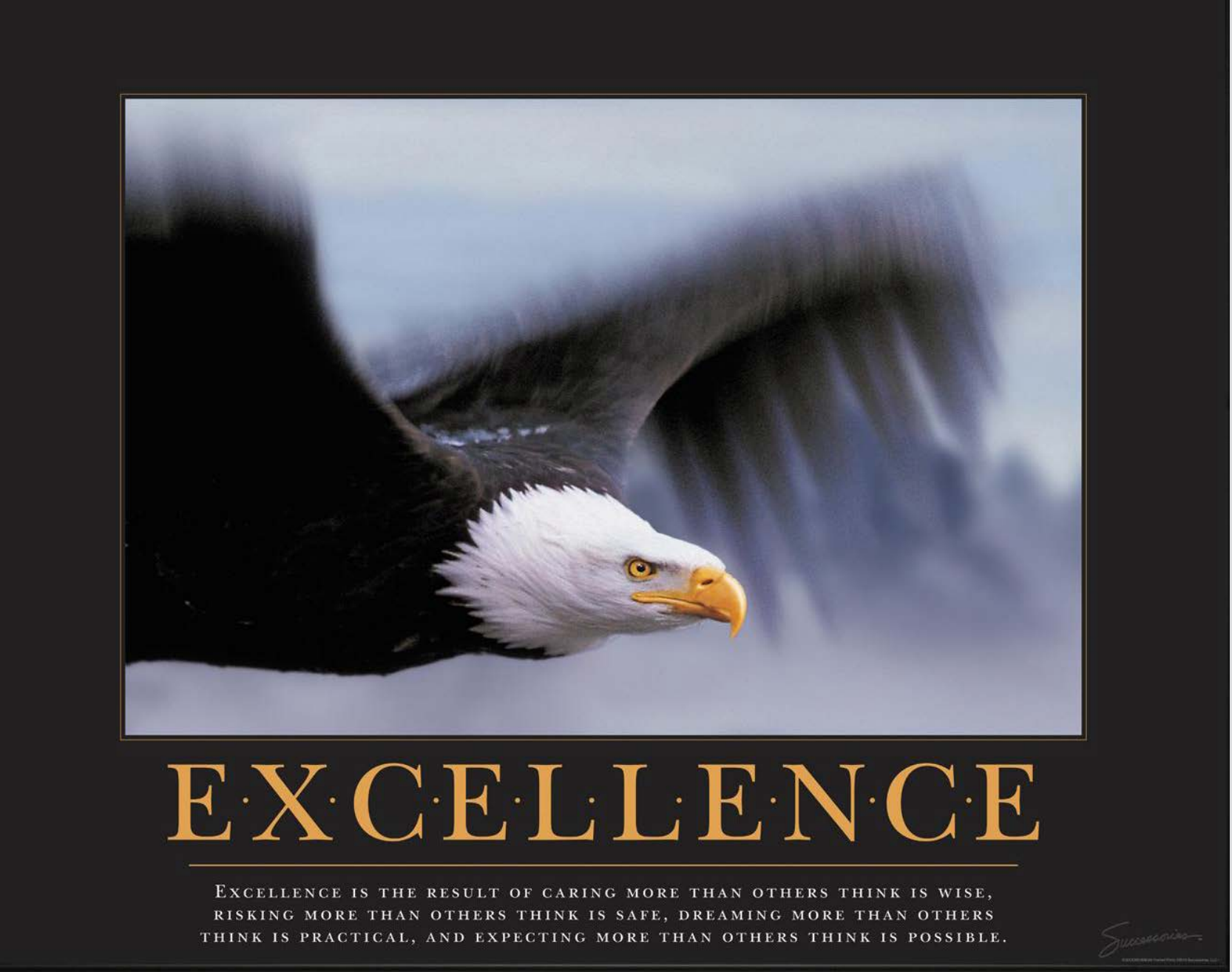
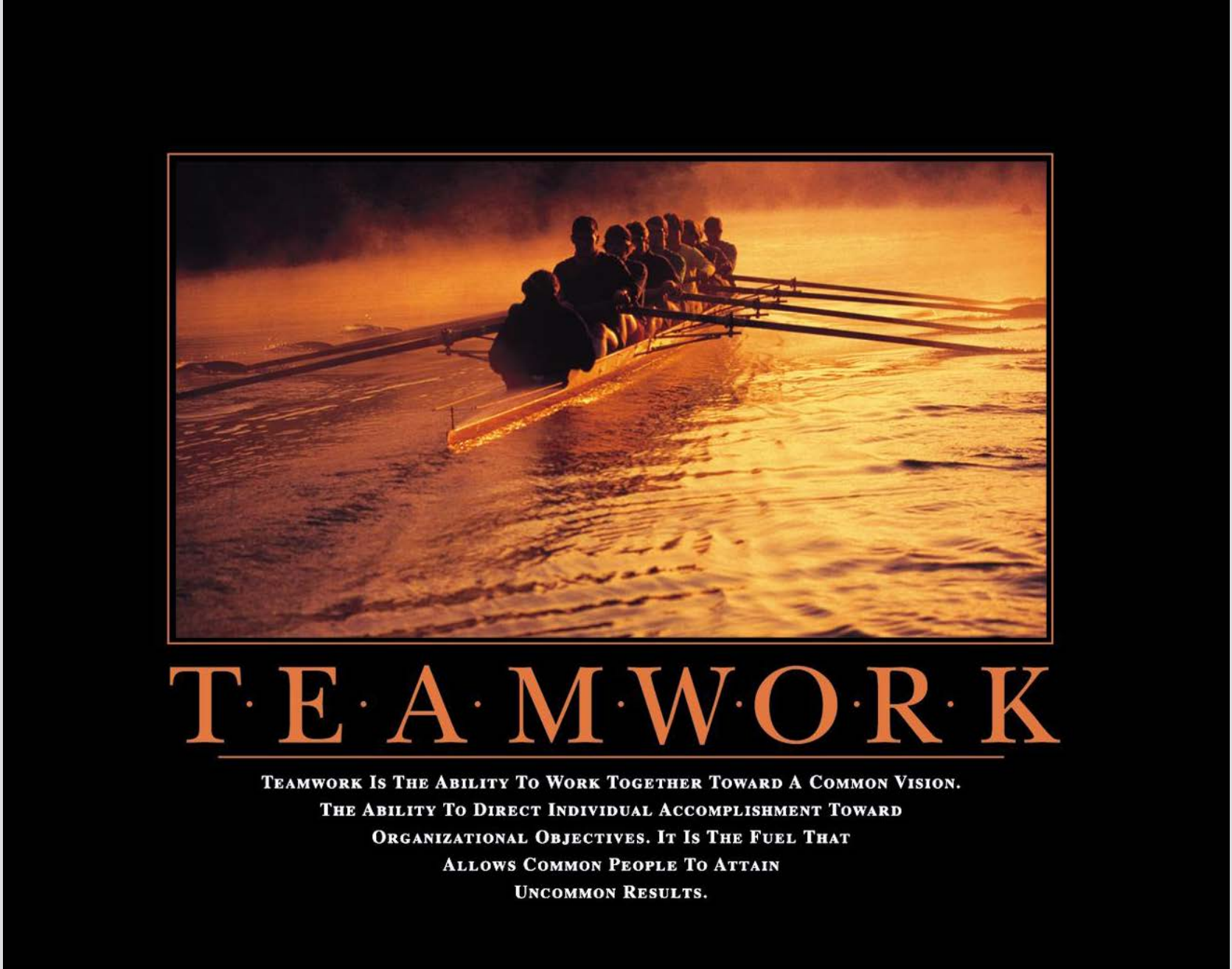


This PDF is a record of my presentation at “Künstler:innen on Artists”, a series of talks organized by WAVES where invited artists speak about another living artist whose work inspires them.

The talk took place at Kunsthalle Zurich on the 17th of December 2024

fig. Successories (sorted by Bestselling)



I will present a series of motivational posters created by Mac Anderson and his company Successories.

fig. Mac Anderson



Mac Anderson is a US American entrepreneur who has founded multiple companies, including a travel agency, a food distributor company, and a multimedia publisher specializing in short motivational books.

fig. Mac Anderson



He is the author of several inspirational books and gives speeches on that subject.

fig. Mac Anderson



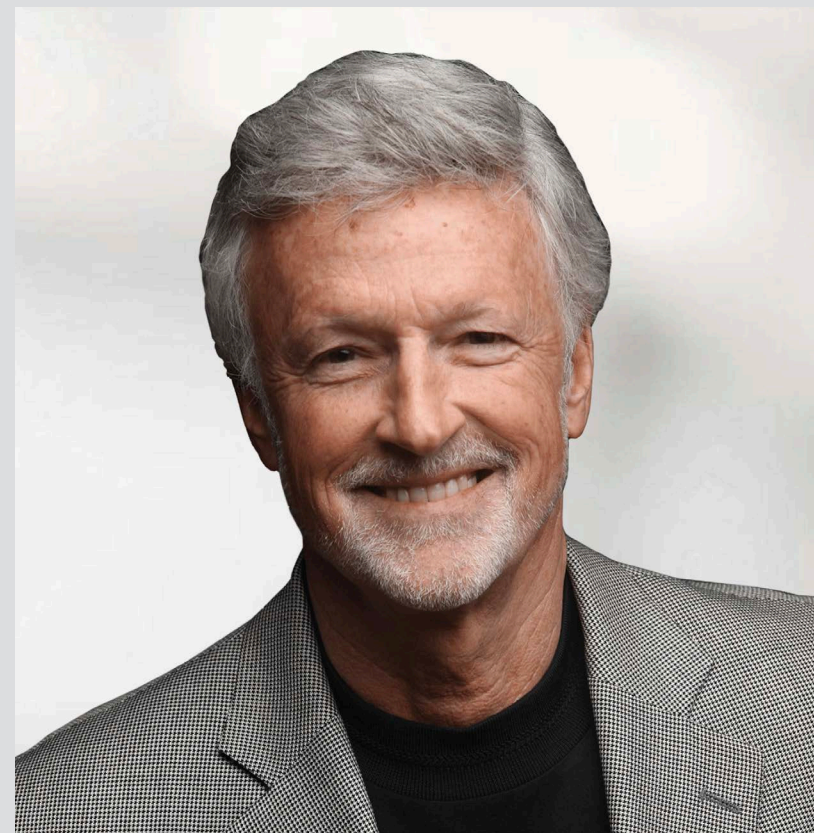
In 1985, Mac Anderson founded Successories driven by his passion for collecting quotes. His idea was to combine inspiring phrases with evocative images in a design that could hang in corporate and educational environments.

fig. Mac Anderson



The posters reached the peak of their popularity in the 1990s and became an icon of office decoration.

fig. Mac Anderson



*In the early 2000s, after the advent of the internet and poor business decisions, the company was struggling.
In 2004, Anderson sold Successories to a private investor who continues to run the company today.*



Preparing for this presentation, I was concerned about distancing myself too much from the framework of these talks.



*Can the posters be seen as art?
Could Mac Anderson’s entrepreneurial career be a kind of artistic practice?*



Fortunately, these questions will be answered at the end of my presentation.



For now, I will proceed by avoiding aesthetic judgments and accepting the Successories’ website definition, where these images appear under the category “Art & Posters” and are referred to as “artworks”.

fig.



*I worked from a sample of 84 Successories' posters that preserve the original 1990s design.
You can still buy them on the website.*

fig.



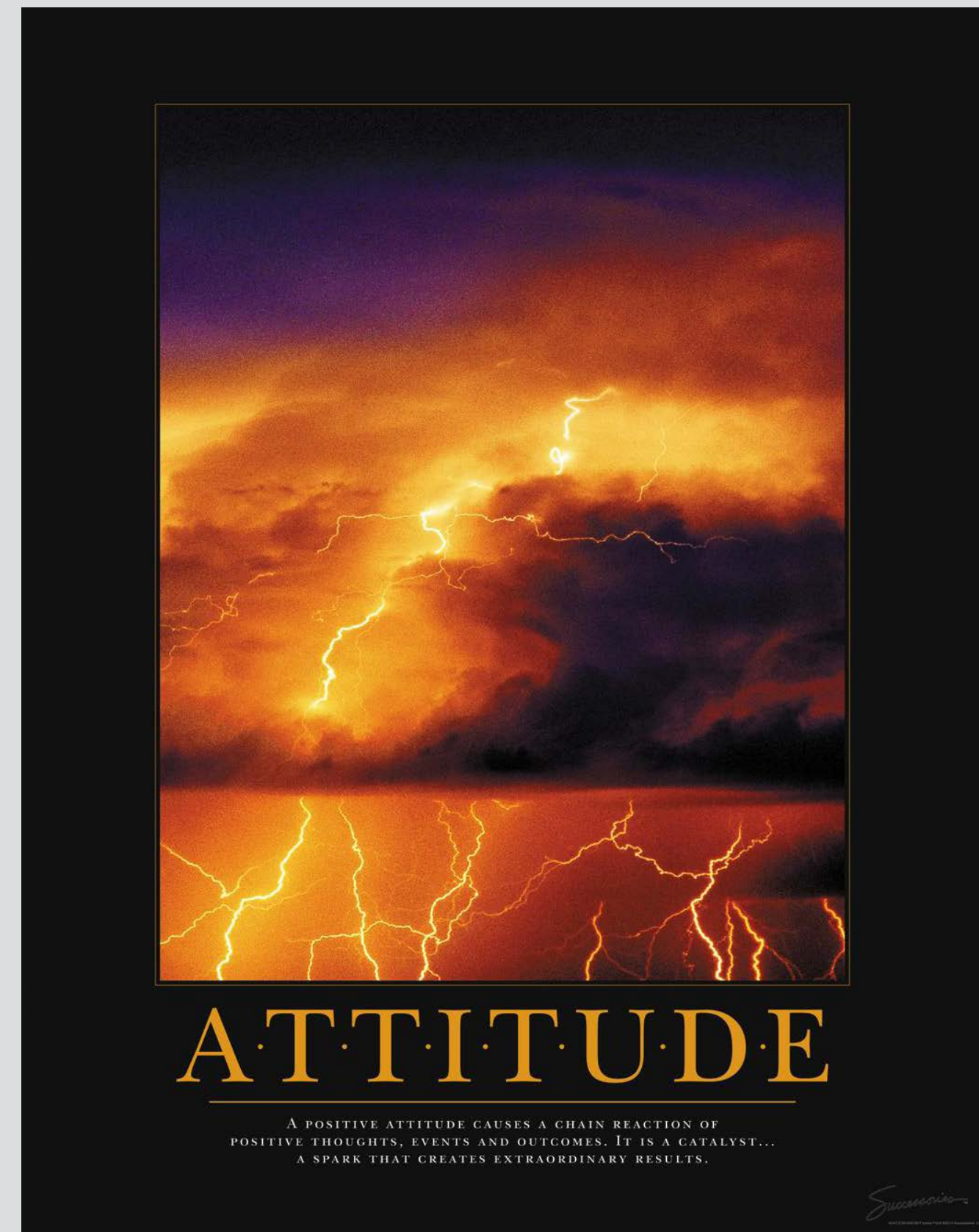
The posters were produced in the US and reflect therefore a North American corporate culture. While some of what I will discuss is specific to the U.S., other things can be translated to other geographies.

fig.



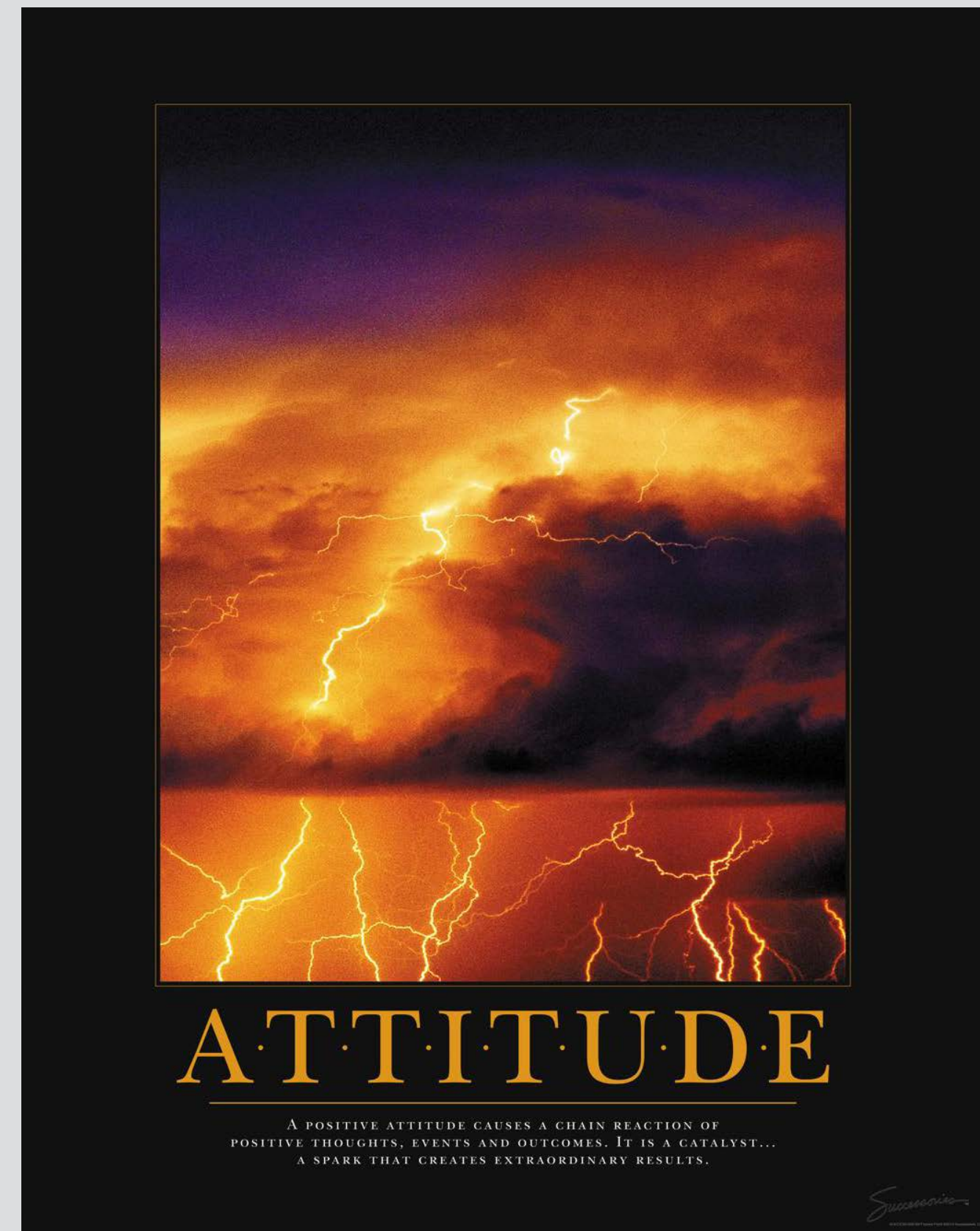
*I sent the posters to friends and colleagues who generously shared their comments.
I am very grateful for their contributions and integrated some in this presentation.*

fig.



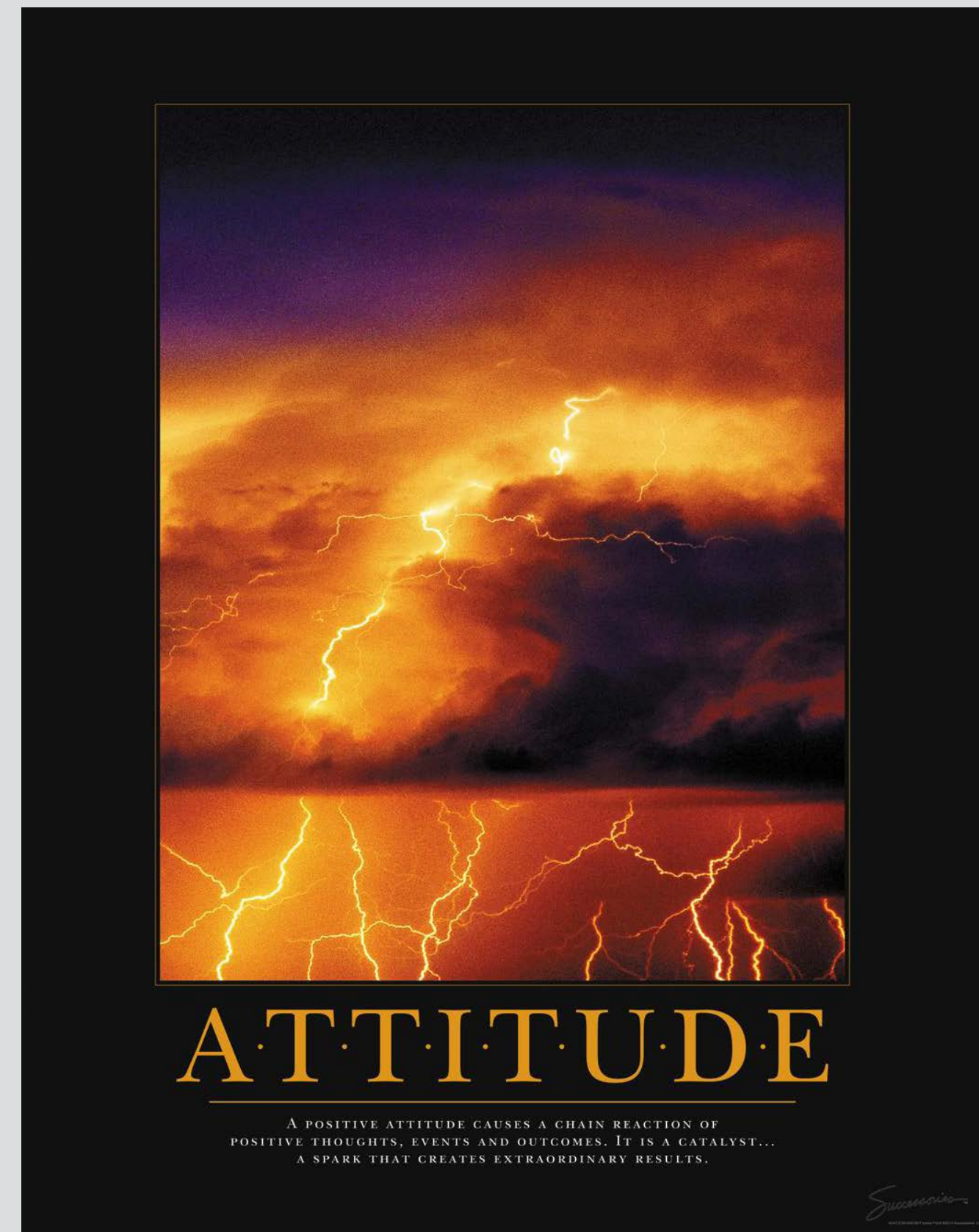
*The posters are composed of a stock photograph, a title in uppercase, and a quotation on a black background.
The elements are clearly separated from each other.*

fig.



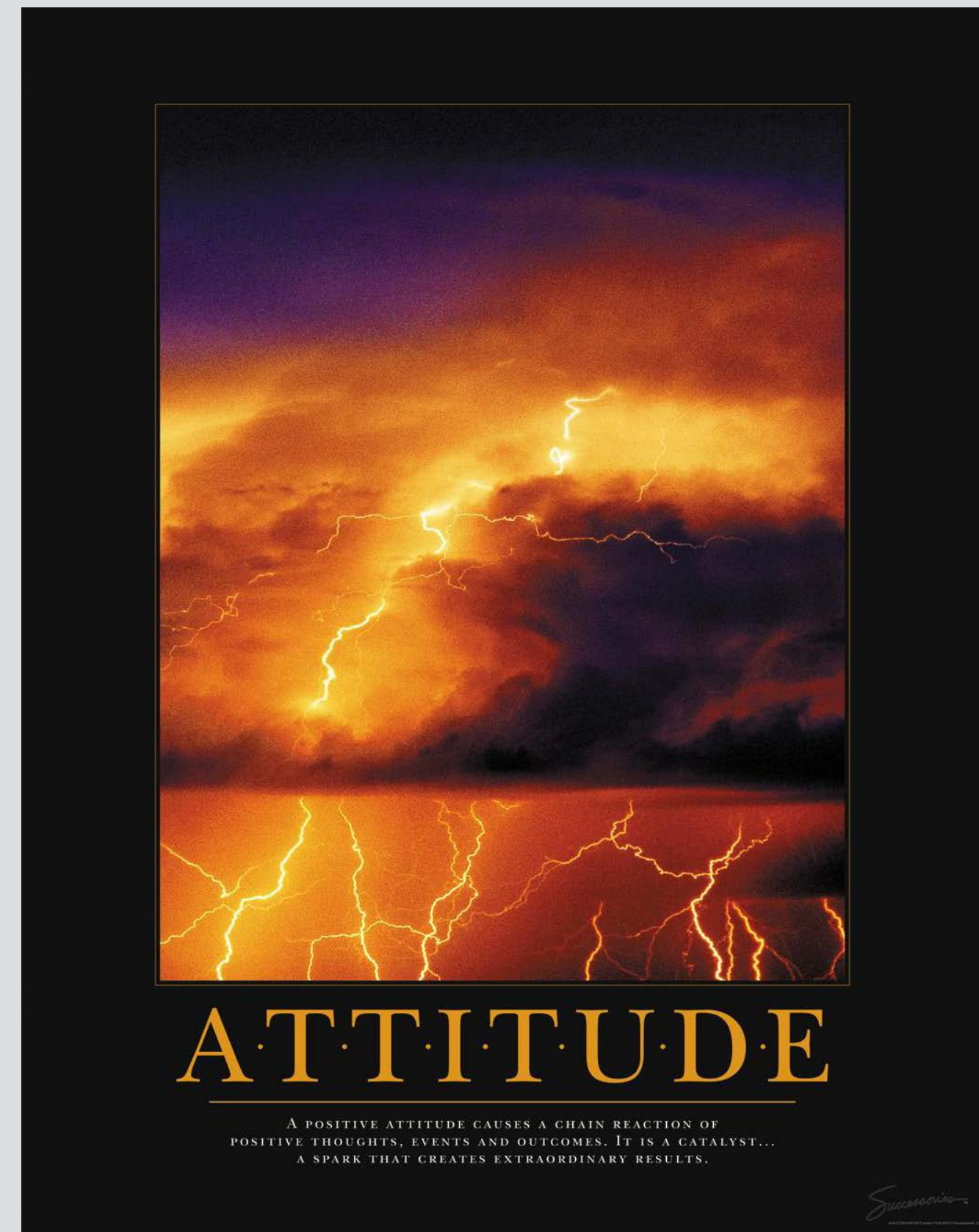
The typeface is Baskerville. There are secondary elements like the frame around the photograph, the middle dots, and the underline on the main title.

fig.



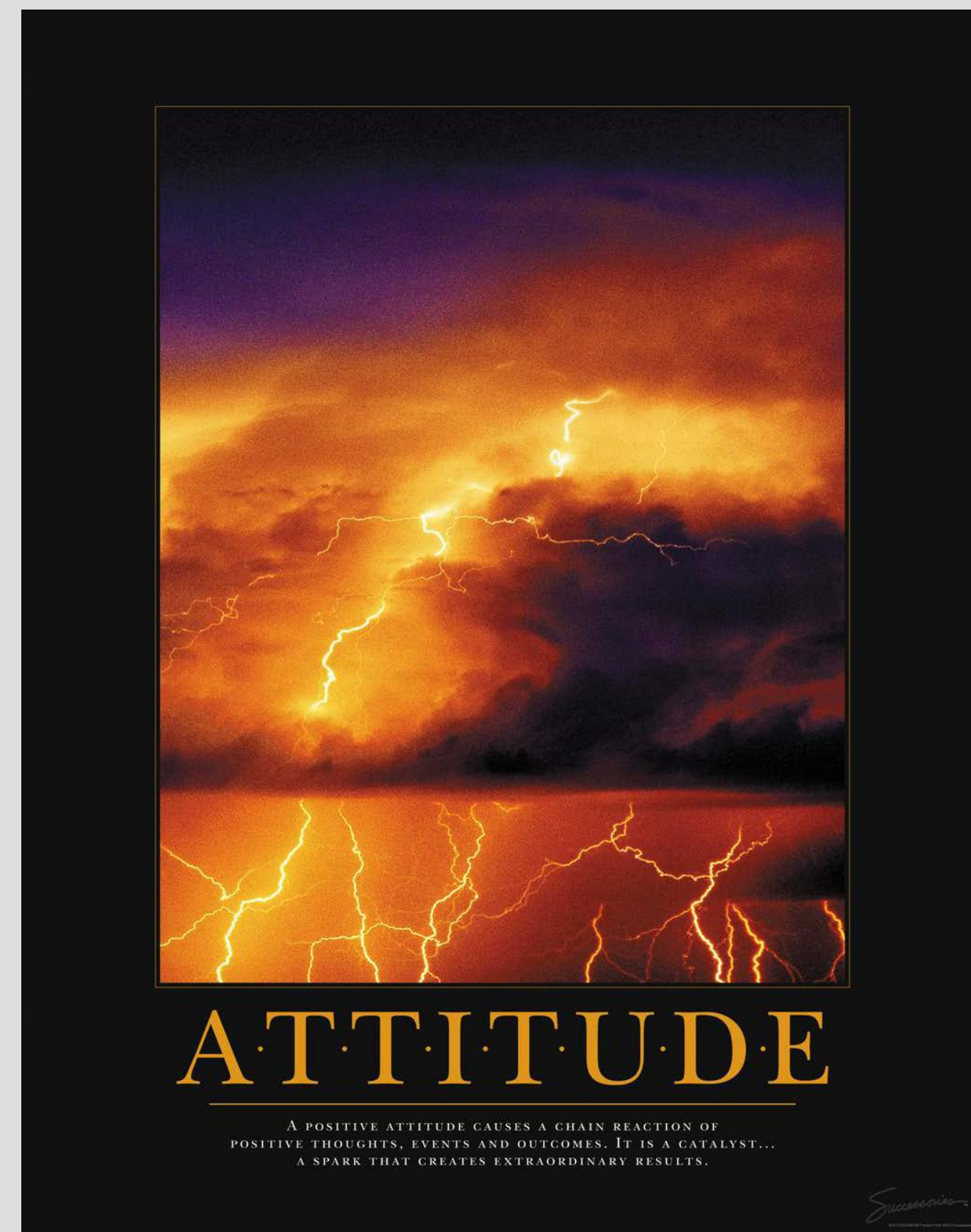
*Some posters have a Successories' signature on the bottom right.
The title and frame copy the predominant color of the image. The quotation text is in white.*

fig.



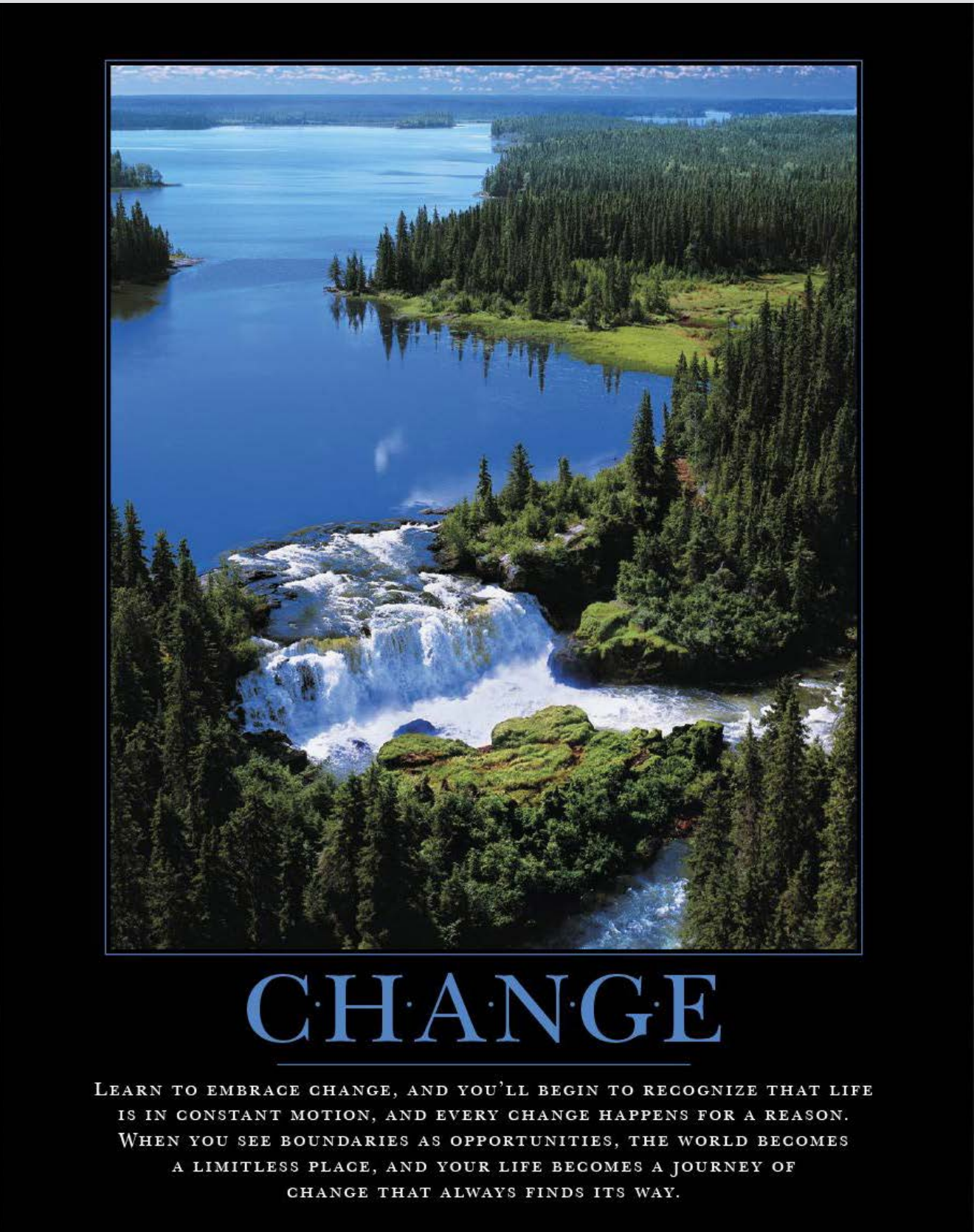
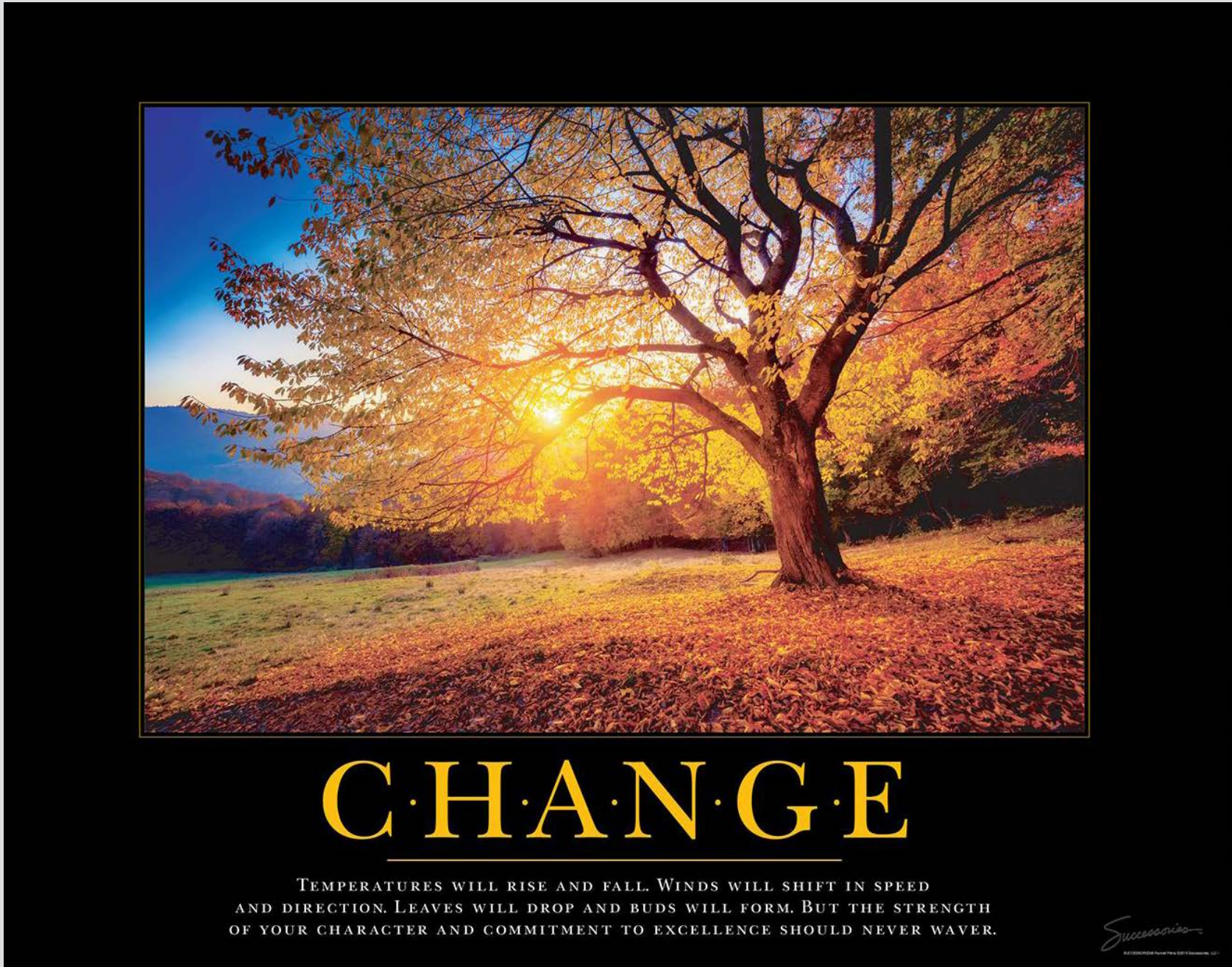
The relationship between text and image is not obvious. The image, although larger, is subordinate to the text, and functions as an illustration.

fig.



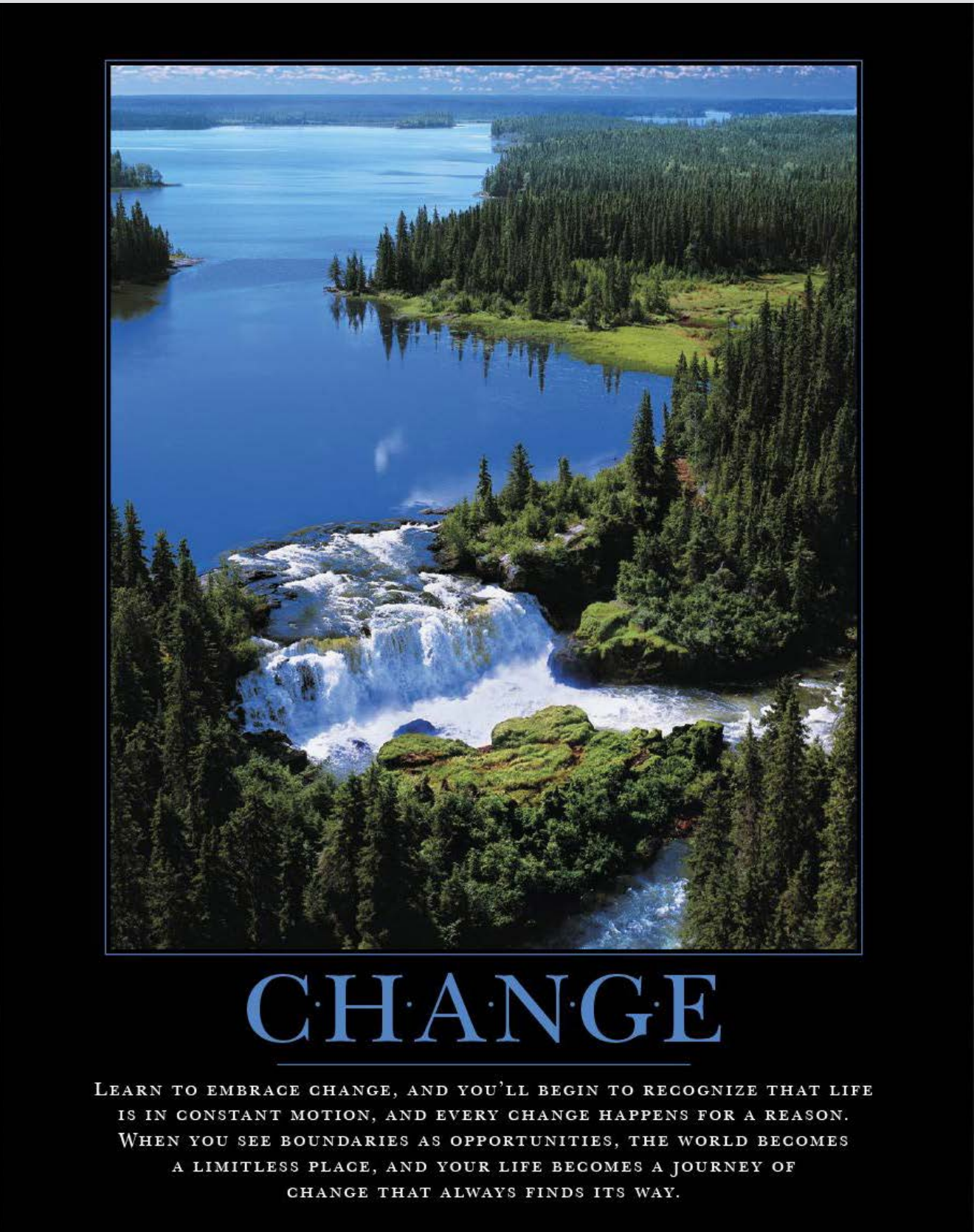
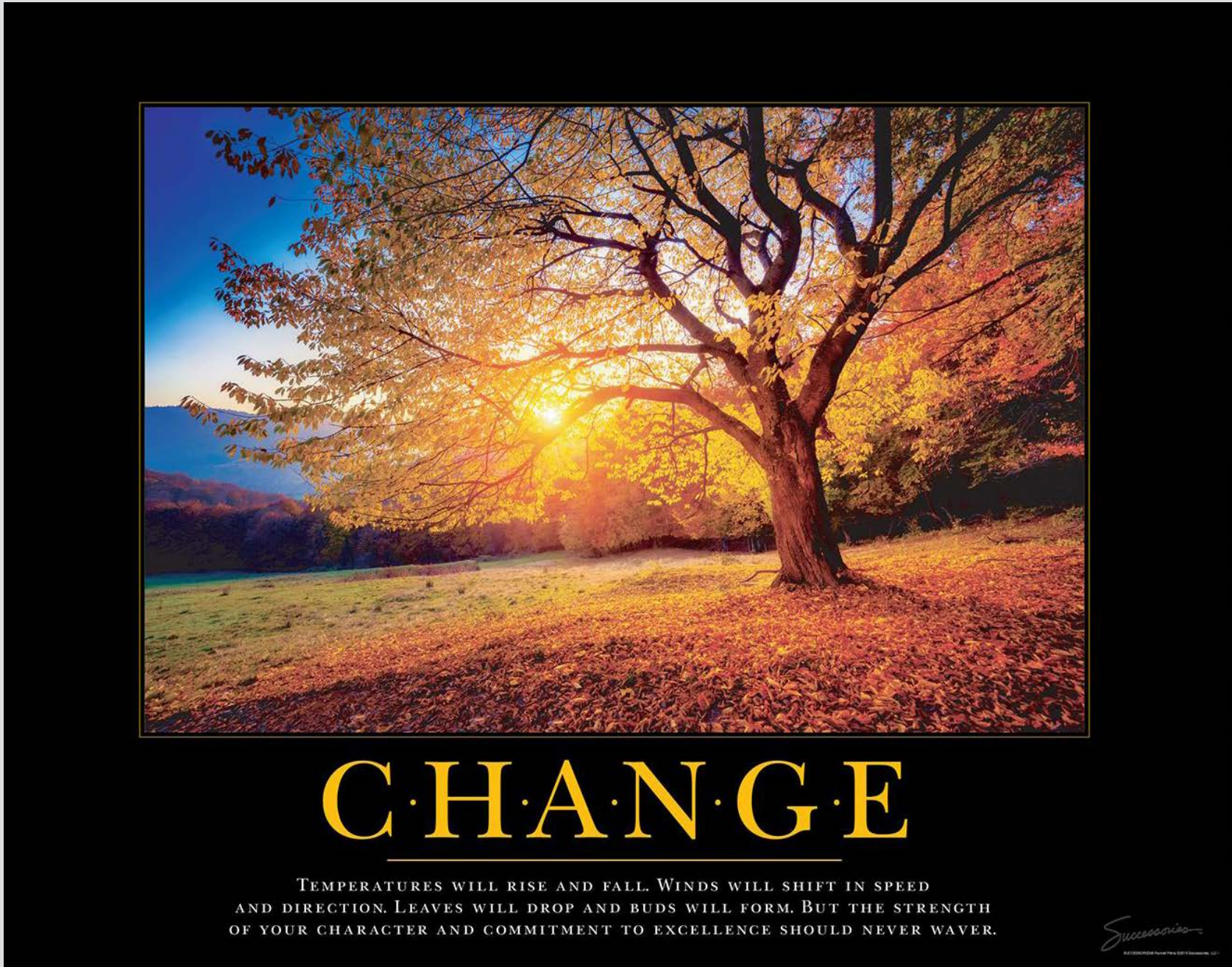
The main title is often abstract and vague and we usually need to read the quote to understand how the three signs operate.

fig. Change (metaphor: tree / river)



The linguistic message does not describe the image. Instead, they have an interpretative function that tells us what to see in them.

fig. Change (metaphor: tree / river)



In this example, the same title has two different meanings when associated with a different image. On the left, “change” is a test to your character. On the right, “change” is adaptation and growth.

Seeing stunning artwork paired with an inspiring message makes motivational posters so effective for a wide variety of office settings. In business, taking in meaningful words and memorable images helps improve productivity and spark growth. Having a constant reminder of encouraging posters in an office or business building spurs momentum. Visitors who see inspirational posters associate positive sentiment with your work or your business, which can help to reinforce a relationship.

One of the best ways to inject personality into an office and motivate employees is with inspirational office art and office posters. Adding a personal touch with beautiful images and thought-provoking words helps those in an office stay focused and productive, and makes for a warm greeting for visitors.

Studies have shown that office inspirational wall art provides both a morale and productivity boost in employees. If you're in the market for inspirational wall art for your office, this page is for you! We have a staggering array of Inspirational and motivational art in all shapes and sizes, offered in a variety of framing options.

What is most important about these images is their special status as IMAGES THAT WORK (in the sense of labor).

Seeing stunning artwork paired with an inspiring message makes motivational posters so effective for a wide variety of office settings. In business, taking in meaningful words and memorable images helps improve productivity and spark growth. Having a constant reminder of encouraging posters in an office or business building spurs momentum. Visitors who see inspirational posters associate positive sentiment with your work or your business, which can help to reinforce a relationship.

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successories.com

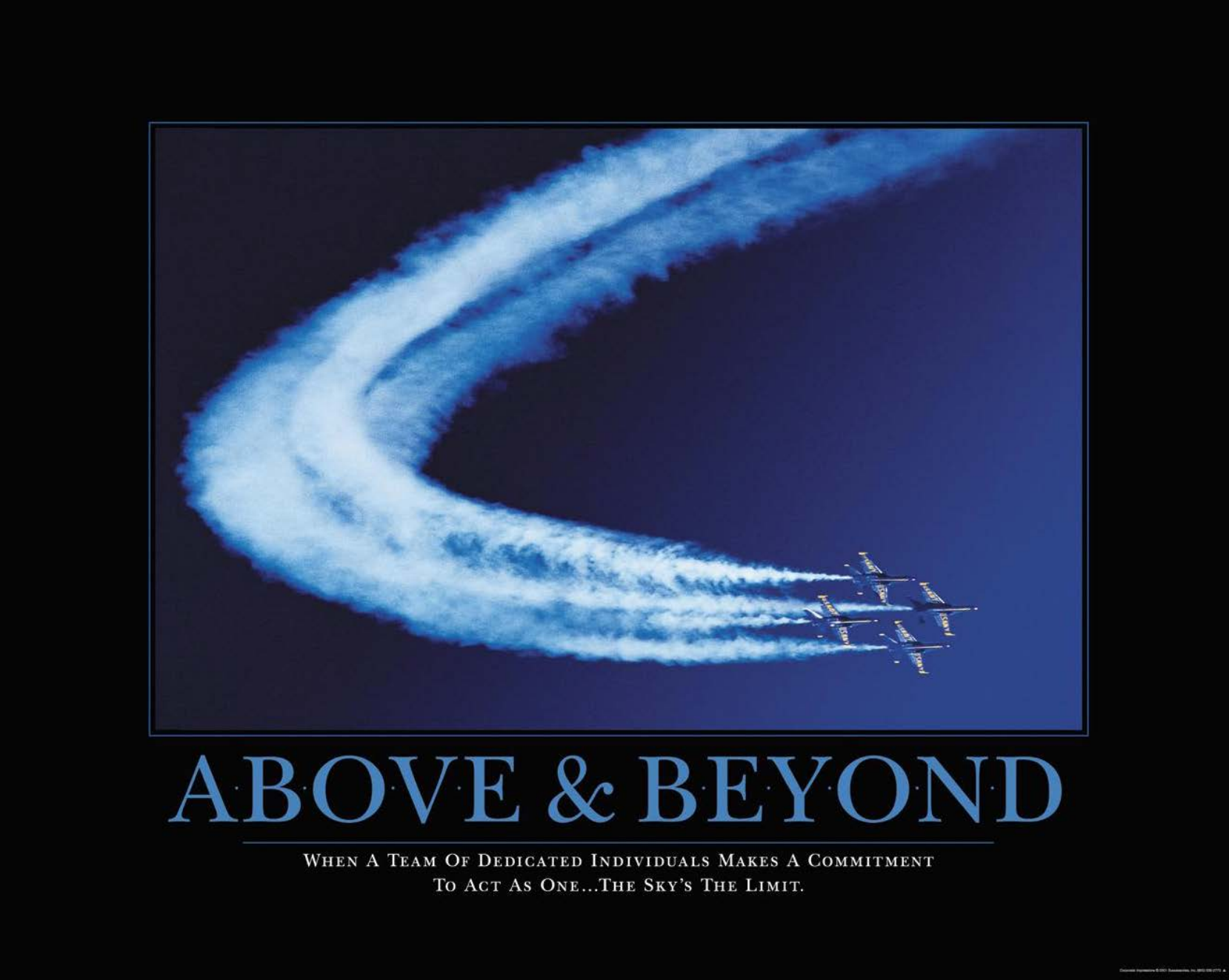
The posters are not made to decorate the working place but to actually transform it.

Seeing stunning artwork paired with an inspiring message makes motivational posters so effective for a wide variety of office settings. In business, taking in meaningful words and memorable images helps improve productivity and spark growth. Having a constant reminder of encouraging posters in an office or business building spurs momentum. Visitors who see inspirational posters associate positive sentiment with your work or your business, which can help to reinforce a relationship.

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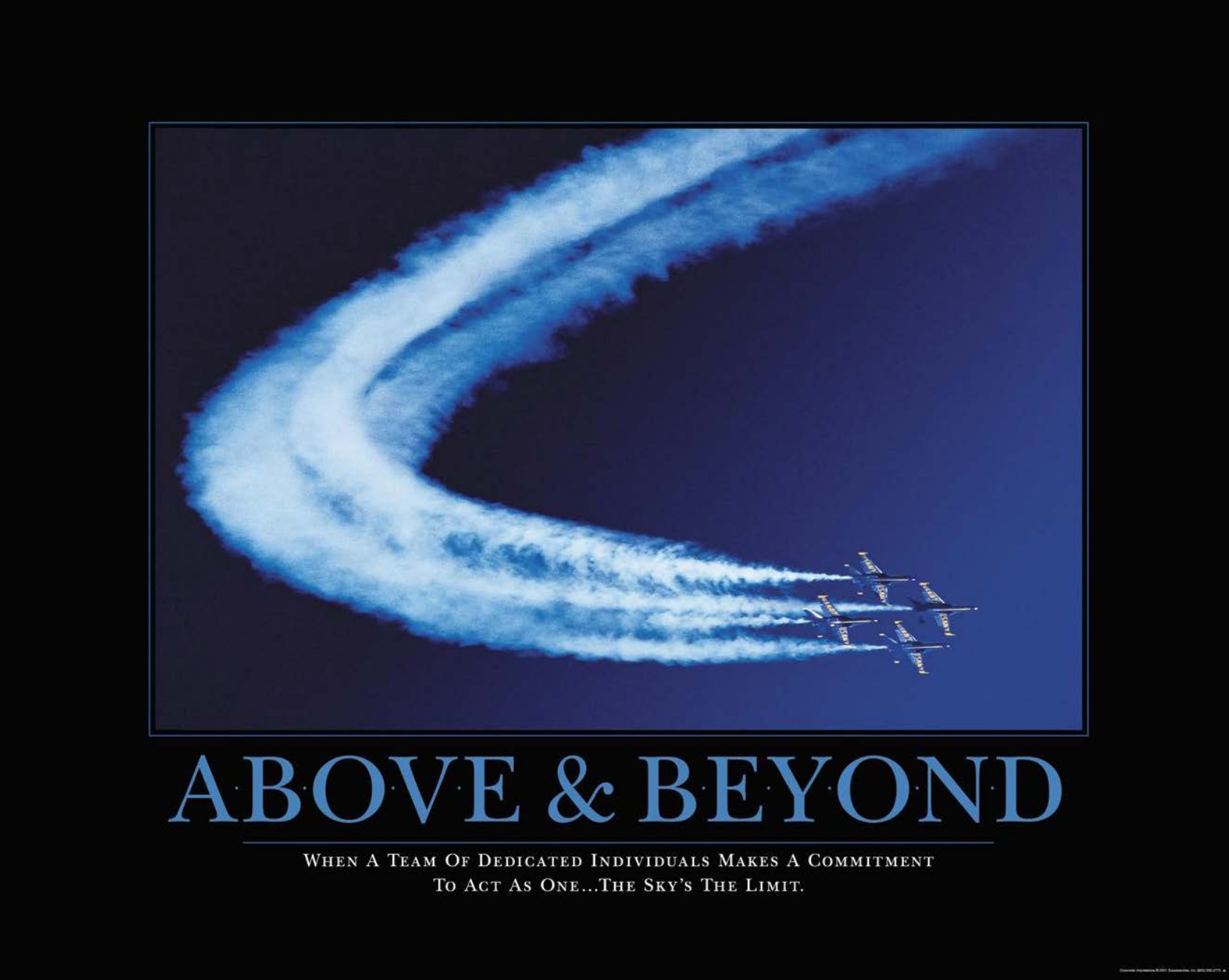
Some of its tasks include improving productivity, sparking growth, building momentum, reinforcing relationships, injecting personality, help to stay focused, boosting the morale, etc. (quotes from the website)



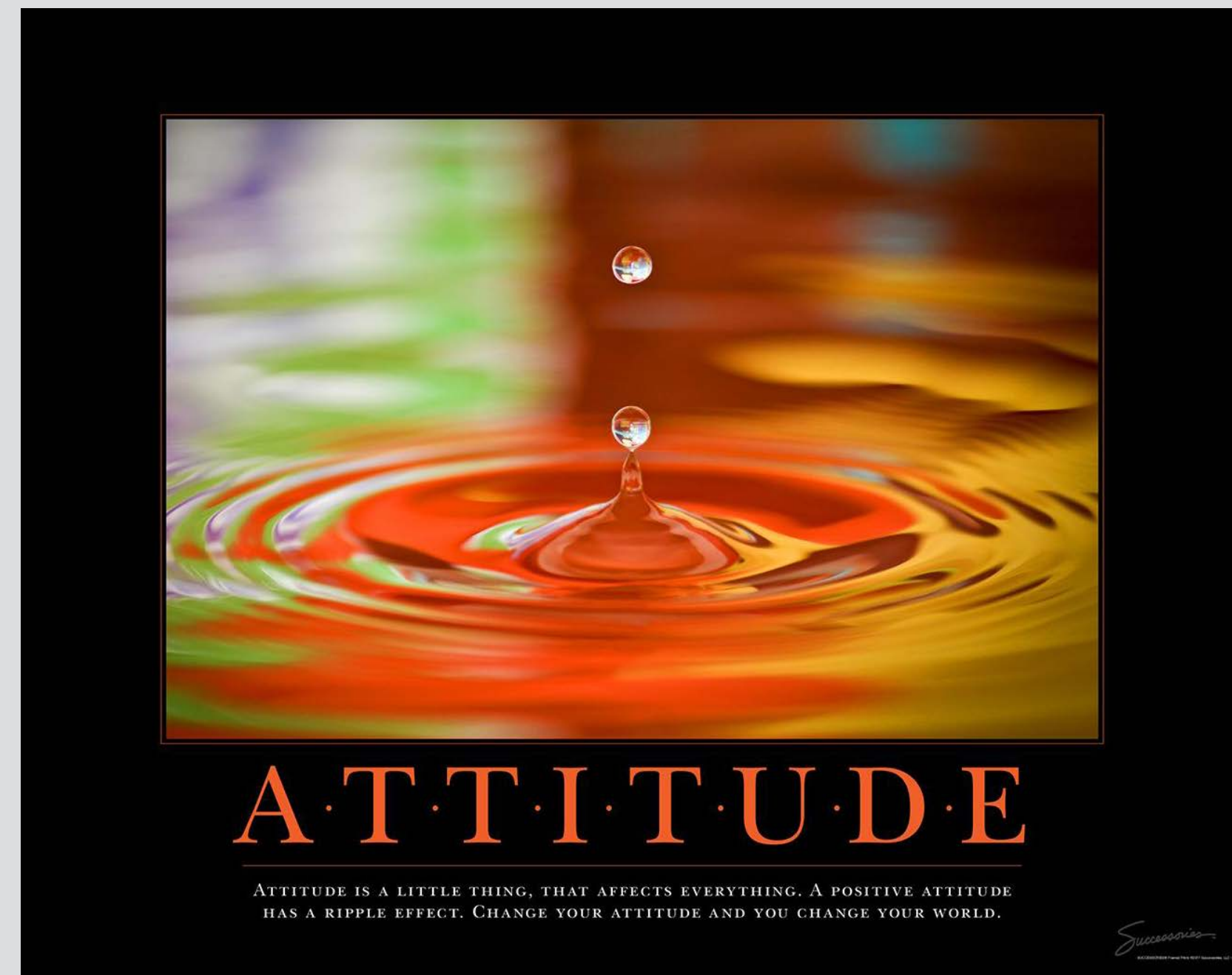
Successories’ claims about the competence of their images is supported by the authority of “studies”.



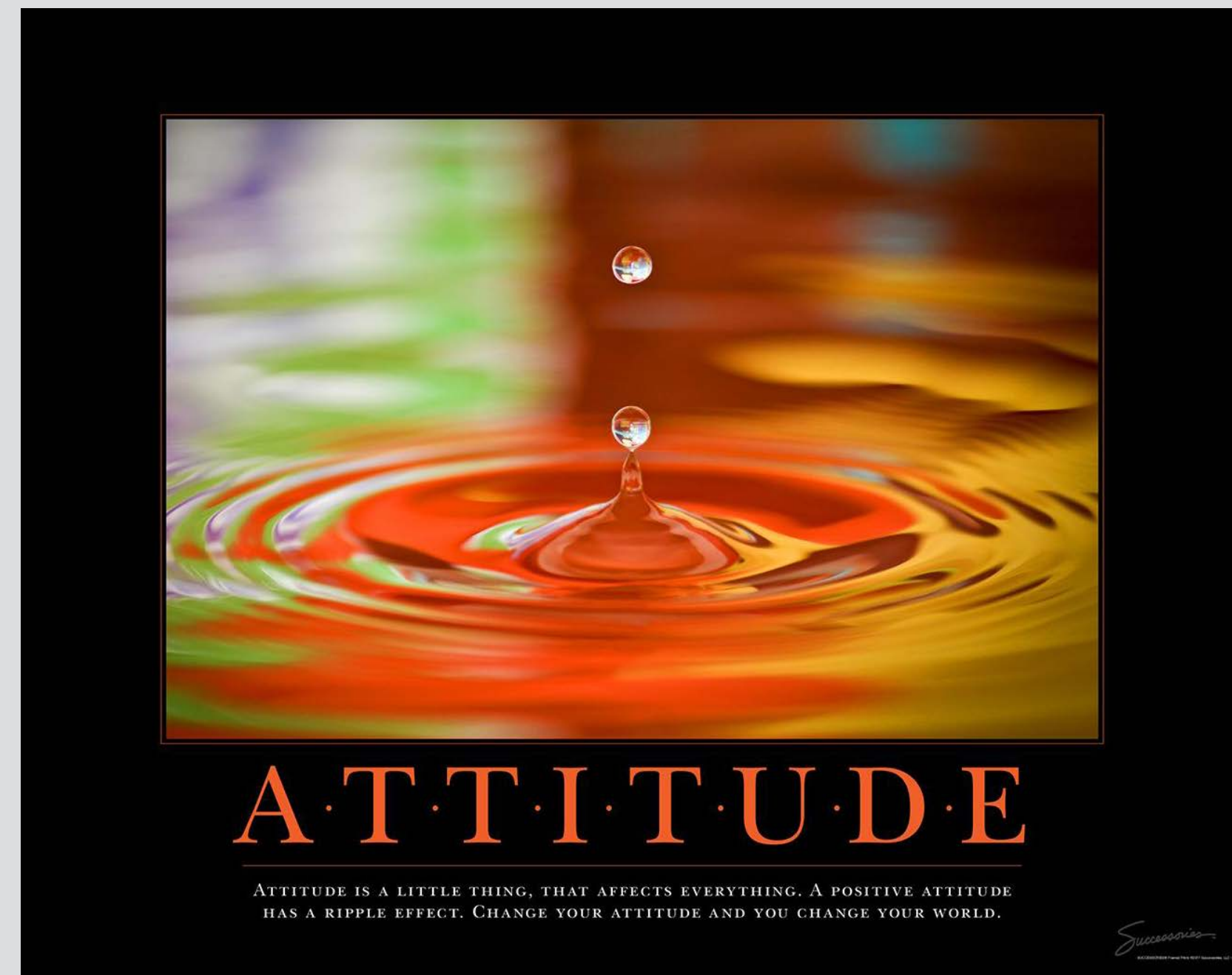
On their website, one can download a small brochure titled “Do Motivational Posters Increase Employee Performance?”. The answer is Yes.



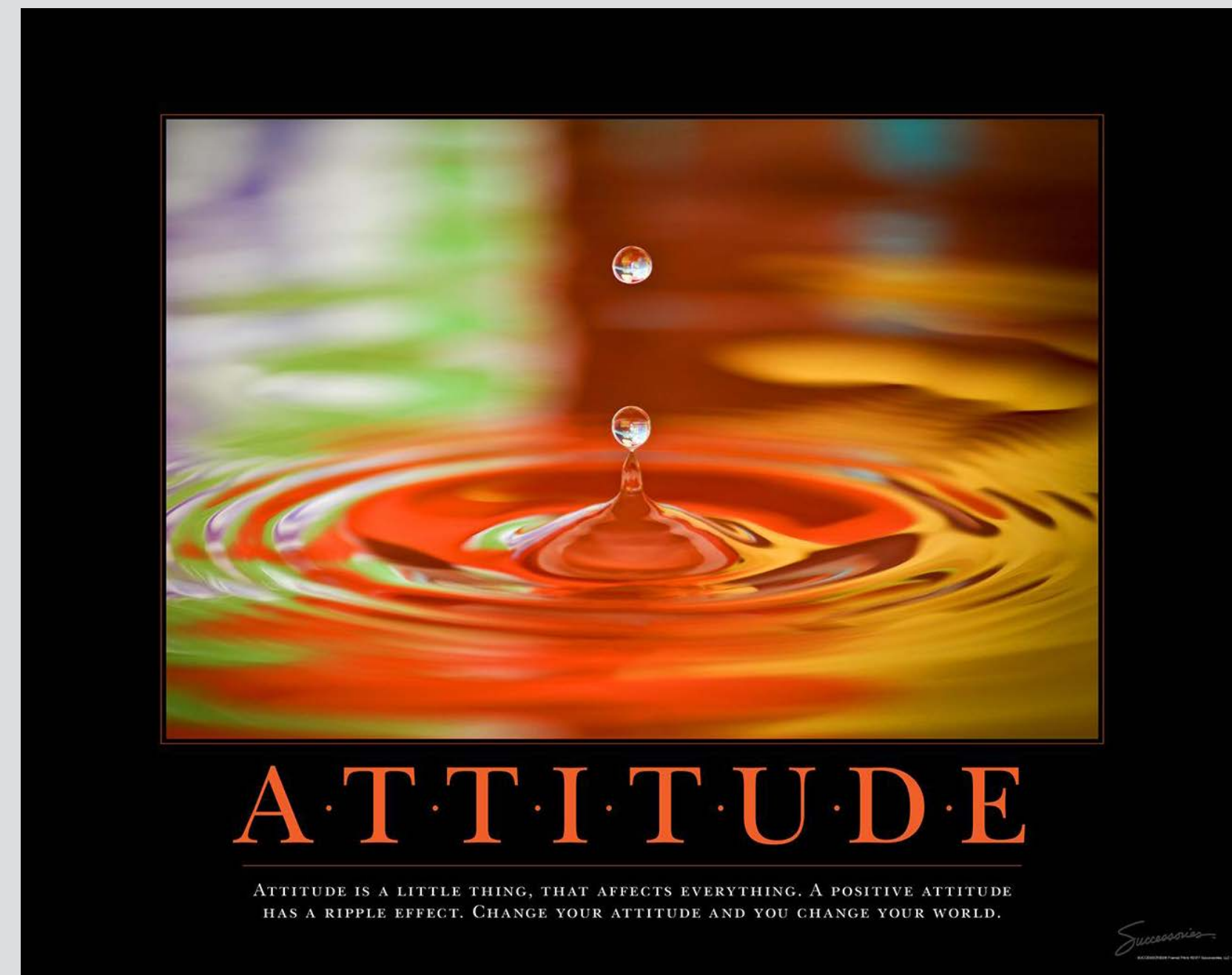
I found these claims exemplary since they represent a belief in the power of images and words that art also seems to aspire. Isn't the function of art to transform individuals and groups?



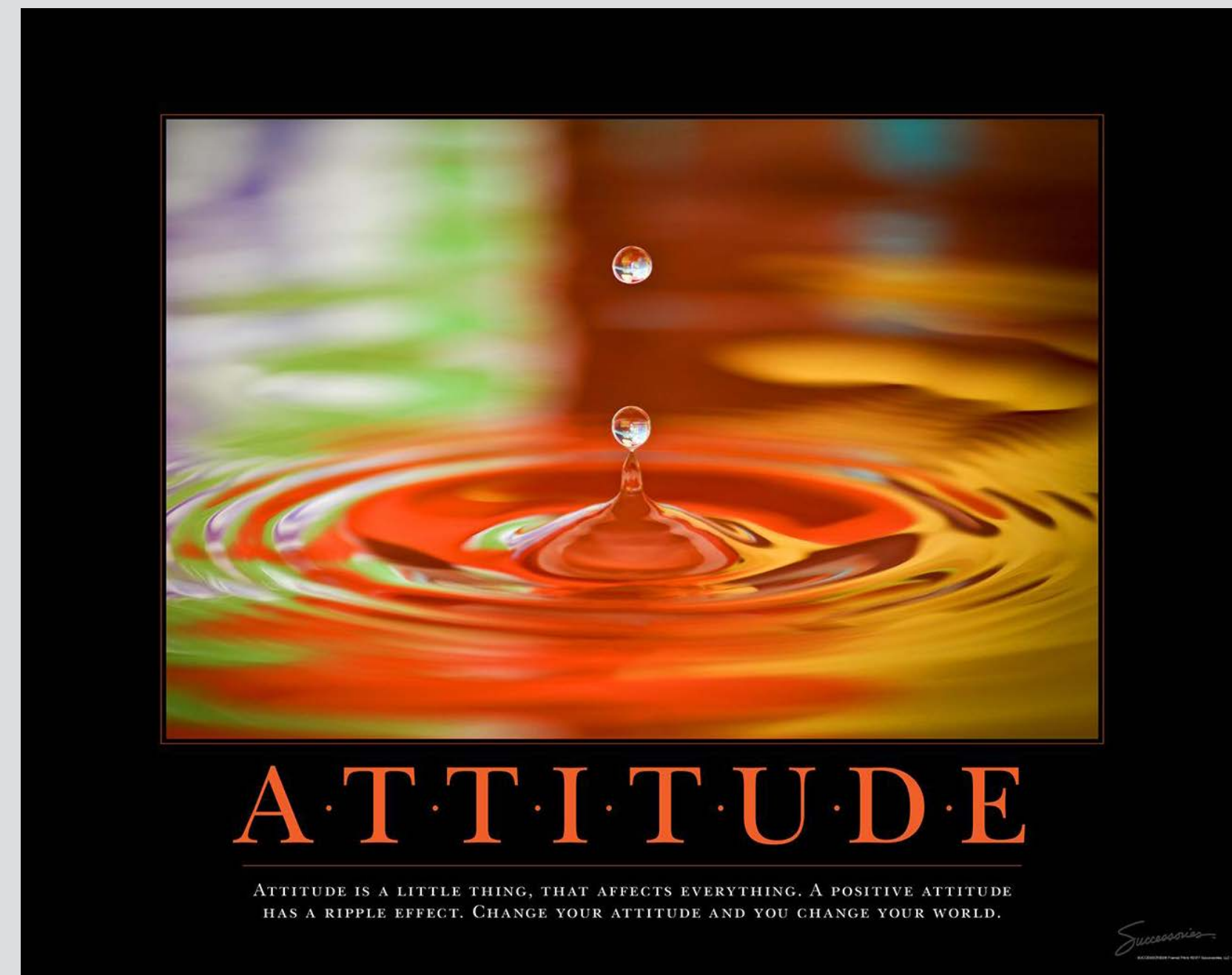
*But the confirmation that these images work in any objective way is beside the point.
We have to abandon the paradigm of the empirical sciences and look at the corporate belief system as magic.*



I illustrate this idea with a passage from Malinowski where he describes the magic spell of beauty and its importance in the Kula exchange in the Trobriand islands:



“There is no doubt that a deep belief in the efficacy of such magic might almost make it effective. Although actual beauty cannot be imparted by spells, yet the feeling of being beautiful through magic may give assurance,



and influence people in their behavior and deportment, and as in the transaction it is the manner of the soliciting party which matters, this magic, no doubt, achieves its aim by psychological means.”



*But instead of looking at what Mac Anderson and Successories tell us about their posters,
I would like to understand what the posters say themselves.*



What is the main discourse of the texts?



Although there is no coherent philosophy (the posters need to be ambivalent enough to be sold in different contexts) it is clear that Successories' politics is that of neoliberalism and its ethics of individualism, libertarianism, and meritocracy.



The themes move around ideas of self-improvement, empowerment, determination, adaptation, positivity, and excellence.



*As we know, in the neoliberal mythology success is personalized:
it is the individual alone who is responsible for the outcome of their life.*



Needless to say, in its most basic formulation “You can make it if you really want it” this view neglects the material challenges experienced by people of different social backgrounds, class, gender, race, etc.



Like in advertisement, the most effective literary device for empowering the spectator and creating a sense of uniqueness is the general use of the second person singular YOU. (there are some exceptions where this YOU is plural.)



This direct approach simulates a feeling of proximity and trust, that makes the office worker feel personally touched by the message. Curiously enough, this device also seems to exclude others from the message.



To be fair, some of the posters also focus on cooperation and teamwork although these seem instrumental or subordinated to the logic of individual success.

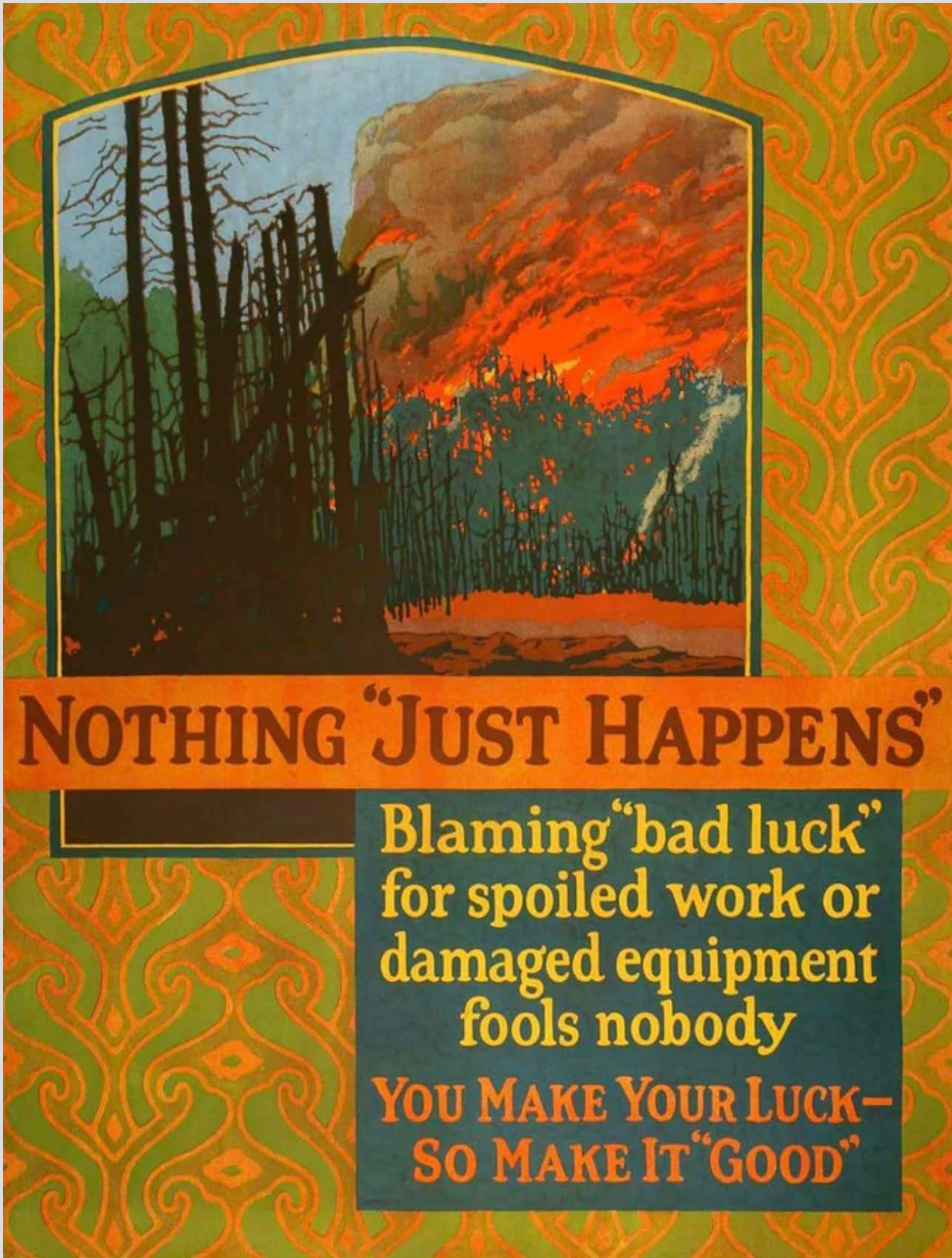
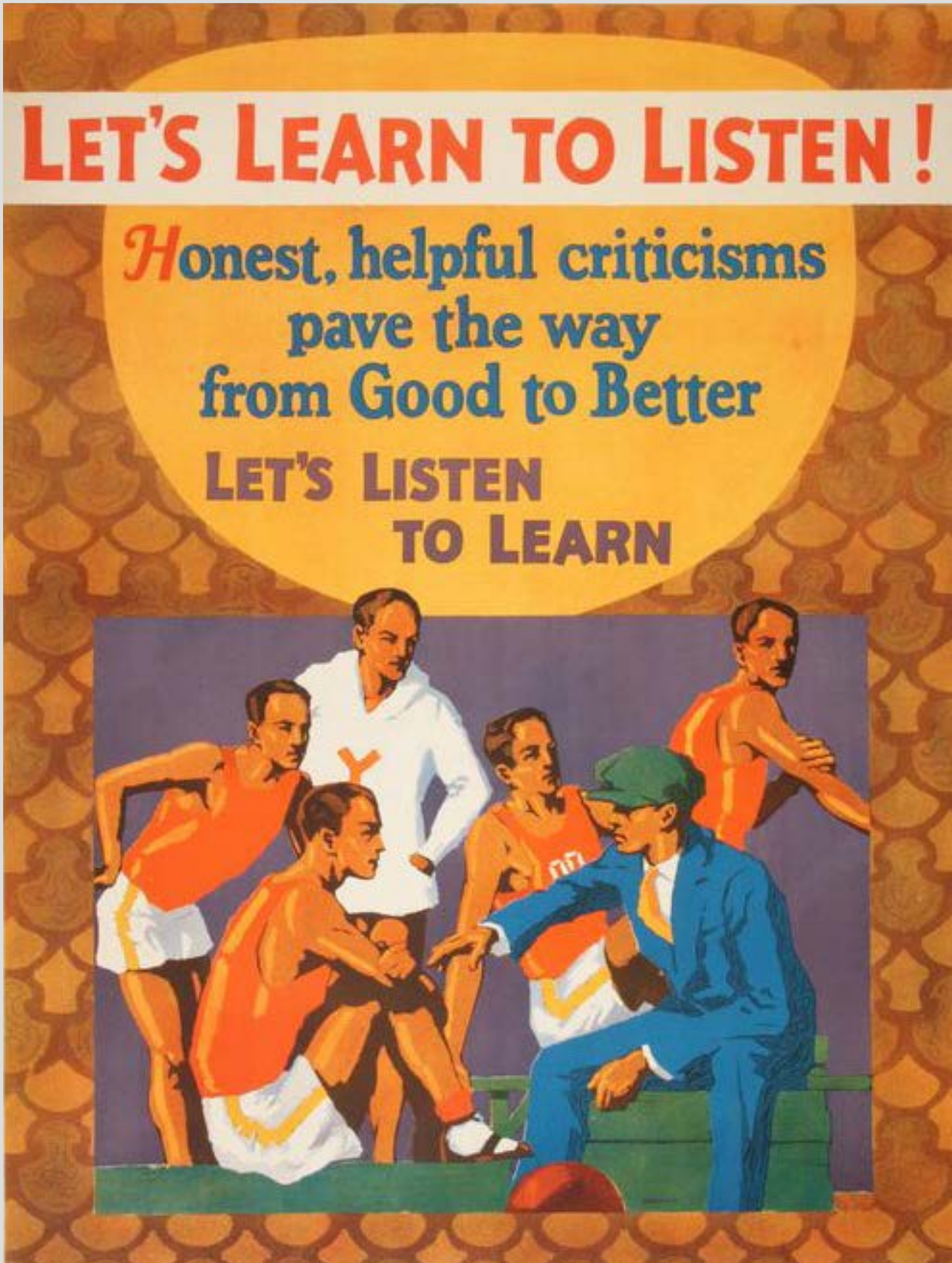


For this empowering device to work, neoliberalism had to create a new social image of the worker.



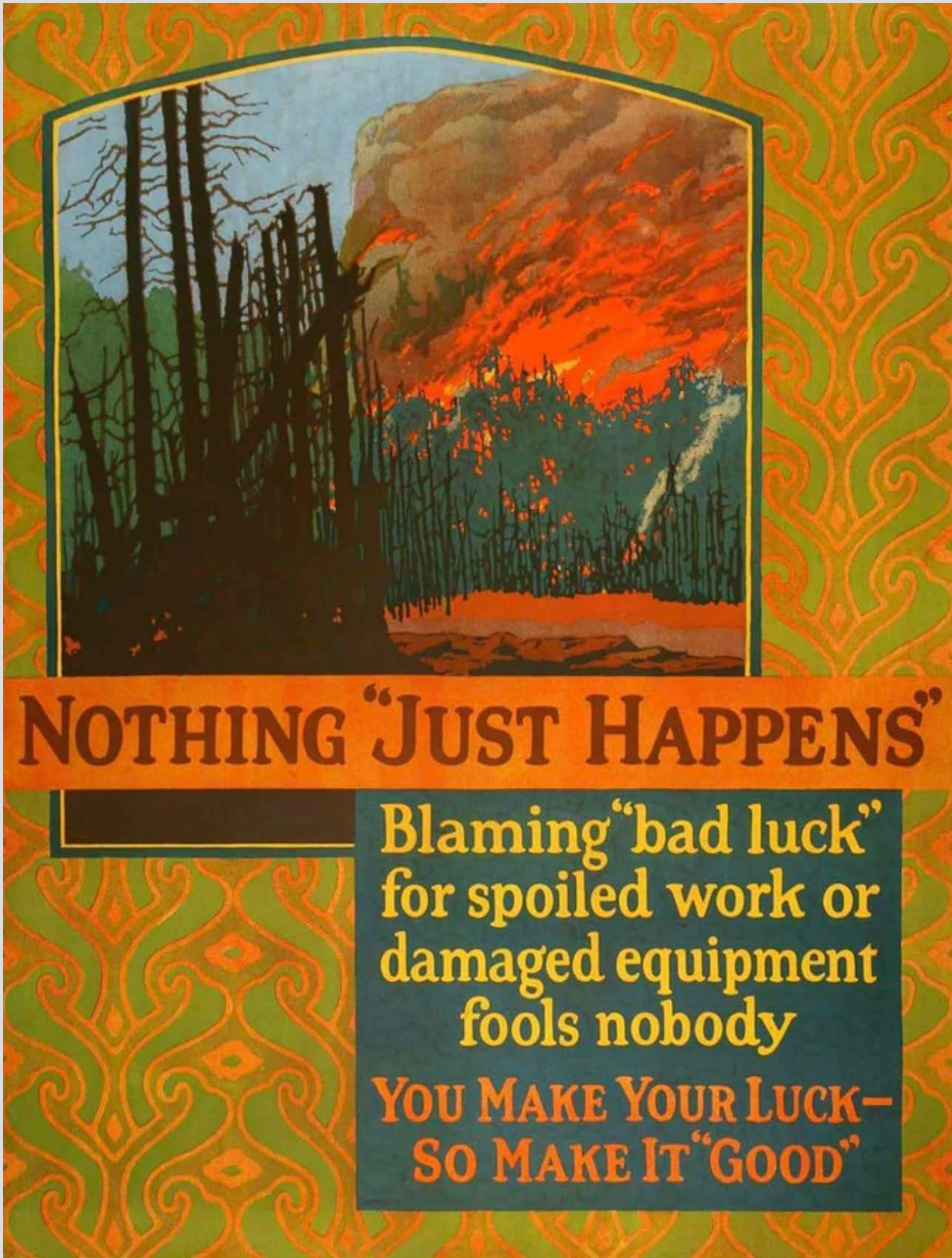
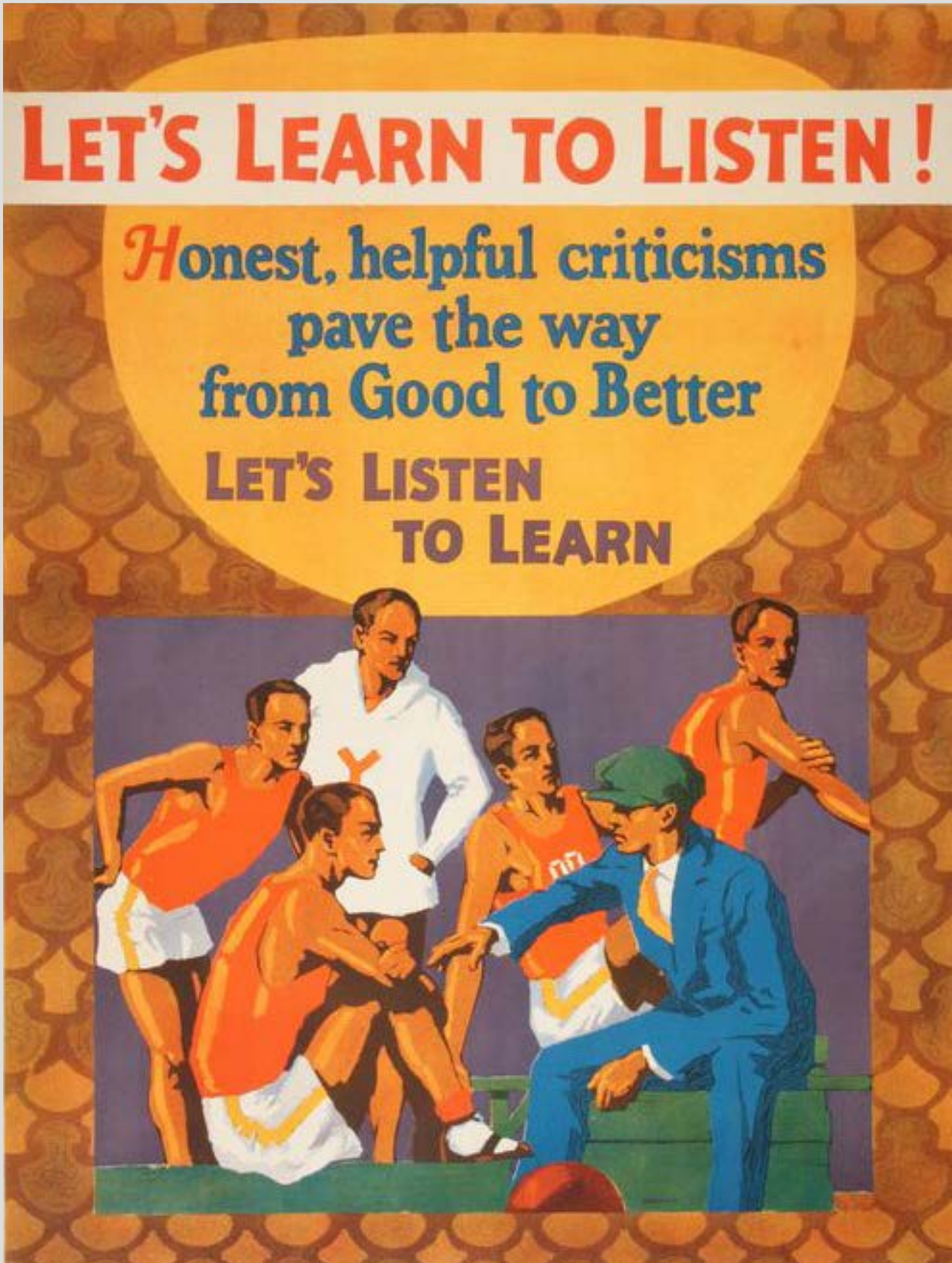
Instead of a paid subordinate, the worker is now a free entrepreneur who is capable of changing his/her material conditions by the sole power of their will.

fig. Mather & Co.motivational posters (1923-29)



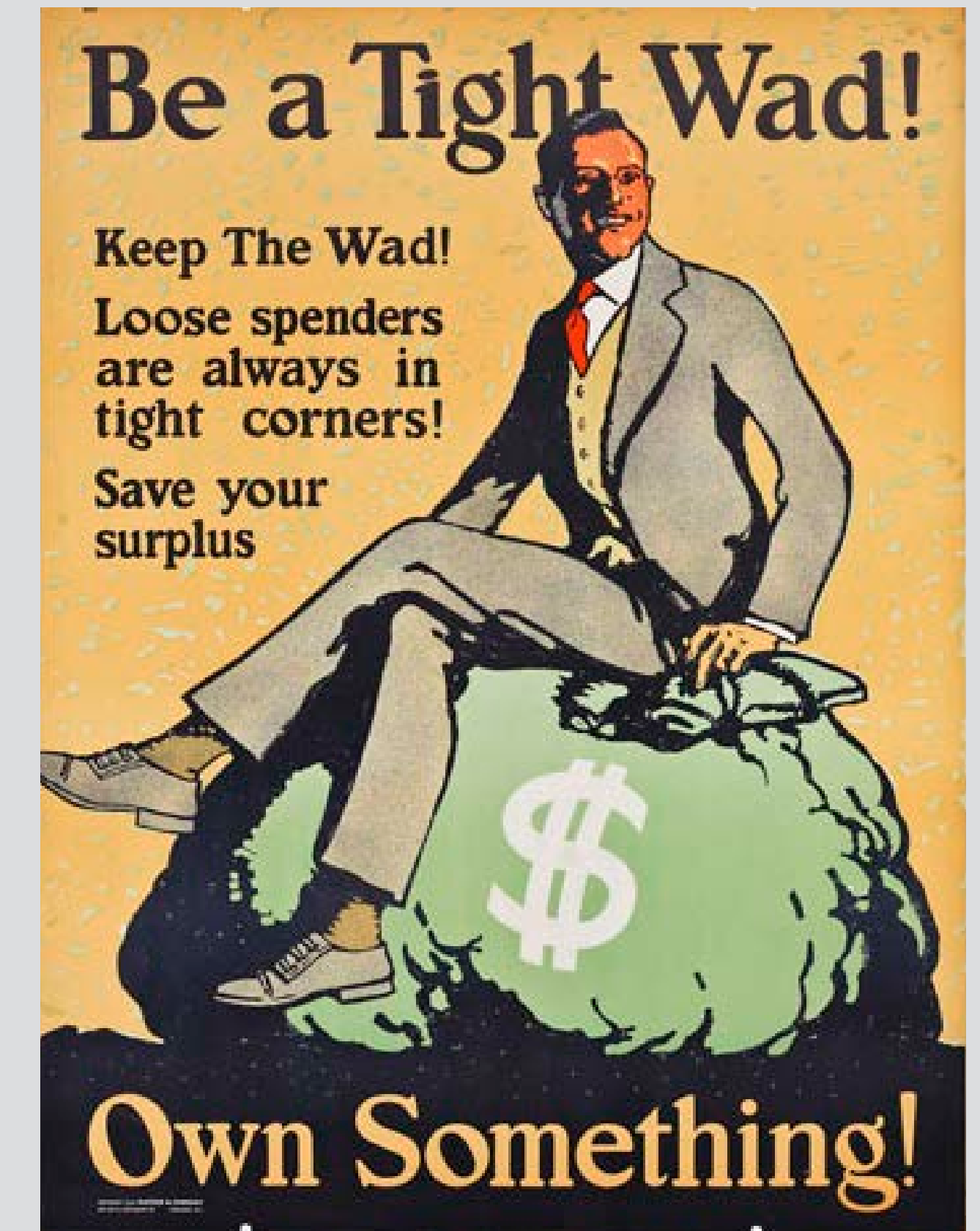
To illustrate this shift, I would like to show you the motivational posters created by Mather & Co. in the 1920s.

fig. Mather & Co.motivational posters (1923-29)



Besides the great differences in design, these posters set out to educate and shape the workers into a new job discipline.

fig. Mather & Co.motivational posters (1923-29)



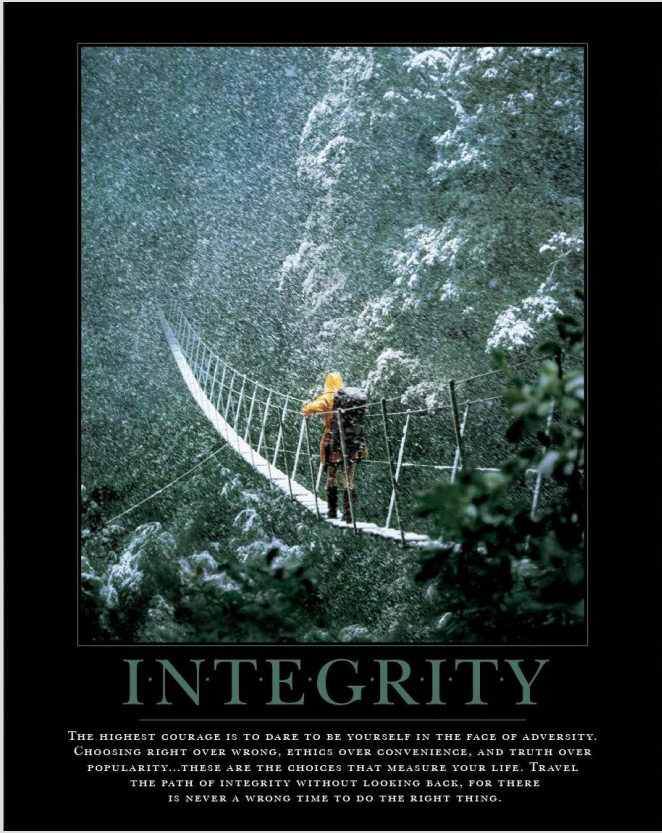
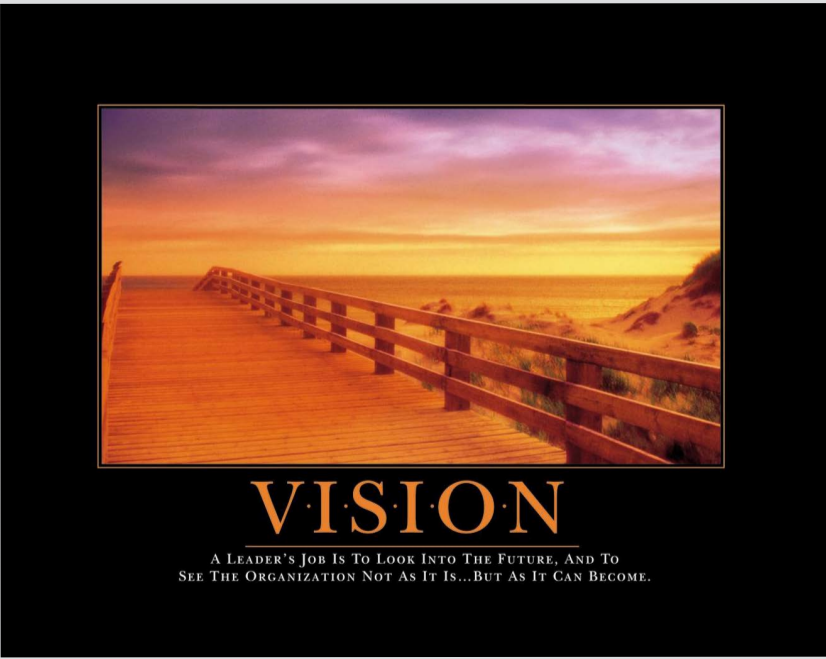
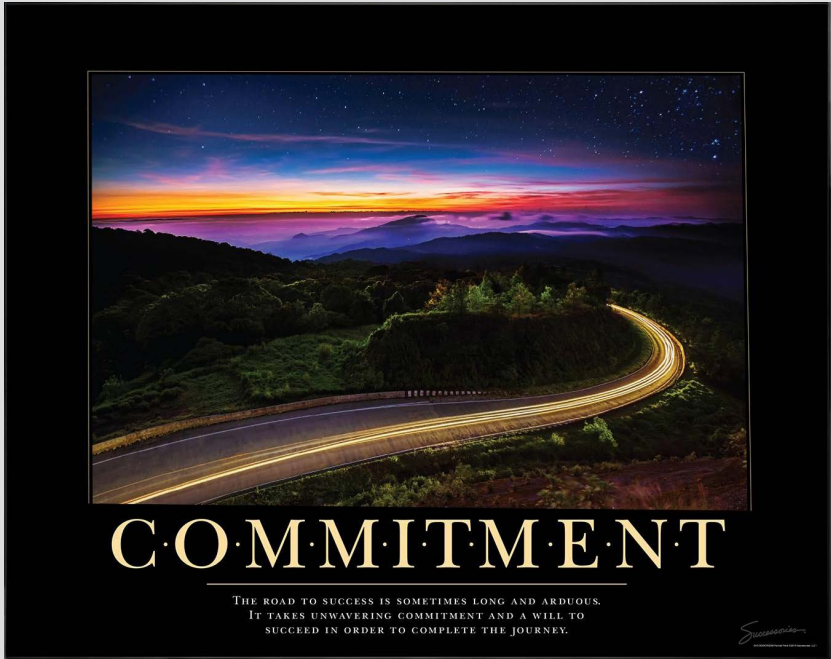
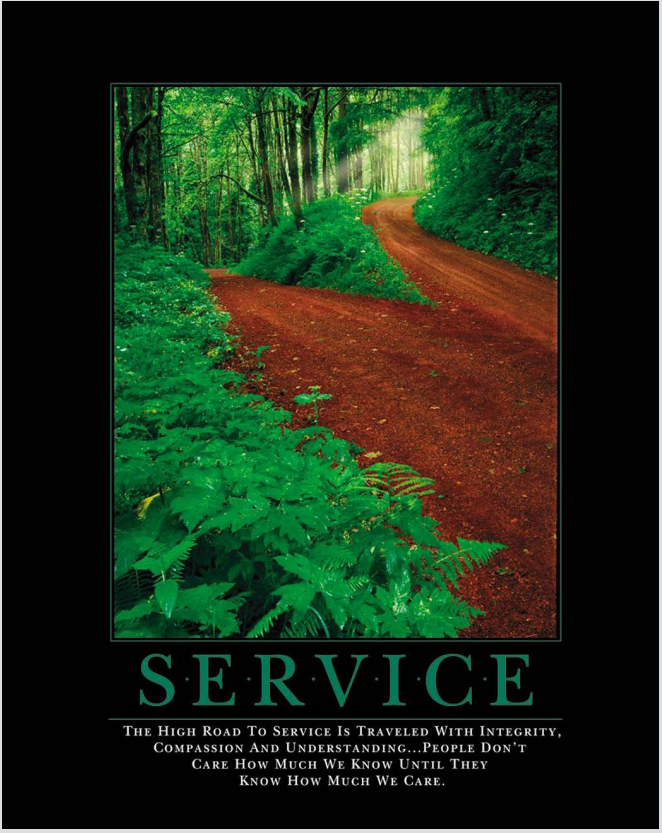
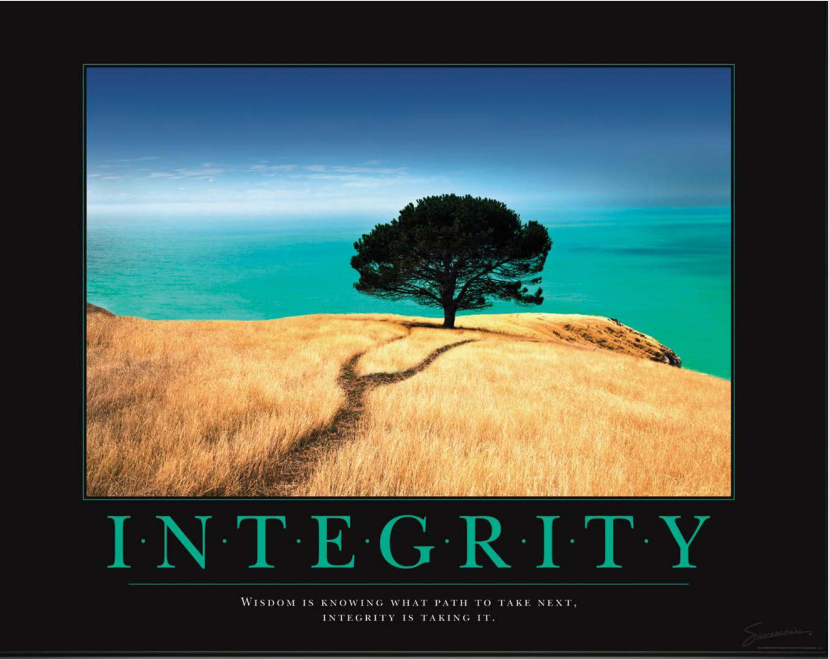
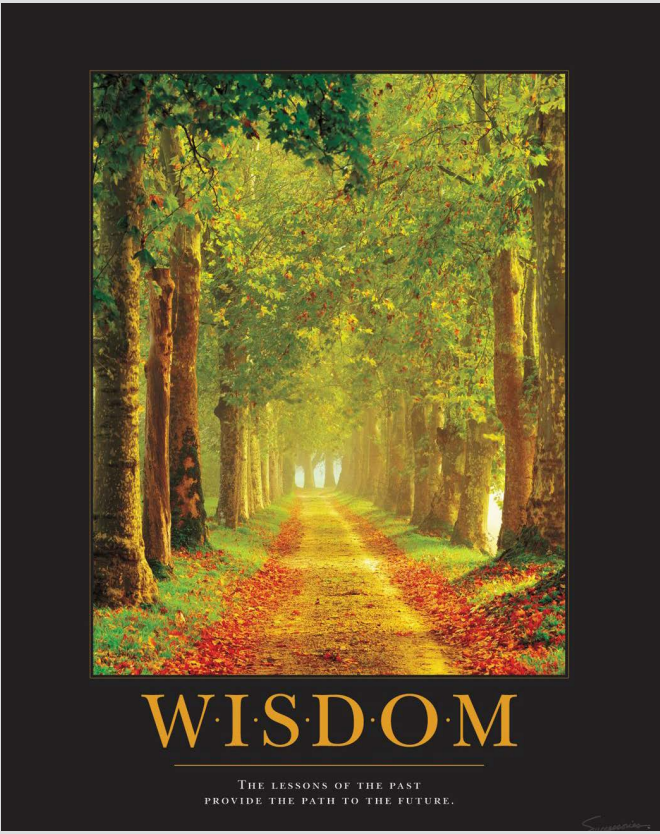
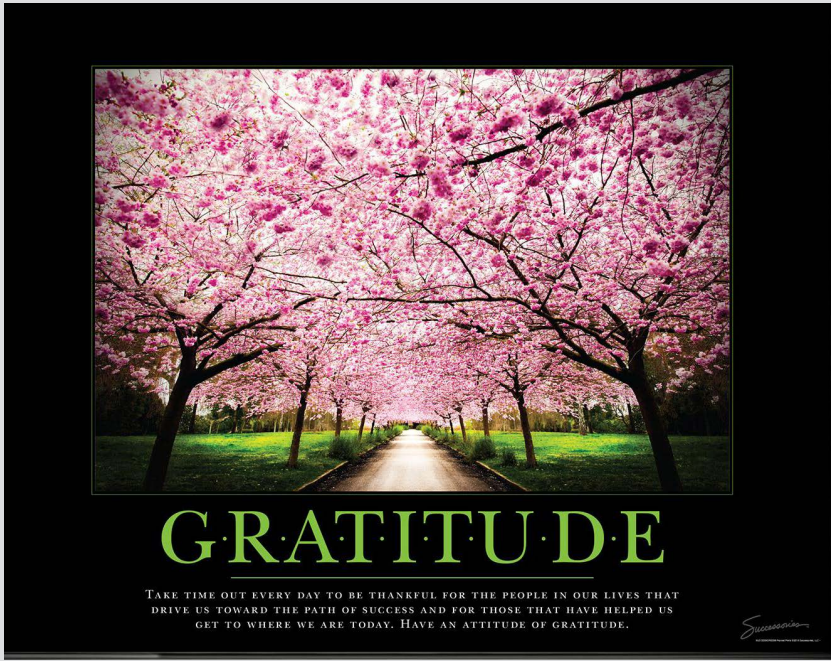
Their tone is paternalist, moralist, and pedagogic, and relies on a deep belief in hierarchy and specialization that praises the value of honesty, loyalty, and hard work.

fig. Mather & Co.motivational posters (1923-29)



If you are competent enough you will be promoted to one of the paths defined in advance.

fig. The Hero's Journey



In comparing them, it becomes obvious that Successories never addresses their audience of office employees as salaried workers in a corporate hierarchy (what they are).

fig. The Hero's Journey



The fundamental message of Successories to BE YOURSELF is a departure from Mather & Co.'s disciplinary function of shaping workers into a competent and submissive workforce.

fig. The Hero's Journey



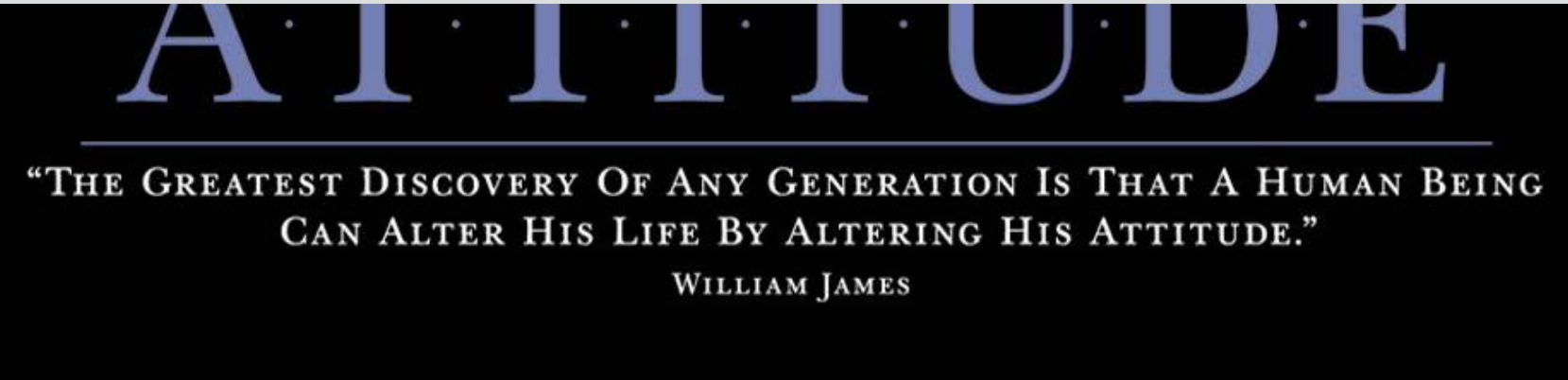
This might be part of a more fundamental difference. While Mather & Co. needed to create a taste for work that their employees might not yet have, Successories portrays work as the inner drive that defines one’s sense of identity.



I would now like to talk about the sentences under the titles.

IF YOU'RE NOT RIDING THE WAVE OF CHANGE...
YOU'LL FIND YOURSELF BENEATH IT.

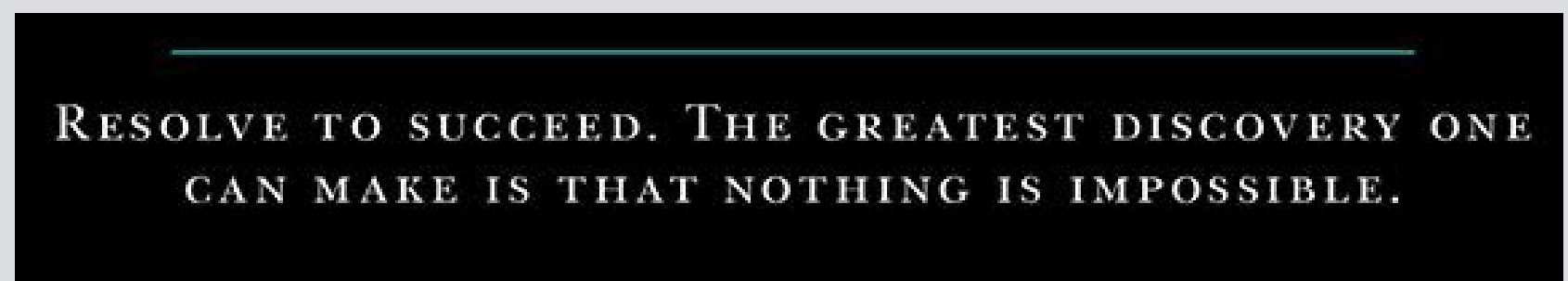
These sentences are quotations. Mac Anderson used to collect quotes and he would use them in the posters.



I couldn't figure out why some phrases appear with quotation marks and others not, or why the authors are only sometimes mentioned.

YOUR ATTITUDE ALMOST ALWAYS
DETERMINES YOUR ALTITUDE IN LIFE.

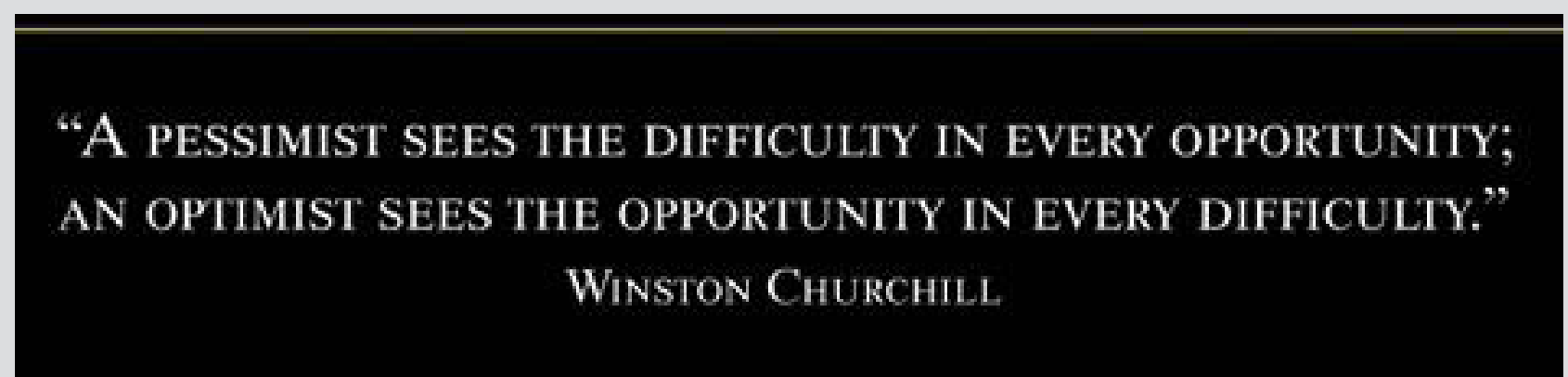
Since most of the quotations are not identified, I ran the texts in an AI model. The list of results showed personalities like Socrates, Confucius, Henry Ford, Michael Jordan, Margaret Mead, Winston Churchill, Emerson, and Van Gogh.



Still, I was not sure about the rigor of this methodology. In some cases, while trying to confirm the sources, I found different attributions or sentences by other authors reformulated in only slightly different ways.

WISDOM IS KNOWING WHAT PATH TO TAKE NEXT,
INTEGRITY IS TAKING IT.

Besides, the internet is full of misquotations.



Then I realized this might actually be the strength of the inspirational quote.

THE ONE THING YOU HAVE THAT NO ONE ELSE HAS IS YOU.
YOUR VOICE, YOUR MIND, YOUR STORY AND YOUR PASSION.
START EVERYDAY YOUR WAY.

That its formulation feels so self-evident as not to require the authority of a specific author.

OUR GREATEST GLORY IS NOT IN NEVER FALLING,
BUT IN RISING EVERY TIME WE FALL.

*The identification should be direct and without mediation. Like something you just find.
The texts appeal to a sense of NOWNESS that encourages you to act (not to think).*

SUCCESS IS A JOURNEY, NOT A DESTINATION.

Here again, we could compare the inspirational quote to a magic spell. For Malinowski, the formulation of the spell is not the creation of an individual sorcerer, but the accumulation of linguistic traces from different times.

fig. Successories (sorted by alphabetical order)



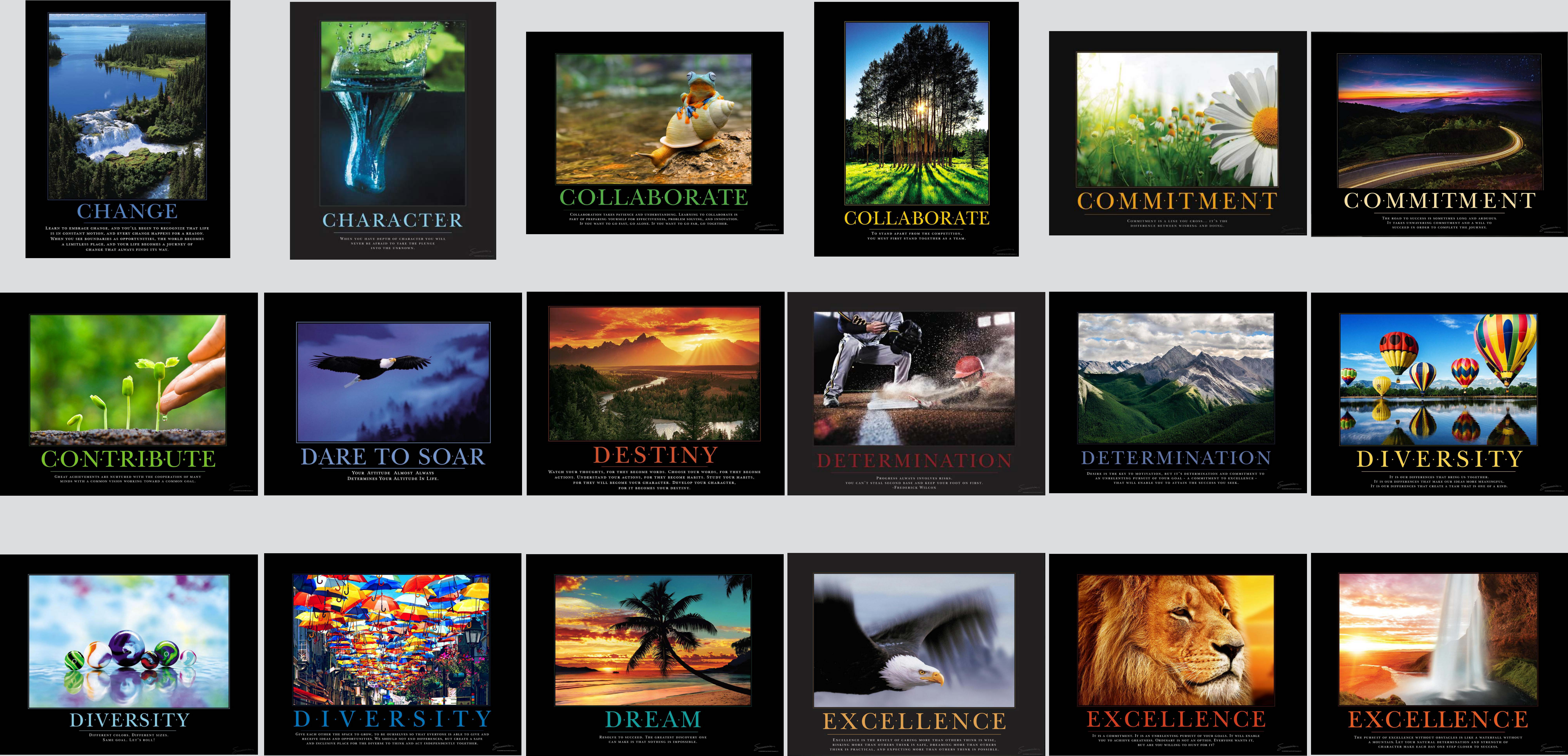
I would now like to turn to a visual analysis.

fig. Successories (sorted by alphabetical order)



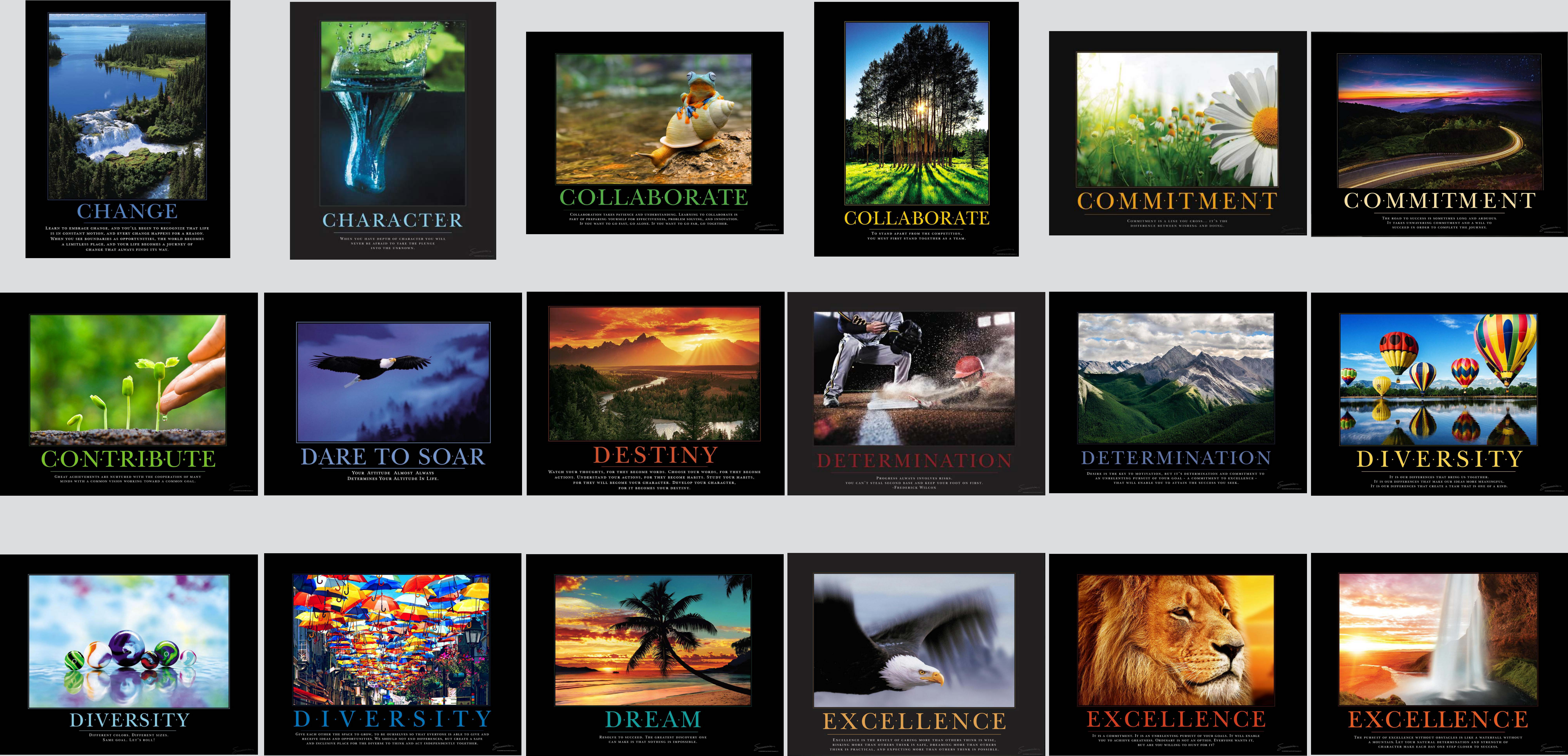
What is represented in the photographs and how do they illustrate the ideas I just described?

fig. Successories (sorted by alphabetical order)



By far the most common motives are those of landscape, organic matter, and animals: in a word, nature.

fig. Successories (sorted by alphabetical order)



The representation of nature and its meanings is infinite and it is impossible to assign it a single function.

fig. Successories (sorted by alphabetical order)



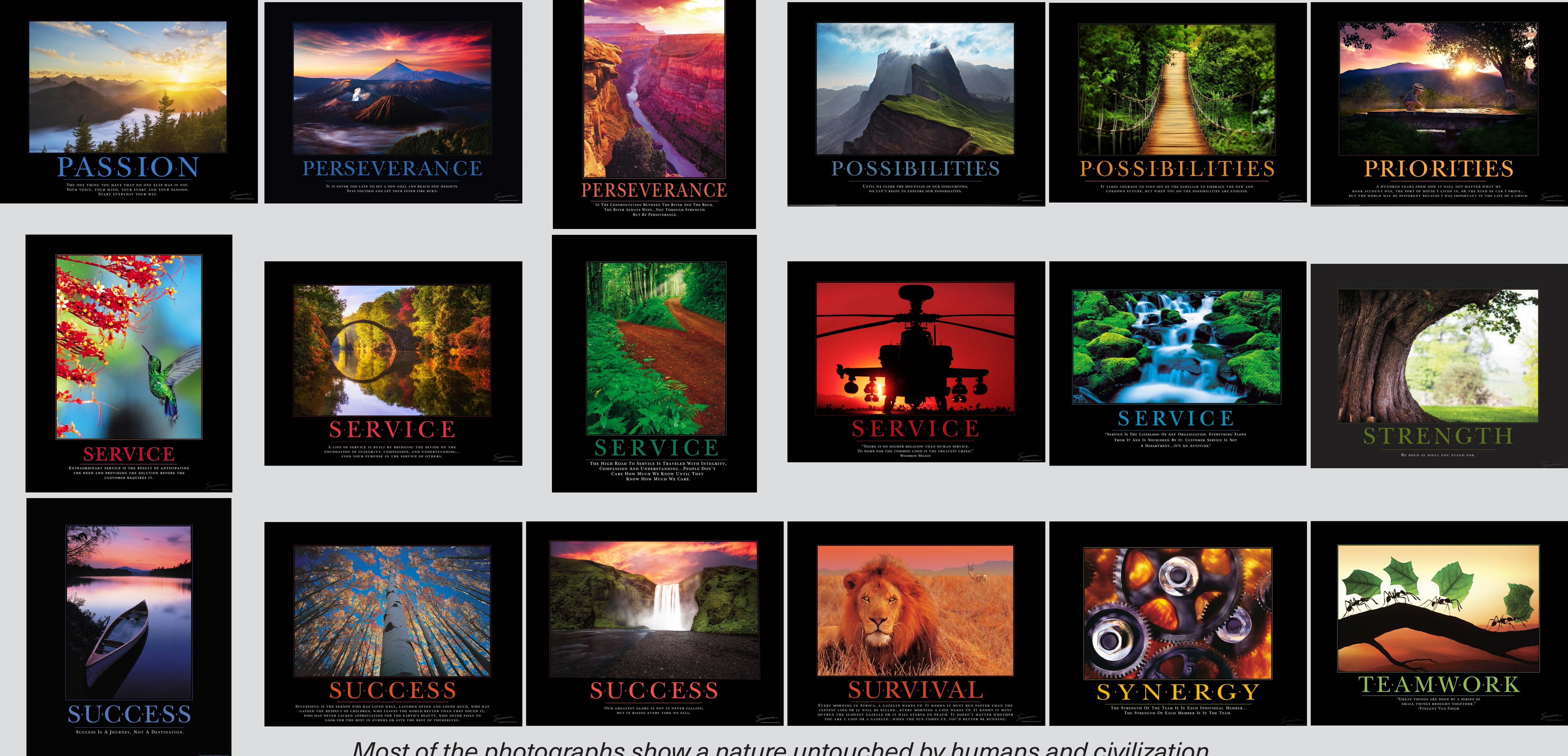
Maybe here, this ambiguity is its best advantage since in the posters' design, the photographs can easily absorb the ideological message of the text.

fig. Successories (sorted by alphabetical order)



As natural elements are supposed to have no culture or history, the photos can be transformed into abstract illustrations of life, growth, energy, change, symbiosis, perseverance, etc.

fig. Successories (sorted by alphabetical order)



Most of the photographs show a nature untouched by humans and civilization.
In some cases, there are rudimentary infrastructures like dirt paths or bridges.

fig. Successories (sorted by alphabetical order)



Only very rarely are these roads paved or the bridges made out of concrete.

fig. Successories (sorted by alphabetical order)

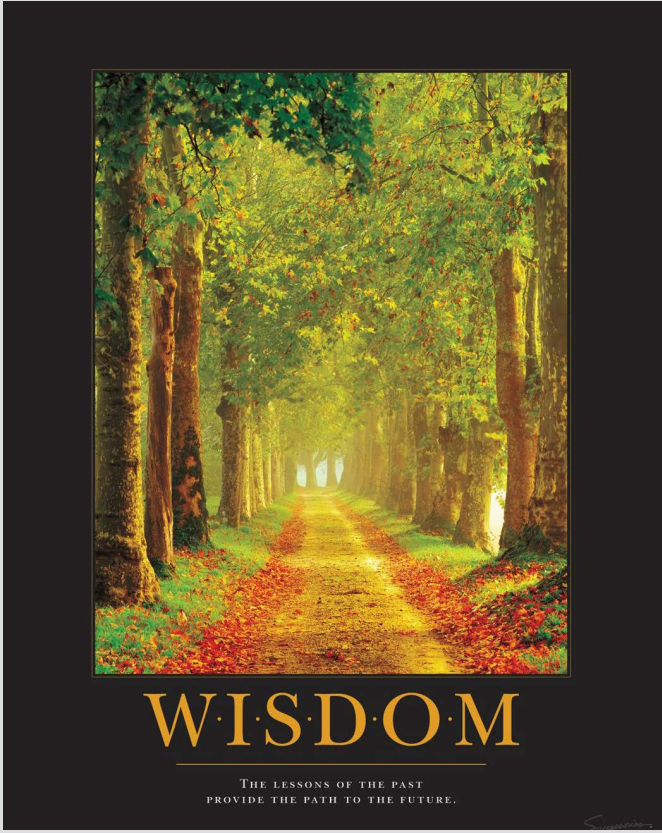
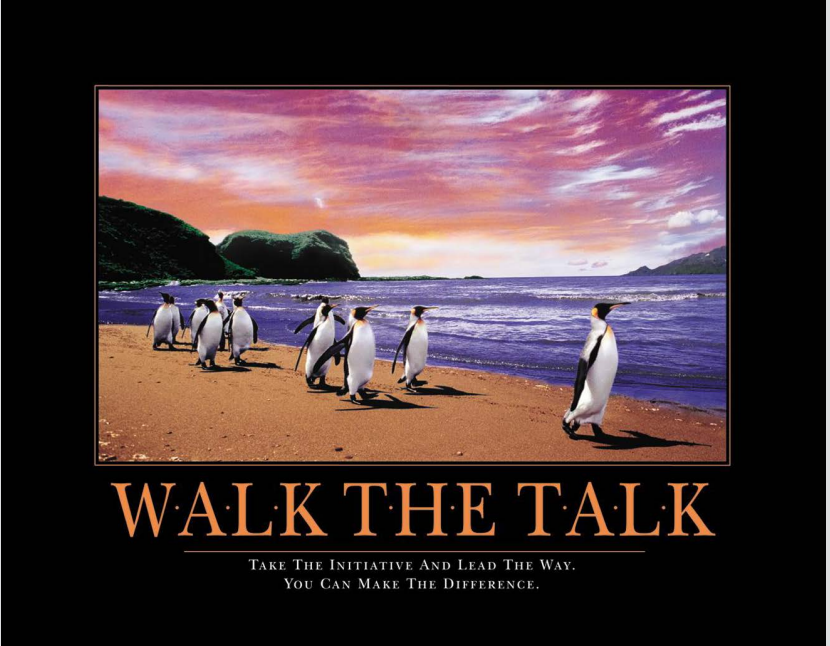
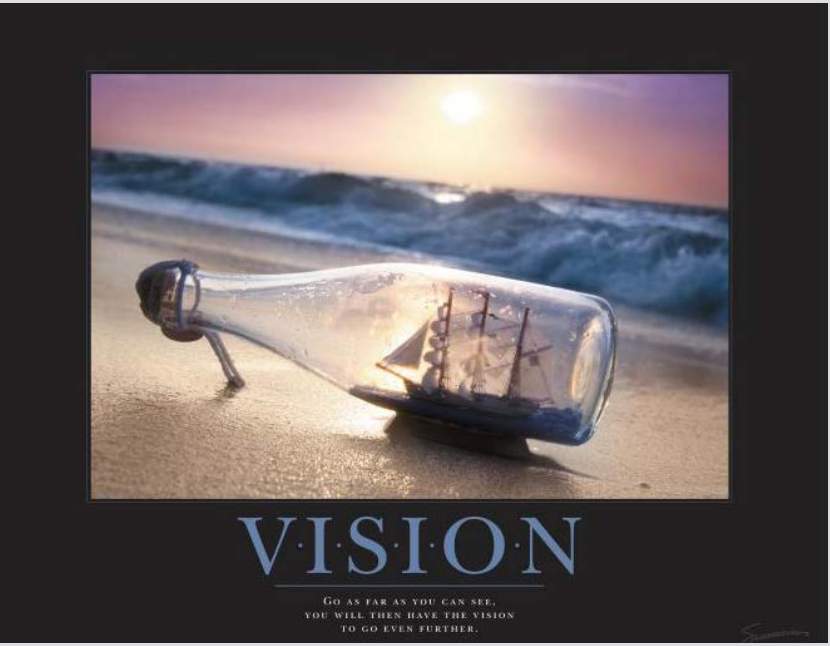
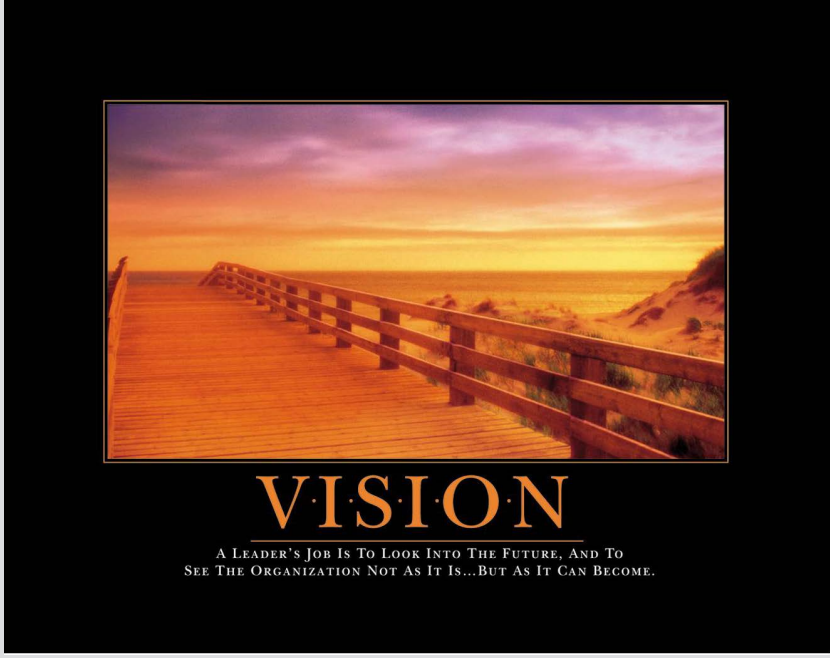
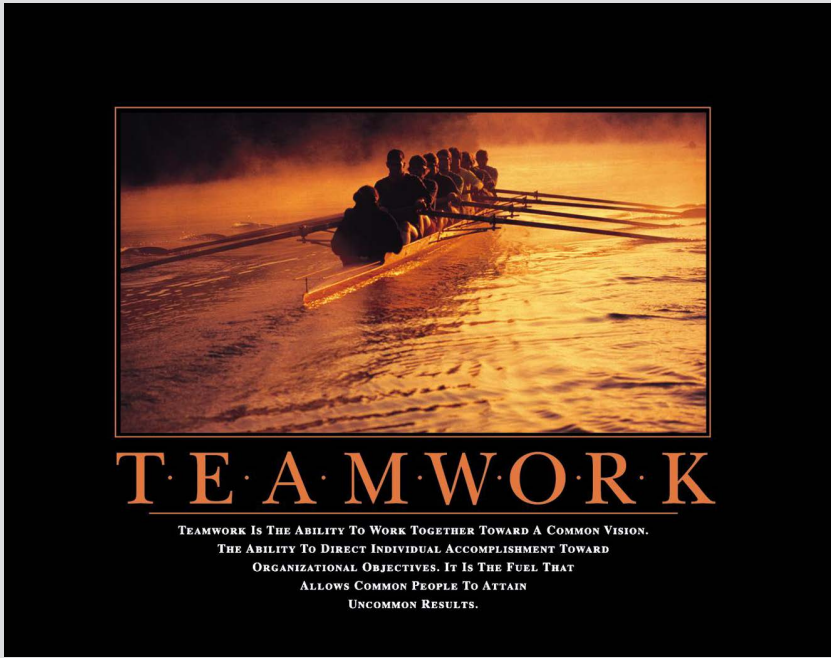
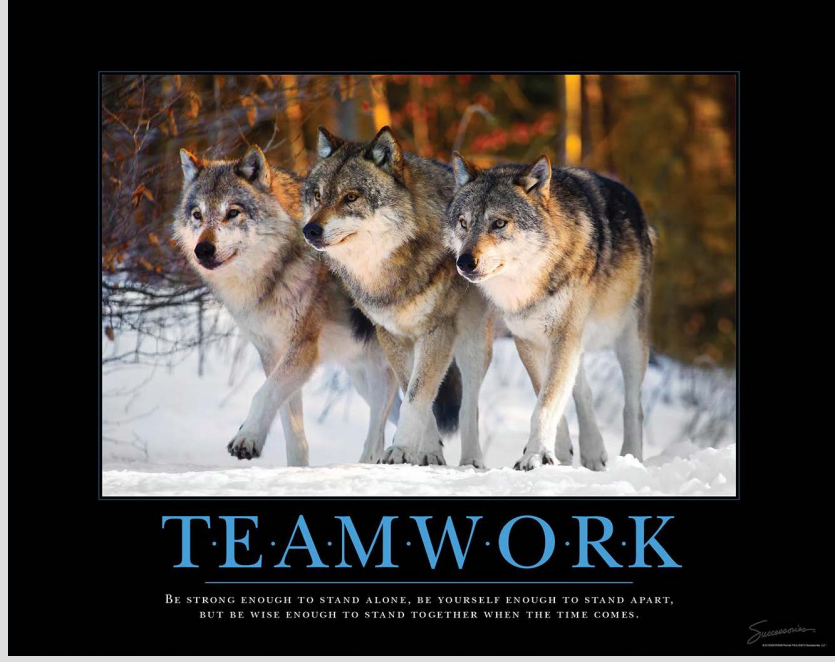
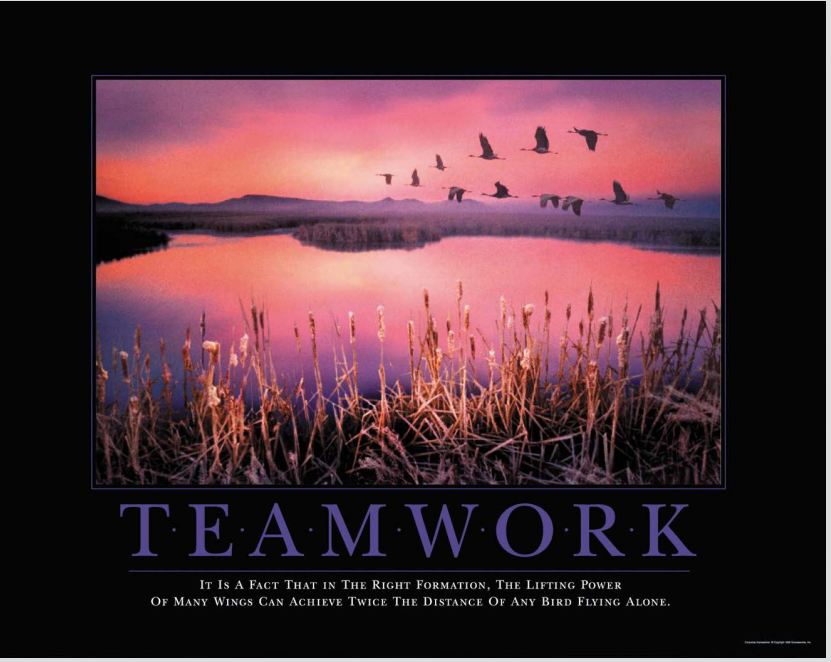
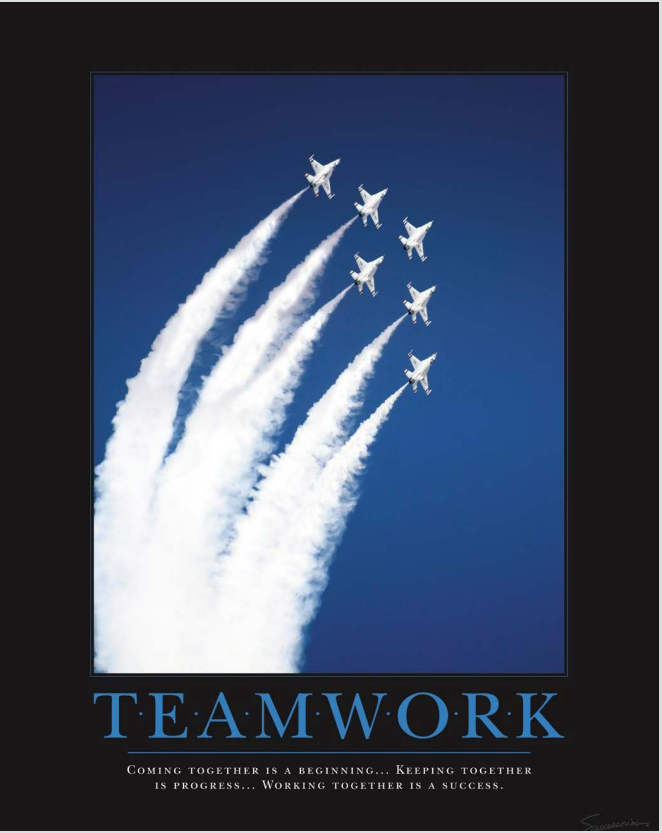
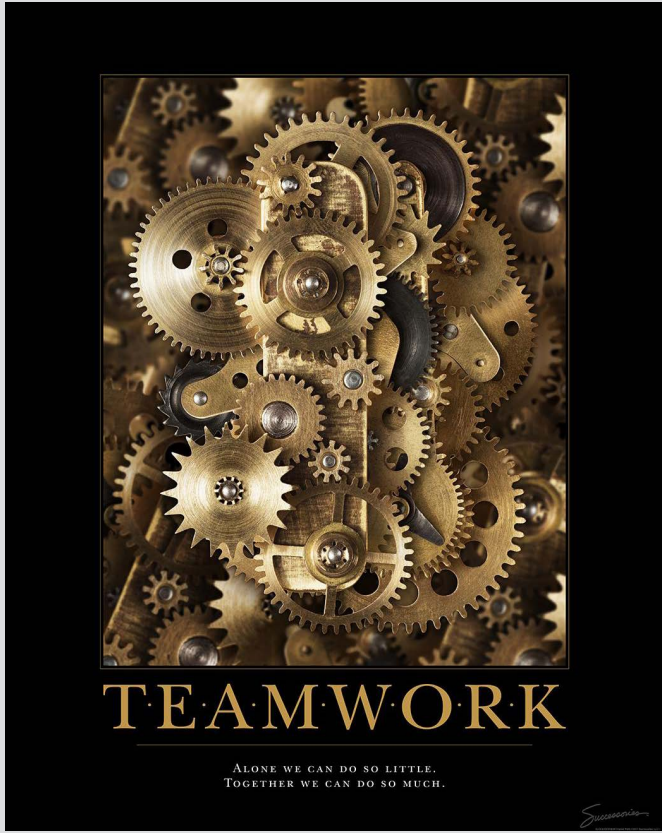


fig. landscape painting



By far the most frequent photographic motif is that of landscape.

fig. landscape painting



Since it seems quite obvious that these images do not express a nostalgia for rural life (like in pastoral painting) or a return to pre-industrial societies, what is their function?

fig. landscape painting



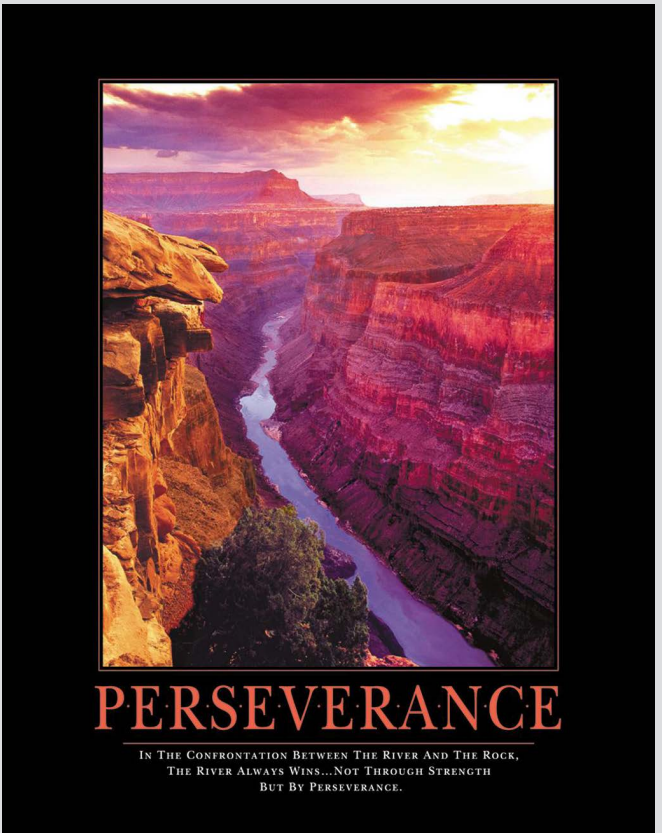
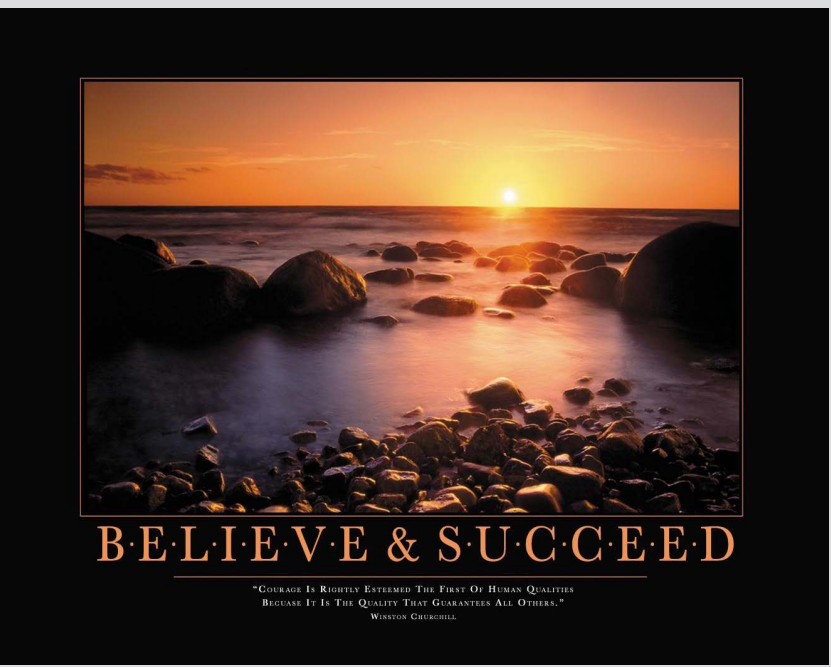
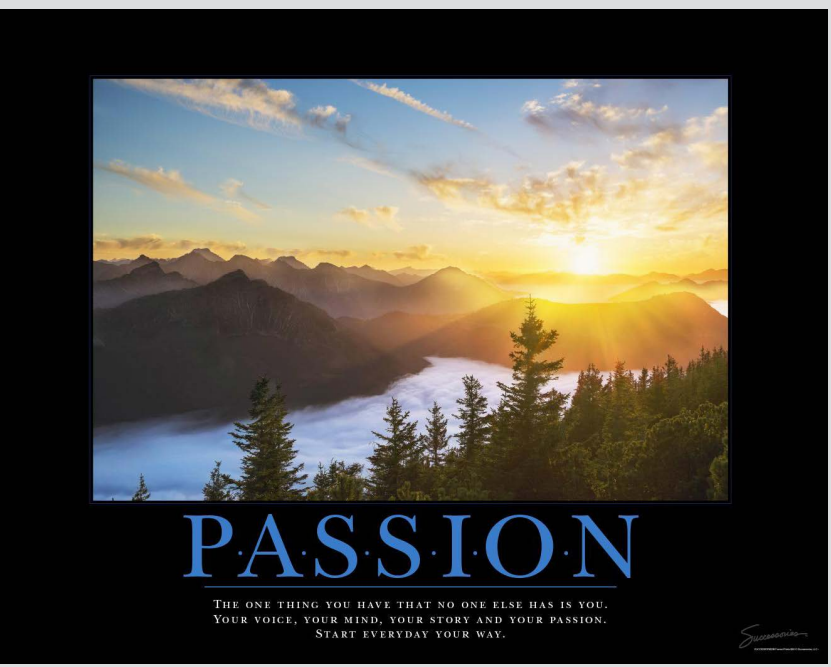
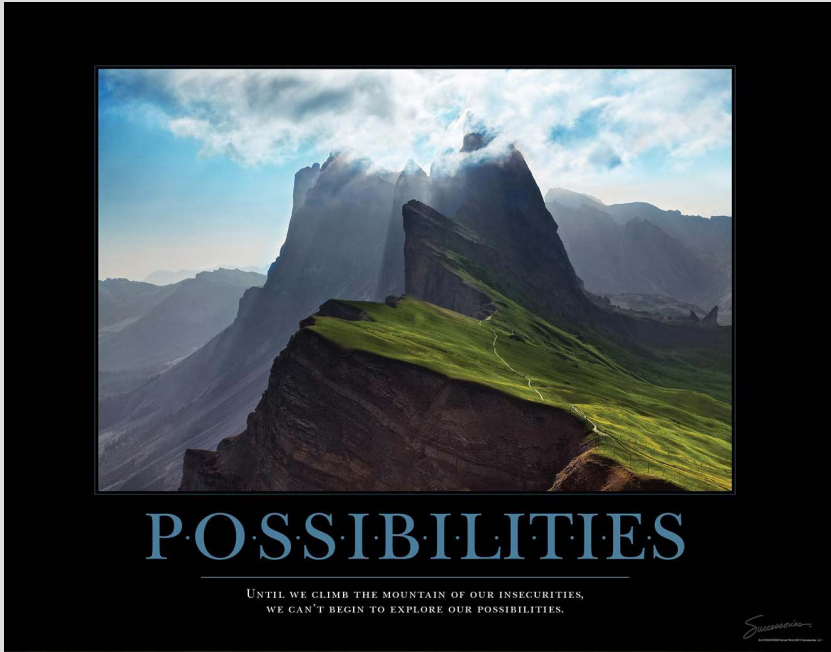
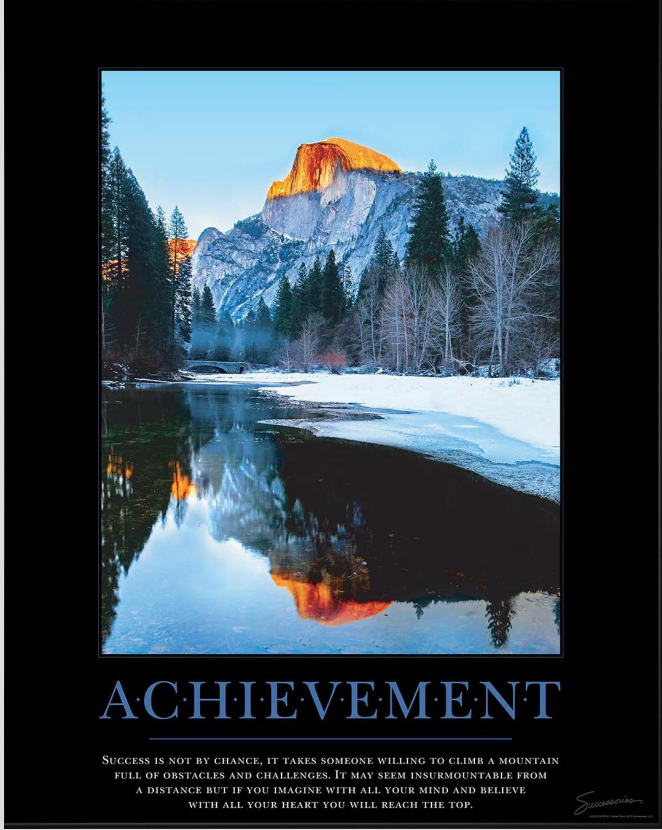
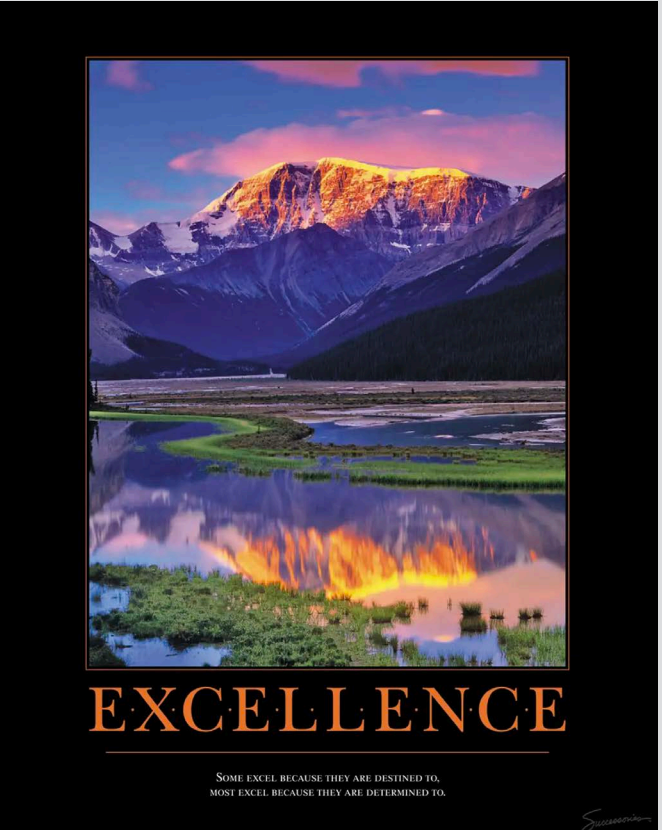
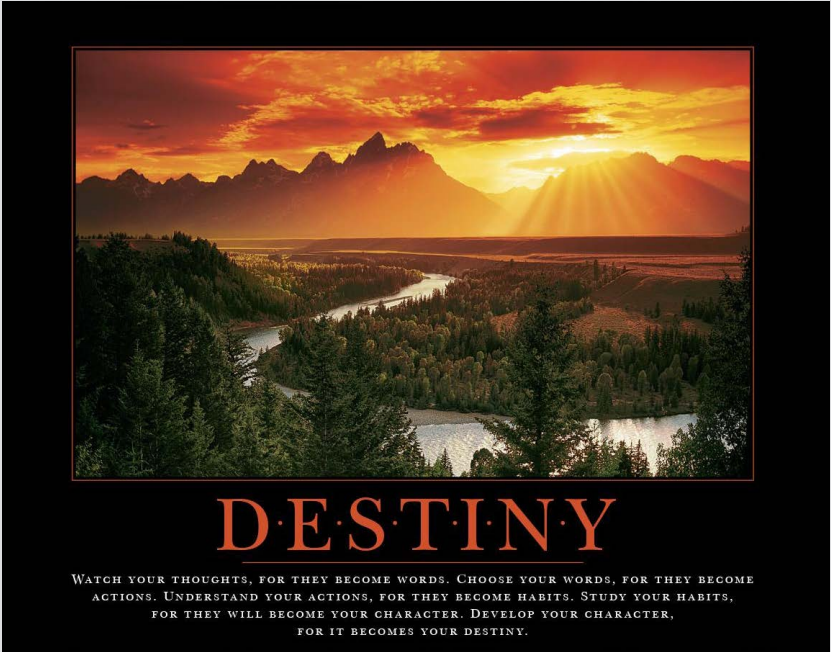
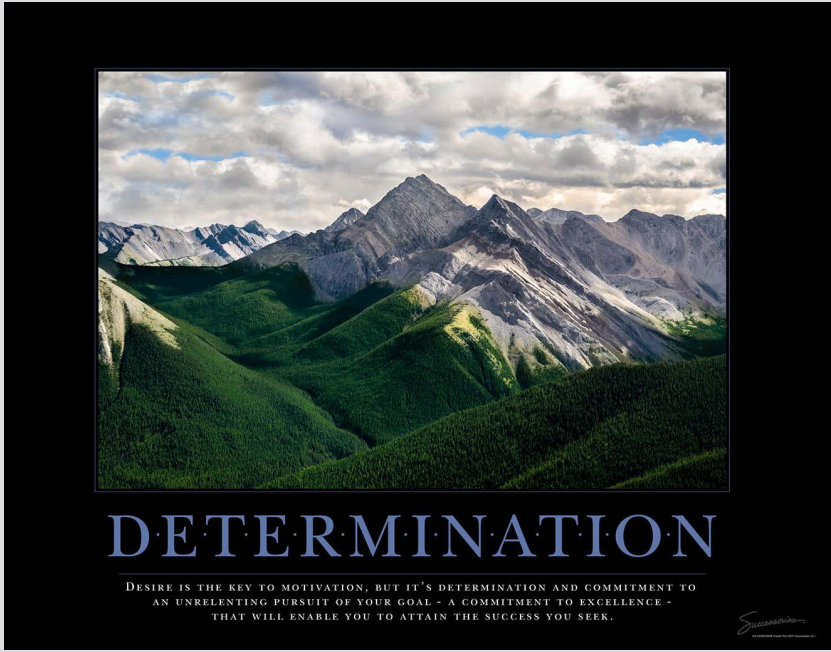
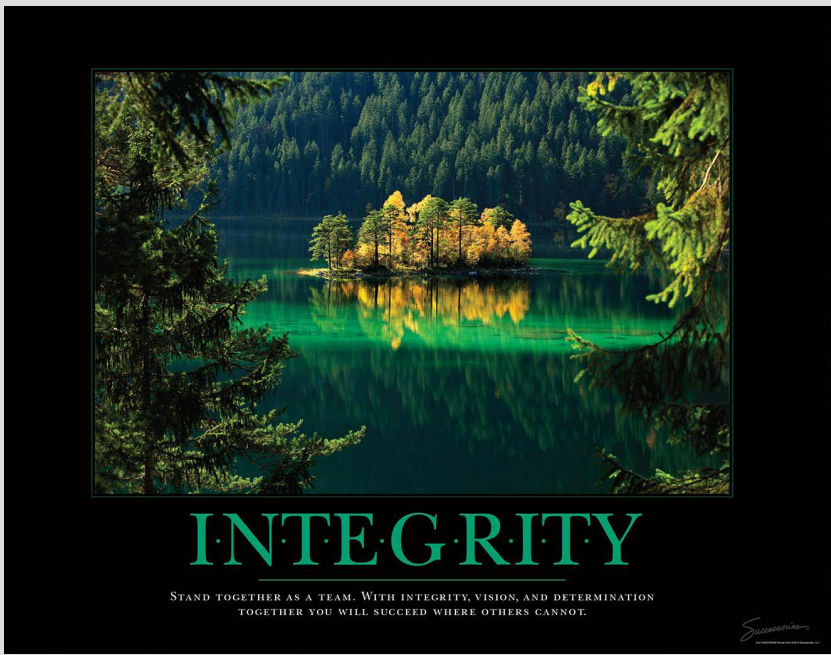
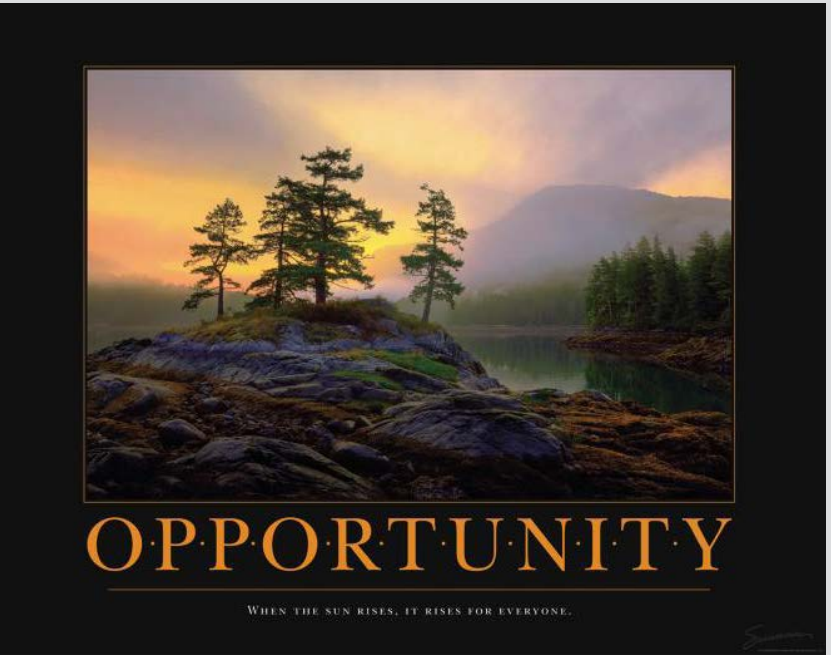
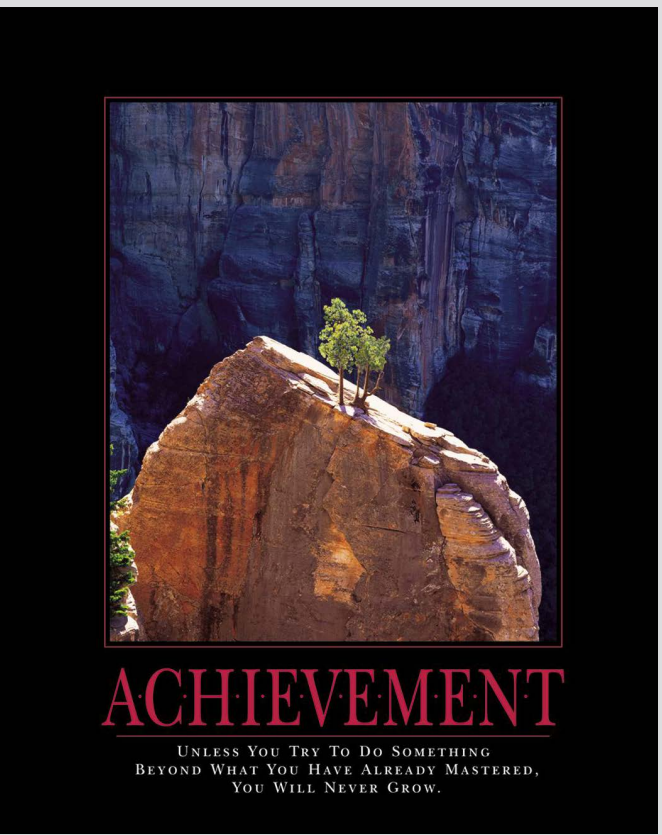
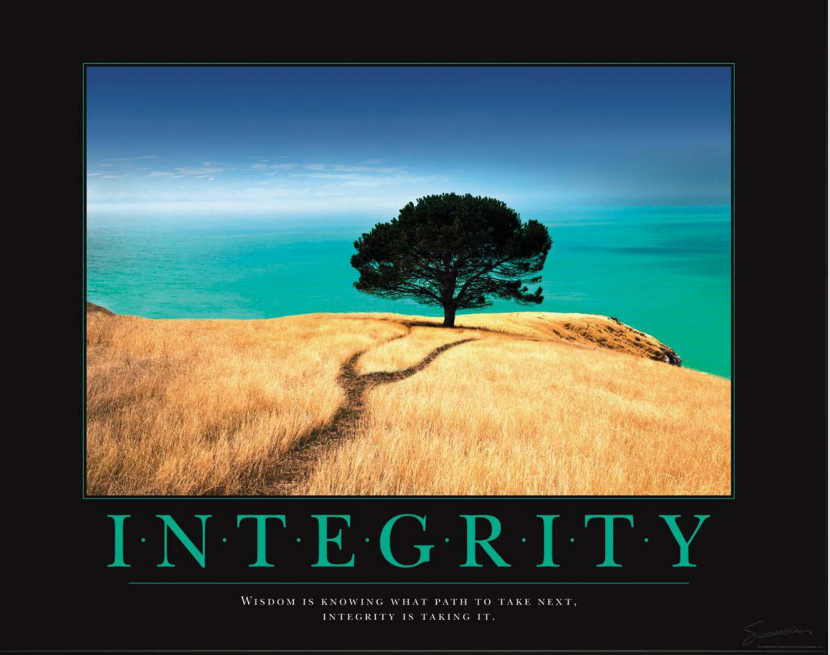
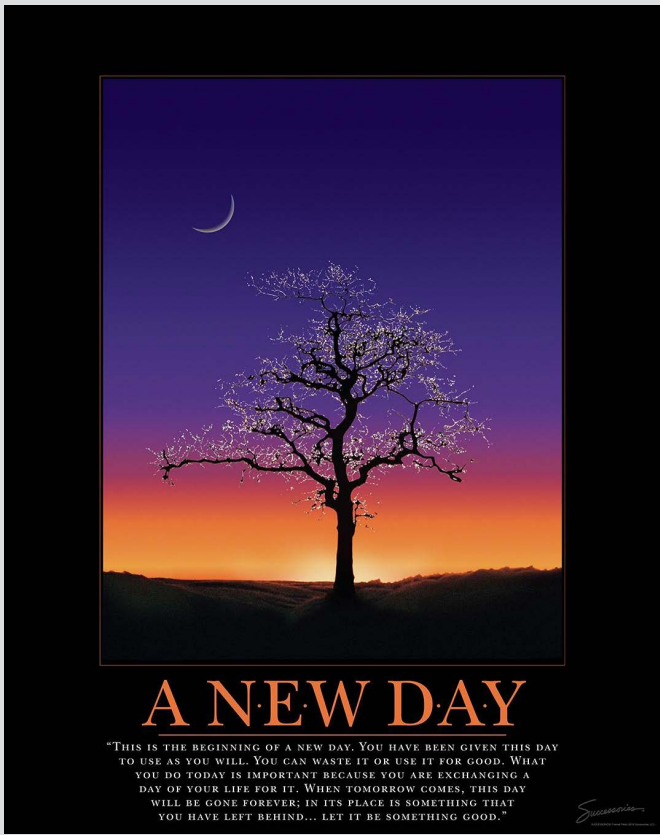
To understand that, I propose using Simmel’s definition of landscape, which he describes as a modern invention that transformed nature into a contemplative experience and necessarily presupposed a separation between nature and culture.

fig. landscape painting



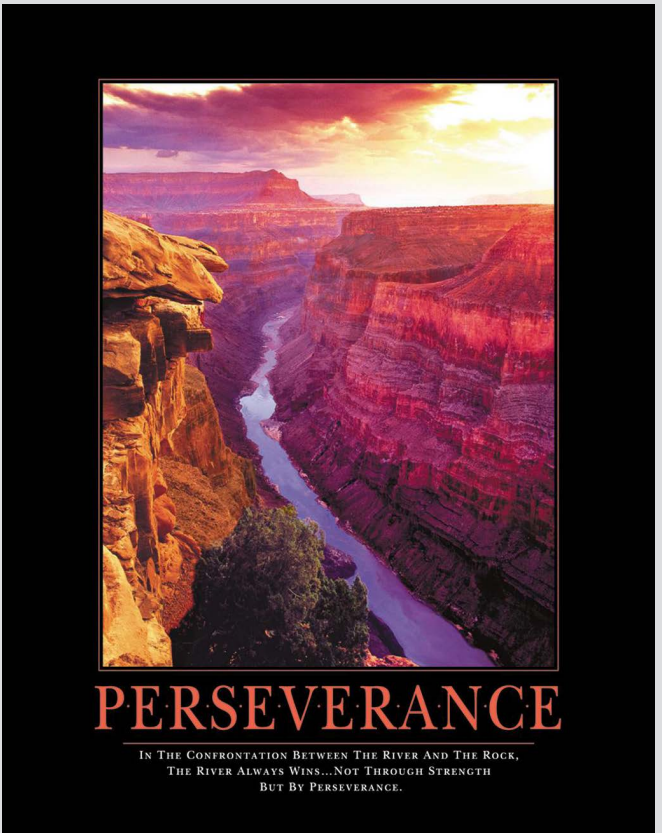
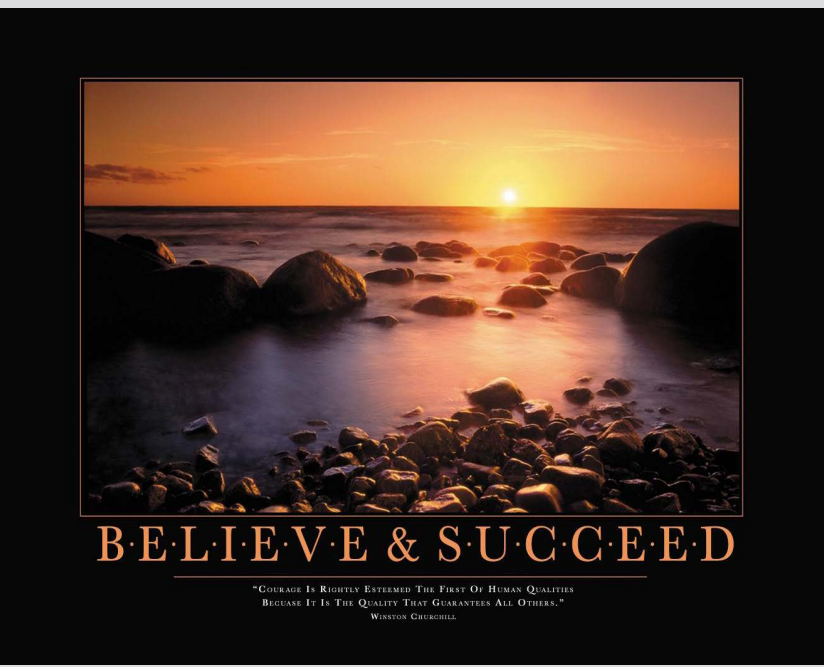
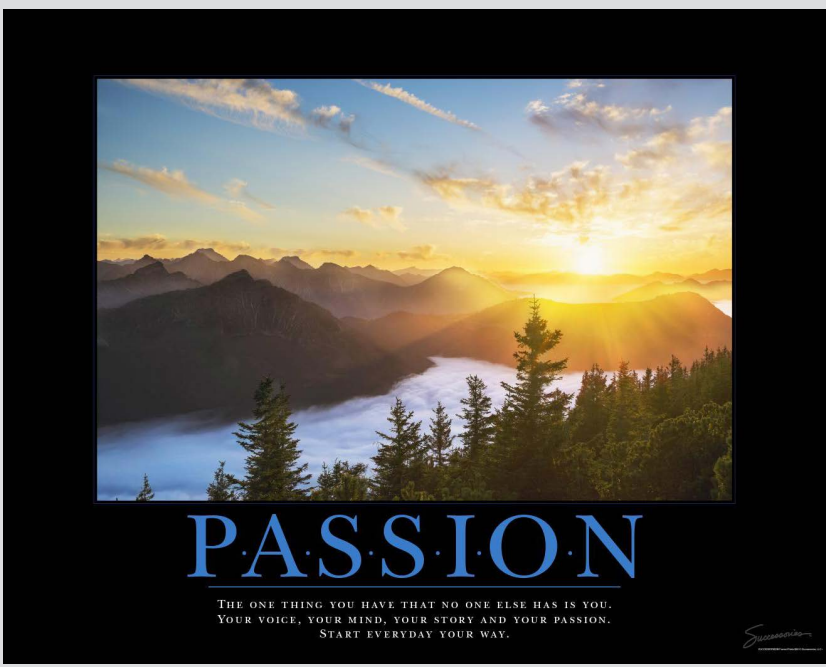
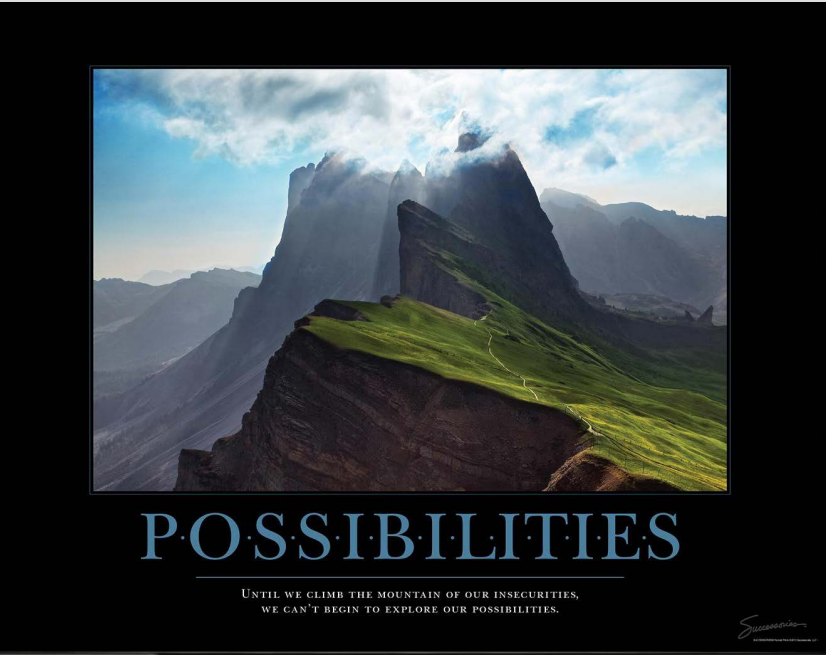
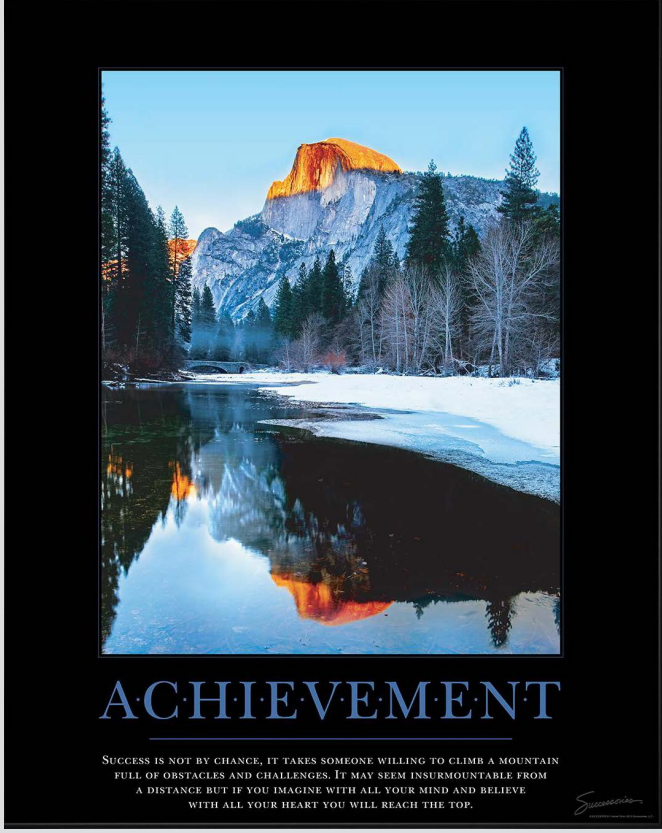
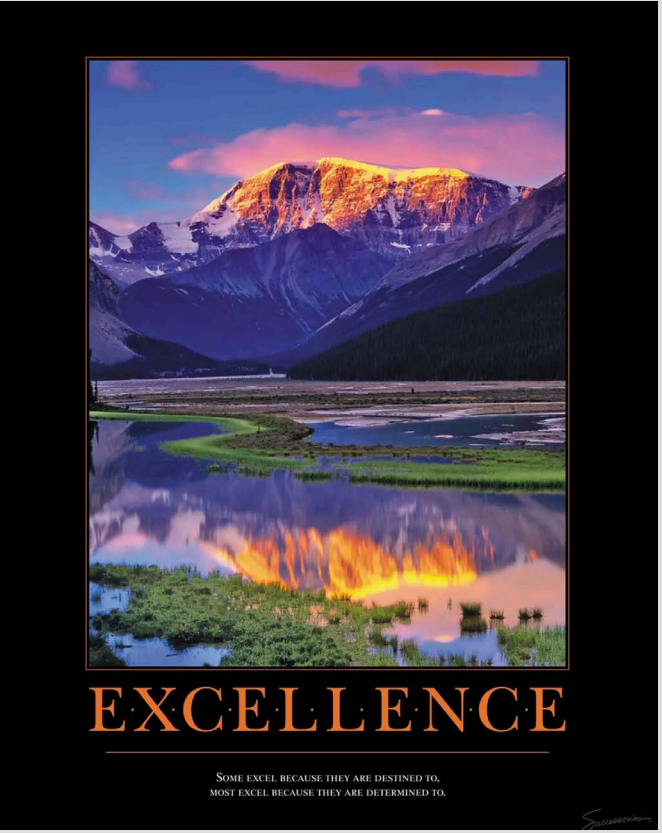
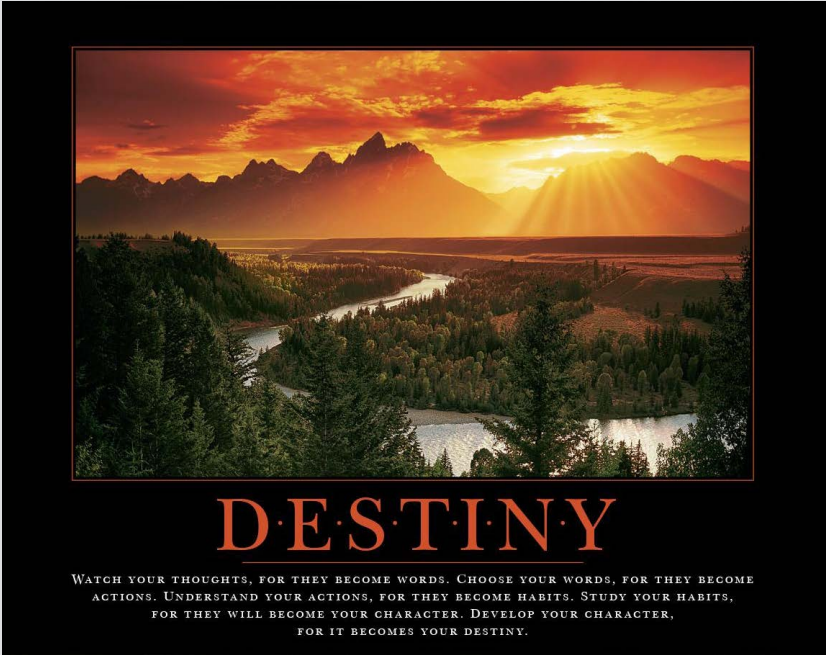
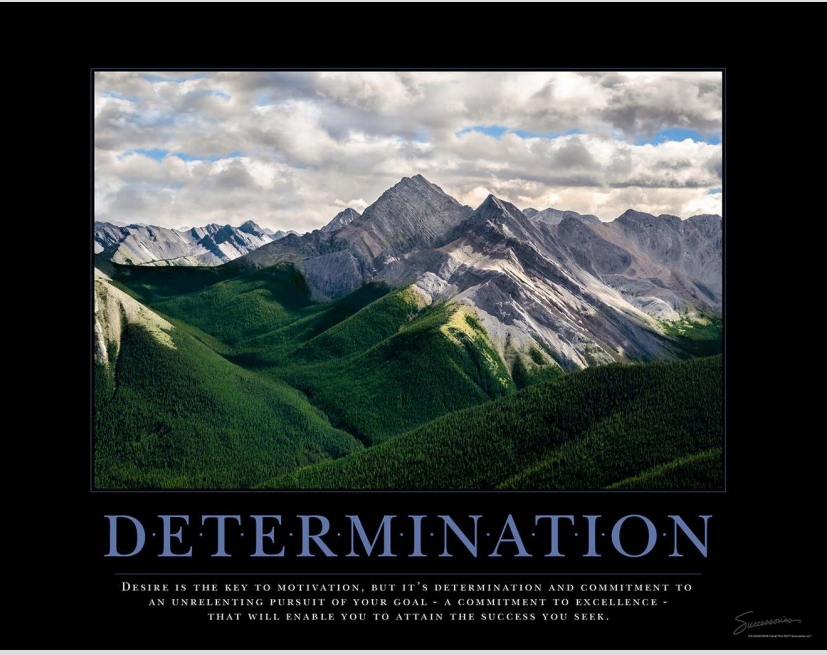
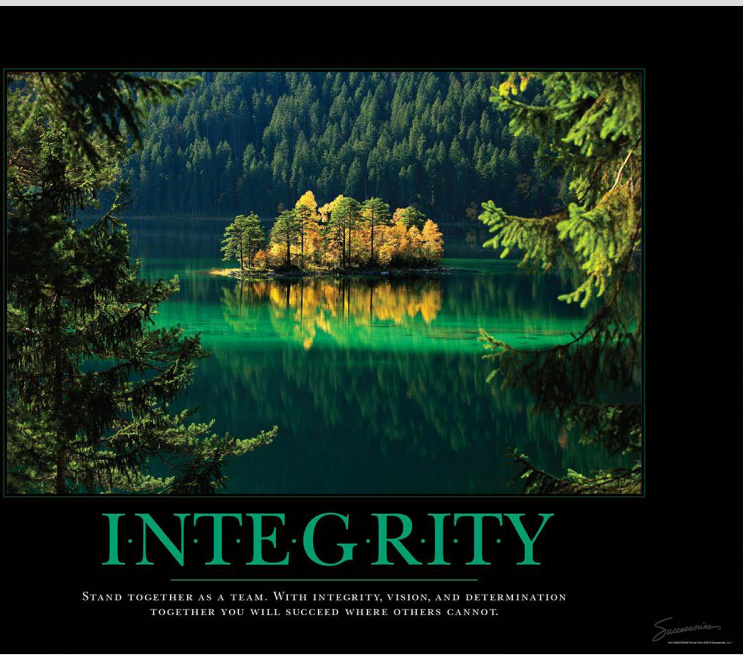
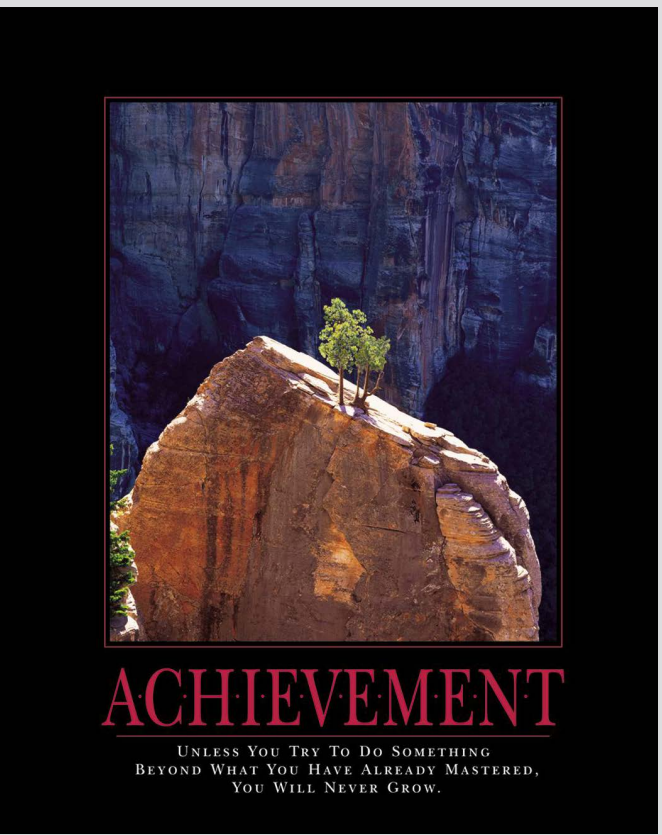
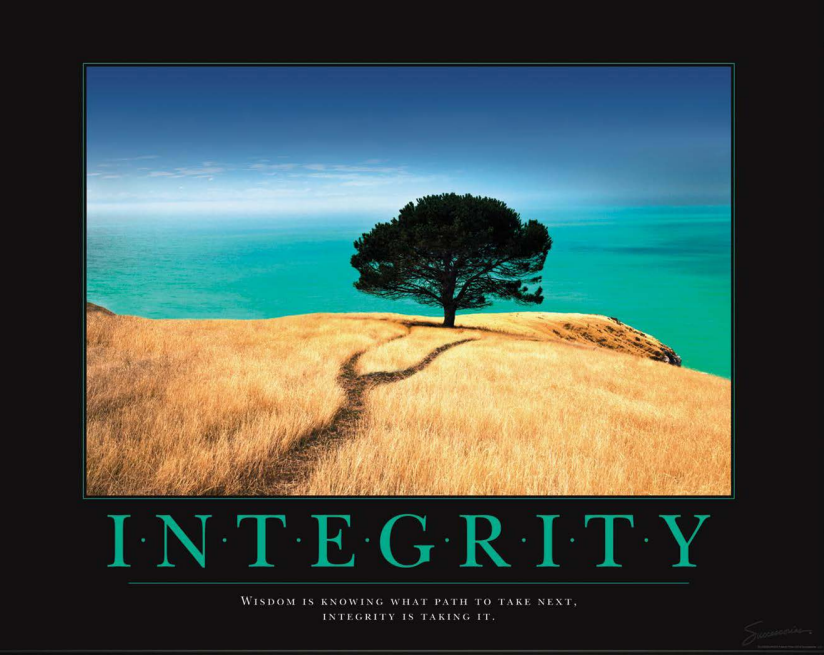
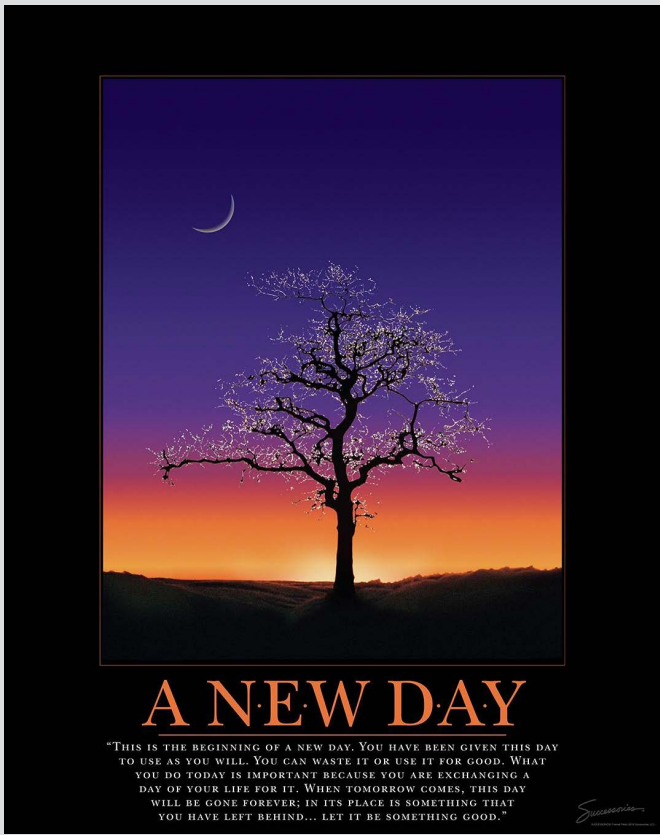
While in romantic painting this separation created a passive attitude of contemplation, the Successories' posters turn landscape into a separation to be overcome: a challenge.

fig. landscape painting



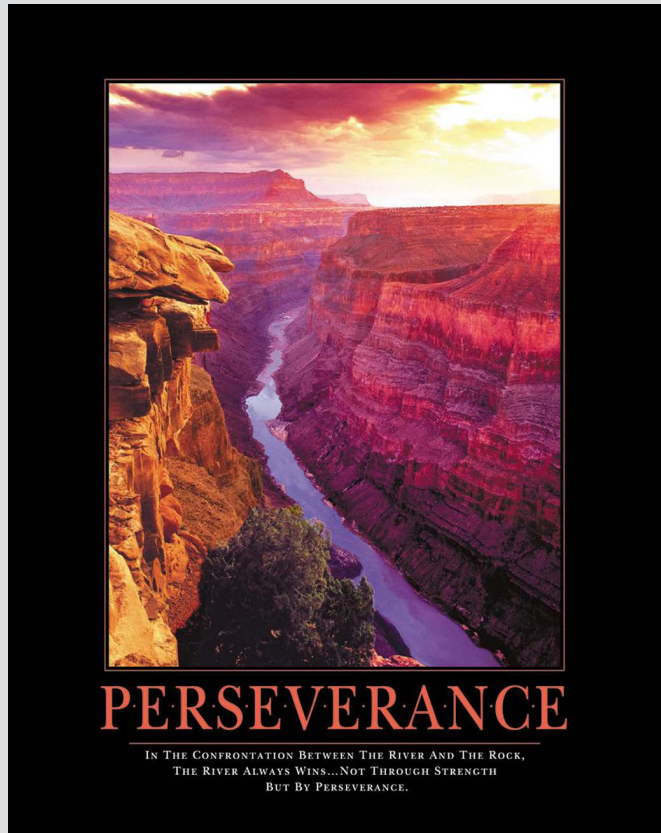
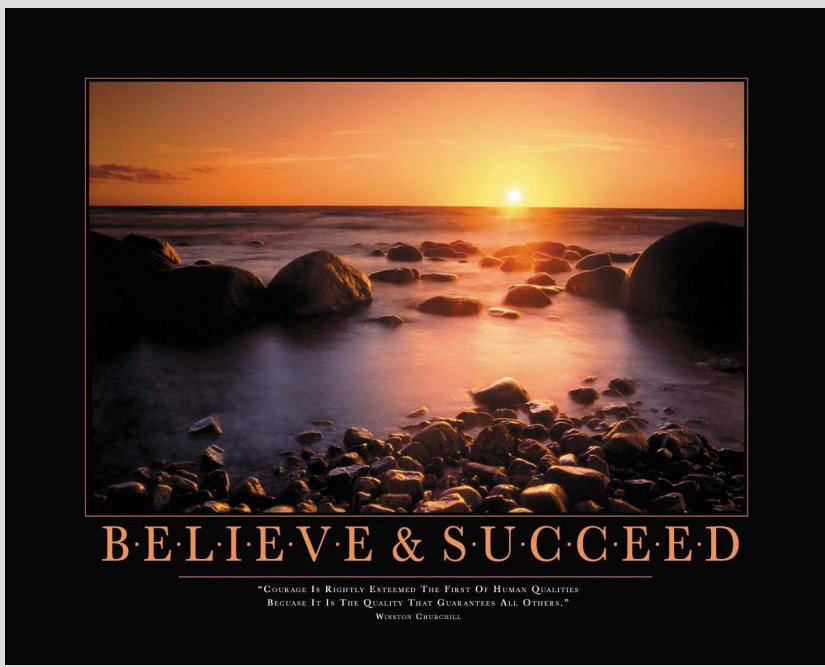
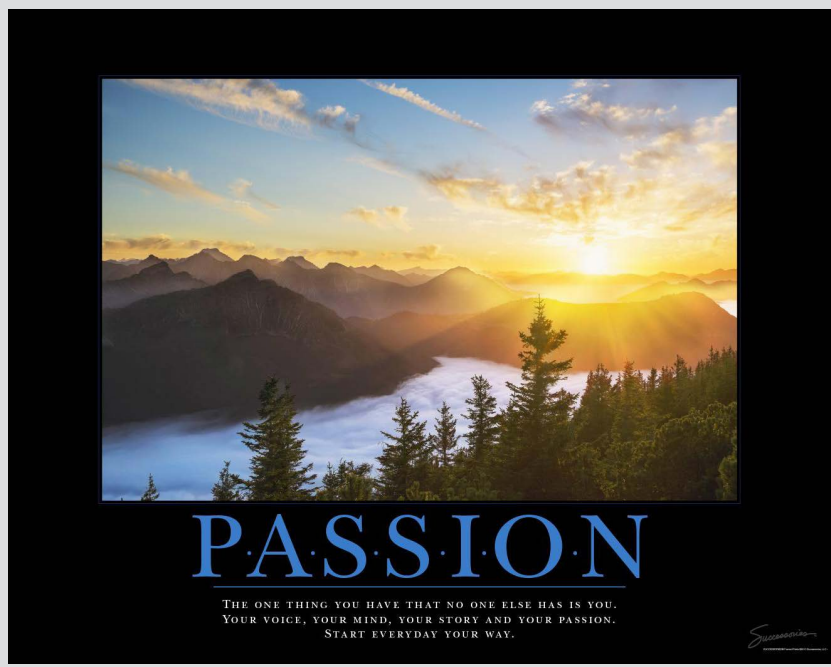
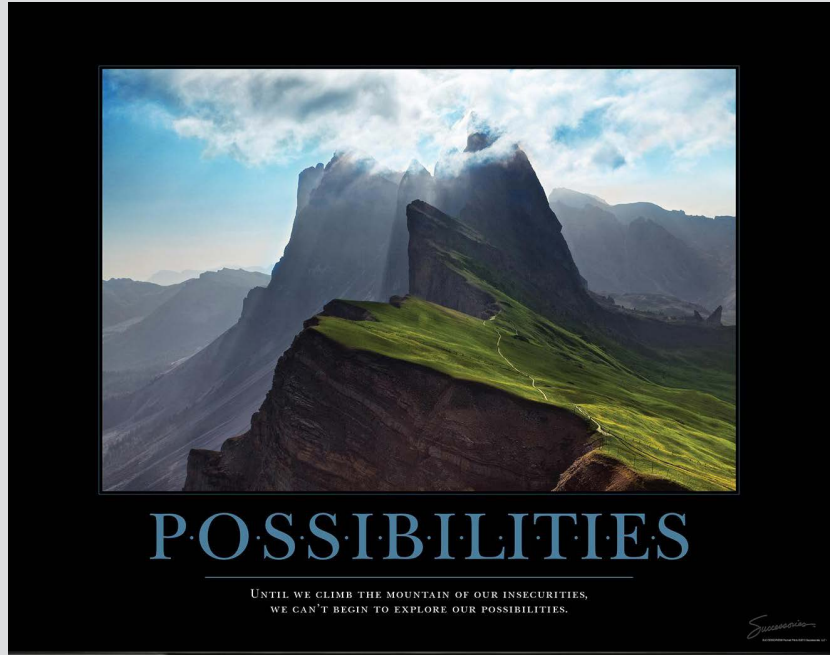
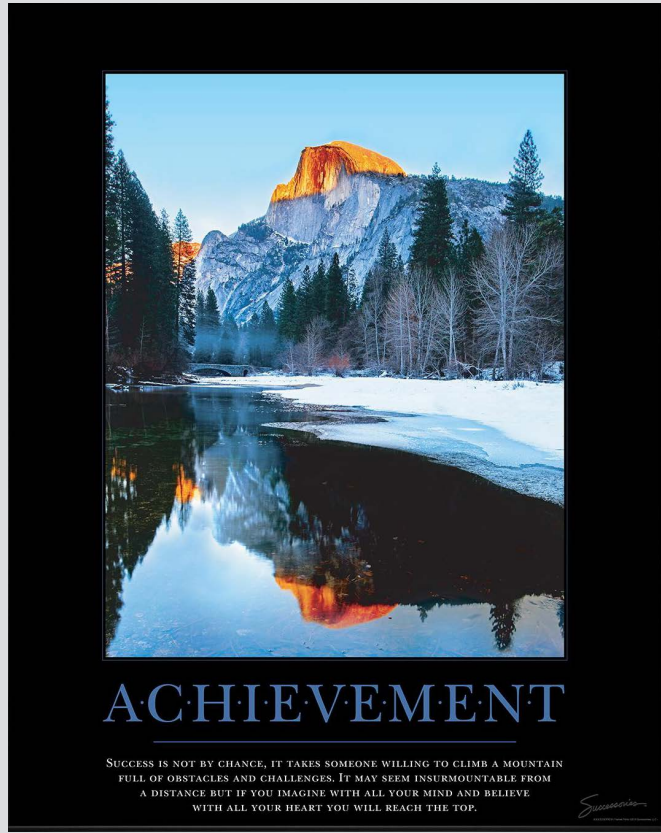
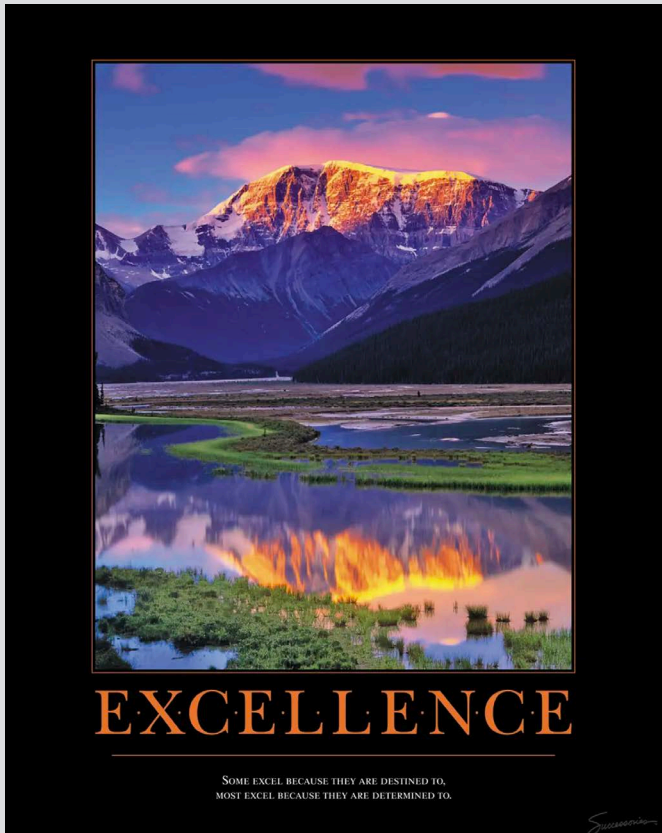
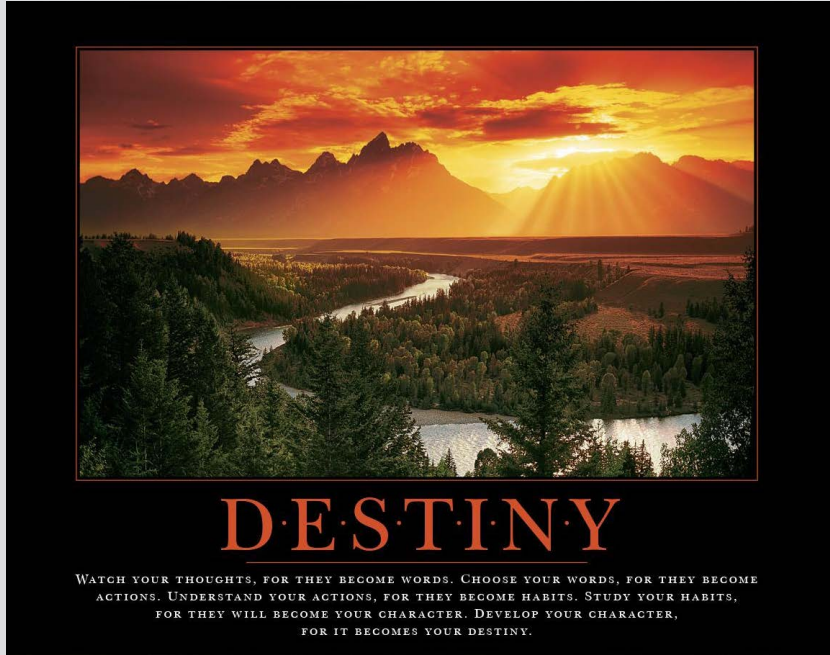
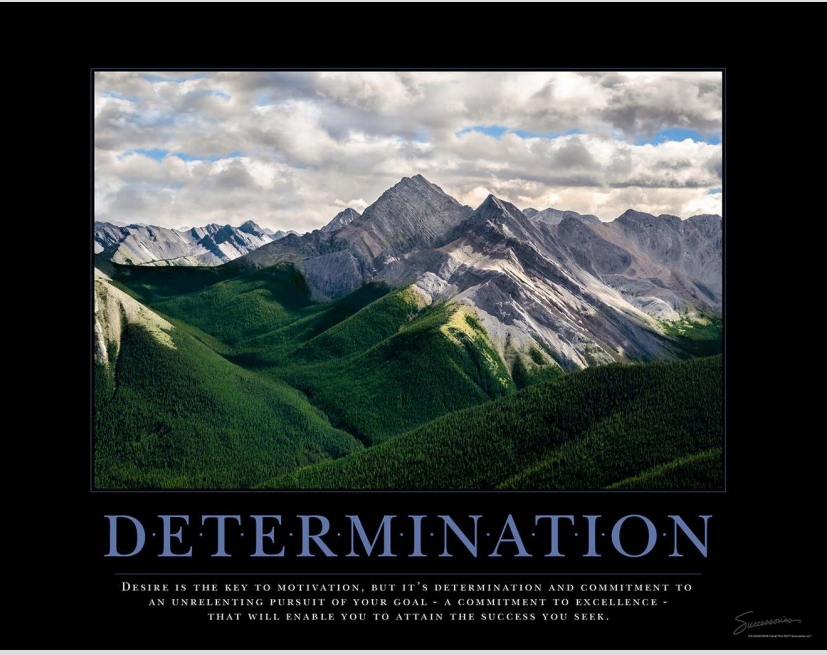
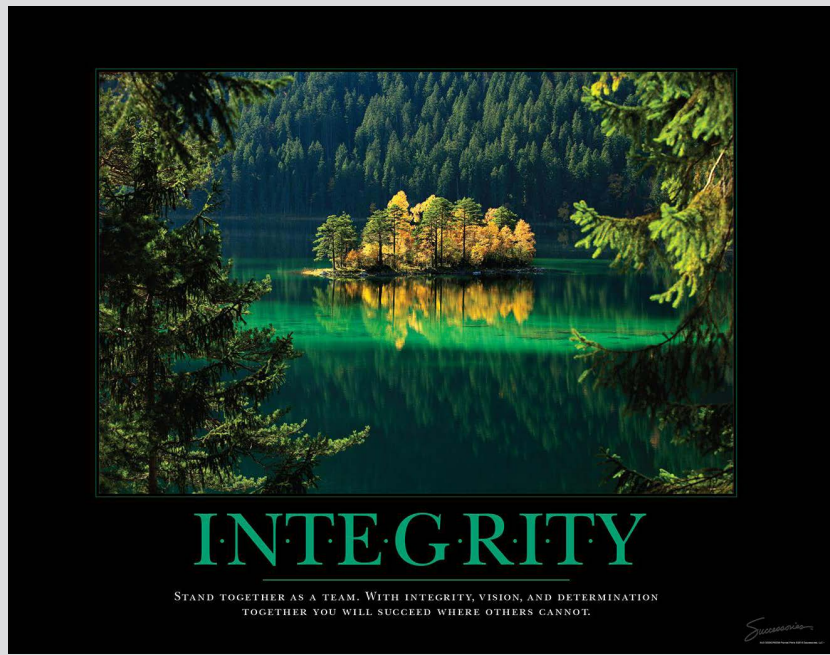
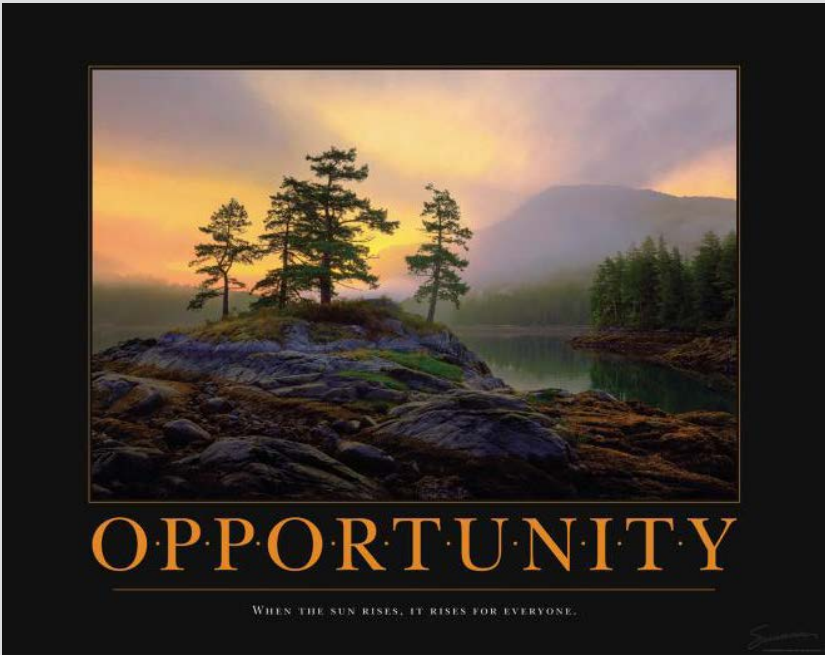
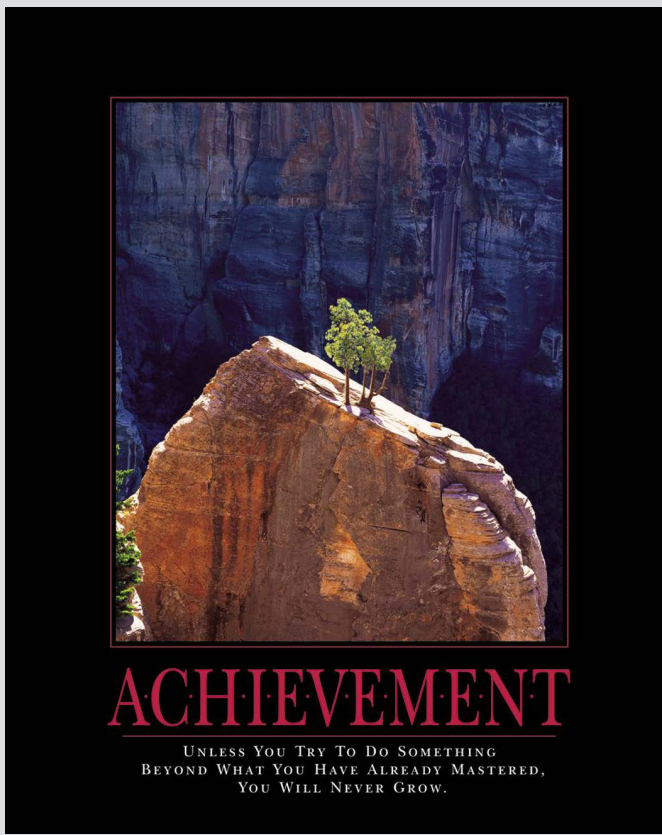
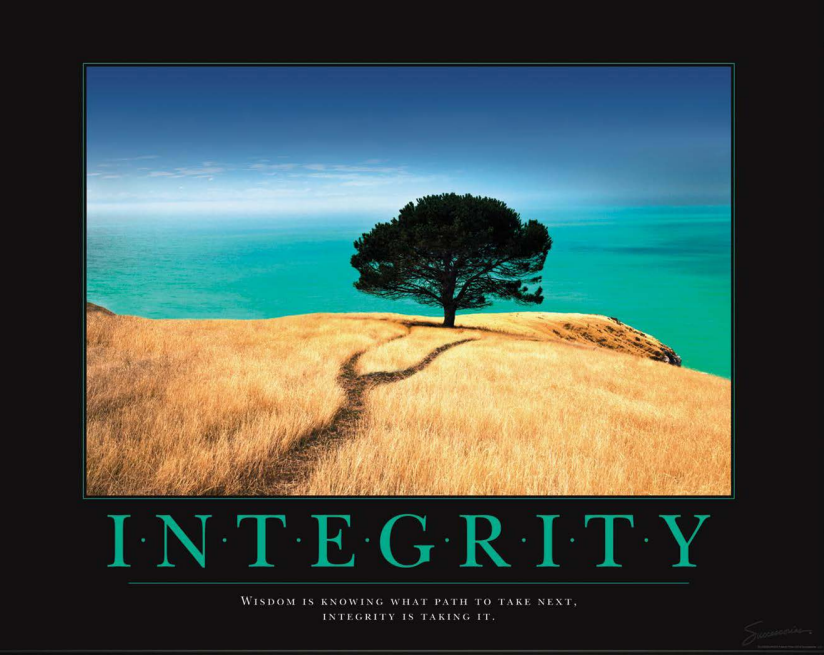
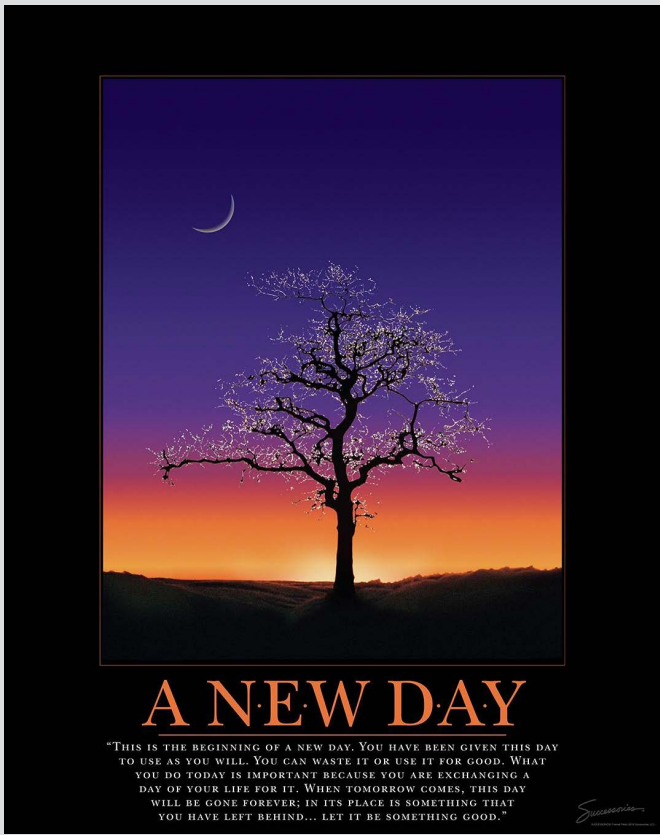
These landscapes do not represent the existential terror of some romantic paintings but a harmonic “theatre of nature” that does not challenge the power of human will.

fig. landscape painting



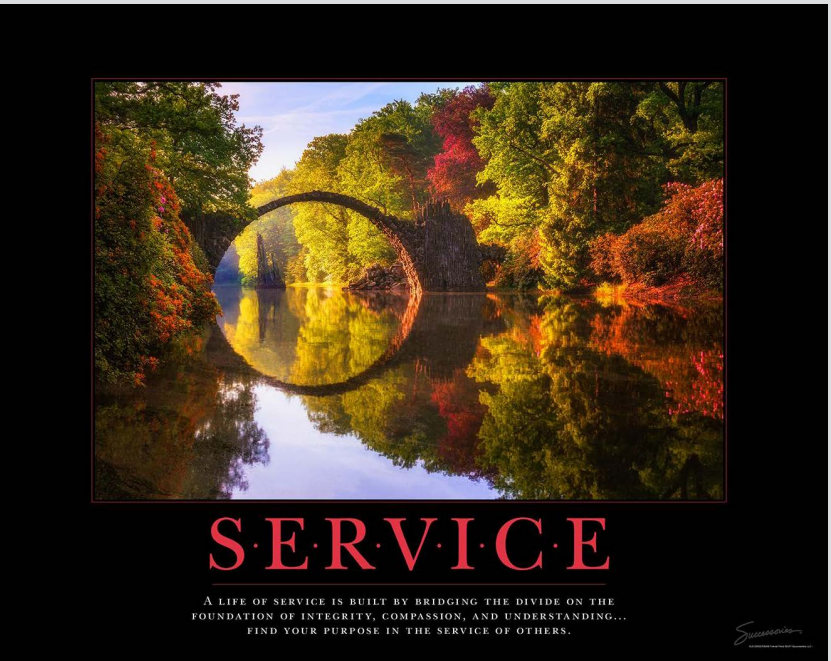
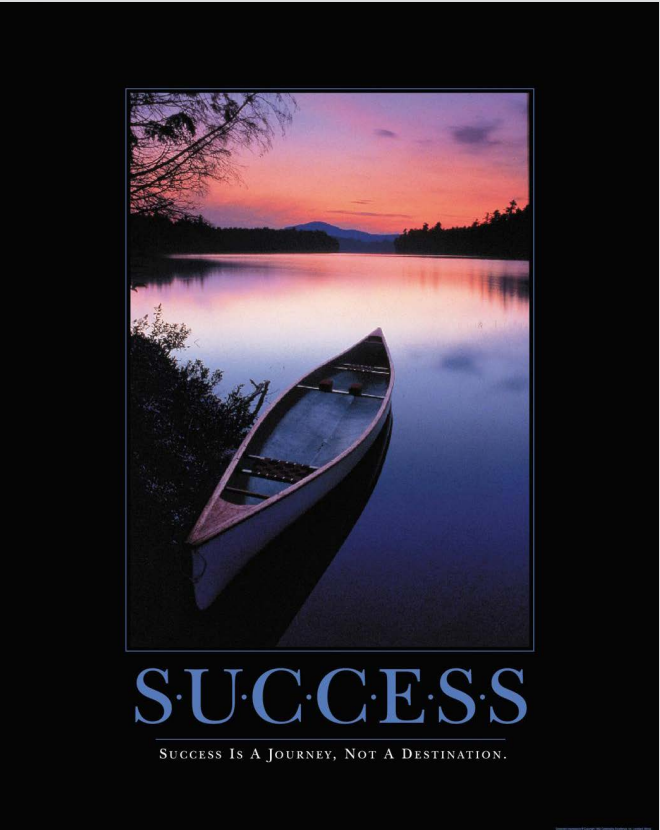
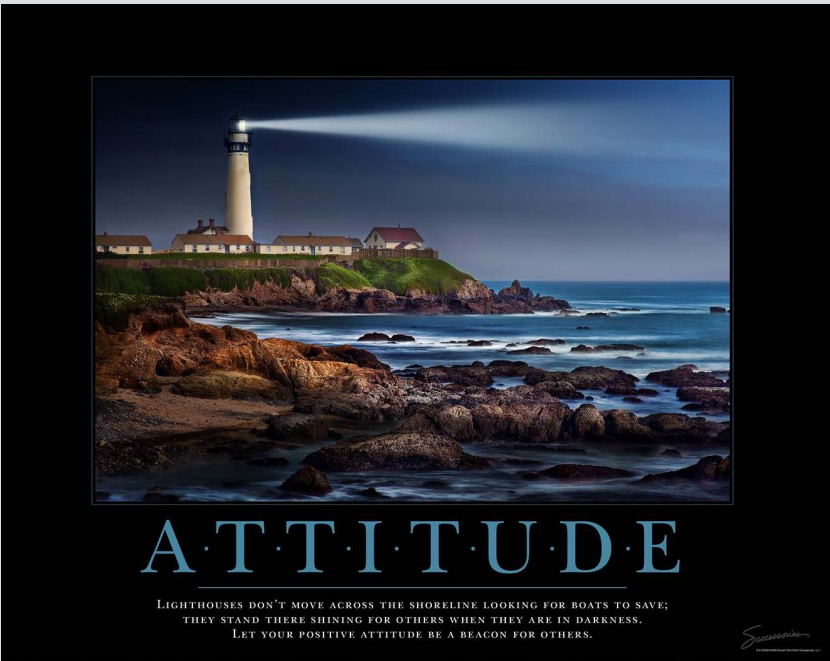
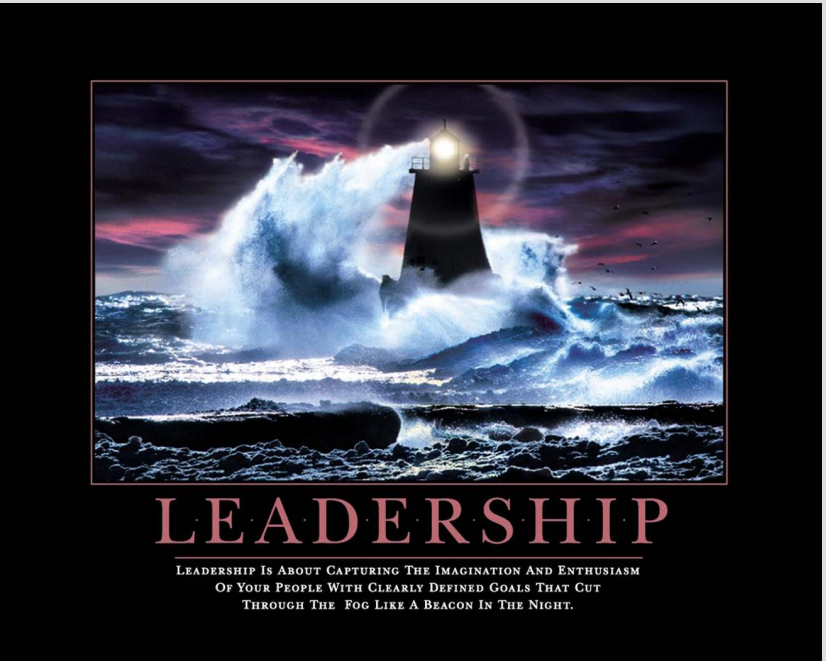
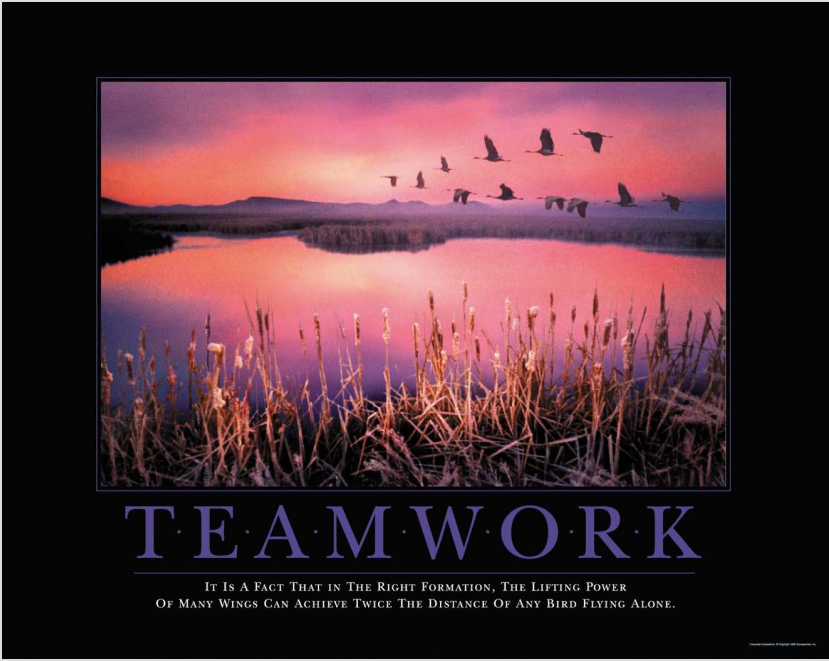
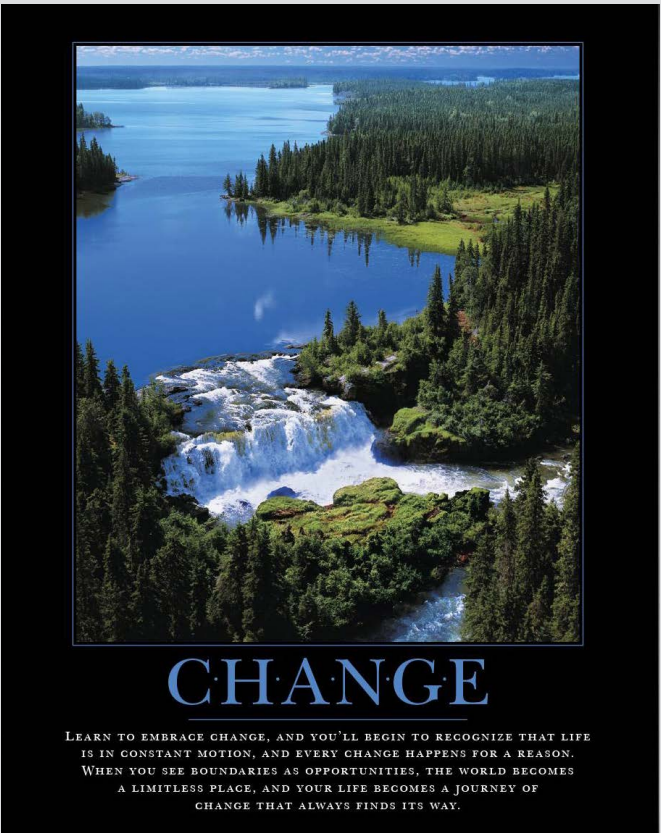
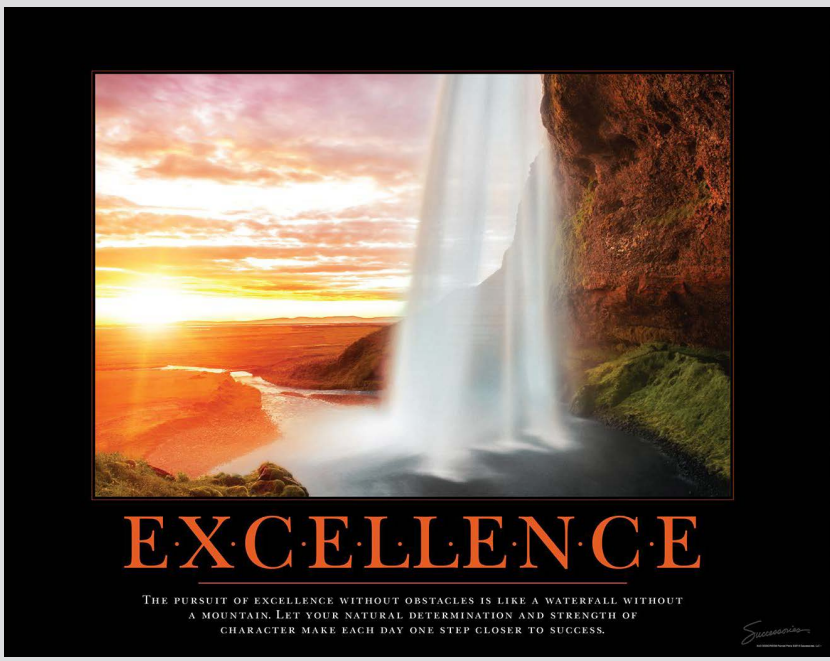
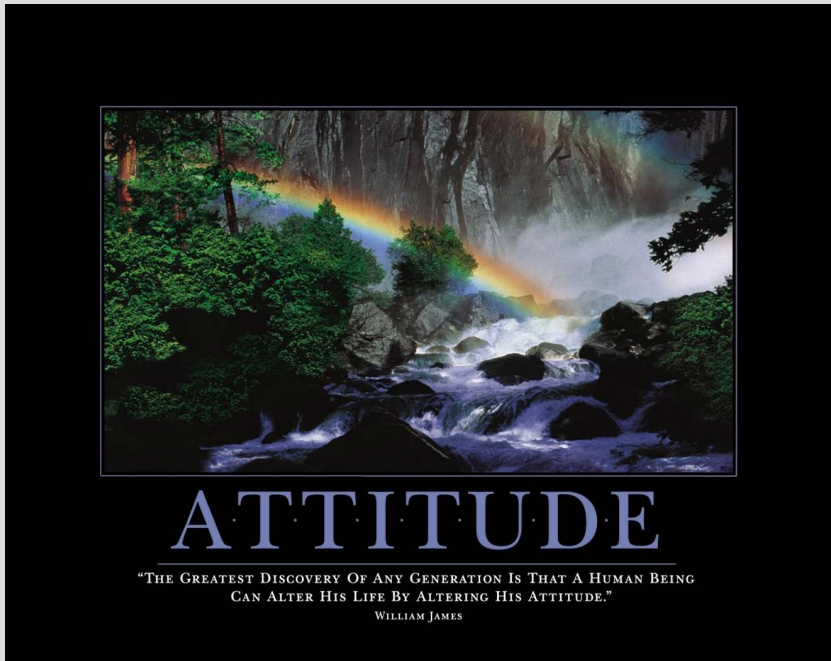
The effect of emotional identification is reinforced by the inspirational appeal to BE YOURSELF and aims at breaking the nature/culture divide.

fig. landscape painting



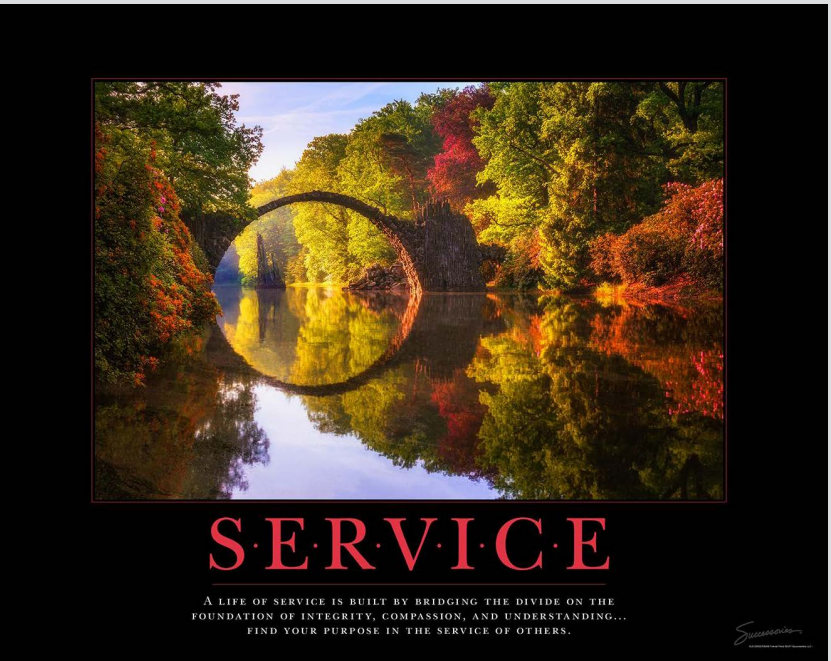
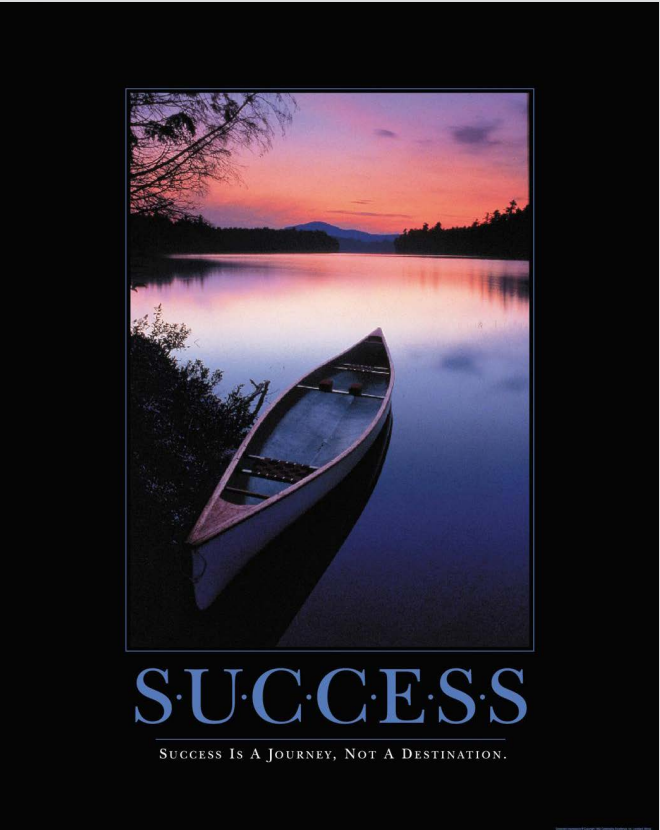
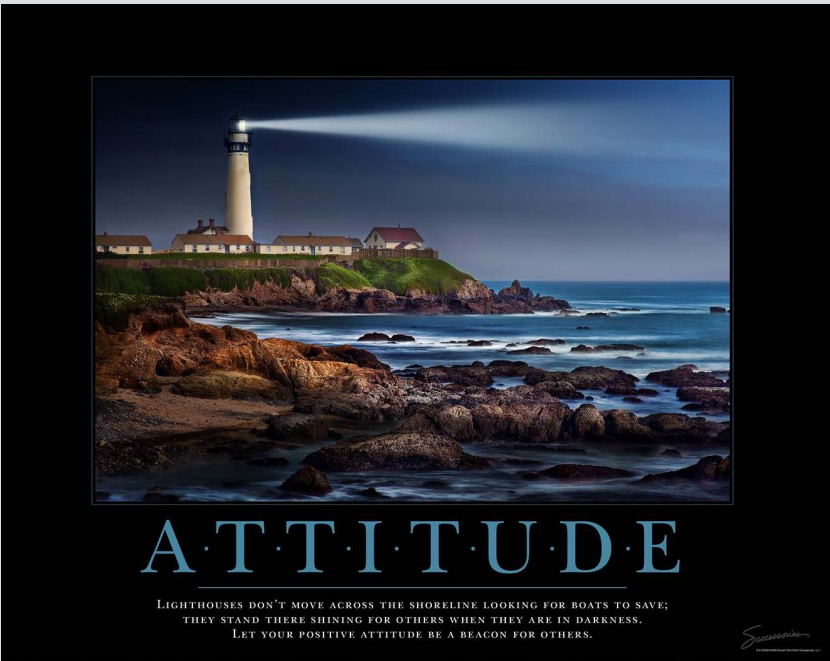
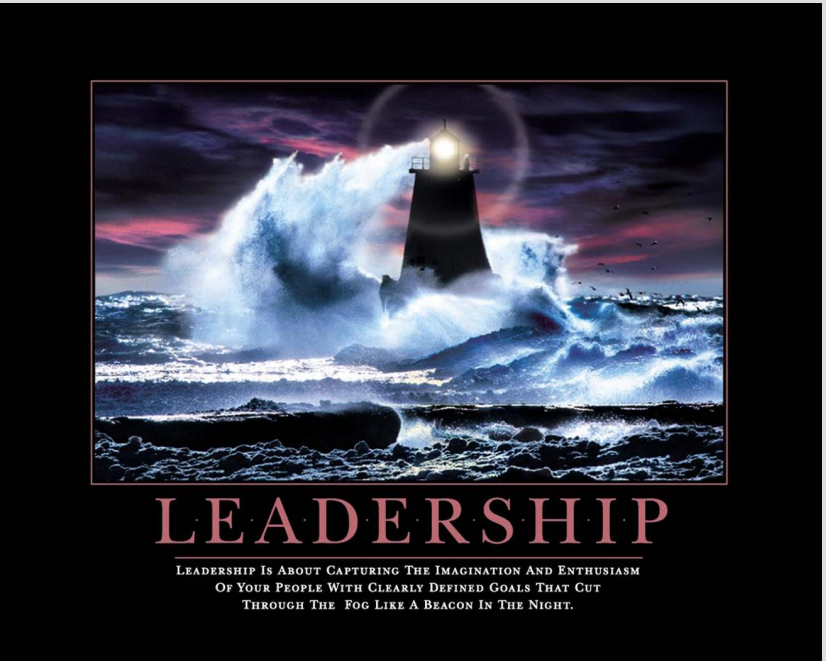
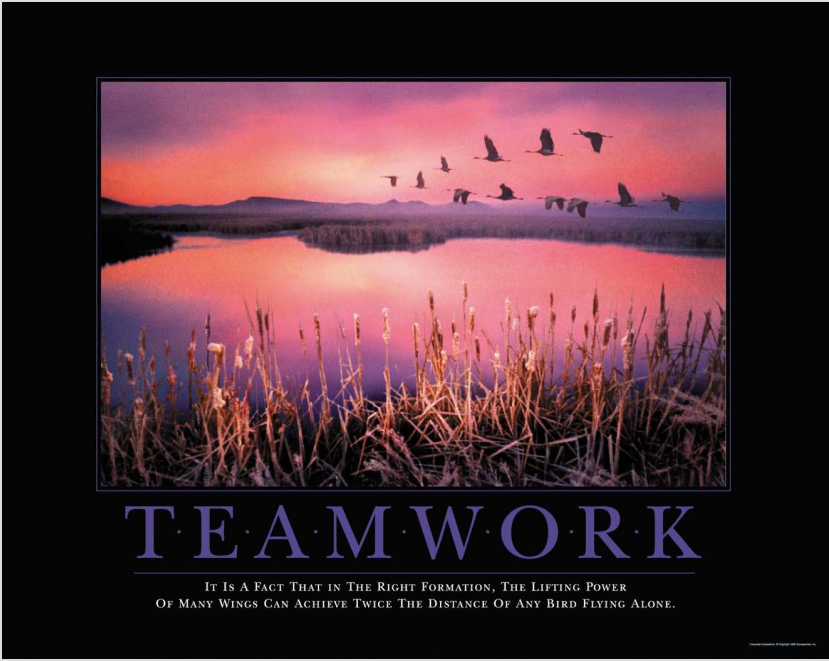
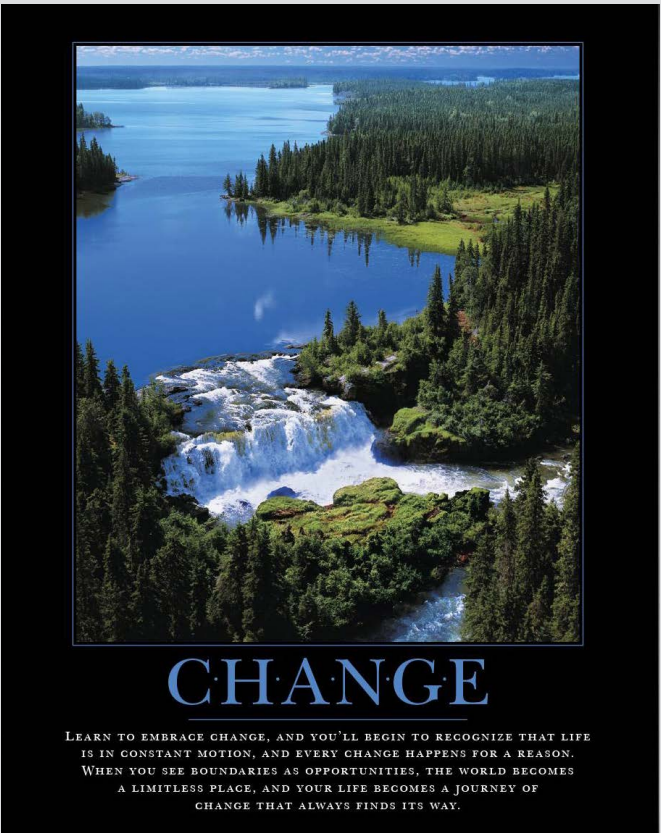
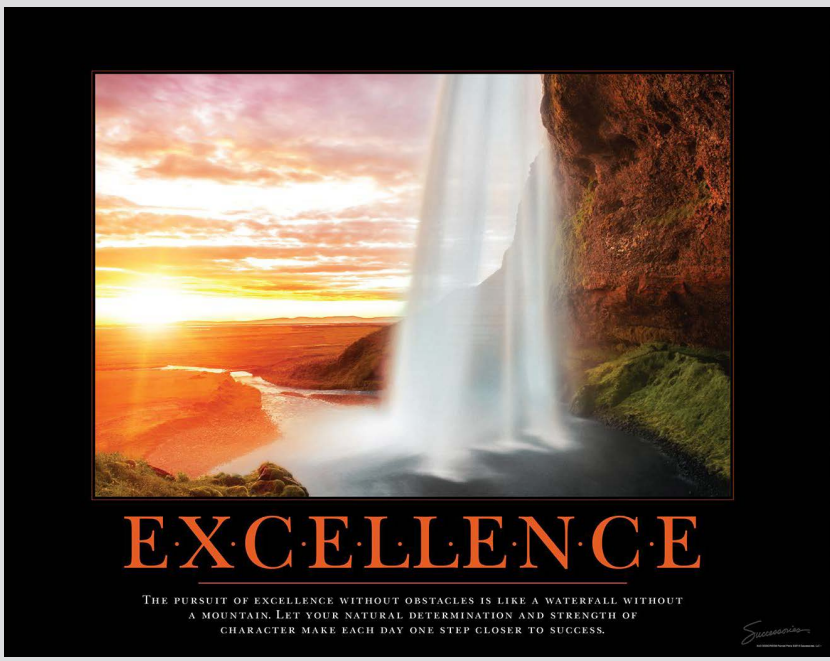
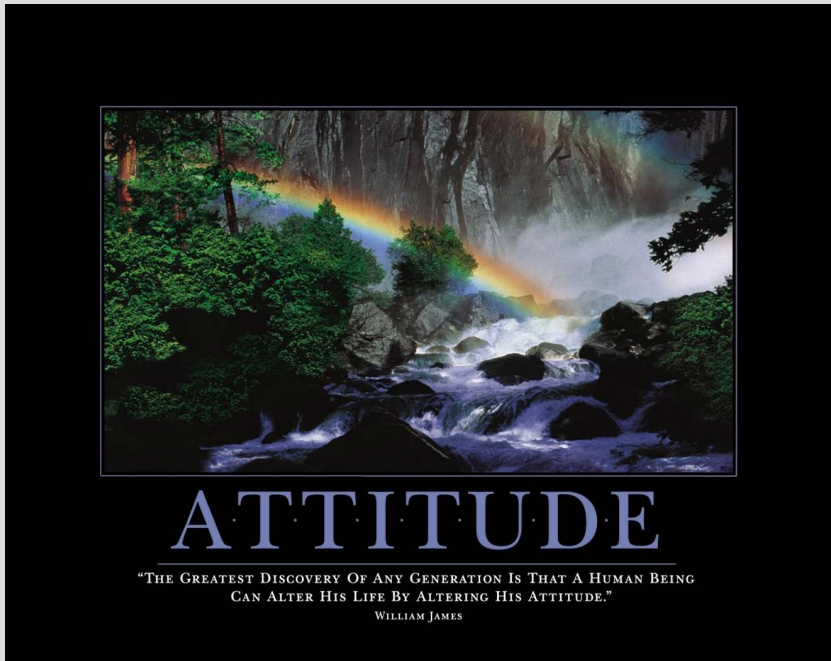
*In many cases, the visual metaphor is quite direct:
be the mountain, be the tree, be the river, be the eagle, be the lion.*

fig. landscape painting



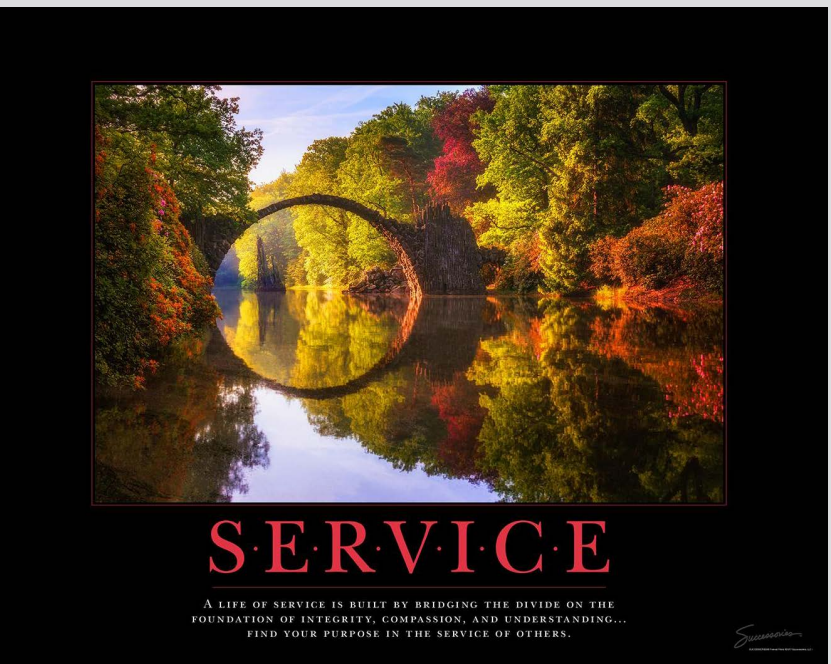
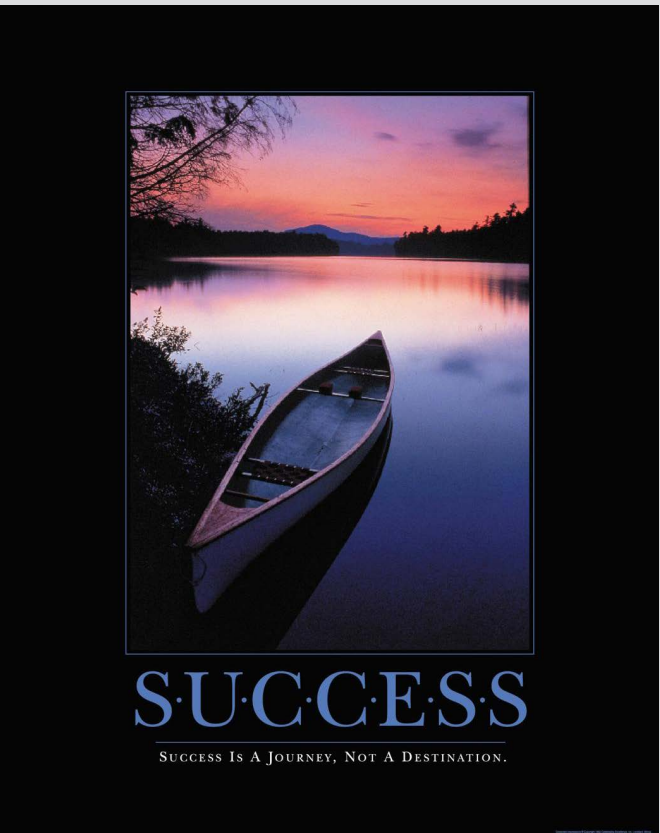
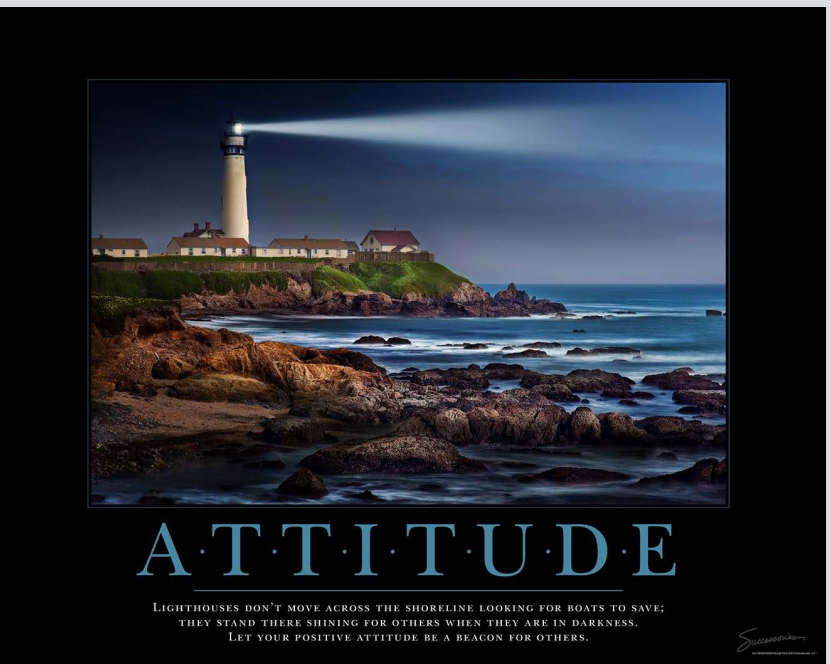
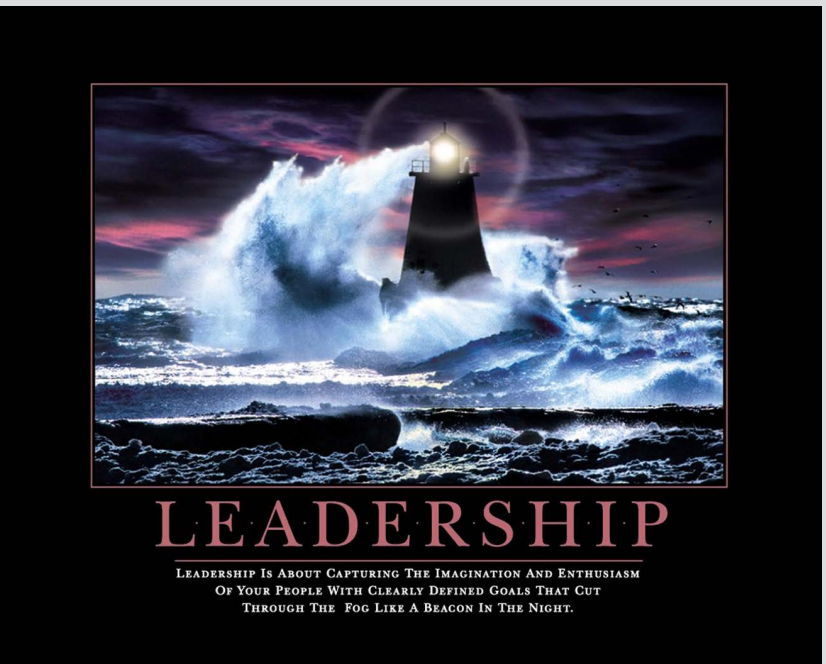
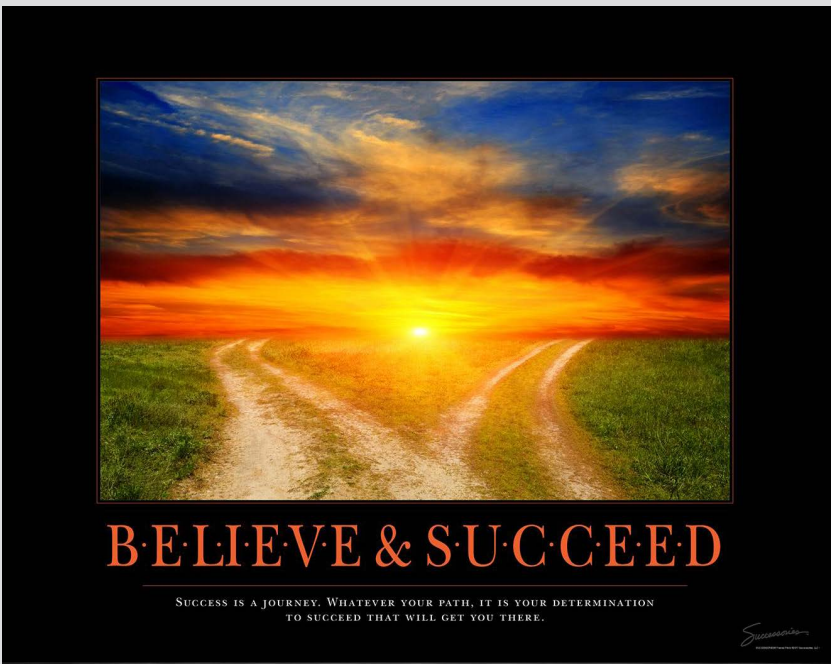
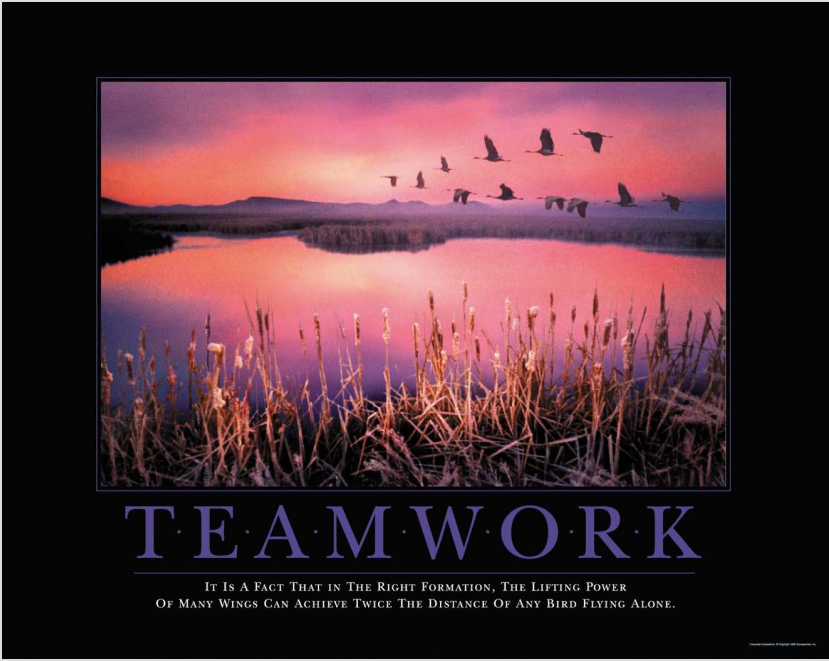
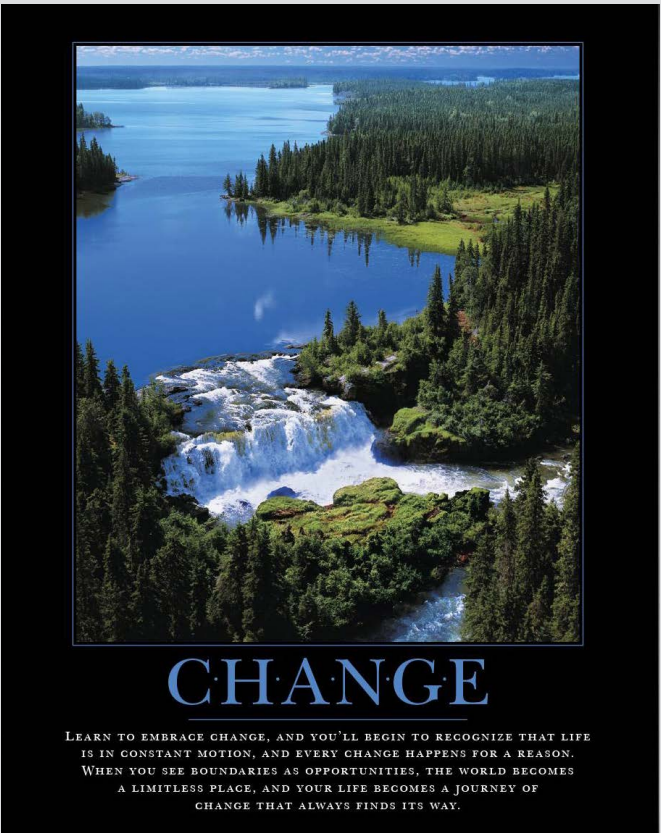
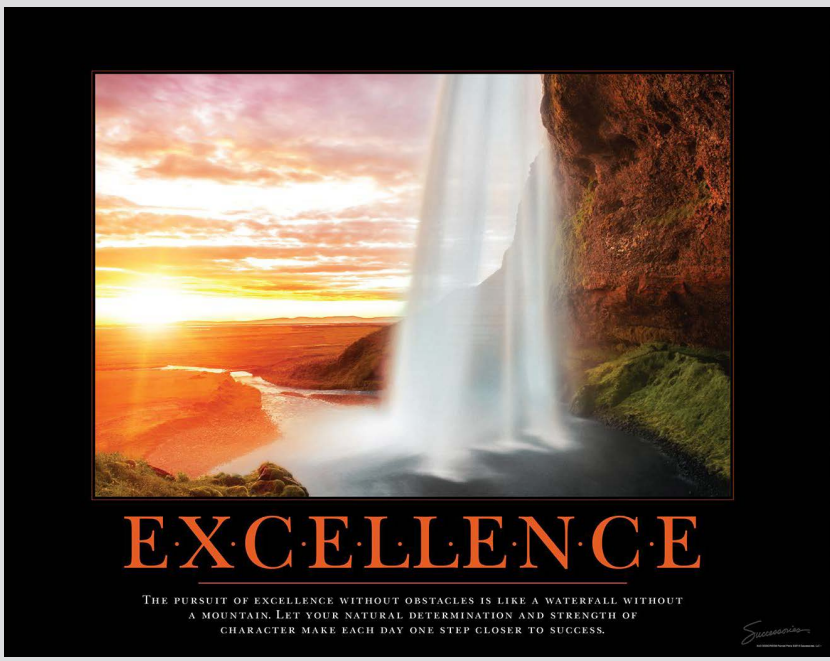
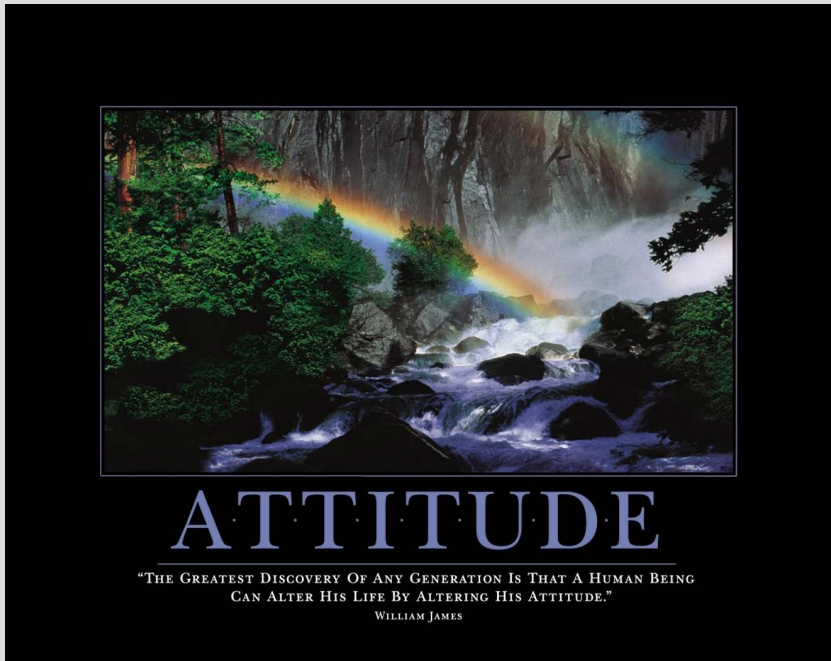
*To the office worker sitting all day in an air-conditioned room,
the image of pristine nature must feel like a call to unleash his primal instincts.*

fig. landscape painting



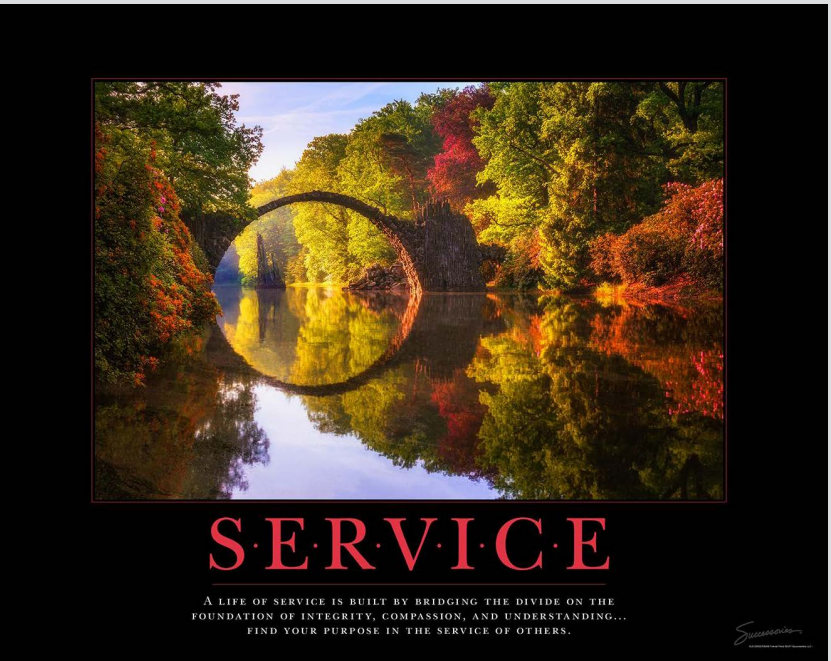
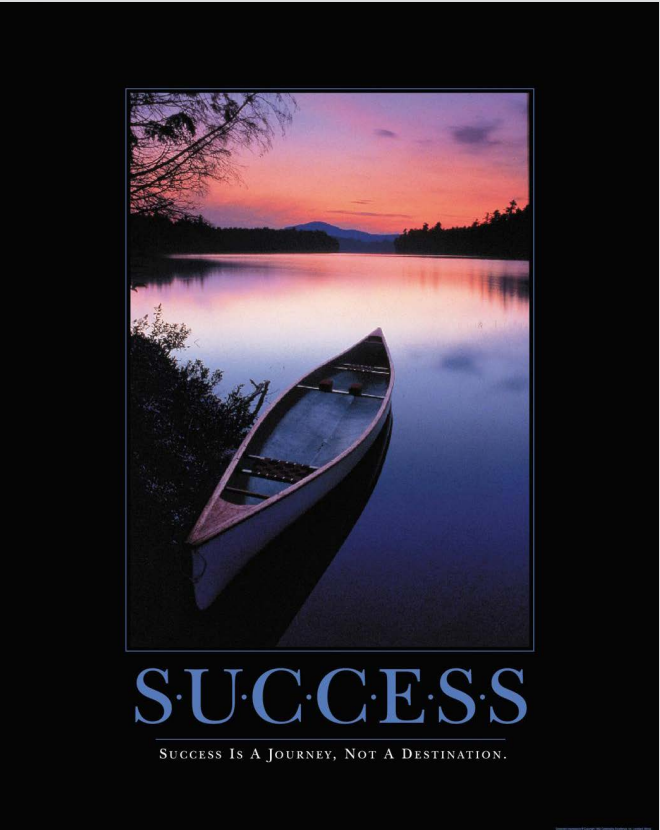
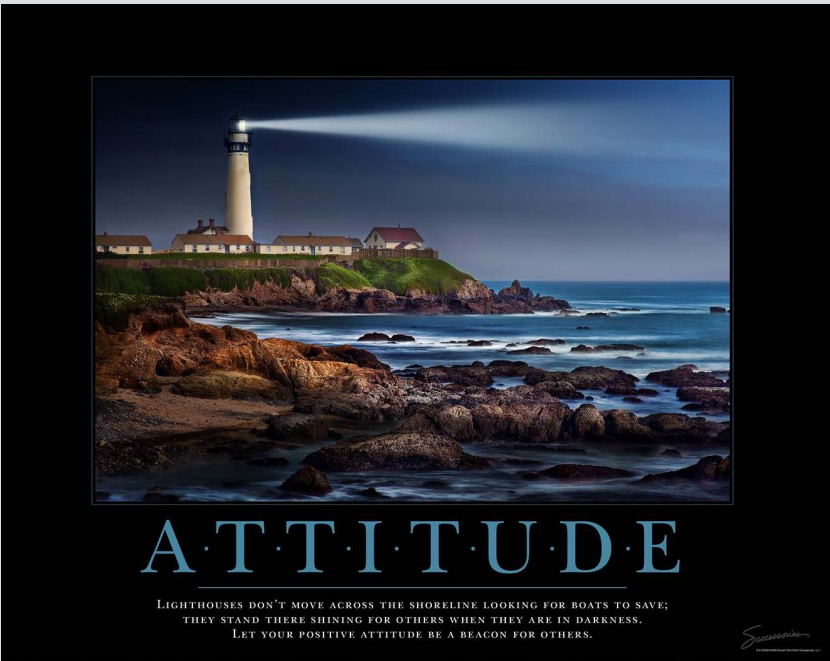
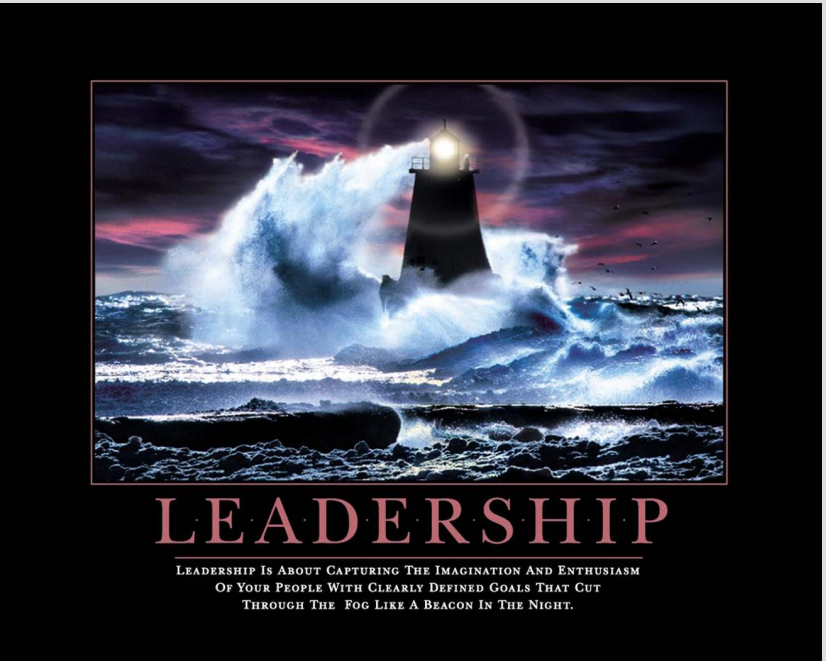
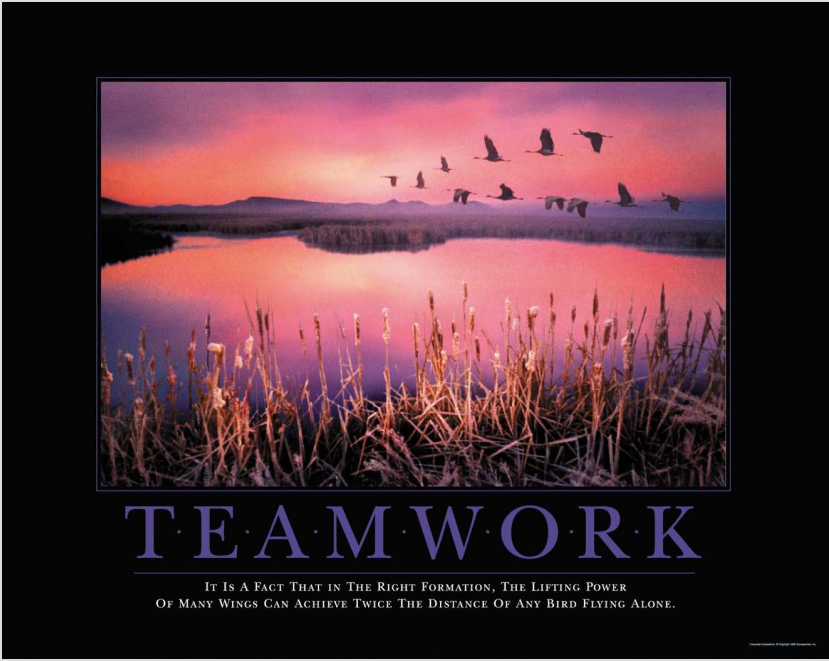
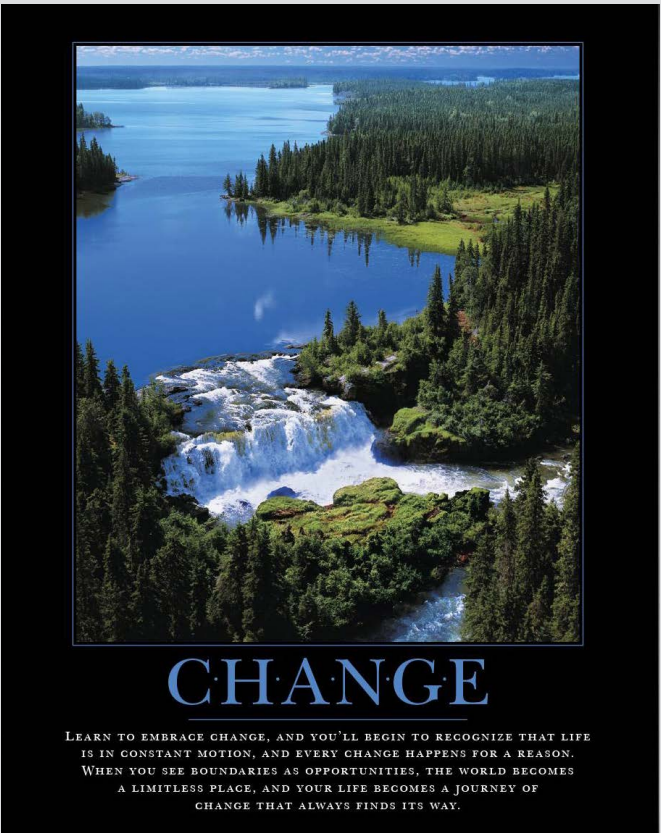
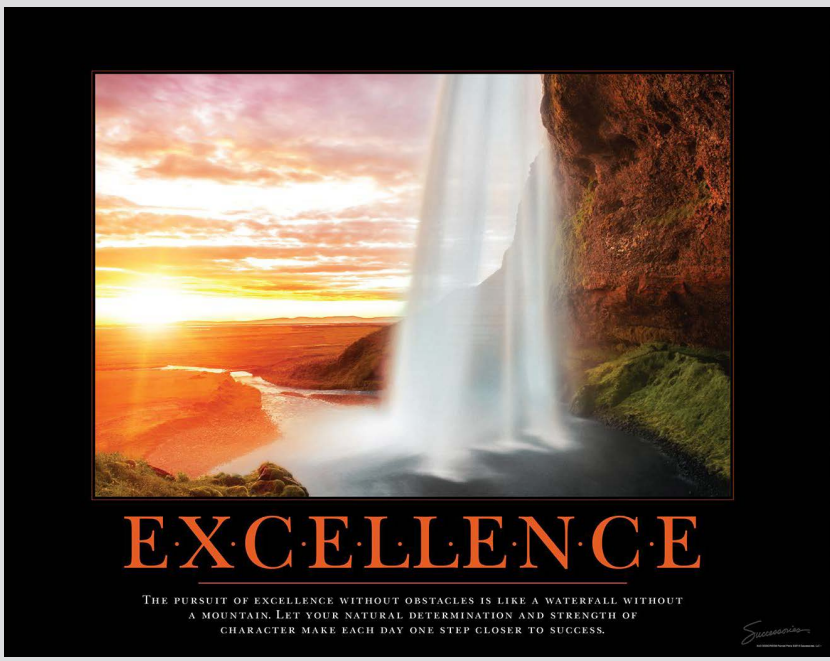
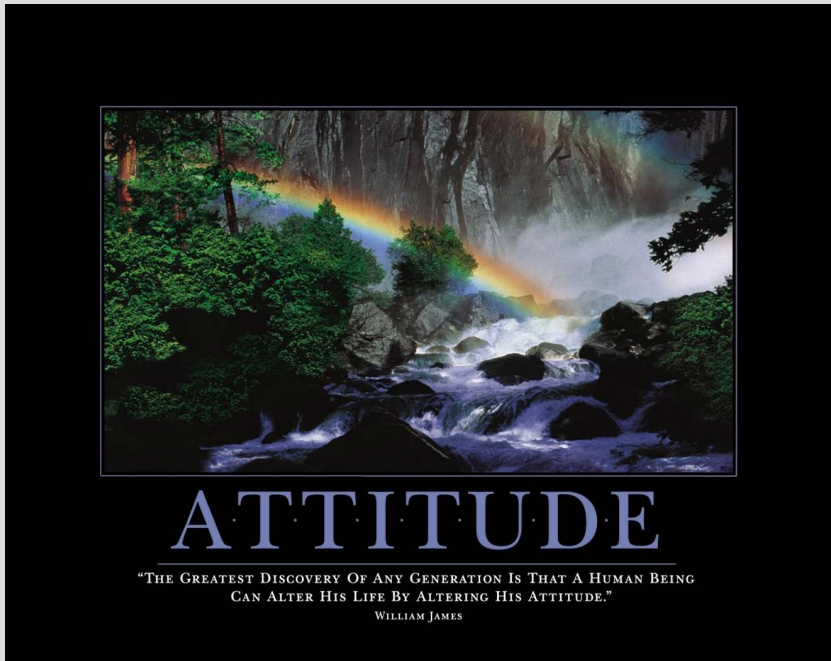
The question of gender might play a role here.

fig. landscape painting



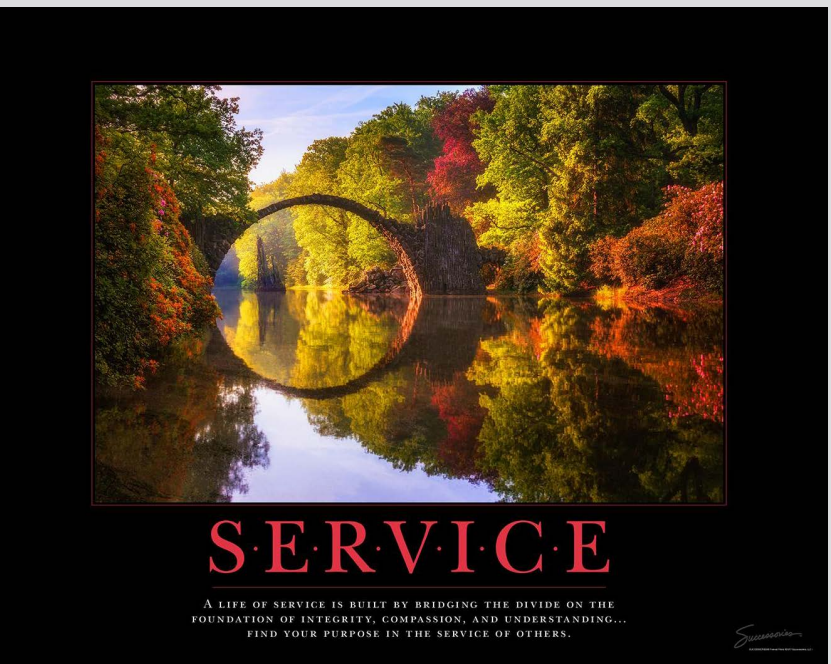
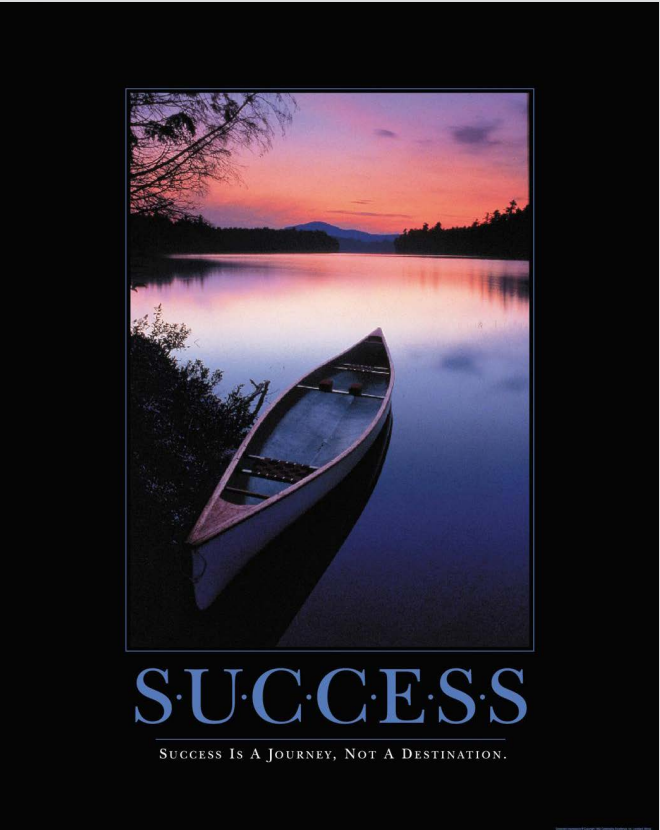
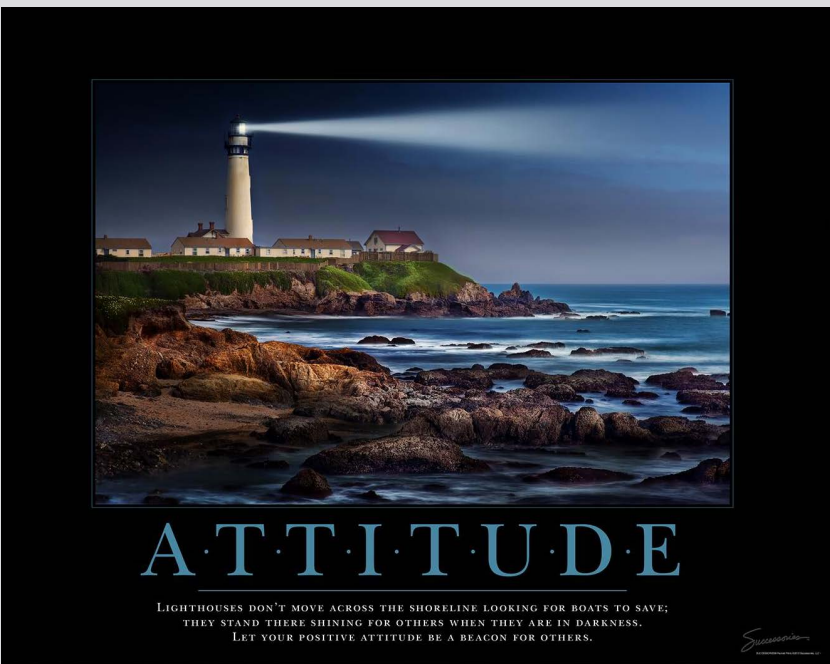
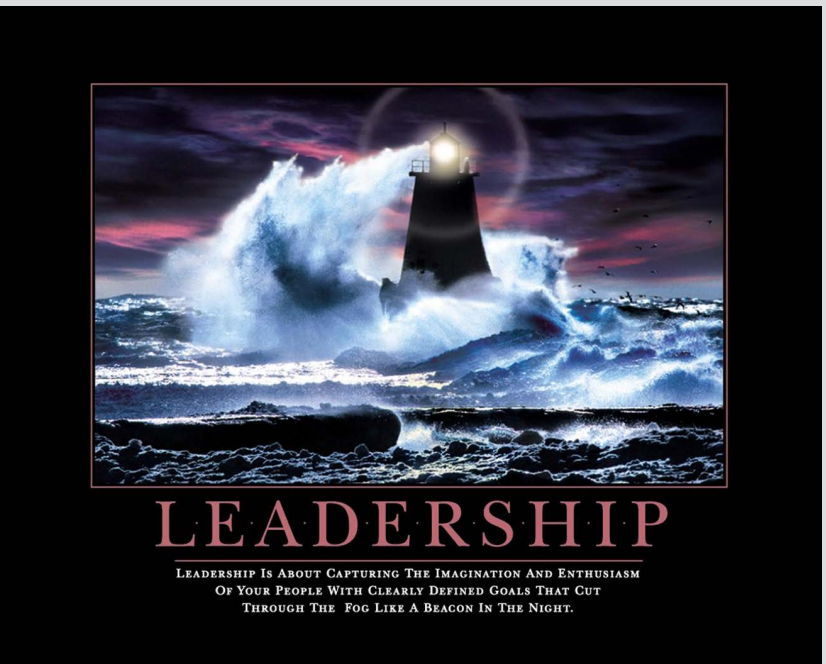
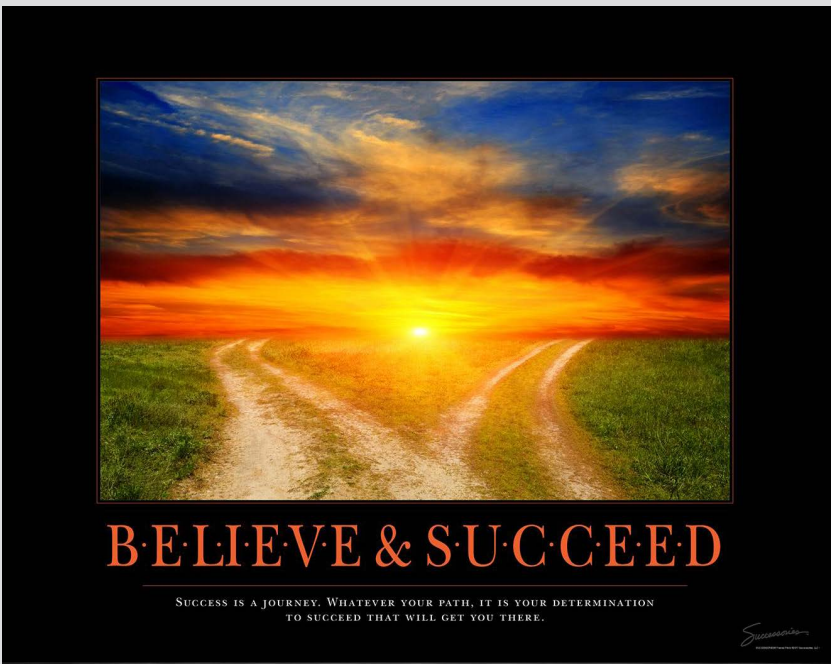
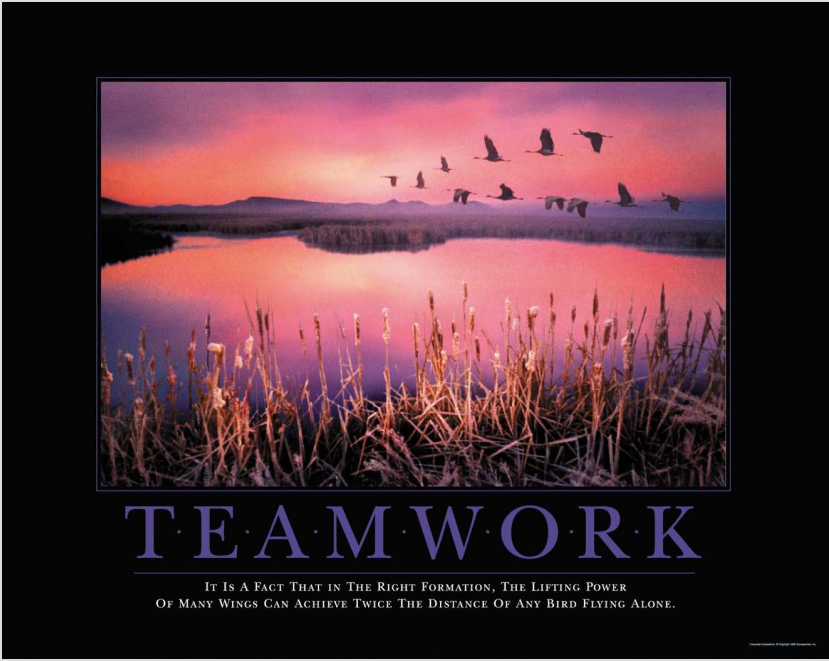
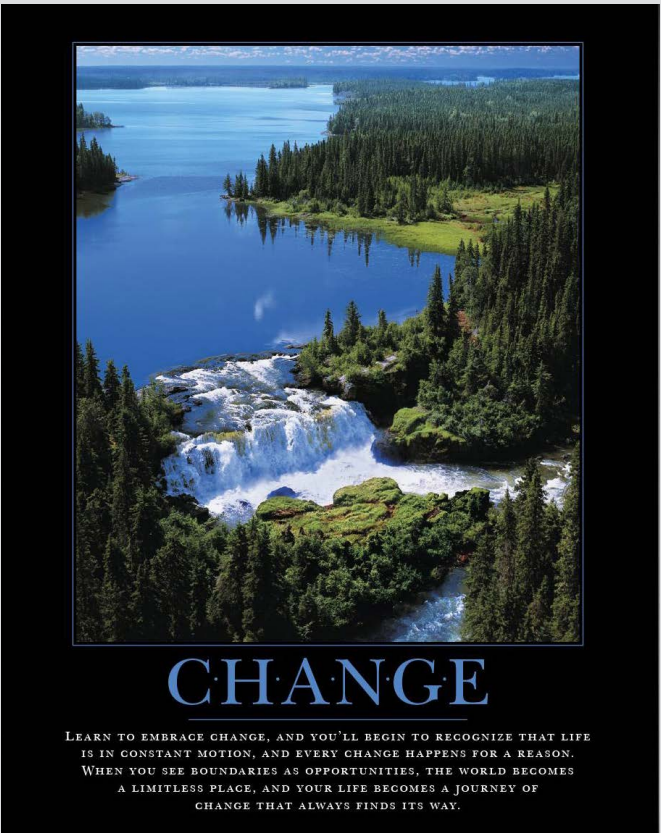
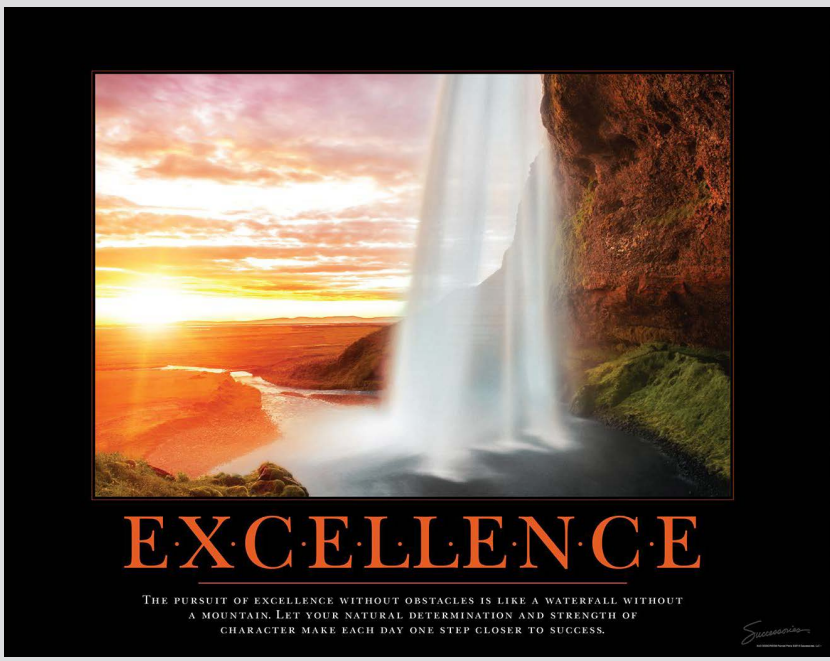
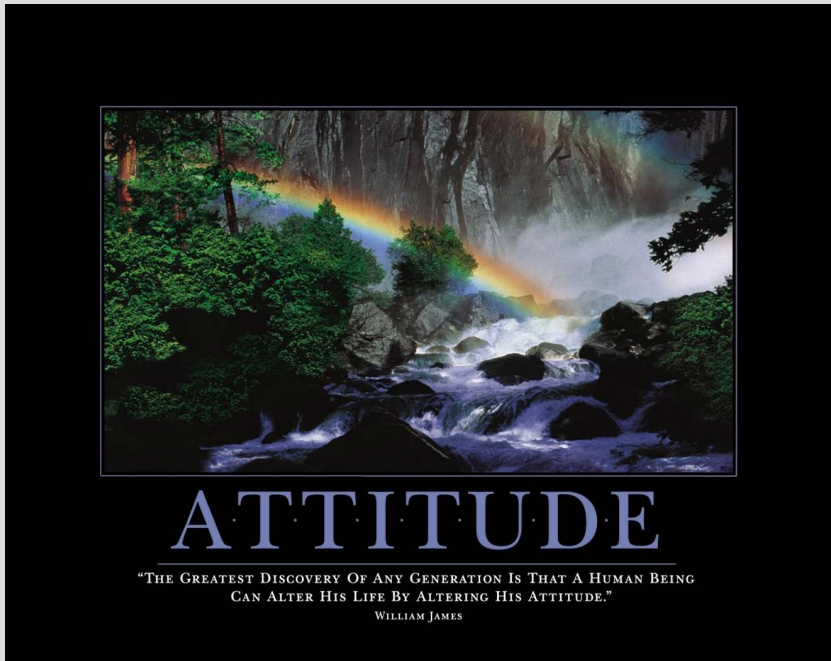
Since the 19th century, with the proliferation of bureaucratic work (that was then mostly made by men), concerns about physical degradation, and the association of male work with the physical labor made in factories and fields,

fig. landscape painting



the body of the clerk was, for the popular opinion of the time, seen as too fragile and effeminate.

fig. landscape painting



The conquest of the corporate world could then be the adventure of self-discovery in the search for a lost masculinity.

fig. fables



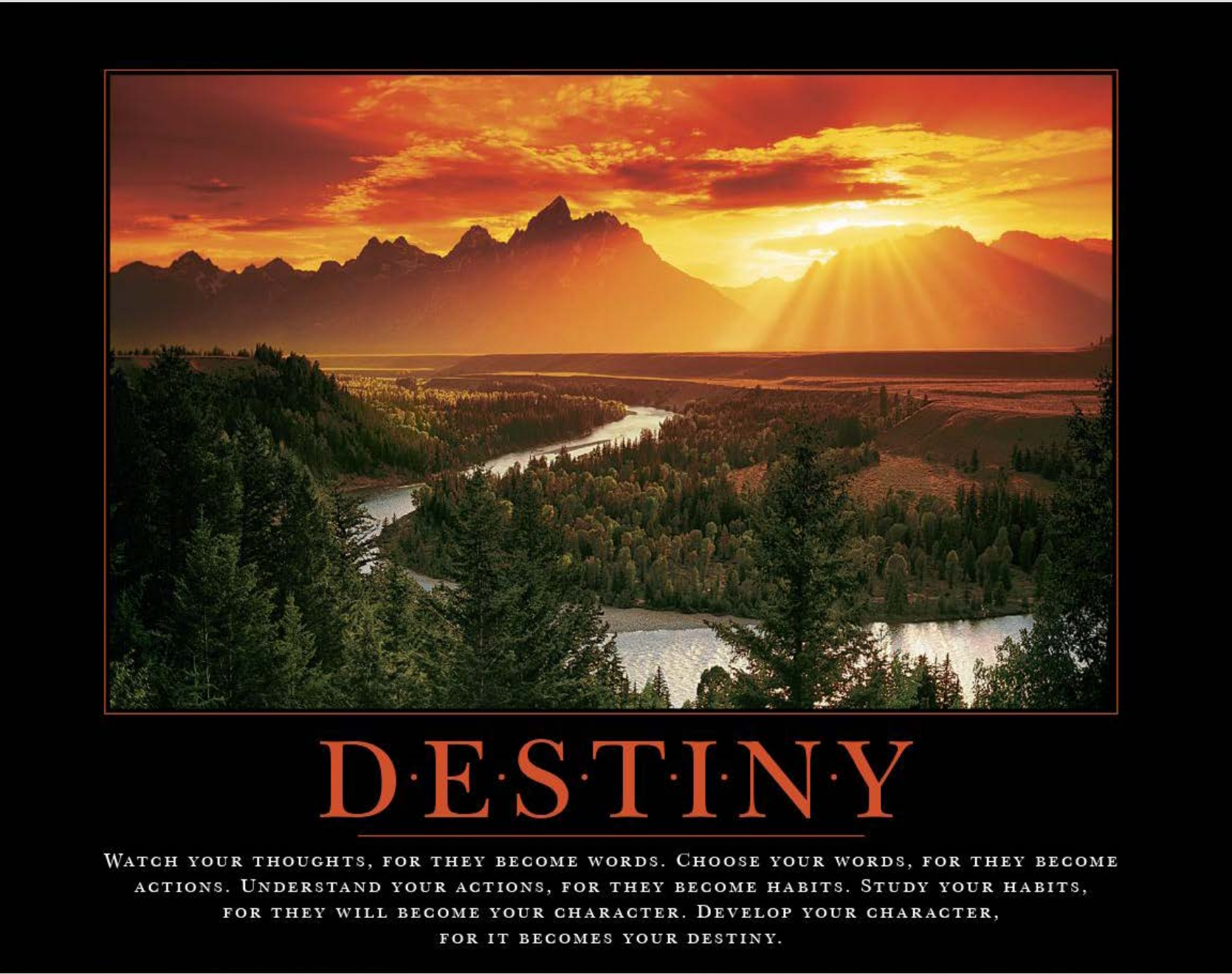
The image of nature probably also reflects the social Darwinism of the libertarian mind that understands social conventions, like the state, religion, and moral,



as artificial forces that prevent the full emancipation of Homo economicus and his self-interested nature.



Albert Bierstadt, *Sunset in the Yosemite Valley* (1868)

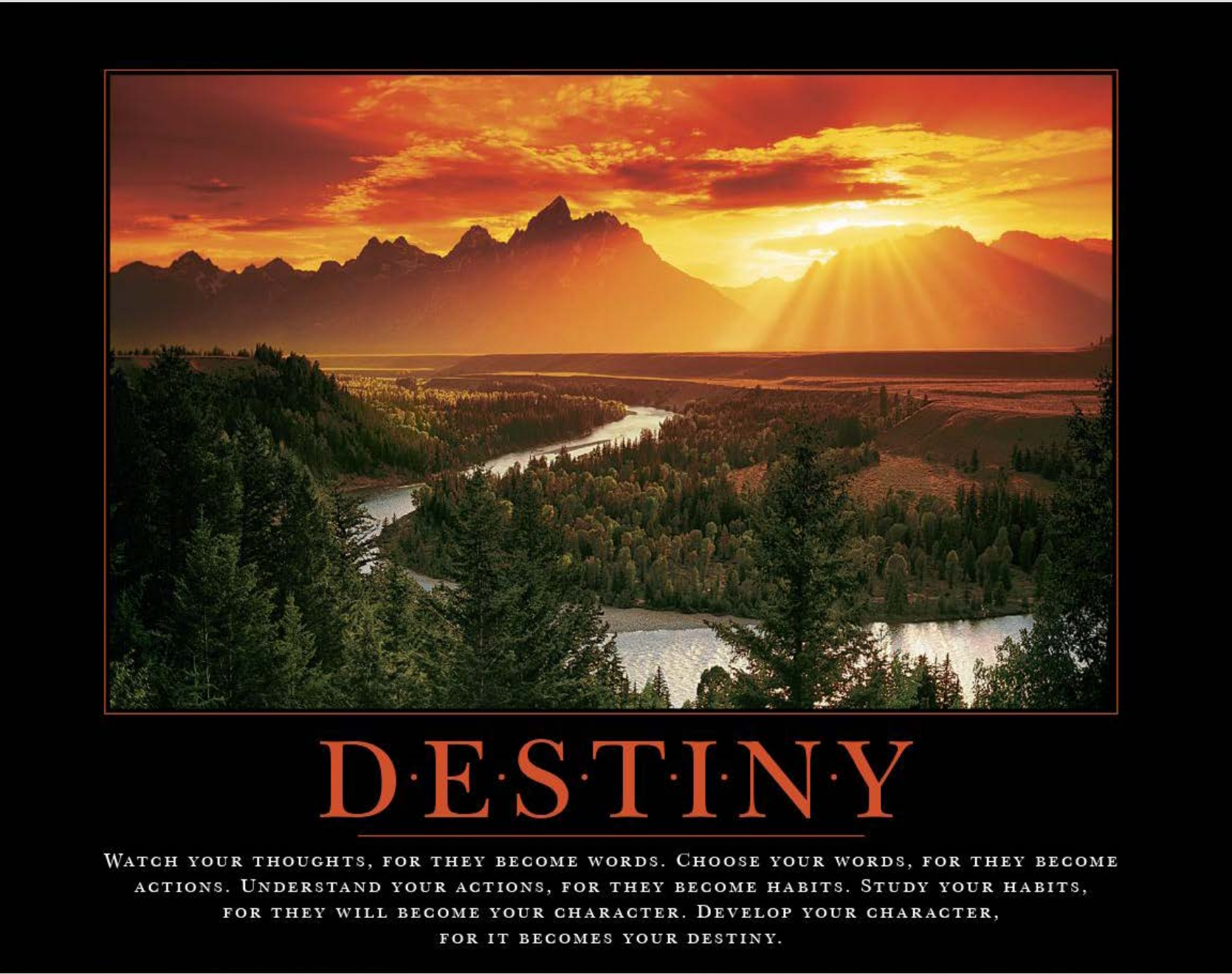


photograph: Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming

It might be helpful to understand the meaning of landscape specific to US American culture.



Albert Bierstadt, *Sunset in the Yosemite Valley* (1868)

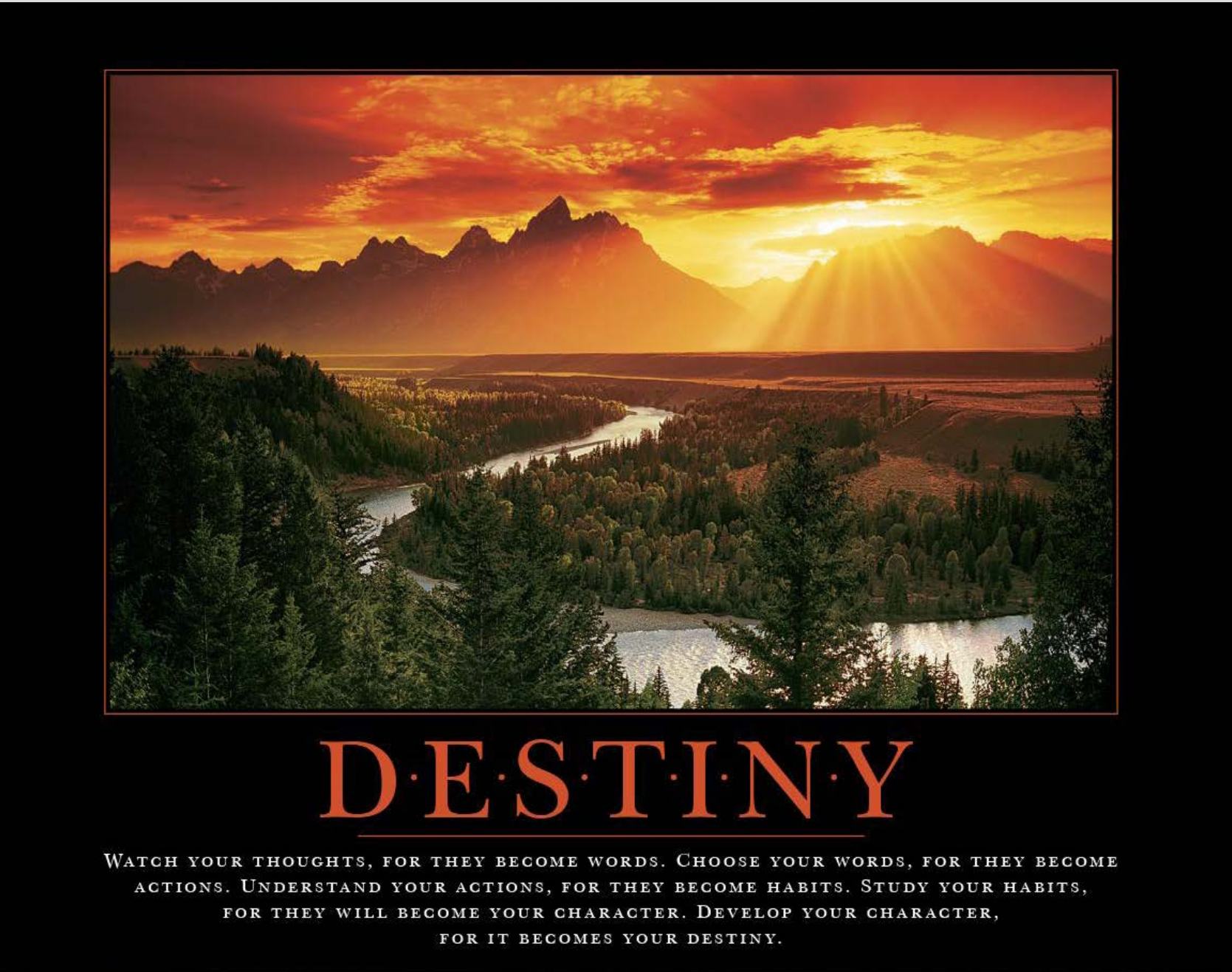


photograph: Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming

The history of the American landscape is deeply connected with American (interior) imperialism and the construction of a national identity.



Albert Bierstadt, *Sunset in the Yosemite Valley* (1868)

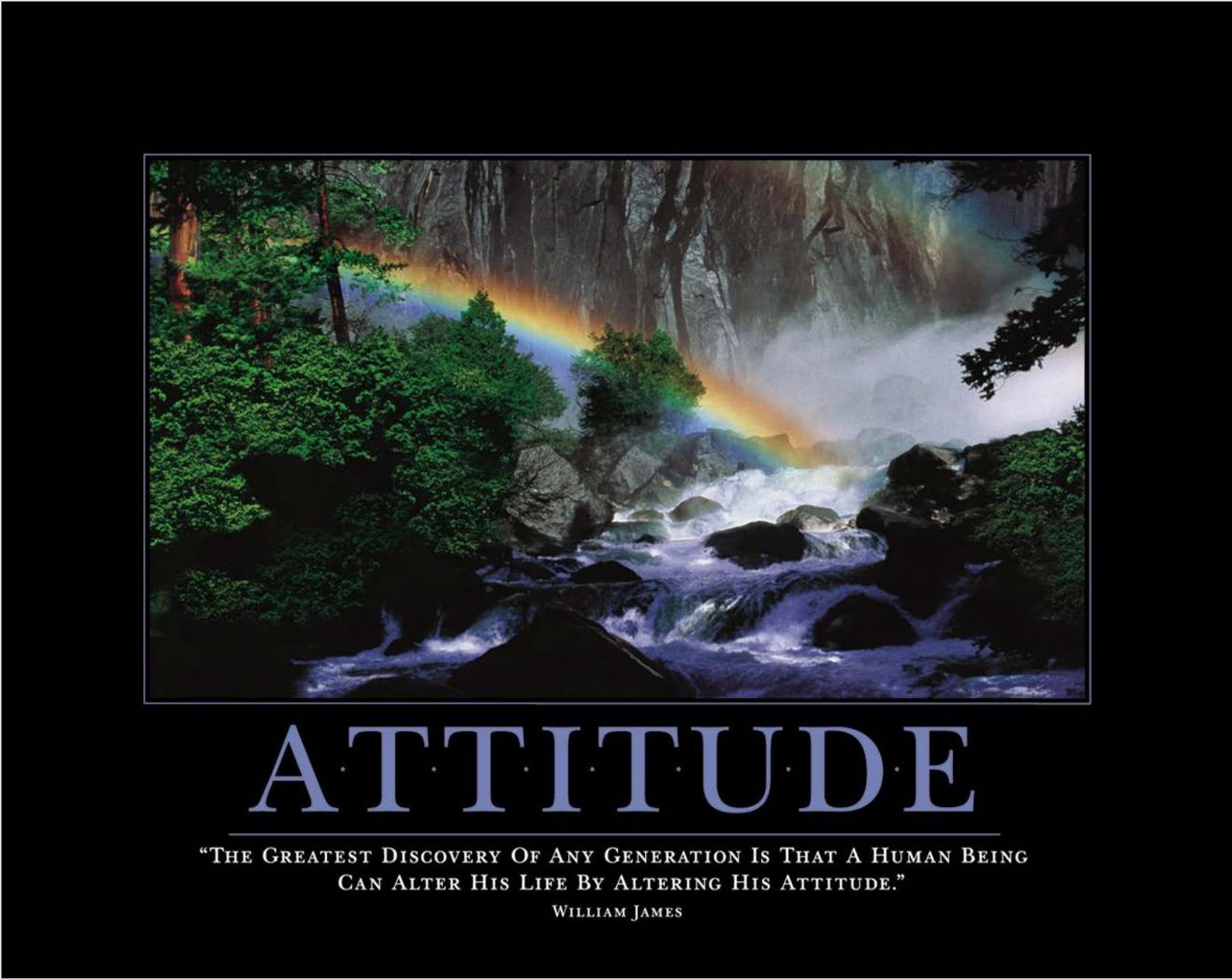


photograph: Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming

The American expansion to the West was driven by the idea of Manifest Destiny, a term coined in 1845 as “our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.”



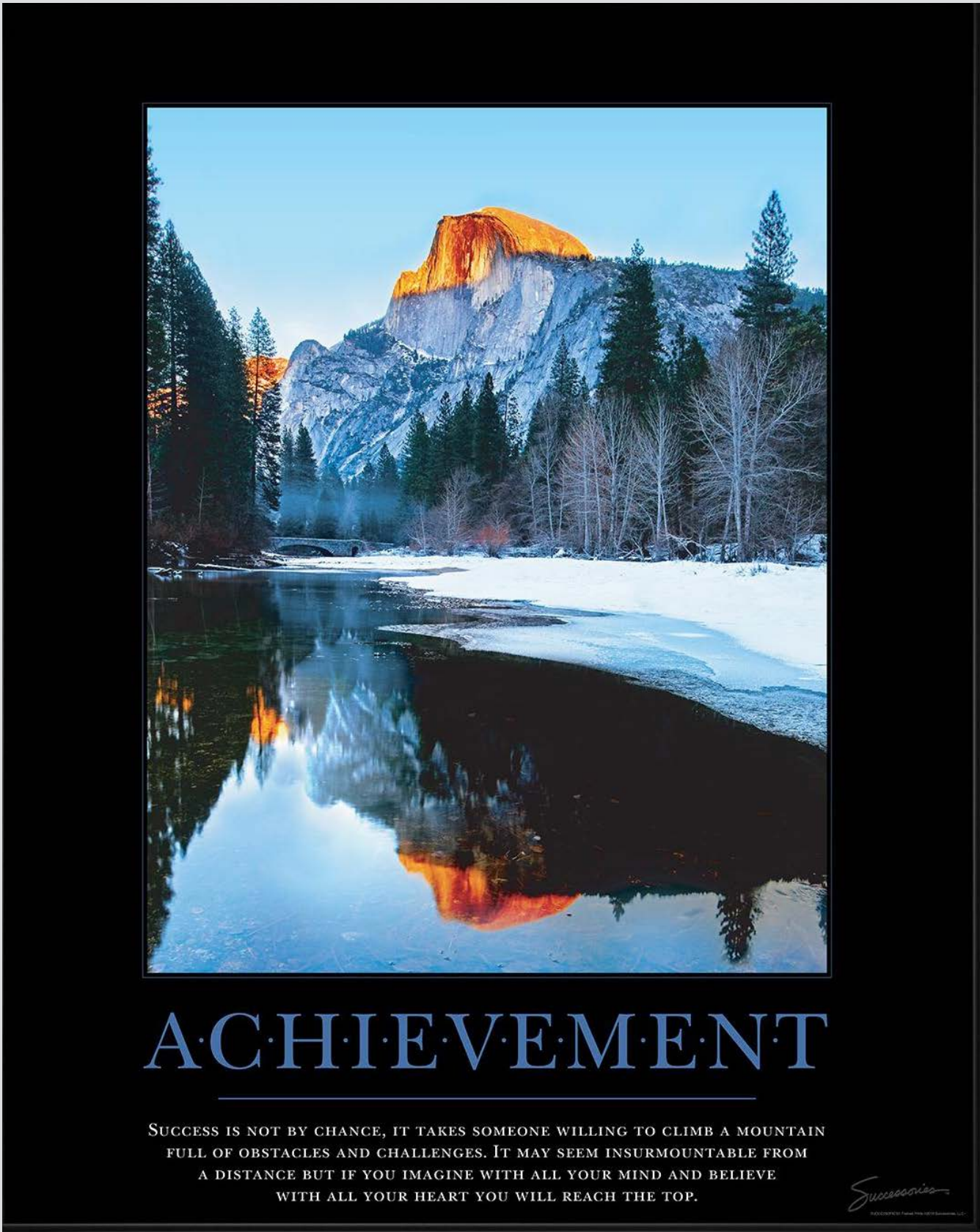
Albert Bierstadt, *Niagara* (1869)



This view understood the American continent as empty, virgin, and devoided of history and its colonization as a divine mission in which landscape painting played a very important role.



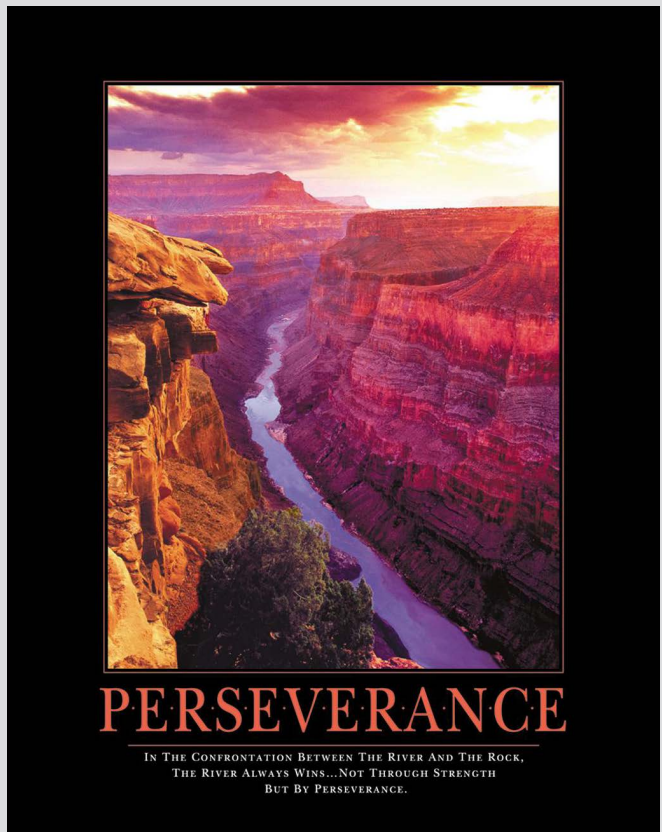
Albert Bierstadt, *Cathedral Rocks, Yosemite* (1872)



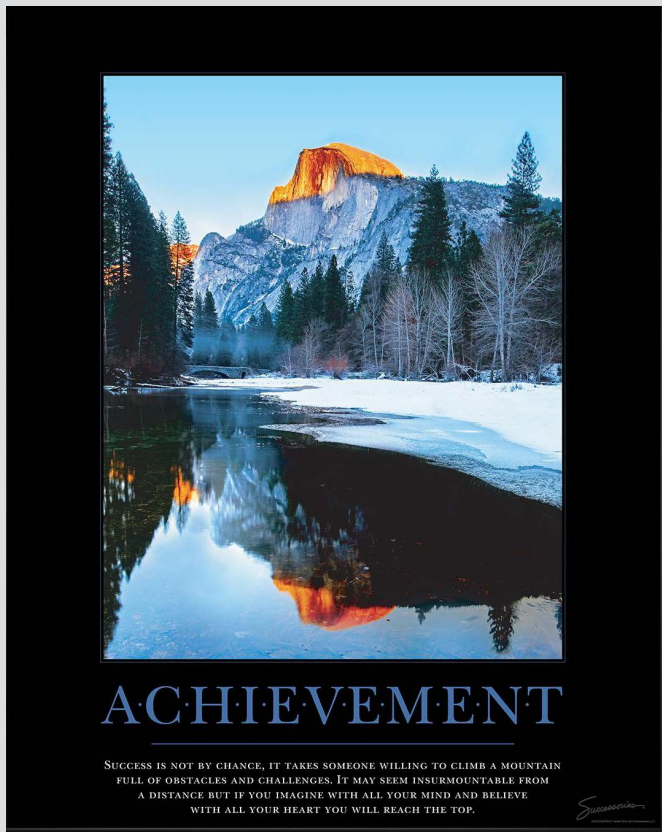
Photograph: Half Dome, Yosemite Park, California

Expeditions to the West often carried painters like Albert Bierstadt who depicted the landscapes that became part of the national imaginary.

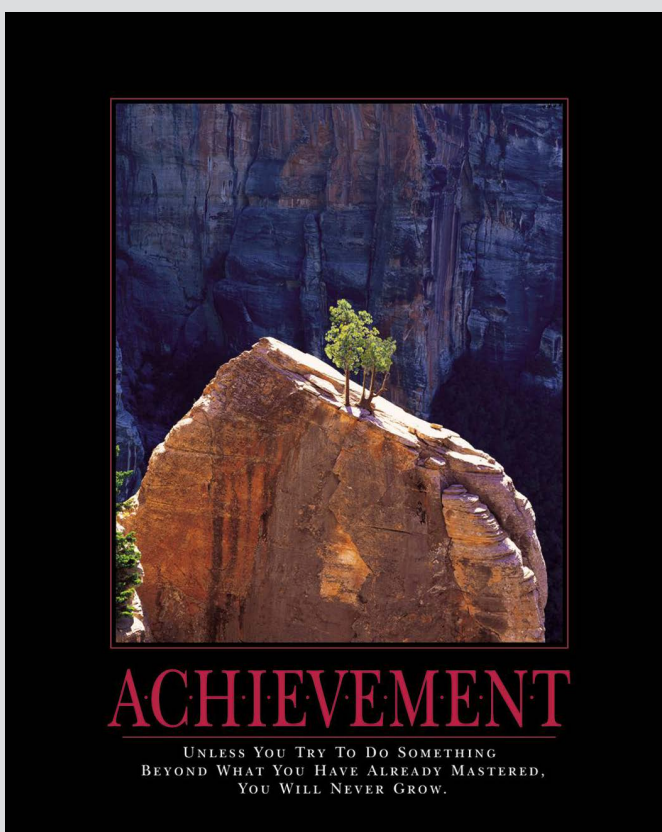
fig. American Sublime: Manifest Destiny



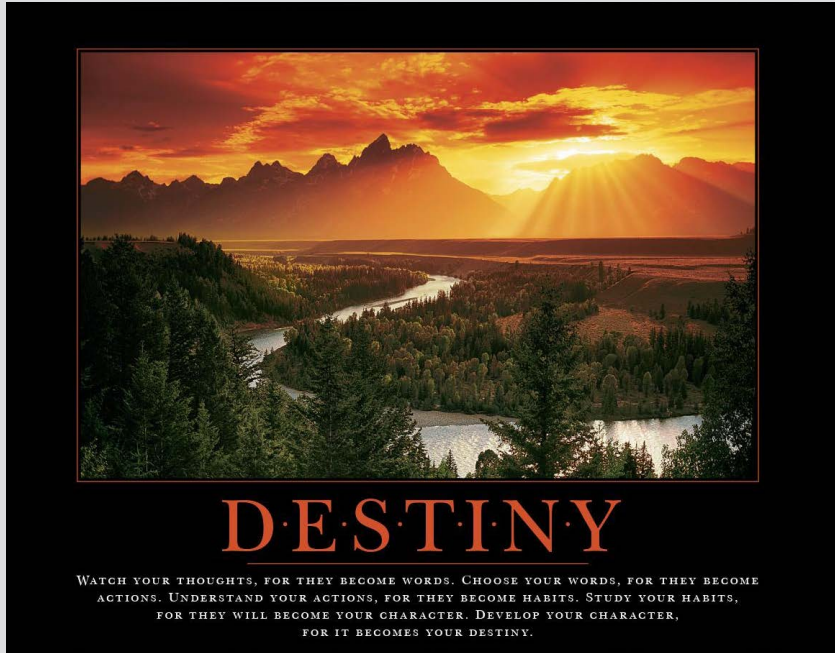
Toroweap Point
Grand Canyon, Arizona



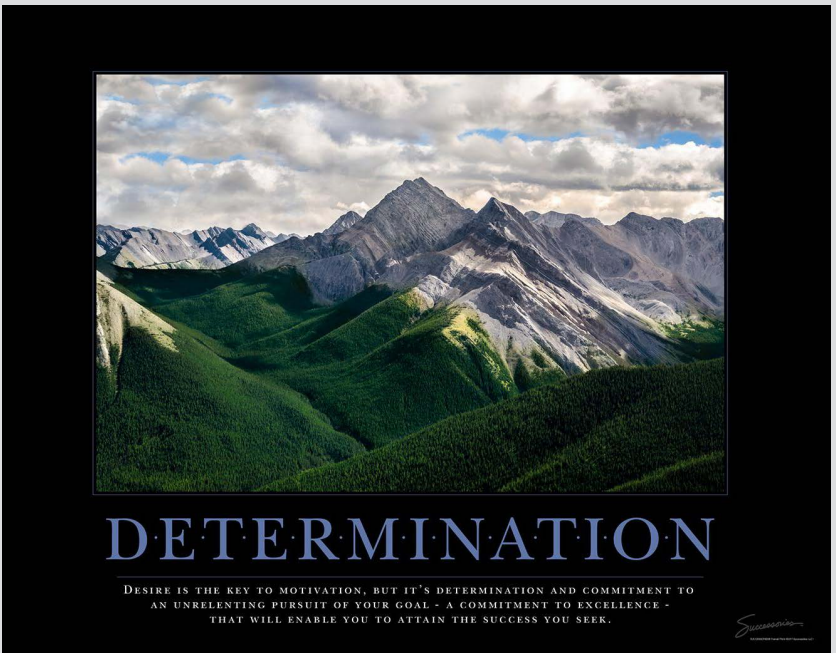
Half Dome
Yosemite Park, California



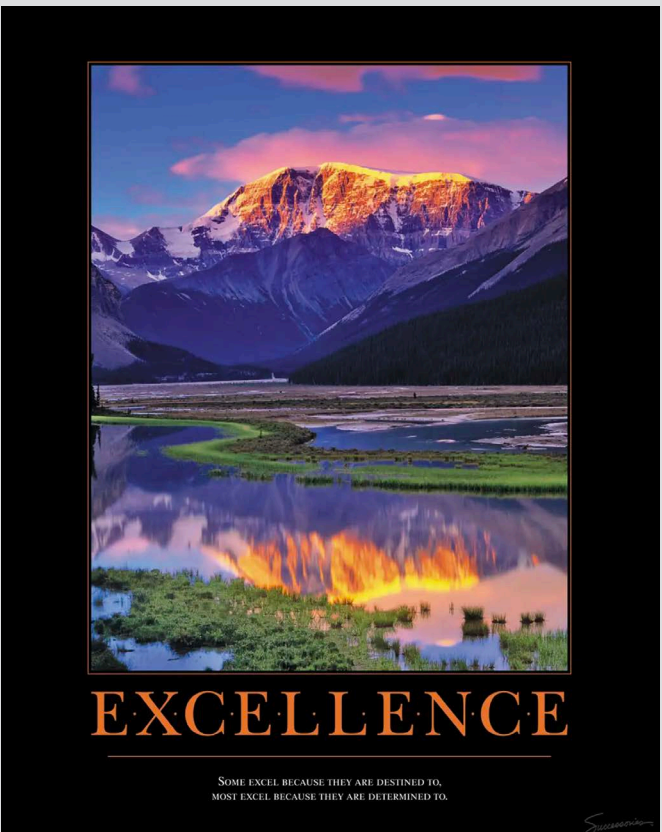
Zion National Park
Utah



Grand Teton National Park
Wyoming



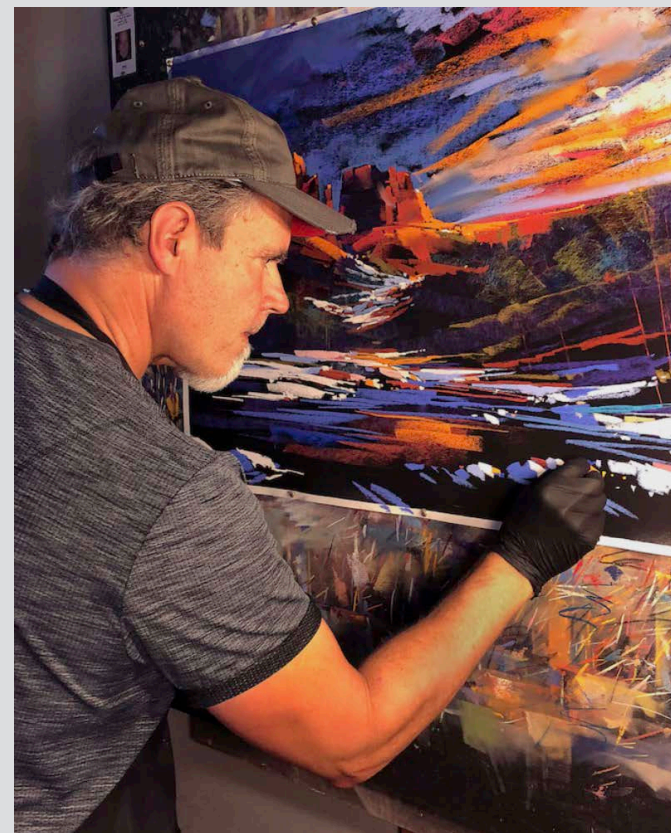
Rocky Mountains



Rocky Mountains
Canada

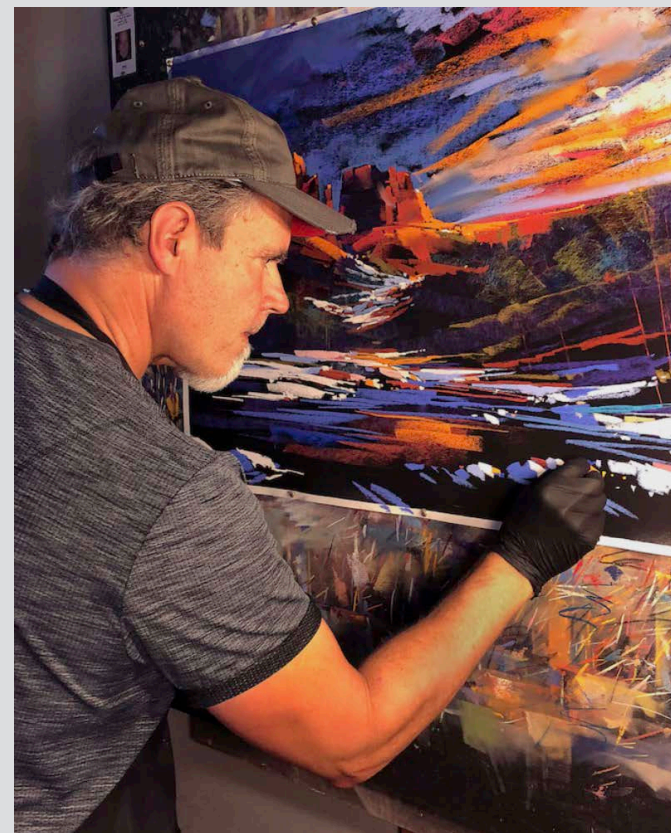
Some of these landscapes, like the Yosemite Valley and the Rocky Mountains, appear in Successories' posters.

fig. Michael Mckee



I want to finish by going back to the initial proposition of these talks and introduce the work of Michael Mckee, a living American artist who paints landscapes and abstract compositions.

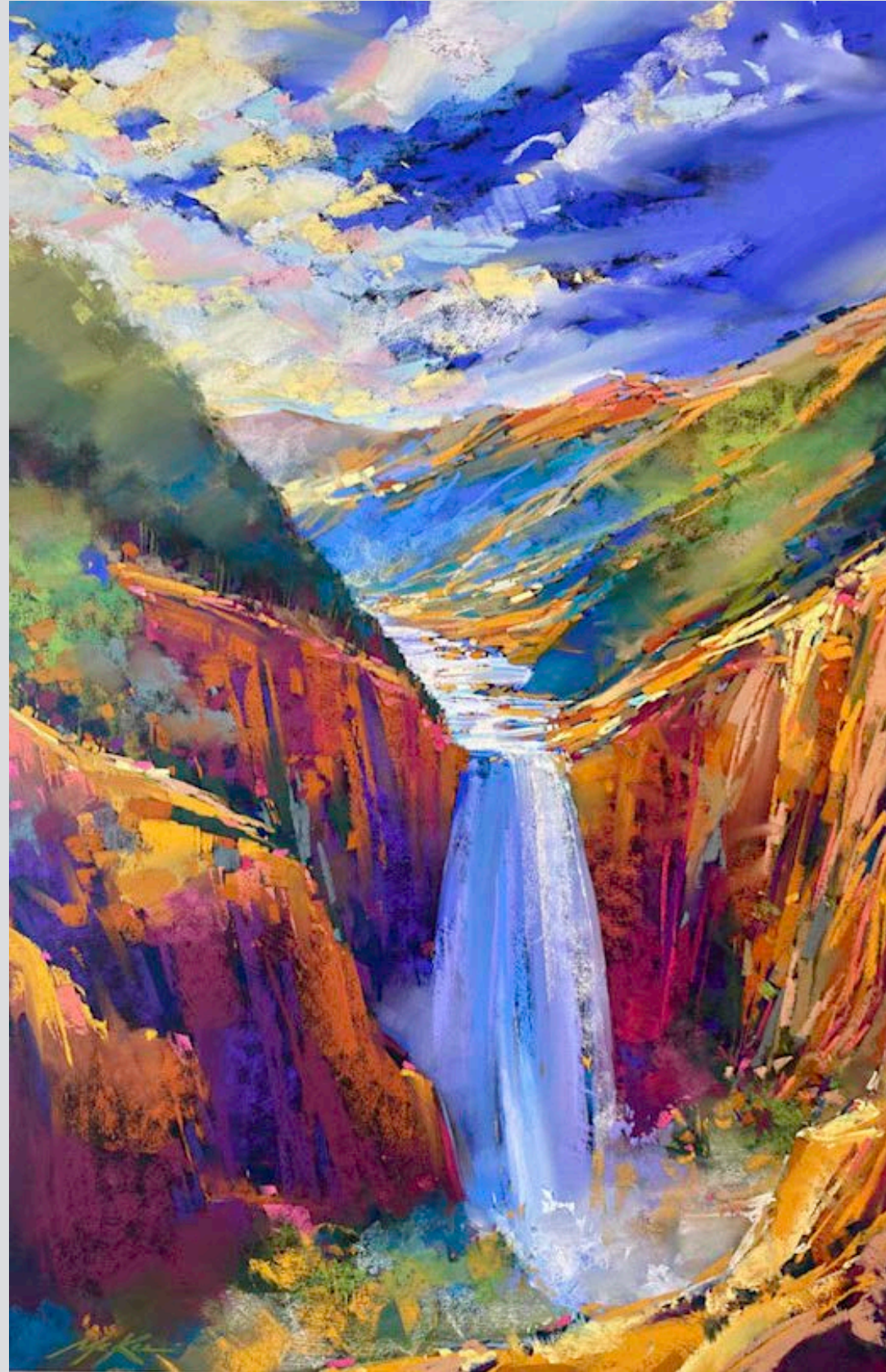
fig. Michael Mckee



Although Mckee is rarely mentioned in the Success story of Mac Anderson, he was the co-founder and creative director of Successories and therefore the artist responsible for many of the decisions made.

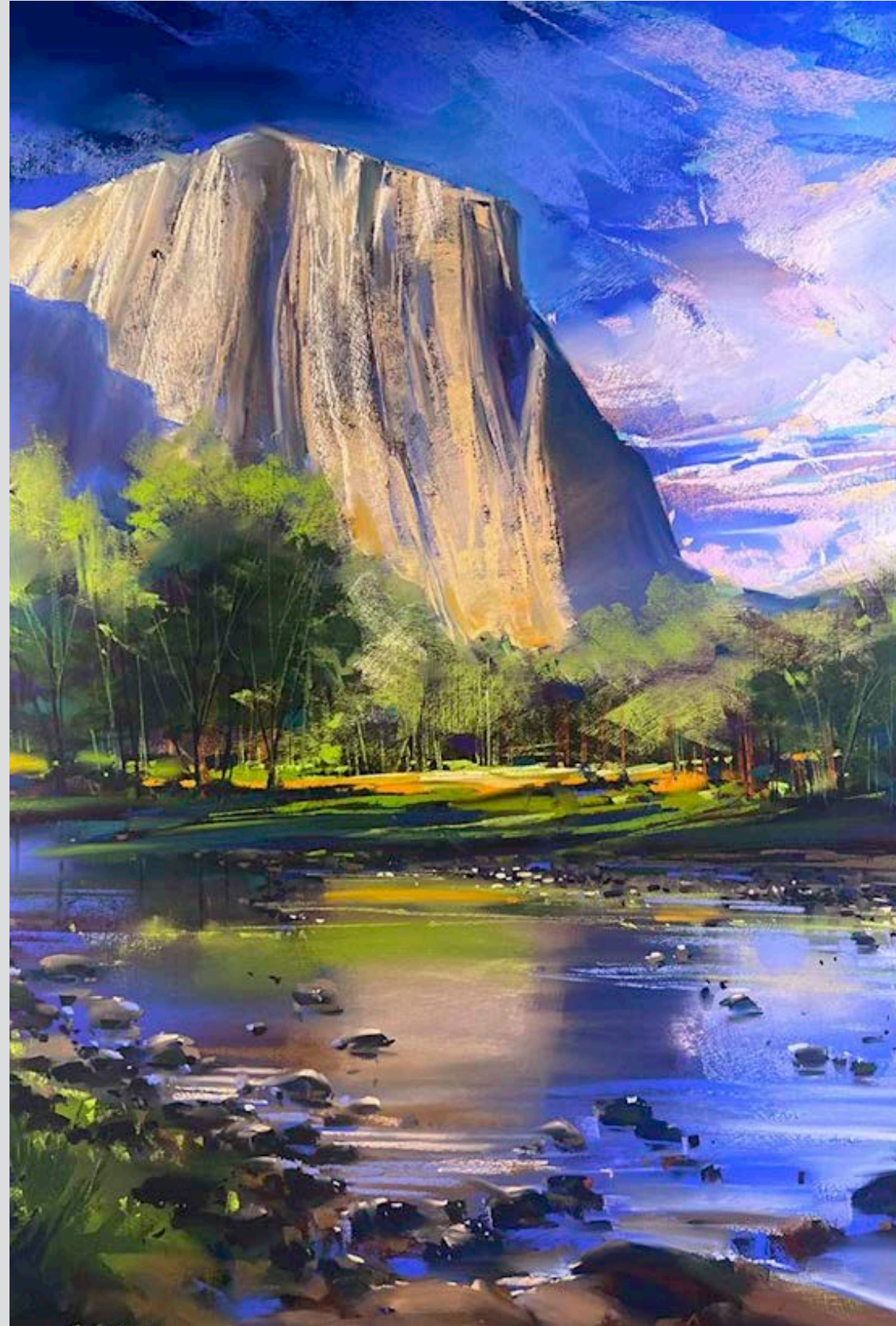


Michael Mckee, *Wonder Lake 'Denali'*



Michael Mckee, *Lower Falls Yellowstone*

fig. Michael Mckee



Michael Mckee, *El Capitan Golden*

Acknowledgements & Sources

Andrew Wilson, American Sublime (exhibition catalogue);
Bronislaw Malinowski, Argonauts of the Western Pacific (1922);
David Harvey, Spaces of Global Capitalism (2019);
Georg Simmel, The Philosophy of Landscape (1913);
The Inspiring Man Behind Thousands of Motivational Posters, Jason Daley (<https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna51002907>);
Dorky motivational posters invented internet memes and changed the way we make fun of work, Corinne Purtill (<https://qz.com/work/1185762/the-maker-of-those-dorky-motivational-posters-from-the-90s-is-still-around>);
Nikil Saval, Cubed: a secret history of the workplace (2014);
Roland Barthes, Mythologies (1957);
Roland Barthes, Image Music Text: selected essays (1977);
etc...

This presentation was made with talks and contributions from Kim, Leila, Roman, Miguel, Kiah, and others.