost speechless at all the machinery, the commerce, the materialism of the age. In our work, in our business world, during our working hours, your elders are giants. They labor with the might of Hercules. In strength and wisdom, they out-god the ancient gods.

Why, then, should I encourage revolt and cheer you in an attitude of disrespect toward the greatness of your elders?

It is because these same gods are only gods while they stay on their pedestals and their pedestals are their businesses. Off the pedestal and at play, they are lost, pathetic, stupid. See this god of business at leisure, graduate of a great university of learning perhaps, go to the greatest invention of the modern age, the radio, and dial in on what?—"Amos 'n' Andy". See him take the mechanical marvel, the automobile, and race madly about endangering life and limb, ignoring the beauty and peace of the countryside, seeking his repose in high speed to get nowhere in particular. See him use up his evening in utilizing another of the age's great inventions, the talking movie, to see dramatized back alley scandals that he would not mention at the family table if they happened in his neighborhood. See him pass by the editorial page of his newspaper to get at the intellectualisms of "Andy Gump" or the elevating theme of "Bringing Up Father."

Yet it is this older generation that complains because you younger people show signs of unrest, appraise even prosperous lives as failures, and set out on ways of your own. So we may properly pause as you leave these portals, admitting our gigantic achievements in business, admitting that we are a well intentioned sort of folk, to see just how much of our cultural goods are worth salvaging. In what I describe of stupidity of life of your elders, I am part and parcel. This is a confessional, not an indictment.

Your mission, aside from making a living, should be to make life more livable. The passing age has already brought its machinery up to demand and it now seems way ahead of it. Your age does not need to improve production, it needs to control it. It does not need to attain speed but safety. It does not need to invent means of supplanting labor but to reconcile man's need for work with the machine development.

My generation has failed utterly to civilize its inventions. That work is ahead. It has not got on living terms with that epoch-making invention, the automobile. Its toll of life and limb exceeds the devastation of war, it tears about straining our nerves, honking us out of all peace and rest, destroying and damaging. Can we not in the next generation civilize the thing, bring it to serve mankind without destroying him? The radio annihilates space so far as sound transmission is concerned and is used chiefly to annihilate our peace with amplified nonsense and

commercialized song and story. The talking movie is the most perfect instrument of adult education ever possessed by man, addressing him at once through two senses, combining demonstration and explanation. For the use to which it is exclusively devoted I refer you, sadly but insistently, to the advertising in your favorite daily paper. The mechanical ingenuity of the ages serves our working hours wonderfully; it prostitutes our leisure hours shamefully. We should not complain because we live in a machine age. We should not complain because we are not equal to it. The objection lies to the man behind the machine, not to the machine itself.

Then too, while our race has built up an enormous reserve of capital, a richness of accumulation never equaled, it behaves not as a master of much wealth but as the slave of mere possession.

I have and do urge you to acquire property, to reach independence, to do it early in life, to make such self-denials as are necessary to that end. But it is even more important that you do not let mere property acquire you. Ninety per cent of the businessmen of my day are possessed body, soul and mind by the things they think they possess. They view every act and project of life with the same spiritual insight and cultural viewpoint of an adding machine.

This generation of mine is the most property-minded of any people and of any age. It responds to no appeal except that of coin of the realm—it thinks of its virtues and vices solely in terms of property and profits. For example: What an outcry and furor was stirred up a few years ago when in course of war a cathedral was shelled! Yet those same people had never been heard to make a protest about attacks upon the living faith of which the cathedral was but a dead symbol. Our people sensed an offense against property, but none against the finer things of the spirit. How many of us do not judge the standing of men by the kind of motors they drive, the clubs they belong to, the luxuries with which they surround themselves? Drunkenness has been a vice for ages—intemperance as a destroyer of the finer things of life has moved thinking men for ages. But it never moved the powerful business masses until it was realized that in a machine age, intemperance retarded production and lowered dividends.

You cannot fail to admire the smooth, tremendous machine that business in this country has made of itself. And you cannot fail to see that we are as much its victims as the masters, that it has not fitted itself into our lives and needs but struggles to dominate us and multiply our needs to

equal its production. Mass production has been a blessing in producing the million articles of commerce adequate to our demands. In its overproduction, in its high pressure sales methods to stimulate us into absorbing beyond our needs, it damns itself. Advertising effort interrupts our music with a lecture on mops or toothpaste. It spoils our most inspiring scenery with a billboard on cigarettes or shaving soap. It burdens our reading matter with exaggerated proclamations of everything from the grotesque to the indelicate.

Modern commercial advertising knows no limit of mendacity and arrogance in its appeal to fear. Disinfectants, perfume, medicines, toothpastes and all manner of things are sold upon threats and appeals to fear of mythical dangers from “halitosis” to “athlete’s foot.” Even instruction is based on fear. We are offered courses in modern languages, not that we may know the beauties of a foreign literature or the thought concealed by the foreign tongue, but upon an appeal to fear lest a Greek waiter laugh at us if we can’t read a menu in approved accents of correspondence school French. We are urged to buy a particular car not for its serviceability but lest it be thought we are unable to own it. And as soon as it is sold to us, a new model is brought out to force us to again buy lest it be thought we were not so successful this year.

To steal away the value of the thing you have just bought by artificially created psychological obsolescence is one of the unpunishable larcenies of modern business which will go on as long as the majority of consumers are simpletons.

It seems at times impossible to deal with the necessities of life and keep one’s self respect. We are treated by the trader crowd with the contempt we earn. They bully us into joining what we don’t enjoy, buying what we don’t need, and asserting what we don’t believe. Education seems to throw no safeguard around us. In fact, illiteracy would safeguard us better. If we could not read they could not reach us so easily. But no sooner is a new avenue of approach to the minds of men opened up than it is clogged by traders ballyhooing their wares to the exclusion of almost everything else. Witness the radio.

Commercialism has seized upon our pleasures and exploited them. The passion of the school boy for baseball has built up a great professional industry, highly advertised and cleverly manipulated for publicity purposes. The people pay the money, the professional plays the game. An



hour and a half of “two old cat” played in the back lot with the boys, costing nothing, would do the businessmen more good physically and psychologically than sitting on a ten dollar seat to see a World Series game. Football professionalized and “promoted” has demoralized college standards. We tend to put everything on a money basis, to finance it well and let it run its way. When we feel like play we pay four prices for a ticket to see a professional game. When we feel like singing, we do not sing, we turn on the radio. When we feel contrite, we do not pray, we contribute. When we feel charitable, we do not help someone personally, we contribute to a community chest as the simplest way of getting rid of the matter.

Complaint is often heard that our age is one of standardization. To my mind, the complaint is only half justified. Life has always been more or less standardized. So far as our physical possessions are concerned, it is a good thing. That we all have similar ice boxes, clothes, desks and automobiles is no disadvantage. Our ancestors were standardized too—none of them had any of these things. It is no worse to all have things alike than to all be alike in having nothing.

But standardization of conveniences is one thing. Standardization of ideas is another. All can appreciate the merits of appliances and so we standardize on the best, the most economical, the most convenient, the most durable. But when we standardize on ideas, we always tend to the lower, that most easily comprehended, that taxes the intelligence least. When we get up a flat iron or washing machine to reach the most people, we get the best, one that will excel competition. When we want an idea or an amusement to reach the most people, we lower its standard to the average or below of intelligence. Hence while the most generally accepted flat iron is most likely to be the best, the most generally accepted music, art, speech or idea is almost certain to be false. Here the world of art, of beauty, of culture, of leisure, separates from the world of pure utility and business. This age has made the grave error of trying to carry over into its whole life the standardization of its mass production business masters.

My generation is as standardized in its ideas as our tables of weights and measures, and from its standard it tolerates no dissent. A story of doubtful authenticity but with a pointed moral is told of Lord Northcliffe when he came to America to direct the British propaganda to induce us to enter the War. Some one told him it was futile to try to get the Americans all in agreement. But he replied if we can all be made to wear the same

kind of collars, we can be made to have the same kind of opinions! And here we are, all wearing the same kind of collars, hats, shoes, and opinions. And we all change both collars and opinion in obedience to the fashion. Everyone conforms. We all join the same kind of clubs, follow the same sports, have the same vices and buy the same accessories, mental as well as mechanical.

As Dr. Raymond Fosdick says:

A common pattern runs through the lives of all the people. There is little place for variety. Life in Middletown is herd life. ...

Men and women dance, play cards and motor as the crowd does. A decreasing number is interested in gardening, a few turn to books, one or two surreptitiously write a little. Being "different" is difficult business in Middletown.

As Everett Dean Martin describes us in his book, *THE MOB MIND VS. CIVIL LIBERTY*:

Both the individual and society suffer, as we shall see, from crowd behavior. I know of nothing which today so menaces not only the values of civilization, but also—it is the same thing in other words, perhaps—the achievement of personality and true knowledge of self, as the growing habit of behaving as crowds.

Whether it is temperance, or justice, or greater freedom, or moral excellence or national glory that we desire, whether we happen to be conservatives or radicals, reformers or liberals, we must become a cult, write our philosophy of life in flaming headlines, and sell our cause in the market. No matter if we meanwhile surrender every value for which we must strive to cajole the majority into imagining itself on our side, for only with the majority with us, whoever we are, can we live. It is numbers, not values, that count—quantity, not quality. Everybody must "moral-crusade," "agitate," "press-agent," "play politics." Everyone is forced to speak as the crowd, think as the crowd, understand as the crowd. The tendency is to smother all that is unique, rare, delicate,

secret. If you are to get anywhere in this progressive age, you must be vulgar. You must add to your vulgarity unction. You must take sides upon dilemmas which are but half true, change the tempo of your music to ragtime, eat your spiritual food with a knife, drape yourself in the flag of the dominant party. In other words, you must be "one hundred per cent" crowd men.

The effect of all this upon the individual is that he is permitted neither to know nor belong to himself. He becomes a mere banner toter. He spends his days playing a part which others have written for him, loses much of his genuineness and courage, and pampers himself with imitation virtues and second-hand truths.

Yet it is my generation that talks endlessly of freedom and brags everywhere of its liberty. My generation was also a rebellious generation. We throw off and scoff at religious discipline that we may be "free." We refuse to obey statute and constitution when they interfere with "liberty." But this same generation is dominated by a tyranny of convention which it obeys with oriental deference. It would not think of being caught out on September 16 with a straw hat, nor be seen wearing tan shoes with a dinner coat or cut its lettuce with a knife. My generation will submit to no discipline whatever for spiritual ends. It will submit to no end of discipline for social ends. It will obey no law enacted for the general good. It will obey the most silly rule that is enforced by the sneer. It will deny itself nothing for its own good. It will deny itself anything demanded in the name of the gang.

Perhaps the most powerful arm of the mob to destroy leisure and intrude upon private life is the organization. The craze is to organize every idea, every impulse, every interest, resulting in numerous organizations that take more time and energy in their mere machinery than their ends are worth. One is a brave man indeed who can save time to toast his shins now and then before his own fireside. The weary business or professional man is thought queer if he does not join golf, and bridge and lunch clubs and give his leisure to make meeting those who have joined to make "contacts" with him so as to sell him something he doesn't want. You are thrust upon committees which solemnly debate the obvious by the hour. You are expected to solicit others to join your own crusade and high pressure them out of their peace. Meetings of all sorts, which we all admit we hate but all

attend in obedience to the gang spirit, absorb our energies, annihilate our privacy and destroy all opportunity for meditation, self examination or poised thought.

Someone has pointed out that Jesus Christ changed the thought and culture of nations upon casual meetings and daily work without ever being chairman of a committee, outing on a drive, press-agenting or organizing a campaign. Imagine a club managing a crossing of the Atlantic by air. Weeks of publicity, a gigantic meeting, a big feed, tiresome inspirational speeches, singing of pep songs and a splash.

“Who travels fastest travels alone” is a motto I often see in the office of a friend. And the man who did cross the Atlantic quietly took his rest, arose before the pep song boys were getting home and alone, mind unlittered with the advice of incompetents, poise undisturbed by the qualms of cowards, set forth alone.

Like Lindbergh, you must map your course and travel much alone unless you are to travel the beaten track. From the crowd you will get no encouragement until the trip is over. The crowd gathered on the river bank to laugh at Fulton. It feared for Lindbergh. It has scoffed at its thinkers, doubted its leaders, crucified its Redeemers ever. You can benefit and serve mankind only as you hold yourself above it, face its hostility, scorn its contempt. If you are out to follow the crowd you’ll go down Main Street and back First Street to the place of beginning. You will go its pace, see what it sees and end where it ends. Only as you strike out on paths that lead a more solitary way will you come upon the delights of life.

I do not want to convey a pessimistic impression of my generation to you. It is the best provided for and most comfortable one up to its time. Its average of intelligence, behavior and culture is probably better than ever before. But any idea that you should worship it as all-wise, rest upon its achievements or be dominated by its ideas should be dispelled. We are dizzy with our newly found leisure. A race that used to work from sunrise to sunset does not know how to behave on an eight-hour day that threatens to become one of six or four hours. Just emerged from an age of hand effort, it blunders with all of its newly acquired machinery, it swaggers with its new wealth, it staggers under the weight of its multiplicity of organizations.

Society has placed within your reach what it calls an education. You have been exposed to it. If it has caught you, you are not closing your books tonight—you are tomorrow opening new ones, you are joining the small minority of earnest men and women who place quality before quantity, right before numbers, self reliance above conformity. If it has not caught you, it is wasted time and money—you will spend your work under a master and your leisure with the mob, you will join the school of “Amos ‘n’ Andy” for which education is not only unnecessary but disqualifies, you will drift on, you will be incapable of saying the most important word in the English language, the word that withers the organizer and distresses the high pressure salesman, the word that would save you time, money and patience, that blessed that seldom used monosyllable, “No.”

For you young people who have a high school education, there can be no excuse for wasted leisure. You have received enough education to give you the key to all knowledge—the world’s best treasure houses are unlocked to you. The fine literature that records the noble thought and the heroic deed is yours. The sciences have been opened to you, from the infinite sweep of the universe revealed by the telescope to the tiny microscopic life that often determines our own life and death. Your introduction to history, commercial geography and economics makes it unnecessary for you to leave your political thinking to platform makers. Your knowledge of biology, physiology and hygiene should save you from the fears on which commercial advertising feeds. You do not need the crowd. You should not fear to be alone with your thoughts. You should be too self reliant to surrender your being to organized mediocrity.

It is for you to penetrate the appearances and seek the realities of life. We live in an age of extreme busyness, of high pressure and speed. It hardens our faces and blights our souls. You should not mistake mere motion for progress, mere activity for achievement.

Robert Louis Stevenson, sanest philosopher of the past century, admonishes us:

We are in such haste to be doing, to be writing, to be gathering gear, to make our voice audible a moment in the derisive silence of eternity, that we forget that one thing, of which these are but the parts—namely, to live. We fall in love, we drink hard, we run to and fro upon the earth like frightened sheep. And now you are to ask yourself if, when

all is done, you would not have been better to sit by the fire at home, and be happy thinking.... After all, it is not they who carry flags, but they who look upon it from a private chamber, who have the fun of the procession.

Some of you, before you join the big parade that we call life, will linger a little in the academic shades, will push your studies into higher realms and extend your experiences into college. I envy those who may do so, who will have this chance to season your characters and mature your intellects under influences which, if not ideal, are the best society can offer toward bringing out the best there is in you.

You will contribute to the sum total of the culture of your generation, some more and some less. The great unfinished task is not to produce more or to speed up or to be efficient. Production, trade, transportation, communication are all equal to our own needs. The unfinished task is one outside of business largely, one of reconciliation. It is to subdue the machine and subordinate it to our living, to get a balanced perspective upon property and wealth as a means, not an end, to put commercialization in its place and prevent its intrusion into the field of culture, sport, recreation and leisure, and above all to develop a self reliant, thinking, cheerful populace that is above slavery to convention and obedience to propaganda and organized mediocrity.

That the task is an enormous one is no cause for discouragement. It is cause for rejoicing. I bid you to lives of courage and happiness and struggle in the words again of the immortal Stevenson,

A strange picture we make on our way to our chimeras, ceaselessly marching, grudging ourselves the time for rest; indefatigable, adventurous pioneers. It is true that we shall never reach the goal; it is even more than probable that there is no such place; and if we lived for centuries and were endowed with the powers of a god, we should find ourselves not much nearer what we wanted at the end. ...

Little do ye know your own blessedness; for to travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive, and the true success is to labour.