

## THE PERILS AND PROMISES OF SUCCESS

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### AN ANECDOTE AND AN INSIGHT

From Steve Gardiner, Billings, MT (*The Sun*, August 2017)

As a beginning author, hoping to gain advice and inspiration. I attended a state writers' convention. The weekend was capped off by a closing banquet at which awards were given out for fiction, nonfiction, poetry and other categories. Then came the highest honor: the Hang Fire Award. The MC read the winner's name, and a short, energetic woman dashed to the front in victory while everyone gave her a standing ovation.

The Hang Fire Award, the MC explained for the sake of newcomers like me, was given every year to the writer who received the most rejection slips. Seriously? I couldn't believe this woman was so excited to be the most rejected writer in the state.

A friend saw my confusion and said, "It's a recognition of her persistence. If she has the most rejection slips, she probably sent out the most pieces of writing."

I got it, but still felt uncomfortable that they had singled her out for her failures.

Over the year that followed, I had a few articles published in the local newspaper and regional magazines. I went to the writers' conference again the next spring and won an award for photojournalism, after which I continued working on my writing, increasing my productivity and reaching larger markets. As my correspondence with editors increased, I created two file folders: one for my acceptance letters and one for my rejections. The second folder grew faster than the first.

By the time I attended the spring writers' conference again, I had received seventy-five rejections – enough to make many a writer reconsider his or her passion. Yet I had been published in *The New York Times*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, the *Chicago*

*Tribune* and other magazines and newspapers. The joy of publication had balanced the sting of rejection.

That year I won the Hang Fire Award: I was the most rejected writer in the state. Now I understand.

From the Dalai Lama

Suppose I had no depth of human feeling, no capacity for easily creating good friends. Without that, when I lost my own country, becoming a refugee would have been very difficult.... There was a certain degree of respect that was given to the Dalai Lama in Tibet, and people related to me accordingly, regardless of whether they had affection for me or not. But if you see yourself, first and foremost, as a human being within a human community, you share a bond that is strong enough to give rise to a sense of worth and dignity. That bond can be a source of consolation in the event that you lose everything.

Generally speaking, you have two different kinds of individuals. On the one hand, you can have a wealthy, successful person, surrounded by relatives and so on. If that person's source of dignity and self-worth is only material, then so long as his fortune remains, maybe that person can sustain a sense of security. But if his fortunes should wane, there is no other refuge.

On the other hand, you can have a person enjoying comparable status and success. But at the same time, that person is warm and affectionate and has a feeling of compassion. With such a person there is far less chance of becoming depressed if the fortune disappears. Here you can see the very practical value of human warmth and affection in developing an inner sense of worth.

\*\* REFLECTIONS \*\*

Recently I came across an essay on Alexander the Great, written by the eminent American man of letters, **George Steiner**, back in 1991. His review of the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. boy-conqueror's riotous life captured my attention, because it deviated in several notable respects from the admiring accounts we encounter in the popular media.

**Steiner** – amply supported by recent scholarship – says that the closest parallel to **Alexander** we find in Western history is none other than **Adolph Hitler**. Perhaps temporal distance and historical myopia have served to temper this ancient potentate's image, but apart from the raw, unrestrained power he wielded, there really isn't much to admire about **Alexander**.

As a military commander, the Macedonian has no peer. Crowned king as a teenager, by the time of his death at age thirty-two **Alexander** had conquered territory stretching from the Nile to the Indus River, from the Balkans to the Persian Gulf. But, as **Steiner** points out, success was achieved by means of utter ruthlessness and a megalomaniacal ambition that undoubtedly hastened his demise – he may well have been poisoned by members of his own entourage.

As a youngster, **Alexander** studied with **Aristotle**, one of the Greek world's wisest and most ethically astute men. But this made little difference. With success on the fields of battle, his ambitions also soared. His armies spent years on the march, and **Alexander** ignored repeated pleas by his weary, battle-fatigued commanders to pull back and to be satisfied with their immense gains. He purged his leadership corps, eliminating any officer who questioned his decisions. "Hysteria and morbid distrust of all who drew near him came to possess the Macedonian's fevered mind," **Steiner** observes.

Few lamented his passing...and for several centuries after his death, **Alexander** was regarded as a tyrannous aggressor, a foreign autocrat

who imposed his will by violence alone.

**Alexander the Great** was a larger-than-life figure, but his early death should not be viewed as tragic. Success affected him like a powerful, habit forming drug on which he ultimately overdosed.

Perhaps this ancient story can serve in our own time as a cautionary tale, for although there has been no one remotely comparable to **Alexander** since **Hitler**, his malady is a familiar one. A steady stream of revelations about sexual misconduct by men in high places has poured out in recent months. Women in all walks of life have complained about the "liberties" such men have been taking with other people's bodies. Some of these miscreants, like an ancient monarch, seem to have regarded their predatory practices as a personal prerogative, a status perk they are meant to enjoy. As **Donald Trump** summed it up so succinctly in 2005, "When you are a star, they let you do it; you can do anything."

What's truly alarming about these reports is their ubiquity. As the emergent #MeToo movement has made clear, this sort of abuse and exploitation has been practiced by office holders of both political parties, by a wide assortment of professionals and by men of various races, religions and ethnicities.

If nothing else, this spectacle would seem to confirm **Lord Acton's** famous dictum that "power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." And to the extent that success in business, politics, sports, entertainment and even journalism does give individuals increased leverage over others, the temptation to exercise that heady power inappropriately grows accordingly.

Sexual misconduct aside, power can also foster the dangerous belief that one need not answer for one's behavior – that power inoculates a person from accountability. U.S. Presidents sometimes let power go to their heads and have to be brought up short - witness the inglorious ending of Lyndon

Johnson and Richard Nixon's administrations. The power of the office seduced **George W. Bush** as well, as attested by a telling comment he made early in his tenure. "I do not need to explain why I say things," **Bush** asserted.

That's the interesting part of being president. Maybe somebody needs to explain to me why they say something, but I don't feel like I owe anybody an explanation.

Why do so many powerful people act as if their moral compass had developed a malfunction? Some may be sociopaths who've spent their lives striving for power and influence as ends in themselves. Outwardly charming and cleverly manipulative as they climb the ladder of success, once they've arrived the masks come off and their hidden, authoritarian impulses come into full view.

Evidence suggests that sociopaths are born, not made; they come into this world lacking a crucial part of the brain that triggers an empathetic response. Without the ability to experience and enjoy fellow-feeling, sociopaths objectify those with whom they must interact, using them as pawns to secure their own advantage. This isn't invariably the case, however. If a person has been exposed to and been able to internalize the appropriate social and ethical norms, their sociopathic tendencies can be mitigated.

Sociopaths seem predisposed to use power inappropriately, but other evidence suggests that power itself can have a transformative effect that's similar. Several decades of research by **Dacher Keltner** of the University of California at Berkeley suggest that as people acquire power, something shifts in their mental makeup. "They act as if they had suffered traumatic brain injury," **Keltner** writes. When people are successful in gaining power, they may "become more impulsive, less risk-aware" and, like sociopaths, "less adept at seeing things from another person's point of view."

In related research, **Jonathan Davidson** has identified what he calls "hubris syndrome" in persons who've successfully acquired and held onto power for an extended period of time. Left unchallenged or unchecked, such power holders begin to feel contempt for others; they lose contact with reality, engage in restless and reckless actions and become increasingly incompetent.

This warping of the personality is, then, one of the real perils that attend success. Still, we can point to plenty of highly successful people who have been able to keep a level head and continue leading caring and empathetic lives. So how do they avoid the pitfalls I've described?

So let's consider **Rebecca Solnit**, a prolific author who is much in demand as a social commentator. **Solnit** recently penned an article in which she highlighted her own struggles with success and celebrity. At some point she realized that she needed to step back and take a hard look at herself and what she saw wasn't pretty.

As she was increasingly in demand, **Solnit** noticed that her feelings about others began to shift. She experienced a chronic sense of urgency, while perceiving other people as "being in her way." I began to believe that "my rights and needs mattered more than others," she admitted, and in this state of self-absorbed entitlement, ordinary people became bothersome. But **Solnit** recognized that this emerging callousness violated her professed ideals and the values with which she was raised. "As my own status has risen" **Solnit** writes, "I have come to realize that the force you need to resist is yourself."

It may well be that when a person experiences a great deal of socially-sanctioned success, builds on it, and invests in it, they also become less self-aware. Preoccupied with the care and feeding of the public self, the individual looks outward, but not inward. It took a concerted, mindful effort on **Solnit's** part to correct that imbalance and bring her ideals and her behavior back into alignment.

“You have to begin with the fundamental practice of knowing your own mind,” the Buddhist teacher **Richard Reoch** reminds us. The mind, he says, can be our most powerful ally if we can be trained to use it in a self-reflective and discriminating fashion. It is, perhaps, our best line of defense against the shadow side of success.

**Arturo Toscanini** was another celebrated figure whose career is worth considering. **Toscanini** was, as classical music lovers know, one of the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries’ premier orchestra conductors. Admiring but equally famous conductors described his work with the baton as “incomparable.”

Despite his singular triumphs, **Toscanini** knew his own mind. Courted by both **Mussolini and Hitler**, the powerful leaders of Europe’s emerging fascist powers, **Toscanini** demurred. Honors and generous honorariums failed to win him over: he refused to lend his prestige to German and Italian cultural projects. As a result, his recordings and broadcasts were banned in both countries. But **Toscanini** still conducted. A birthright Roman Catholic, traveling to Palestine, he lent his immense talent to a newly formed orchestra comprised mostly of Jewish refugees. Following World War II the philosopher **Isaiah Berlin** dubbed **Toscanini** “The most morally dignified and inspiring hero of our time.”

Clearly, it is possible to enjoy success without putting one’s personality and core values at risk. But again, knowing one’s own mind is crucial.

Still, there are other perils to be concerned about. Although **Toscanini** never let his successes interfere with his moral scruples, he did suffer from expectations that were left unfulfilled. He never found the “ultimate” success he was looking for. “In all my artistic life,” he lamented, “I have never had a moment of complete satisfaction.”

Another musical legend, **Franz Liszt**, had similar outsized ambitions. Despite a towering reputation as a performer and composer, **Liszt** was profoundly disappointed

with himself. “To tell the truth,” he told a friend, “I sense in myself a terrible lack of talent compared with what I would like to express. The notes I write are pitiful.”

It’s not my intention today to dismiss success – as an artist, a professional, a public servant – as a less-than-worthy objective in life. Far from it, for I’ve enjoyed a modest amount of it myself. The challenge is keeping it in perspective, which is precisely what **The Dalai Lama** was urging in the passage I shared earlier in our service. Success in our chosen endeavors and the recognition that comes with it aren’t to be sneezed at. Nevertheless, mental and emotional security and our sense of self-worth are most dependably secured as we forge a common bond with other members of the human family. “That bond,” **The Dalai Lama** said, “can be a source of consolation in the event you lose everything.”

But the thing is, you don’t have to lose everything – all the successes you’ve worked for and accumulated – to feel disconsolate and unfulfilled. As **Oscar Wilde** famously observed, “In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it.”

Now, one would think that some people, psychologists for example, would be more cognizant of the perils of success than others. These are folks who study the life of the mind and are equipped to help others understand their thoughts, feelings and predilections. And this they do. But it doesn’t mean that they, too, don’t struggle with the emotional complexities of achievement and success.

Writing about her father, **Erik Erikson**, the developmental psychologist who coined the term “identity crisis,” **Sue Erikson Bloland** describes his “drive to achieve recognition as monumental.” As **Erikson** rose to the height of his profession, the house was full of plaques and honorary degrees,” his daughter says, “but these failed to secure for my father the true sense of accomplishment for which he longed.”

Reflecting on her father's experience, as well as on others who enjoyed comparable success, **Boland**, herself a psychologist, says that we need to be more cognizant of our heroes' humanity.

We want to believe that they have arrived at a secure place of self-approval; that achieving recognition can set us all free from gnawing feelings of self-doubt. We want to believe that if we ourselves...could feel sufficiently admired, we would be healed and our self-esteem secured....

We harbor fantasies about what success can do for us that, according to **Susan Erikson Boland**, may tempt us to forego the inner work that someone like **Rebecca Solnit** undertook. **Solnit**, you will recall, realized she needed to do some serious mental and emotional housekeeping. This is an exercise **Sue Erikson Boland** also recommends. "The real cure for inadequacy," she continues

...is to expose to others what you are ashamed of...and discover that you will not be cast out for making that known – that you are still a member in good standing in the human community.

While this is a lesson we'd all do well to heed in the dawn of this new year, it may be especially relevant for those of us who are

preparing for or have recently entered retirement. At this stage of life, success in the commonly accepted sense of that term has to be set aside, and if we haven't already begun the inner work that **Boland** and the **Dalai Lama** recommend, we should start it now.

This doesn't mean that success becomes irrelevant, only that we need to reconceive it. While resting, at last, on our professional laurels, we can cultivate supportive relationships, pursue neglected interests, explore opportunities to serve, come to terms with our aging and mortality and consider the legacy we wish to leave. By so doing, we can bring closure to a life that might otherwise leave us feeling unfulfilled and incomplete.

In the eyes of the world "success" makes us somebody, and we can get off on that. Admittedly, the kind of success I'm recommending for the last chapter of our lives isn't going to get us much recognition. That's not so bad because, as the spiritual teacher **Ram Dass** tells us: "You've been somebody long enough."

You've spent the first half of your life becoming somebody. Now you can work on becoming nobody, which is really somebody. For when you become nobody, there is no tension, no pretense, no one trying to be anyone or anything. The natural state of the mind shines through unobstructed – and the natural state of the mind is pure love.