

THE LUCK FACTOR

By Max Gunther

Yes, some people are luckier than others. What do lucky people do that you're not doing? Find out—and improve your luck!



I have been a fascinated collector of luck stories and luck theories since the middle 1950's, when a thunderbolt of good fortune came crashing into my life from nowhere (or so it seemed at the time) and radically altered the design. Since then, in the course of interviewing several thousand men and women for sundry journalistic purposes, I've also interviewed them about luck: their experience with it, thoughts about it, attempts to control it. I've paid special attention to spectacularly lucky people and also to the spectacularly unlucky, and I've tried to find what the differences are. I've asked: what do lucky people do that other people don't do? Is it possible to change one's luck by making practical changes within or around oneself?

My conclusion is: yes, it is possible. When you know how to do it, you can exert limited but perfectly real control over your luck. You may not be able to control it in the deliberate and detailed

fashion envisioned by some mystical and occult practitioners. Nonetheless, with or without unseen forces to help you, you can position yourself in such a way that your chances of stumbling into good luck and avoiding bad luck are appreciably increased.

I have made this adjustment in and around myself. It produces pleasant results. My friends call me lucky, and it's true. I am. But I believe I'm lucky not just because I'm lucky, but partly because I know how to be. I have found there are five outstanding characteristics that distinguish the lucky from the unlucky. These five characteristics turn up again and again in the stories of men and women who seem to enjoy consistent good luck. They are conspicuously absent in the stories of the unlucky. These are the five components of The Luck Adjustment.

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THE SPIDERWEB STRUCTURE

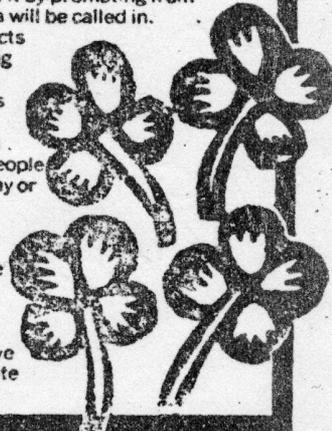
A spider strings many lines to catch passing flies, and the bigger her web, the better she eats. So it is with those who

would catch good luck. In general and with exceptions, the luckiest men and women are those who have taken the trouble to form a great many friendly contacts with other people.

O. William Battalia is an instrument of luck. It is his business and in most cases his pleasure to bring good luck to other people. He is an executive recruiter (or, in business vernacular, "headhunter"). His clients are major industrial companies, banks, ad agencies, service organizations—all of them wealthy. When one of them has an executive-level job to fill and can't fill it by promoting from within, Battalia will be called in.

Battalia conducts his search along many avenues. The candidates he finds and presents to his client will be people who in some way or another have made themselves visible.

"But of all the people I find," says Battalia, "only a small percentage have waged deliberate



From "The Luck Factor" by Max Gunther

Illustration of Sher Safran Associates

publicity campaigns to help me see them. A lot of them are simple people who have somehow made themselves known to many other people, usually without thinking about it. It's their style."

Battalia and his former partner, Jim Lotz, used to spend considerable time analyzing the chains of circumstances that led them to one winning candidate or another. The majority of these chains turned out to be chains of simple acquaintanceship. A particularly enlightening story concerns a woman who had started her professional career as a secretary and before age 40, due to the sudden appearance of Battalia and Lotz, became a personnel director of a bank. In that one move she more than doubled her salary and vastly broadened her horizons. We'll call her Catherine Andrews. She graduated from junior college in the 1950's when job opportunities for women were fairly limited. An insurance company hired her to work in its billing department. Although not thrilled by her job, Catherine was a friendly person. In the company cafeteria at lunchtime she talked to anybody who



turned up near her: people behind her in the food line, people who sat at the same table. One fellow employee with whom Catherine struck up a casual lunch-hour friendship was an older man who worked in the personnel department. He learned two things about Catherine in their occasional noontime conversations: that she was bored in her present job, and that she had some original ideas about practical ways of broadening women's career opportunities. He passed her in a corridor one day, seemed struck by a sudden idea and stopped her. There was a job opening in the personnel department, he said. If she was interested he would see what he could do to get her transferred. Catherine took the job.

"The opportunity came to me from a man I hardly knew," she mused many years later. Yes, it was luck. But she had put herself in a position to receive that luck by making herself known to many people. A few years later, through the normal process of attrition from the top and promotion from below, Catherine became assistant personnel director. By both choice and assignment, her main areas of responsibility were the special problems and widening prospects of women employees.

Battalia's client, a bank, needed a personnel director who, among other things, commanded a thorough knowledge of women's job rights. Battalia contacted a woman college professor who had written on such problems in a labor-relations journal. The professor said, "It just happens I was talking to a woman here last week. We had a

seminar on job rights and related problems. She was very friendly and charming. Now, if only I can remember her name..."

Her name, of course, was Catherine Andrews!

Dr. Stephen Barrett of Allentown, Pa., is a psychiatrist who has done a good deal of thinking about this difference between the lucky and the unlucky. He finds that lucky people as a breed not only have the knack and habit of initiating friendly contacts often, they also have a certain magnetism that makes them the targets of other people's friendly approaches. Dr. Barrett calls this magnetism a "communication field." It seems to say, "Come and talk to me, we'll get along."

What is this communication field made of? Dr. Barrett believes there may be hundreds of components: facial expressions, body positions, voice tones, choice of words, ways of using the eyes and holding the head. Dr. Barrett says, "We know whether someone is friendly or unfriendly, warm or cool. We can meet a total stranger and know in seconds whether the stranger does or doesn't want to spend more time with us. In general, people who are considered lucky—people who get lucky breaks handed to them by other people—are those whose communication field is inviting and comfortable."

Tom Watson Sr., founder of IBM and probably one of the most brilliant salesmen who ever walked the earth, used to pound the lesson into young recruits. "If you don't genuinely like your customer,"

Watson insisted, "The chances are he won't buy." All successful salesmen regard what Watson said as an unarguable truth. If you don't genuinely like strangers, no fakery will hide the fact, and you will not go far as a salesman.

Dr. John Kenneth Woodham, a New Jersey psychologist, is intrigued by what he calls the "loner syndrome." He agrees with the proposition that lucky breaks often come through other people, and that a loner is therefore unlikely to be lucky. "In any case," he says, "I don't think any human enjoys isolation. That's why I urge isolated people to go out and talk to others, not only people they already know but also strangers. Especially strangers. If you're scared of other people or scared of rejection, the quickest cure is to go out and deliberately make contact. The more you do it, the more you enjoy it."

One of Dr. Woodham's patients was a lonely middle-aged man whose wife had died and whose children had grown and gone. On Dr. Woodham's urging, the man made a deliberate attempt to talk to people more often. One woman he talked to was the owner of a stationery store where he customarily bought cigarettes.

He stopped in one morning to find the store owner eagerly waiting for him. She reported that a woman friend of hers, who lived nearby, had a problem. She had been left a box of what appeared to be very old European coins. "I remembered you said you were a coin collector," the store owner said. "There are no coin appraisers in town here, and—well, I

kind of thought maybe you could..."

The man could and did. The store owner's friend turned out to be an attractive widow of his own age and in the same state of loneliness. Today they are married.

Moreover, the European coin collection turned out to be very valuable. Nor is even that the end of the story. Luck, when it finally comes, sometimes seems to come in embarrassingly generous bunches. The man didn't want the European collection because his specialty was American coins, so his new wife sold them. The couple used the proceeds to go to northern Michigan, a region they both loved, and rent a lakeshore cabin for a month-long honeymoon. While there, the man bought a Michigan lottery ticket and won \$25,000!

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THE HUNCHING SKILL

A hunch is a piece of "mind stuff" that feels something like knowledge but doesn't feel perfectly trustworthy. Some people trust their hunches more than others do, and of those hunches that are trusted, some turn out to be accurate while others do not. Obviously a capacity to generate hunches and act on them, would go a long way toward producing "luck." Lucky people as a breed do, indeed, have this

capacity to a notable degree.

Conrad Hilton, the hotel man, owed his monumental success partly to a hunching skill so finely tuned that at times it seemed occult. For example, at one point he was trying to buy an old hotel in Chicago. The owner was selling on the basis of sealed bids. All the bids were to be opened on a certain date, and the hotel would go to the highest bidder. Several days before the deadline, Hilton submitted a bid of \$165,000. He went to bed that night feeling vaguely disturbed. The next morning he awoke with a strong hunch that his bid was not going to win. "It just didn't feel right," he said later, helplessly, when asked to explain. Acting on this strange intuition, he submitted another bid: \$180,000.

It was the highest bid. The next one down was \$179,800.

Where does an accurate hunch come from? Many psychologists and other authorities think they can explain it without referring to ESP or the occult. In essence, the theory is this:

A hunch is a conclusion that is based on perfectly real data, on objective facts that have been accurately observed, efficiently stored and logically processed in your mind. The facts on



which the hunch is based, however, are facts you don't consciously know. They are stored and processed in some level of awareness just below or behind the conscious level.

For example, your friend telephones you. No name need be spoken. You need only hear a few words, and you recognize the voice. How? If you tried to describe that voice to me so that I, too, could recognize it, you would find the task impossible. As a matter of fact, the New York Telephone Company once tried to find how people recognize each other's voices on the phone and gave up in despair. It turned out that the recognition process doesn't depend on consciously known data. Yet despite this lack of discrete data, no doubts assail you when you hear a familiar voice on the phone. You know who it is.

In effect, this kind of knowing is a species of hunch. You know, but you don't know how. Seen in this way, a hunch becomes less mysterious. Conrad Hilton's hunch about the hotel bid, for instance, could have welled up from great stores of facts in the recesses of his mind. When his rational brain assembled some facts and based a bid on them, the other part of his mind rummaged in a huge dark warehouse of other facts and concluded that the bid was too low. He trusted the hunch, and it was magnificently right.

If you want good luck, the hunching talent is a useful if not essential piece of equipment. How can you develop it? There are three major rules to follow.

The First Rule:

Learn to Assess the Data Base. "A hunch is only as good as the sum of past experiences that produce it," says Dr. Natalie Shainess, a New York psychiatrist who has studied the differences between people who do and don't consider themselves lucky. "You can trust a hunch only if you've had experience in the situation it deals with. I often do intuitive things in treating patients, for instance. I have hunches about what will and what won't work. I trust these hunches because I've had long experience in this field. I take them to be true perceptions on a nonconscious level. But if I had a hunch about some field I didn't know—let's say a hunch about making a killing in soybean futures—I wouldn't trust it. It couldn't be a true perception."

The Second Rule:

Never confuse a Hunch With a Hope. If a hunch tells you something is true, and if you badly want it to be true, regard the hunch with suspicion. A lot of bad hunches are just strong wishes in disguise," says Dr. Shainess. This is a second reason why she would reject her hypothetical hunch about "making a killing in soybean futures." When hunches and hopes are churning about, they feel confusingly alike.

How can you tell the difference? It is never possible to be perfectly sure. But it is possible to examine the hunch, feel around the edges of it, test its strength and composition. One method is to try deliberately to make the hunch break down before going with it.

The Third Rule:

Make Room for Hunches to Grow. Hunches are made of facts, but they come as feelings. According to psychologist Dr. Eugene Gendlin, "Many people are not really in touch with their own feelings." This undoubtedly is a reason why many men and women, perhaps the majority, lack a well-developed hunching talent. To hunch soundly you must listen to your feelings, respect them, give them a full hearing. This rule is probably the most crucial of the three.

Also when you gather information, collect "soft" facts along with the hard. Soft facts are feelings, impressions—or, to use a fad word of the 1960's, "vibrations." Hard facts—the overt, the objective—seem more real to many people.

"But the ability to perceive vibrations improves with practice," says New York psychiatrist Dr. Abraham Weinberg. "To become good at it, you have to do it every day, in every situation," he says. "Keep forcing yourself to perceive more than you see. This may improve your hunching talent—and your luck."



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THE "AUDENTES FORTUNA JUVAT" PHENOMENON

"Fortune favors the bold," says the old Latin aphorism. And, as a group, lucky people tend to be bold people.

Why is this? It could be pointed out first that luck probably creates boldness. If life hasn't hurt you a great deal, in other words, you are probably somewhat more willing to take chances than somebody whom fortune has often kicked in the face. But it also works the other way around. Boldness helps create good luck.

"When I first got out of college," a Princeton graduate told me, "I was full of those old Work Ethic teachings — you know, keep plugging along in a straight line, keep your nose to the grindstone. But around age 30 I suddenly realized that the Work Ethic is a prescription for bad luck — or at least for throwing away good luck. The luckiest people I know haven't lived their lives in a straight line but in a zigzag. You've got to be ready to jump off in a new direction when you see something good."

This man, after serving in the Air Force during the Korean conflict, joined a giant manufacturing company as a sales-management trainee. He worked hard for several years. Then an intriguing opportunity appeared mysteriously on his horizon. In a Southern city on a sales

trip, he walked into a hotel dining room and saw an old high-school friend at a table. The friend turned out to be in the business of selling mutual-fund shares. "My friend was happy and prosperous. He told me his outfit was anxious to hire new people. It was scary to think of leaving my secure job and starting something completely new, something I'd never even thought of. But I told myself 'See here, buddy, luck has dealt you a wild card for free. Are you going to throw it away because you're scared of it?' So in the end I played it."

The mutual-fund business made him rich. He worked for two companies over a period of several years. Then a new opportunity drifted into view and he jumped off in a different direction. He and two friends opened their own investment-management company. It prospered and so did he. Then came still another change. He was asked to join a state government commission. "I'd always wanted to get into government service, so I said okay. And right now I'm looking at another exciting, scary opportunity. Last month somebody suggested I run for mayor from my town. I'm considering it."

Dr. Charles Cardwell is a philosophy professor at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute who has pondered the role of luck in life. He suggests that a distinction be made between the words "luck" and "fortune." Dr. Cardwell says: "You hear it said that people make their own luck."

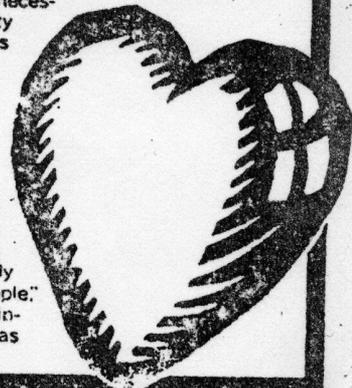
But if you take 'luck' to mean chance events, happenstance, then the statement isn't true. Luck happens to everybody. You don't make your own luck. But you can make your own fortune, by staying alert and using luck wisely."

An Important Rule:

Know the Difference Between Boldness and Rashness. If you bet your life savings on a speculative venture in which you stand to lose everything, that is rash. If you accept an exciting new job opportunity even though it isn't on your straight-line route, even though you are scared by the thought of stepping into the unknown, that is bold.

In the speculative venture you may have much to gain, but you also have a fearsome amount to lose. In the case of the job there is also much to gain, but there is probably little to lose. Unnecessary timidity often comes from failing to make this distinction.

"Men and women who call themselves unlucky are often notably passive people," says Dr. Weinberg, who has



spent years studying differences between the lucky and unlucky. "They tend to let life happen to them instead of using its opportunities in an assertive way. Often they are afraid of change itself, even change without risk."

When I began talking to the lucky and unlucky many years ago, one puzzling fact became apparent to me very quickly. With exceptions, spectacularly lucky people are superstitious. Billionaires like J. Paul Getty, J. Pierpont Morgan and Cornelius (Commodore) Vanderbilt all had their special superstitions. Now, the apparently high incidence of superstitious ideas among successful men and women can be interpreted in at least two ways. It can be used, and of course has been, to prove that a certain superstition like astrology or fortune telling really works. But what if you think of a superstition simply as a neat psychological device that can come to your aid in moments of worry, confusion and indecision. In a situation where you must make a choice but are intimidated by the shortage of facts, a good superstition helps you avoid paralysis. When you have done all your homework and still don't know what course to take be-

cause the available facts aren't enough, then superstition is something to fall back on. It can relieve you from worrying and tussling. It helps make you bold!

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THE RATCHET EFFECT

A ratchet is a device that preserves gains. It allows a wheel to turn forward but prevents it from slipping backward.

Lucky people typically seem to organize their lives in an analogous way. They know that almost any venture can lead to either loss or gain. At the outset it is impossible to know which way the wheel will turn. But if it starts to turn the wrong way, the lucky are prepared to stop it. They have the capacity to get out of deteriorating situations quickly. They know how to discard bad luck before it becomes worse luck.

This sounds like a simple trick — little more, one might think, than plain common sense. But it evidently is not nearly as simple as it sounds. Great numbers of people — the essentially unlucky — never seem to master it. They habitually get themselves stuck in bad situations, in many cases stuck for life.

Why can't everybody practice the ratchet effect successfully? It turns out that, for many and perhaps the majority, two great emotional obstacles stand in the way.

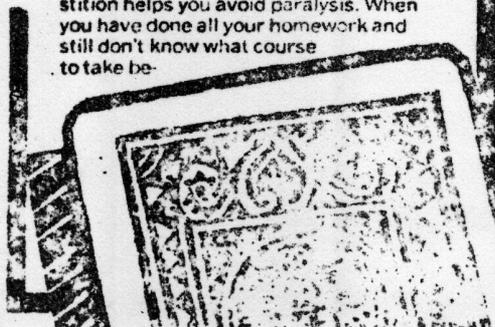
The First Obstacle: It's too hard to say, "I was wrong."

Dr. Ronald Raymond, a clinical psychologist who practices in Connecticut, finds that unlucky people often drift into marriages and other long-term relationships that they can guess won't work. Quick action in the beginning can end a flawed relationship before it becomes an entanglement, but the action of course requires somebody to say, "I was wrong." It may require one partner or both to go through the pain and embarrassment of calling off a wedding.

"People avoid doing that because they think it will make them seem dumb and ridiculous," Dr. Raymond says. "So even if they're starting to have serious doubts, they go on drifting toward the wedding day. The closer the day gets, the more entangled they get. Finally, by sheer inertia, they find themselves married without really wanting to be. And now they face years of unhappiness, maybe a lifetime of it. They end up consulting people like me, looking for a way out."

The Second Obstacle:

It's too hard to abandon an investment. An investment may consist of money, love, time, effort, commitment, or a combination of any or all. Whatever it is made of, it is a cherished thing, a thing to be protected. If a venture of yours turns sour, the only way you are going to get out of it is to abandon what you have invested in it. That hurts at least as much as admitting you were wrong. Much more, sometimes. It hurts some men and women so much that they seem



unable to do it all. Thus they get thoroughly trapped in ill fated ventures. They can only flounder helplessly as bad luck turns to worse luck.

Yet the willingness to accept a string of small losses while waiting for a big gain is a key trait of all gamblers and speculators who succeed over a long term. All of them. It is also a key trait of lucky men and women in general. As Wall Street analyst Gerald Loeb put it, "Knowing when to sell out and having the guts to do it at the right time — this is an essential technique of successful living. And it is better to use the technique inefficiently than never to learn it at all."

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THE PESSIMISM PARADOX

The words "lucky" and "optimistic" are somehow thought to belong together. When I began buttonholing lucky and unlucky people years ago, I expected to find that the luckiest would be overwhelmingly optimistic. I was wrong. In fact the majority of them nurture a basic core of pessimism so dense and tough and prickly that it startles you when you first come upon it.

It was hard for me to come to grips with this phenomenon at first. It seemed paradoxical. Shouldn't lucky men and women be optimistic? It puzzled me to

previous few years had prepared us to meet a woman of loud voice and large ego. We met no such woman. Martha Mitchell said softly, "Life is slippery like a piece of soap. If you think you have a good grip on it, you are wrong."

That is Mitchell's Law. I attach her name to it mainly to give it a name (and because I grew fond of her). "There was a time when I had the world on a leash," Martha Mitchell also said that day. "I had everything I wanted, and I also had a feeling of control. I felt I was in control of my life. I thought, 'As long as I'm careful, nothing can slip away from me now.' Well, the feeling was false. It all slipped away. There were precautions I could have taken, things I could have done, if only I hadn't felt so strong and confident..."

She was saying that pessimism would have been useful, especially pessimism about her own degree of control over events.

Lucky men and women, notably more than the unlucky, are aware that unforeseeable and uncontrollable events may come blundering into their lives at any time. No life is ever totally under the control of its owner. Lucky people are those who adapt to this environment of uncertainty. They accept disorder as a fact that must be dealt with, whether one likes it or not. The unlucky tend to argue with it.

This was clearly illustrated in a study by Dr. Eugene Emerson Jennings, professor of administrative science at Michigan State University. He examined the lives of executives in an attempt to learn what qualities made for success or



hear J. Paul Getty say, "When I go into any business deal, my chief thoughts are on how I'm going to save myself if things go wrong." Or to hear a brilliantly successful woman commodities speculator say, "Out of every four trades, I figure I'll lose money on three. And I'm not surprised when I lose on all four." Canny Gerald Loeb said it in a way that startled me the most. "On the stock market," he said flatly, "optimism can kill you."

I decided I better find out what is going on! It turns out that the uses of pessimism among the lucky can be articulated in terms of two cardinal laws.

Murphy's Law

As far as I have been able to discover, there is not now and has never been a Professor Murphy, originator of Murphy's Law. The reasons why this particular name is associated with this law are lost in the mists of time. The law says, "If something can go wrong, it will."

Helena Rubinstein made her fortune in a world that was not hospitable to women in business. Instinctively she understood Murphy's Law. I phoned her once on a magazine assignment, and as soon as she found I was calling from a booth she insisted that I give her my number. "In case we're cut off." The possibility had not occurred to me. But remember, if something can go wrong, it will. It did. We were cut off, and I found my pockets empty of coins.

Pessimism had, of course, served her in vastly more important ways during her lucky and eventful life. Her own version of Murphy's Law was: "If there is a wrong way to use this product, somebody will find it." And the corollary: "The woman who finds it will have friends who talk a lot." Once, when a new skin cream was under development, she asked what would happen if somebody left a jar of it on a radiator. What happened was potential commercial disaster. The product, when warmed, turned into a loathsome, scummy soup. It was abandoned.

Mitchell's Law

Martha Mitchell was born obscurely in Arkansas, battled her way to success as a model, married a fast-rising lawyer, climbed to a dizzy peak of fame and fortune, and then saw her life come apart piece by piece in the last inglorious days of the Nixon Administration. Two editors and I met her for lunch in New York City one day in 1975. We wanted to talk about an autobiography that she thought she might write. Newspaper stories over the

failure. In Dr. Jennings' remarkable book *Executive Success*, that came out of this study, he reported that two outstanding traits of the "failure-prone" executive are an "illusion of immunity" to bad luck and an "illusion of mastery" over all of life's events.

Says Dr. Jennings, "The successful man or woman is aware that chance can make nulp out of the most carefully constructed plans. When that happens, the successful executive is unhappy, of course, but can rise above the misfortune by saying, 'Well, part of this was my own bad management, but part of it was sheer bad luck.' The failure-prone executive is not emotionally equipped to handle random disaster in this serene way. Since he clings to the illusion that he has, or should have, total control over events, his tendency is to blame himself, when bad luck steps in and takes things out of his hands. His reaction is: 'I've failed!'"

Clinging to an illusion of control, you open yourself to two kinds of danger. The first is that you won't build defense against the unknowable bad luck that at any hour could snatch control from your grasp. The second is that, when bad luck strikes, you will be too greatly demoralized. You will react in ways that are not useful.

Murphy's Law and Mitchell's Law both say: *Never enter a situation without knowing what you will do when it goes wrong.* And that's a fairly gloomy thought. Yet, these pessimistic laws can be said to have this optimistic corollary: *If something goes right, don't argue. Or to put it another way: When good luck pulls you sideways, let go.*

You might as well. Life is slippery no matter how you handle it. Perfect control is an illusion. Good luck!

