

Jane Doe

Sue Muecke

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The Real Key to Success

To my brother, as he nears high school graduation.

As senior year draws to a close and college looms near, thoughts of the future are sure to be clouding your mind. Yes, you've chosen a college, and yes, you know what you want to study. However, keep in mind that the real key to success lies not only in your occupation status or your bank account balance, but within your ability to follow your heart and do something that truly makes you happy. A common phrase states: "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." The same holds true for success. While as a society we have been programmed to believe that success is a measure of your wealth or occupation status, this is not the case for everyone. Success is also a feeling of fulfillment; the ability to look back proudly on a life well lived. As your big sister, it is my job to look out for you. By the time you finish reading this, it is my intent that you arrive at your own personal definition of success, keeping in mind the information you are about to receive. Between examples of what success is not, and examples of what, surprisingly, success can be, I hope to have a positive impact on your future.

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines success as "1. [a] degree or measure of succeeding, 2. a favorable outcome, 3. the attainment of wealth, favor, or eminence." (Merriam-Webster Online). Likewise, Business Dictionary.com defines success as "... an individual that

has more objects (money or any other desirable item) relative to another individual.” (Business Dictionary.com) Everywhere you turn, people will try to convince you that being successful is all about how much money you make, what occupation you hold, or what kind of car you drive. Society has programmed us all to believe that in order for us to be successful we should aspire to be big-wig CEOs or brain surgeons and flash our money around. Little do many know, but these people we all dream of becoming have problems just like ours.

Take for example Alberto Vilar, an ordinary man who came into money from the stock market. According to Forbes.com, Vilar invested money in AOL and Yahoo! stocks, and in 2001 had a net worth of one billion dollars. Living lavishly, he decided to “[act] the part of the billionaire benefactor, pledging hundreds of millions of dollars to opera houses and ballet theaters in New York and around the world.” (Forbes.com). You probably know where this is going. When the stock market took a fall, Vilar’s portfolio went right down with it. Around the same time, the theatres he had pledged money to asked him to follow through with his promises. He was ultimately left with nothing. “Instead of coming clean, he allegedly stole money from at least one of his wealthy investors. He's fighting the charges.” (Forbes.com)

Similarly, Robert Ostrowski won \$7.9 million in the Megabucks in 1992. Since then, he owes half a million dollars in back taxes, and has a large federal tax lien against him. Once the owner of a bar, he even had to sell that to get money to pay the IRS. “He owes so many people money, it’s ridiculous,” says Todd (last name withheld by request), a bartender at Cassidy’s who has known Ostrowski for years. “One time, some guys from Vegas came into Bob EO’s and stripped Bob of all of his gold-nugget Mr. T. jewelry in front of his customers,” he remembers. “He had a beautiful condo on Prospect. As far as I know, he now lives out of his car. If he still has it.” (Milwaukee Magazine).

Both of these cases are examples of “rags to riches” stories, stories of ordinary people like you or I who strike it rich overnight. Many people think that obtaining large amounts of money will solve all of their problems, but as you can see, the money also brings along woes of its own. The word “success” is often synonymous with the word “rich,” but if the money causes your entire life to crumble, how successful have you really become? As quoted in the Bible, “For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (*King James Bible*, Mark 8:36). What good is it to have all the money in the world if you have no family, no friends, and no real enjoyment in life?

If money doesn’t equal success, then surely it should come from securing a high-profile job, right? That is what college is for, isn’t it? To graduate with the fancy degree, score a job at the best firm around, and work your way up to the top? That is what Akio Toyoda thought. Earning his Master’s degree in Business Administration from Babson College, Akio Toyoda began as an Auditor of Shiroki Corp and eventually worked his way up in the company to become the President of Toyota Motor Corporation in June of 2009. (Bloomberg.com). Shortly after, Toyota performed one of the largest recalls to date, recalling over 8 million cars for faulty accelerators which stick and cause the vehicle to surge forward. Initially announced as a recall due to “faulty floor mats,” Toyota now has to face accusations of hiding the true cause of the recall. (Yahoo! Cars). With all of this on his plate, the term “success” seems quite far from Akio Toyoda’s description, and he now stands to lose everything he has worked his entire life for.

Even the “success” of a celebrity or sports star can be short-lived. Evander Holyfield has been reported to have gone broke, despite making over \$250 million while boxing. John Daly, a champion golfer, lost around \$60 million due to his gambling addiction, and lost his \$1.6 million dollar home. Mike Tyson probably took the cake when in 2003 he was forced to file for

bankruptcy, after losing his \$400 million earnings. (Riddix). Mr. Holyfield probably thought that his \$20 million dollar home was a sign of his success. Mr. Tyson probably thought that his multiple Bentley cars, \$2 million dollar bathtub, and two Bengal Tigers would complete his success story. On the contrary, even these major sports celebrities have found themselves on hard times, proving that monetary acquisition does not necessarily lead to a “successful” life of luxury and happiness.

What these stories should tell you is that money will not necessarily buy you happiness. Keep this in mind when you are making your plans and goals. The amount of happiness you bring to your life will also affect its longevity. According to a study done at the University of Chicago, “increases in total life expectancy were mainly contributed by increases in expectancy in happy years rather than unhappy years. Happy life expectancy is longer than active life expectancy.” (Yang 1235). In other words, a happy life is a longer life. People who live their years unhappily tend to have a shorter life expectancy than those who can say that they are truly happy. Likewise, another study conducted by Hope College and the University of Illinois found that even as countries become more affluent, the happiness level does not rise. The results from the study state “once people are able to afford life’s necessities, increasing levels of affluence matter surprisingly little.” (Myers and Diener 13). Another study found only a +.12 correlation between levels of income and happiness. (qtd in Myers and Diener 13). The results of each of these studies prove that while some money is needed to afford life’s necessities, increasing amounts of wealth do not lead to increasing amounts of happiness; in turn, increasing amounts of money do not lead to a feeling of success.

Not surprisingly, the road to wealth also brings along economic and ecological problems. According to Ed Diener and Eunkook M. Suh, authors of *Culture and Subjective Well-Being*,

“not only does wealth development require the use of natural resources . . . it also produces byproducts that can pollute water, air, and land.” (Diener and Oishi 186). I know, my brother, that you have no desire to contaminate this earth any more than has already been done. Embarking upon your future, remember that becoming successful also means remaining conscientious about the issues surrounding society, and striving to make the world a better place. Even one person can change the world in their own way.

So if success doesn't come from money, and it may not come with a high-profile job, what is success? Consider the story of Rayna DuBose, a former basketball player at Virginia Tech University. During her freshman year, Rayna contracted meningococcal meningitis, a bacterial infection that can be fatal. After being rushed to the hospital, DuBose found herself fighting for her life. She remained in a coma for three weeks, and after three months in the hospital underwent surgery to remove all four of her limbs. She now uses prosthetics to perform the basic duties of life, but remains in great spirits. ““Every day is a new learning experience for me,” said DuBose. “Every day I learn a new way to comb my hair or brush my teeth or button my pants. Adversity always seems to jump in front of us at crazy points in our lives. The question is, can you bounce back from that?” (Pressbox.com) While this seems at first to be a story of struggle, consider the following: Rayna now spends her life traveling the country speaking to groups of people about overcoming adversity. She has been the recipient of several awards, including the Wilma Rudolph Award, which is given to female athletes who overcome adversity, and the Most Courageous Award at the men's Final Four in New Orleans. (Pressbox.com). DuBose is even back on the court, working as an assistant basketball coach. She has developed a love for life many only hear of. It didn't come from money. It didn't come from

power. DuBose's success comes from the feeling of fulfillment she has with her life and her contribution to the world around her.

Granted, some people seem to thrive in the high-stress, cutthroat corporate atmosphere. Some individuals are just programmed to perform well under such stress, and are only happy when they are working. However, this is not the norm for many Americans. In today's global economy, it is easy to believe that in order to just survive you have to follow the herd of cubicle dwellers and corporate drones. But remember that there are so many artists and free-spirits who have survived the shift to globalism, who still make a good living for themselves while doing what they love.

When you dream of your success, I hope you dream of fulfillment that money cannot buy. Realize that there is more to life than being rich. There is so much beauty in the world, just waiting for you to discover it. Beauty in the love of a family. Passion within your love of music, your guitars and your drum set. Fulfillment in making a difference in the world. You want to teach; some of the greatest achievements are made by teachers. All of these combined add up to the real key to success. Remember this when making your life plans. Take time to do something you love. Never forget to tell your loved ones how you feel. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said: "To laugh often and much; to win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children; to earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure the betrayal of false friends; to appreciate beauty; to find the best in others; to leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch or a redeemed social condition; to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived. This is to have succeed."

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