Observations of a Highway Commissioner

J. Earle Wooding
Member, Indiana State Highway Commission

Feeling the need of help to prepare these remarks, I asked an expert for some advice. I was told that a good speech should contain four important elements—references to religion, to royalty, to sex and to mystery.

To emphasize the matter I was told of a schoolboy, who, when he received the same advice about writing a theme and was told to keep it short and to the point, handed in the following: "Holy Moses," said the princess, "I'm pregnant again. Who done it?"

Following this format it would be in character to say that in all of the eons of time since the formations of the earth and our solar system, the raw materials used in building our roads and bridges, and myriad other conveniences, have been readily available. The know-how and the diligence to put them to work are most recent, and the future surely will bring further developments for our comfort and convenience, if only man can develop the character and ability to control his actions in harmony with God's plan for the universe.

I saw a television program recently about the late Dr. A. A. Michelson, the renowned physicist, and was reminded about how our knowledge has grown, just in the area of astronomy. As telescopes were invented we became aware of our solar system, as they were successively improved we learned about our galaxy, and as further improvements were made we learned that a vast number of galaxies can be photographed and counted—perhaps billions of them! A knowledge and comprehension of these things certainly are an obvious foundation for a sincerely reverent attitude, which must surely come to those who think at all about the intricate complexities of our total environment. We are dealing here with the word and the concept of infinity, and being finite we are wholly incapable of comprehending it.

I shall skip over royalty—it is outmoded anyway, for today the common man is king! And also sex, of which we seem to have a superabundance everywhere these days.

This brings us to the heading of mystery, and I want to say a few things about MAN, a rather special kind of mystery. The writer and
thinker, Norman Cousins, observed, when commenting about the need for bringing about man's improvement, looking to ultimate perfection: "To talk about the need for perfection in man is to talk about the need for a new species. The existence of man is imperfection; imperfection and blazing contradictions—between mixed good and evil, altruism and selfishness, co-operativeness and combativeness, optimism and fatalism, affirmation and negation."

These contradictory traits very well could be a short outline of human nature, brought about no doubt by ages of strife with the weather, the other animals and his own species. And most of them are rooted in insecurity of one kind or another. But we have come to know that the really stable man is the one who is secure, not in what he has but in what he is. For example, if a man enjoys his breakfast every morning, does it really matter whether he eats it out of a solid gold dish or a plastic one? If he does not enjoy it, the kind of dish he uses will not improve his appetite or his health.

I am not so pessimistic as to believe that man will not improve in time, but I will agree that our material comforts have come so quickly that we have not been able to up-date our philosophy of life fast enough to keep pace. Certainly man's greatest enemy is man himself. He can and will be conquered, and will fail, when he is corroded within by the loss of morality. But he can have a better—a more secure world and life, when he gets to be a better individual. And while this will take some doing, we can all start right now, if we will. Miracle drugs have been devised to destroy germs and bacteria, but a pill to improve basic human nature is not likely to be produced very soon.

I saw in Construction Digest recently a two-sentence description of our situation. It went this way—"the little voice inside used to be our conscience. Now it's a pocket radio."

One side of human nature today is illustrated by our common enemy, communism. The Communists openly boast about having no morals or scruples, not only between them and other nations, but between themselves as individuals—and this is the basic reason that communism will fail. All successful relations between men, as well as between nations, must rest on morality—that is, honesty, integrity and the keeping of commitments. This concept has evolved over the long ages that man has developed into a social being. Other ways have been tried again and again and have always failed. A sound and stable and permanent society cannot be raised on an insecure base.

I cannot emphasize too much that complete integrity is the basic ingredient in the building of our roads and the maintenance of them,
and in the handling of the money and the records involved in doing this job. It is an immense responsibility! The interstate road program is the largest single construction project ever undertaken, I am told, involving billions of dollars. And it is sure to tempt some of us, possibly including contractors, engineers, buyers of rights-of-way and maintenance materials and supplies, and commissioners. But such things always fail and the end result is always tragedy, underscoring my previous statements about the importance of morality.

In this connection, I will share two ideas with you—one is mine and the other is a quote from a famous and successful business man. To list mine first—it has been my observation that in our human relations there is a moral law which is just as valid and operative as the law of gravity, and controls our destinies just as surely. You ultimately reap exactly as you sow in all things. The Scriptures put it this way, I believe—“Are grapes gathered from thorns or figs from thistles?” It might well be paraphrased thus—can evil be sown and good reaped?

Real “prosperity” and “success” will be in direct proportion to your understanding of what these words really mean, and your moral ability to handle these “imposters,” as they have been called in Kipling’s poem. In spite of the constant efforts of many people to get something for nothing, take it from me, there is no such thing. And if there could be, think for only a moment of what it would do to us! We need continuing mental, physical and moral challenges to stimulate growth. When you have made that first million you will realize that the money was not actually the real objective, though it may have been a helpful incentive.

The second thought is this—on being asked at the close of his career to what he attributed his success, a famous business man said, “My secret was only that as a young man just starting out, I pretended that I owned the business and did each day what just such an interested owner would do.” If each one of us would start doing this today, the change that would occur overnight would be quite astounding, and would be sure to be evident to the people of our state. I do not mean to imply that we have been remiss over the past three years, for our accomplishments show otherwise, with record amounts of roads built and contracts let. But renewed dedication would bring results in growth, development and productivity so far-reaching that they would surpass even our wildest dreams of the future.

But a word of caution—as you all know, some internal changes are planned, giving additional responsibility to many of you as we try to decentralize. It has been said, you know, that some people grow when
given responsibility, while others merely swell! Resolve now to look to your moral and spiritual as well as your technical growth in the days ahead, and you will be a “success” by any standard; and in the process, we will have built in Indiana the finest system of highways in the world.

Let me close by mentioning one aspect of our work which might profit from more attention by all of us—I mean the personal relations factor. The basic fact is that we are all servants of the people of our great state, and we should always remember how important the human factor is in all our dealings—even with each other. In writing about good will, Amos Parrish, the author has said, “The most precious thing anyone can have is the good will of others. It is something as fragile as an orchid, and as beautiful. As precious as a gold nugget, and as hard to find. As powerful as a great turbine, and as hard to build. As wonderful as youth, and as hard to keep.” And the very basis of good will is complete integrity—honesty with fairness, rooted in compassion. I commend this to you as a third idea, which if practiced will bring you more friends, and more influence with them, than any course of study available in any university in the world. Nothing is ever accomplished except through people, and of course they will not work with you if you antagonize them.

Finally—remember this—there is always a big “IF” right in the center of the word “L I F E,” and what you do with your own life depends in the last analysis on you and you alone. We revere Abraham Lincoln as a great president—but he had first made himself a great man, and his start was about as inauspicious as can be imagined: no formal education, without wealth or important friends or social position, and a complete lack of material comforts.

In our American tradition, the times that try men’s souls are conquered by men who try—ordinary men like us who are willing to accept the challenges of life and to work to make the other two letters of that word “LIFE” have active and objective meaning as love and effort. Then it can be translated thus: L for love, I for integrity, F for fidelity, and E for effort. And, you see, we have completely submerged those two middle letters! In the process our lives will lose their “iffyness” and we will have become positive and dynamic and constructive!

Speaking for myself and the other commission members, we see a wonderful year ahead in 1964 as we rededicate ourselves unreservedly to the demanding job of better planning, better building and better maintaining the roads of the great state of Indiana.

This fiftieth annual conference is one means of improving our methods and procedures and teamwork in building and maintaining our
highways. Let us, therefore, get on with our program so we can make a more vital contribution toward keeping the United States of America the most powerful and productive nation anywhere in the world.